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Driven by Justice: Exploring the Work of School District Equity Directors

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Abstract

A growing number of school districts are engaging in systems-level, equity-based reform to redress persistent disparities, and many are hiring Equity Directors to lead the way. This qualitative study explores the role of Equity Directors, asking, "What are the leadership practices of Equity Directors?" and "What are the purposes behind those practices?" We interviewed six district-level equity directors across one southeastern state within the United States. Using a grounded theory approach, we analyzed interviews and documents to construct an emerging framework outlining the work of district-level equity leaders. Our framework connects eight educational leadership practices (within four categories) to six, primary purposes.

Keywords: *Equity Director; School System Reform; School District Leadership*

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[Driven by Justice: Exploring the Work of School District Equity Directors]

Introduction

The systematic denial of educational access and opportunity (Ladson-Billings, 2006) to students who are Black, Brown, Indigenous, differently abled, LGBTQIA+, linguistically diverse, and experiencing financial hardship has resulted in greater levels of their economic insecurity through unemployment or underemployment (Brundage, 2020); imprisonment (Burch, 2022); and mental and physical health challenges (Assari & Bazargan, 2019). Although US schools and school systems have engaged in decades of reform efforts to address the inequities, most approaches failed because they did not target the true problem: the inequitable and harmful policies, practices, structures, and relationships that comprise our school systems. Fueled by community outrage and educators yearning to do better, a growing number of districts are engaging in systems-level, equity-based reform. Although their board members and superintendents have courageously committed to addressing systemic failures, they have also recognized the magnitude of the work and are hiring *Equity Directors* (EDs)--the focus of this scholarship--to lead the way.

Despite the conservative political force against equity-based reform in schools (Meckler, 2022), the past few years have ushered in increasingly more equity-based reform efforts within and across school systems. This move accompanies a public reckoning with racial, economic, and other social injustices across our institutions. Although inequities have existed since this country's onset, the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread use of social media have increased the visibility of injustice and calls for redress. A review of the literature around equity-based school reform reveals that much of the work is non-systemic or piecemeal in nature (e.g., culturally relevant pedagogy, anti-racist curriculum, restorative discipline practices). Although certainly beneficial and oriented toward greater equity, these practices alone are unlikely to produce broad-scale, systems-level change. As Critical Race Theory posits (Bell, 1975; Crenshaw, 2010), discriminatory inequities are perpetuated when attention is deflected away from systemic causes toward individual beliefs or behaviors.

We are only beginning to define leadership for systems-level equity. Weiler and Lomotey (2021) propose that educational leaders must "demonstrate the scholarly enactment of system-wide, research-supported, equitable, and socially just practices that ensure the fair distribution of access and opportunity for all students, starting with a dismantling of oppressive structures and practices" (p. 128). An increasing number of school districts are hiring *Equity Directors* (EDs) to do just this. According to Irby and colleagues, equity directors possess the expertise to "support the design and implementation of district-wide equity reforms that will make educational experiences and outcomes more equitable and just for racially, ethnically, and linguistically marginalized students" (Irby et al., 2021, p. 1). Their study is one of two existing studies to date to closely examine the role of district-level equity directors.

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Our study confirms many of the responsibilities identified by Irby and colleagues and goes further by adding additional leadership practices and offering an alternative categorization around *the purpose* for each of the leadership practices. We believe it critical to explore the rationale behind each reported duty as it helps us understand why the role, or the work associated with the role, is needed. To get to this rationale, we employed a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) connecting eight educational leadership practices (within four categories) with six purposes to construct an emerging framework that delineates the work of district-level equity directors.

Given the increased momentum toward hiring EDs, the newness of the role, the dearth of research surrounding the position, the resources required for creating the position, and the high expectations associated with this role, it is essential that we deepen our understanding of district-level equity directors. Our study and framework heed this call offering district leaders more information as they consider whether to add an ED or attempt to define the work or the scope of the work for their present ED. Our study also informs the work of leadership preparation programs; education scholars at the intersection of equity and leadership; and policy actors engaged in district transformation for equitable outcomes.

Literature Review

Although equity directors are relatively new to school districts, scholars have been studying the work of justice-oriented leaders in education for decades. To provide a foundation for this study, we explore two strands of literature: systemic reform in education and equity-focused educational leadership of principals, superintendents, and district-level equity directors.

Systemic Reform in Education

Districts hire equity directors to help lead system-wide reform for equitable outcomes. Since we are only at the beginning of this type of reform work, little research exists describing school system reform as it relates specifically to the creation of equitable and just outcomes for students. However, scholars have attempted to define and describe systems and systems-level change in education for decades. Jenlink and colleagues (1996) offered:

> Systemic change is an approach that recognizes the interrelationships and the interdependencies among the parts of the educational system, with the consequence that desired changes in one part of the system are accompanied by changes in other parts that are necessary to reach an idealized vision of the whole, and recognizes the interrelationships and interdependencies between the educational system and its community, including parents, employers, social service agencies, religious organizations, and much more, with the consequence that all stakeholders are given active ownership of the change effort (p.2).

Herbert, Murphy, Ramos, Vaden-Kiernan, and Butteram (2006) conducted a literature review revealing that school systems have three subsystems worthy of attention by reformers: components (interconnected parts), levels (e.g., individual, classroom, school, district, and state), and competencies (an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities). Cowan, Joyner, and Beckwith (2008) identified five leadership competencies necessary for school system reform: (a)

creating coherence; (b) collecting, interpreting, and using data; (c) ensuring continuous professional learning; (d) building relationships; and (e) responding to changing conditions. Banathy (1996) emphasized the relational piece of systemic change claiming people must "take part directly and authentically in the design of the systems in which they live and work, and reclaim their right to do so because it is the only hope we have to give direction to our evolution, to create a democracy that truly represents the aspiration and will of people, and to create a society about which all of us can feel good" (Banathy, 1996, p. vii).

Equity-Focused, Educational Leadership

School Leaders

To date, scholars have identified several approaches to equity-centered school leadership: (a) social justice leadership (Capper, 1993; Foster, 1986; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007), (b) anti-racist leadership (Gooden, 2012; Horsford, 2014; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020; Theoharis & Haddix, 2013), (c) culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, 2018), (d) youth-centered leadership (Bertrand, 2014; Lac& Cumings Mansfield, 2018), and (e) community-engaged educational leadership (Green, 2017; Ishimaru, 2019; Khalifa, 2012) to name a few. Most of these leadership applications have been studied within the context of single schools and focused narrowly on the role of school-based leaders. Although the associated outcomes appear equity-positive, system-wide transformation remains elusive. To be clear, this scholarship is both non-exhaustive and overlapping.

Superintendents

Roegman and colleagues (2019) examined the equity work of five different superintendents. These superintendents were part of a regional instructional leader network collectively committed to redress disproportionality in AP course enrollment along the lines of race and class. Although all five superintendents could be categorized within the social-justice leadership frame, each superintendent leveraged different approaches to redress disproportionality, including (a) addressing teacher and counselor referral processes and policies; (b) enacting professional development for future AP teachers; (c) providing pre-k and summer AP preparation programs for minoritized youth; (d) redesigning the referral processes for special education; and (e) changing the requirements for AP course enrollment. In a separate study, Hatch and Roegman (2012) examined the work of one superintendent who addressed the lack of rigorous instruction in classrooms through collaborative instructional rounds. Although their work could potentially impact more than one school within their district, it does not address (or intend to address) the multitude of inequities within their school systems.

Equity Directors

Presently, the equity directorship is seen as a senior-level administrative position located in district central office structures. Sparse but burgeoning scholarship sheds light on the roles and responsibilities of K-12 equity directors (Irby et al., 2021). Although there is much unknown variation in these positions, Irby and colleagues (2021) found that K-12 equity directors had similar goals to "support the design and implementation of district-wide equity reforms that will make educational experiences and outcomes more equitable and just for racially, ethnically, and

linguistically marginalized students" (p.1). Their manuscript presents four distinct "role configurations" for the equity directorship: (a) equity seeding; (b) equity collaboration; (c) equity management and compliance; and (d) equity innovations and development. Equity seeding refers to the director's role in writing equity related policies, creating and providing resources, and communicating the importance of the equity work in the district. Equity collaboration describes the ways that directors engage and work collectively with teachers, leaders, and families to expand equity efforts. The equity management and compliance role situates the director as manager of existing programs and leader of a department, team, or office. Finally, the equity innovation role positions directors with substantial latitude to create equity programs, initiatives, and professional learning opportunities. In the latter configuration, the equity director is seen as a thought partner for the superintendent; a supervisor of a sizable budget and office; and an external partnership developer (Irby et al., 2021).

In a more recent study, Irby and associates (2022) explored "the structural and psychological vulnerabilities" (p. 426) of EDs that are dependent upon the "positional power, resources, and authority" (p. 419) provided by their district leaders. In addition, they emphasized the need for districts to identify their expectations for EDs considering "labor-related racial and gender oppression" (p. 417) within their districts. This study highlights the complexity of the context in which EDs serve demonstrating the limits of their reach as well as concern for their wellbeing. Taken together, we intend to contribute to the knowledge base on the K-12 equity directorship by thoroughly examining their common roles, responsibilities, and commitments.

Methods

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the responsibilities of district-level equity directors through an analysis of in-depth interviews and associated documents. We utilized a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) wherein researchers generate theories "in interaction with and interpretation of the social phenomena of interest" (Marshall & Rossman, 2014, p.19). Although participants' telling of their experiences through interviews served as the primary data source, researchers negotiated the meaning of those experiences to construct an emerging theoretical framework (Saldana, 2021) outlining the work of district-level leaders oriented toward equitable organizational reform.

Participants

We interviewed six equity directors from six different public school systems within one state, located in the southeast region of the United States. We employed purposeful sampling to access a specific subset of participants (equity directors). We sent recruitment emails directly to equity directors across the state whom we identified through a review of school-district websites. Search terms included "equity director" and "director of equity." Knowing that district leaders could be serving as equity directors without that title, with a different title, or assuming the role in addition to other responsibilities, we sent recruitment emails to over 100 public school superintendents.

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Six EDs volunteered, and a small stipend was provided. We anticipated a relatively low sample size given the state had no formalized engagement with equity in education. At the time of the study, the state's educational leadership standards for school and district leaders did not explicitly include equity, even though national standards centering on equity-based leadership were created in 2015 (Murphy, 2017; National Policy Board, 2015).

The following table (Table 1) identifies the participants' racial identity; years of experience in the ED position; context (urban, suburban, rural) and size of the ED's district as they define it; and whether their role focused entirely on equity leadership (equity-focused) or included equity in addition to other leadership responsibilities (equity-inclusive). Consistent with Irby and colleagues' (2021) findings on the dominant racial identity of EDs, five out of our six equity directors were persons of color, and three were women of color. Moreover, ED's who worked in a larger urban school district tended to have more experience in their roles and were more likely to be in the "equity innovations and development configuration" (Irby et al., 2021).

Table 1
Equity Director Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Racial Identity	Years in the Position	Context Size and Type	Leadership: Equity-Focused or Equity-Inclusive
Darren	Black/African American	5	Large Urban District	Equity-Focused
Janice	Black/African American	2	Large Urban District	Equity-Inclusive
Rick	Black/African American	6	Large Urban District	Equity-Focused
Mary	Latina	1	Small Urban District	Equity-Focused
Ellen	Black/African American	2	Mid-size Urban District	Equity-Focused
Joe	White	3	Small Rural	Equity-Inclusive

Data Collection

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We used transcribed interviews as our primary data source. Each ED was interviewed by both researchers simultaneously for 60-90 minutes. Interviews were conducted virtually using the Zoom video-conferencing platform. This platform also provided audio recordings and typed transcriptions. The interview protocol was created jointly after much dialogue about what we hoped to learn from the interviews. Nearly all questions were open-ended and framed with the larger research questions in mind. For example:

- What does your work look like?
- What does a typical day look like for you?

If available, participants provided copies of the following organizational documents: (a) a copy of the participant's present job-description, and (b) documents that describe the equity work within their district (e.g., instructional frameworks, strategic plans). Some of these documents were publicly available. We accessed these through district websites. Analytic memos were also included. These documents were used primarily to substantiate the duties reported by the equity directors during their interviews.

Data Analysis

Our study employed grounded theory--a cyclical process with three primary components: data collection, inductive coding, and analytic memo writing (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Saldana (2021) reminds us that these three activities interact and evolve "toward a central/core category as the stimulus for developing the theory itself" (Saldana, 2021, p. 302). Both researchers independently engaged in the first cycle of initial and process coding with analytic memo writing. Before completing the first cycle of coding, we agreed upon one, central a priori code: What is the work of the ED? This code ensured that our analysis would remain focused upon the primary line of inquiry.

After we completed the first round of individual coding and analytic memo writing, we met to share our codes, emerging categories, and reflections; identify commonalities; explore interpretive differences, and identify central categories. During this discussion, we exchanged ideas about the possible purposes of each identified responsibility. After this discussion, we engaged in individual, second-cycle, theoretical coding with increased attention on *purpose*. We met again to discuss our learnings and engage in collaborative deductive analysis (Patton, 2002) which resulted in six theoretical codes (Saldana, 2021).

Methodological Integrity & Limitations

We utilized collaborative deductive analysis, member checks, direct participant quotes, and thick description to ensure methodological integrity. Collaborative deductive analysis after both stages of coding (Patton, 2002) encouraged interrater reliability of participants' meaning, bolstering interpretive validity. In addition, our claims were supported by member checks as participants were given the opportunity to review the final paper prior to journal submission.

When presenting the findings, we mention but do not attach deep meaning to the frequency of some codes over others. We include all reported leadership practices including

those that were only reported by one or two participants. As Saldana (2021) states, “The unique instance of a code that appears just once and nowhere else in the data corpus, or a code that appears just two or three times across different cases or time periods, may hold important meaning for generating a significant insight in later analysis” (p. 37). We suggest that isolated or inconsistent leadership practices across our EDs may indicate where a district sits in its equity reform process (beginning versus experienced) or the number of resources available to support the leadership practice. For example, only one participant reported regular meetings with equity coaches as a leadership practice, but the other EDs did not have an office of equity coaches. Leaning into Saldana's (2021) rationale, we suggest that "later analysis" or future studies might discover greater frequency of certain leadership practices as the result of districts' advancement in the equity work. For this reason, we include all reported leadership practices.

Researcher Positionality

Chapman (2007) and Milner (2007) assert the importance of recognizing researcher positionality. Milner (2007) advises researchers to be "mindful of the enormous role of their own and others' racialized positionality and cultural ways of knowing" (p. 388) to avoid harm to people or communities of color. Both researchers are education scholars with over twenty years of collective experience including doctoral studies at research institutions that prepare justice-oriented educational scholars and leaders. We (a Black male and a White female) are professors who teach, research, and write about equity/inequity in education. In addition, we have both served as teachers and administrators within US public schools. Our positionality and understanding of educational leadership, equity/inequity in schools, and related fields enhanced our ability to negotiate meaning during data analysis.

Findings

For this article, we recognize eight common leadership practices noted by our participants and categorize them into four themes: (a) planning and development; (b) professional learning; (c) data use; and (d) family and community engagement. We then present six purposes behind the practices formed by our collaborative deductive analysis (Patton, 2002). Table 2 elucidates the connections among the individual leadership practices, the leadership practice themes, and the purposes associated with each practice. Subsequent sections explain these relationships.

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Table 2
Connecting Individual Leadership Practices with Broader Leadership Categories and Purpose

Leadership Practice	Purposes of Leadership Practices
Leadership Practice Theme #1: Planning and Development	
Craft a vision	Strengthen the commitment to equity while compelling the work against resistance
Policy development & reform	Help others recognize the inequities and the source(s) of those inequities Strengthen the commitment to equity while compelling the work against resistance Guide the enactment of equitable practices
Strategic planning	Help others recognize the inequities and the source(s) of those inequities Build the capacity of others to understand and enact equitable practices/processes Strengthen the commitment to equity while compelling the work against resistance
Equity planning	Help others recognize the inequities and the source(s) of those inequities Build the capacity of others to understand and enact equitable practices/processes Strengthen the commitment to equity while compelling the work against resistance
Leadership Practice Theme #2: Professional & Organizational Learning	
Professional development activity	Help others recognize the inequities and the source(s) of those inequities Build the capacity of others to understand and enact equitable practices/processes Guide the enactment of equitable practices

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Equity resource development	Build the capacity of others to understand and enact equitable practices/processes Guide the enactment of equitable practices
Leadership Practice Theme #3: Data Use	
Collect, analyze, and present data	Help others recognize the inequities and the source(s) of those inequities Build the capacity of others to understand and enact equitable practices/processes Guide the enactment of equitable practices Help to sustain or adapt the work as it moves forward Strengthen the commitment to equity while compelling the work against resistance
Leadership Practice Theme #4: Family and Community Engagement	
Engage with families and communities	Build internal and external coalitions Help to sustain or adapt the work as it moves forward Strengthen the commitment to equity while compelling the work against resistance

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Leadership Practices

During transcript analysis, we noted eight leadership practices by looking for observable actions or the performance of (an) activity. We define leadership practice as an observable activity that harnesses multiple skills towards a desired, equity-focused goal (purpose). Practices included: (a) crafting a vision for the role of the ED and the district equity work; (b) creating or changing district policy to reflect equity; (c) developing and enacting an equity-focused strategic plan for the district; (d) co-constructing school-based equity plans; (e) constructing and delivering professional development curriculum; (f) collecting, analyzing, and presenting data; (g) locating, developing or sharing existing equity-based tools/resources; and (h) engaging with families and communities. These activities fall into four primary categories: (a) planning and development; (b) professional learning; (c) data use; and (d) family and community engagement.

Planning and Development

Craft a Vision. We found that equity directors worked directly with superintendents and other central office leaders to craft a vision for the role and work of the position. Darren explained, "I worked with him and crafted a vision for what such a position could look like and then he actually tagged me to go into that role." Similarly, Ellen described that her position was developed because of district equity data analysis. She stated, "They did a lot of data diving, root cause analysis work and envisioning for the future. Out of that came this position."

Other ED's explicitly discussed their vision(s) for the district. Mary and Janice described how they envisioned their role in collaboration with other district personnel; equity work is the responsibility of all school-district stakeholders. Janice explained, "I guess my goal is to really create an equity mindedness in people...to think differently...if I were to drop off the face of the earth." Mary expands on this idea by stating, "My goal--and I also said to my supervisor--I know that I should really be trying to work myself out of it, this job." Each ED explained that their roles were, in part, derived from perceived needs based on district equity data and in this role, it was their responsibility to chart a path for the district to address previously identified inequities.

Policy Development and Reform. Equity directors worked with superintendents and other central office leaders to modify or create new policies so that they were aligned with equity. Equity directors spent a significant amount of time in policy dialogues. Rick stated that 50% of his time is spent working on local, equity-focused policy and compliance. Darren also spent a significant amount of time engaging in district-community dialogues focused on developing equity policy. He described the details of that work:

> We had community activists advocating that we have an equity policy and we had board members who were like, 'we have this equity office, we need to formalize some things in policy.' So, what my office did was create a 30-member, equity policy task force and we worked together for about a year to craft an equity policy.

Emily described a slightly different approach to policy; her work focused more on reforming existing policies to reflect the district's equity goals. She explained that their district code of conduct team "is working on really analyzing the code of conduct, reviewing and looking at those policies." Additionally, Ellen explained the process for examining district policy. She

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described "using that racial equity analysis protocol to help us think through how that policy needs to change[so] that we are more race conscious." Collectively, the ED's described the importance of policy reform to catalyze the equity work across the district.

District Strategic Planning. Equity directors revealed that they work with district central office and community-based leaders to develop and enact equity-focused strategic plans. Rick explained, "My primary role is to bring a strategic focus to the district's equity initiatives." Emily noted, "Our strategic plan is very robust in the fact that it has five goals. Equity is woven throughout each of those goals, but there's a specific goal for equity and access." Emily also offered specific details about the planning: "Within that goal, there are very specific objectives [including] one that talks about closing the opportunity [gap] to get where we begin to eliminate those barriers to higher level courses, particularly for Black and Brown children."

School-Based Equity Planning. Additionally, equity directors worked directly with school leaders to develop school-based equity plans. Mary explained a co-constructive process for school-based equity planning stating, "I partnered with each principal and I said, 'Let's write up an equity plan. What does that even mean [and] what does it look like in your building?'" Similarly, Darren explained, "We work with principals to think about developing [their] school improvement plans, [asking them] 'How are you centering equity?'"

Professional & Organizational Learning

Professional Development Activity. All the equity directors engaged in some form of professional development activity suggesting it assumes a significant portion of their work. Darren described his approach to staff development and raising equity consciousness:

> We kicked off the year with a district wide equity 101. We had multiple sessions where they had to come to a three- hour equity session. At that session, we presented data on the disparities - [Black] students who had [a missed] opportunity to enroll in honors biology as ninth graders. We showed data where 80% of black kids who met the criteria were not enrolled in honors biology in ninth grade, compared to 26% of white kids who met the criteria not being enrolled in honors biology in ninth grade. So, emphasizing [that] this isn't even about the kids who didn't meet the criteria, but who should be given [the] opportunity. These are the kids who met the criteria--80% of black kids who scored fours and fives [on] eighth grade science [tests].

Equity Resource Development. Each ED mentioned that they develop and share learning resources with others across the district. Equity directors borrowed existing tools and created their own resources to support school personnel. Darren explained, "We are in the process of developing tools that people can use to address issues of equity in their different departments or their school." In response to the politically motivated, manufactured, mis-information campaign around Critical Race Theory, Ellen "put together resources around Critical Race Theory to help them [teachers and principals] field conversations." Mary also borrowed and shared existing resources to support school-level dialogues related to "white supremacy

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culture traits." Collectively, the ED's named initial and ongoing professional learning as a key component of their work.

Data Use

Equity directors explained that part of their role was to collect, analyze, and present equity data to district and school personnel. Equity directors had varying approaches to data collection, analysis, and presentation. For example, Janice's work focused on the development and analysis of a district-wide data dashboard; this dashboard captures systemic data points (e.g., attendance, achievement, discipline). To redress inequities related specifically to Black male students, Emily stated, "we not only looked at our data in terms of disproportionality but also looked at it in terms of risk ratio. . .particularly for our Black males." We found that data collection, analyses and presentations are an iterative, ongoing practice for equity directors. Rick described, "We work with [schools with high suspension rates] on a monthly basis looking at the data, looking at non exclusionary practices, and how you implement those in schools."

Family and Community Engagement

Equity directors also engage families and local community members in the development of school-district equity goals; the community also serves as an accountability partner. Equity directors discussed several direct, indirect, formal, and informal ways that they engaged their communities. Mary explained her direct work with communities **(**speaking in the third person), "S/he's in the community, s/he's in public housing, and the families trust her. The Black families know her, the families that are on drugs know her, the families that are wealthy know her." Mary described a "street-level" approach to community engagement. Rick and Ellen described more "formal" connections with communities. Rick stated, “I meet monthly with the community equity leadership team, which is a group of advocacy organizations in the community that are most concerned about equity. [I] help them plan their approaches and how they want to hold the district accountable.” Similarly, Ellen described a formal district-community partnership:

> We meet probably every two weeks as we partner with them to really be holistic. [We] are thinking about how we partner with the community in different community programs that could be used as diversionary things for kids to prevent them from going into school to prison pipeline.

Differently, Jovan discussed an indirect approach to community engagement, "[I do] community outreach on social media. I oversee Twitter and we have a website." Taken together, the ED's in this study discussed a keen commitment to finding unique ways to engage families and communities.

The Purpose Behind the Practice and Framework for the Equity Directorship

All eight leadership practices connect to at least one of six, common, identified purposes. By "purpose" we mean, rationale or the reason the ED enacts the practice. The six purposes we derived were (a) to help others recognize the inequities and the source(s) of those inequities; (b) to build the capacity of others to understand and enact equitable practices/processes; (c) to guide the enactment of equitable practices; (d) to sustain or adapt the work as it moves forward; (e) to build internal and external coalitions; and (f) to strengthen the commitment to equity while

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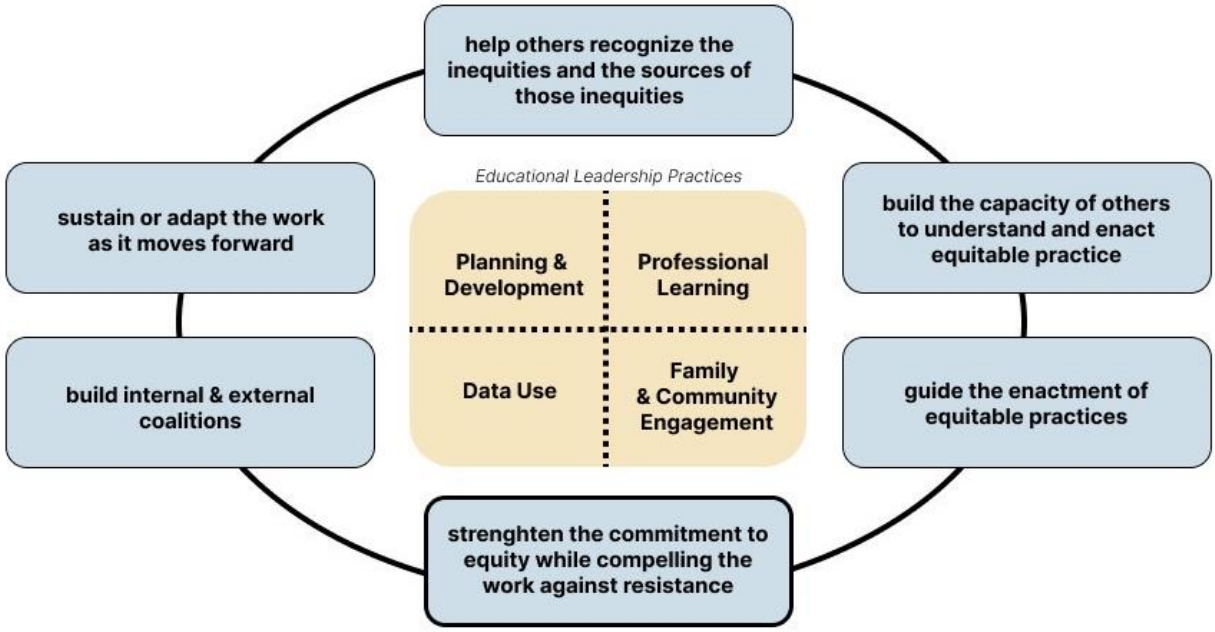
compelling the work against resistance. These purposes are positioned in Figure 1 on the oval that surrounds the four themes of leadership practice.

Figure 1.
An Emerging Framework for the Equity Directorship



Helping Others Recognize the Inequities and the Sources of Inequity

Many of the EDs' practices were motivated by the need to help others see and understand the problem – to identify inequity and the source(s) of those inequities within schools and school systems. When EDs work with superintendents, board members, and central office leaders to (re)construct policy or develop a strategic plan, for example, they must first illuminate the system-based inequities in need of change. It cannot be assumed that the inequities are apparent to everyone at the table especially for educators whose identities align with the dominant culture (White, non-disabled, economically advantaged, English speaking, cis gender) and for whom present systems work.

Five of the six EDs were Black or LatinX leaders and, in part, through their lived experiences, recognized the problems in schools as systemic, longstanding, and connected to our country's history of White supremacy wherein assimilation to the dominant group's ways of knowing, being, and doing are the expectation (Horsford, 2014).

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Using equity audit data examining (dis)proportionality, Ellen gave a data presentation that revealed the overrepresentation of Black students in the special education program to fellow educators. Darren's "equity 101" session was intended to raise awareness among district stakeholders about the existing inequities in the honors course referral process. Notably, he centers the reality that Black children are not under achieving; they are being underserved by school-based referral practices. Darren further explained that his PD approach also seeks to empower "other leaders to identify and address disparities."Arguably, recognizing inequities is the first building-block in systems-level, equity-centered reconstruction. We must identify and collectively agree on the problem to address it.

There are great challenges associated with this purpose given that educators are being asked to one, recognize the ways in which they (as agents of the system) have perpetuated inequity and two, shift their viewpoint from student failure to organizational failure. Simultaneously, they are also being asked to accept that many of their educational practices (designed against a socially constructed, exclusionary norm) are inappropriate because they do not represent or elevate all our students, families, and communities. As many of our EDs shared, work associated with this purpose (helping others recognize inequities) is often met with acute criticism and resistance from stakeholders within and outside the school system adding a tremendous burden to EDs – one that would not necessarily exist for other central office leaders.

Building the Capacity of Others to Understand and Enact Equitable Practices

Naturally, EDs must follow or accompany the exploration of the problem (inequitable practices) with learning experiences for the enactment of equitable practices that better serve and represent the full diversity of our students, families, and communities. This purpose clearly connects with the leadership practices: constructing and delivering professional development and sharing existing equity-based resources. Although many would argue that we are in our infancy with equitable practices, educators and stakeholders expect practicable solutions to this critically urgent problem. As Ellen suggested, "They want me to just give them answers and solutions and my perception behind that is that there's maybe this belief or mindset that it's a cookie cutter approach. So, if s/he says do this, then that's got to fix the issue."

When EDs were asked about their district's equitable practices, some referenced district frameworks as guides for identifying practices while others pulled from their personal learning experiences. Mary explains "some of it [resources] is from the Racial Equity Institute and some of it is from Tema Okun, dismantling white supremacy culture traits." It is safe to assume that EDs will work to build the capacity of others to understand and enact equitable practices. Without them, the status quo persists. But, given the breadth and the relative newness of equity work, EDs must engage in their own continuous learning whilst individual and systemic practices for equity evolve. For example, Darren shared that he felt confident in his understanding of racism in schools but reflected, "I feel I need to dive deeper into issues facing the LatinX community and in supporting our LGBTQ students and staff. I've had professional learning on both, but I need to do more."

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Guiding the Enactment of Equitable Practices

EDs also engaged in activities intended to guide the enactment of equitable practices. By "guiding" we mean...equity directors work in an ongoing capacity (beyond providing initial professional development) to guide school leaders and educators who need continued assistance or support. Rick referred to this as "coaching" noting, "equity work is not something you can just read a book about and then all of a sudden you're [an] equitable person but it takes practice, and it takes experience and so we partner with school district leaders in their work to become more equitable educators." Ellen reported the need for ongoing guidance noting that educators might require more than a singular professional development session, "professional learning is important, but it also has to be coupled with coaching and support."

Helping to Sustain or Adapt the Equity Work as it Moves Forward

Sustaining equitable practices or adapting those that are not meeting expectations stems from the district's desire to hold educators accountable to the work. Practice examples include curriculum reviews, an accountability report, and garnering community feedback. Rick stated, "we do a lot of curriculum review—reviewing lessons to make sure they're culturally responsive and that they're not framed in the deficit." He also shared, "If we do a professional development workshop, [we] will survey [teachers]. 'Give us a short description of how that's being used in the classroom'. . . and we're going into classrooms to actually see if we see evidence of the culturally responsive practices that we've taught." The ED's explained that consistent data analysis and data conversations were also necessary to help sustain or adapt the work over time.

Only two of our six EDs (Darren and Rick) mentioned practices for holding schools accountable. Although we make no assertion, we suspect that other EDs were not engaged in accountability practices because, unlike Darren and Rick, they were just beginning the equity work. EDs would not attempt to hold schools accountable for work they are just beginning to learn about or enact. Darren and Rick had been serving as EDs longer than the other four EDs and had done so in districts engaged in equity work for more than three years. This illustrates possible steps or stages in contemporary, district-level equity reform wherein certain purposes might precede others. For example, EDs must help others recognize the inequities and the source(s) of those inequities *before* they can build the capacity of others to enact equitable practices. Given the newness of district-level equity reform and the present dearth of related research, it is likely too early to posit systems-level equity reform steps or patterns at this time.

Building a Coalition with the Community

Many of our EDs described community engagement activities as part of their leadership responsibilities. Examples include: (a) providing marginalized families with learning opportunities in technology to support their student's learning, and (b) co-developing remote learning centers with outside agencies. These two activities and several others focused on providing direct support to families and students. Other EDs engaged the community to build a coalition around equity-oriented reform--lifting the voices, expertise, and resources of marginalized members. As Mary shared, "I'm looking at this work as locking arms with Black and White and Asian [community members] -- all of us so that we can attain collective

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liberation." In most cases, EDs facilitated or joined conversations with families, associations, activist organizations, and equity-oriented community groups. They shared their district's efforts toward equity, listened to concerns, and collected input or feedback which informed district efforts. Arguably, the purposes listed thus far are common to all types of reform initiatives but this purpose (building a coalition with the community) seems unique and critical to equity-oriented reform given that districts traditionally engage in unilateral reform--excluding community members.

Strengthening the Commitment to Equity while Compelling the Work Against Resistance

Our EDs consistently worked to erode resistance while simultaneously trying to strengthen the commitment of their colleagues and community members toward equity-driven action. Nearly all the leadership activities were aimed at or included the purpose of compelling the equity work against resistance. Let's consider policy development. The primary purpose of policy development is to set system wide expectations for organizational behavior. When the expectation for equity is codified into policy, less room exists for opposition or refusal. The policy compels the work forward.

Another leadership activity used to compel the work forward was data presentation. Two EDs spoke of the power of data to show resistors that inequity does indeed exist. Janice shared, "One of the other major pieces is the data dashboard that we're instituting so that we can have data; because it's hard to address things when you actually don't have data."

These two practices connect to more than one of the six purposes, but some of the ED work is aimed solely at countering resistance. Knowing that resistance is fueled by one's beliefs, Ellen spoke of professional learning that opens or changes people's minds:

> I think some of it goes back to mindsets and belief systems; So, to me, some of the hardest work. . . the pushback you get when trying to dismantle stuff that's been in place for so long. That's part of our professional learning that our advanced learning team is going to be doing with those teachers--work around mindsets to really challenge their belief systems.

Like the previous purpose (building a coalition with the community), compelling the work against resistance seems unique to equity-oriented reform. Would a reform-initiative aimed at improving math or literacy instruction face the same level or type of resistance and require professional learning that examines teachers' personal beliefs?

Discussion

Our research shows that the work of Equity Directors reflects common perspectives in the equity-focused leadership literatures: anti-racist leadership, culturally responsive and community engaged leadership (Gooden, 2012; Ishimaru, 2019; Khalifa, 2018); these explicit foci are related to the racialized and gendered identities and backgrounds of the ED's in this study. ED's demonstrate an explicit commitment to interrupting racist, school-based practices, supporting culturally responsive school environments, and centering community voice in aspects

of district-level decision-making. Moreover, the work of the ED moves beyond singular, district-level equity initiatives led by central office leaders (see Roegman and colleagues, 2019). Instead, we find that ED's engage in larger systemic change which include multiple concurrent efforts, with an explicit focus on capacity building across departments, schools, communities, and other stakeholder groups.

We attempt to situate our work in the developing equity director literatures (see Irby and colleagues, 2021). Our scholarship identifies individual and categorical leadership practices, many of which nest within Irby and colleagues (2021) "role configurations" especially "equity seeding" (e.g., planning and development practices) and "equity collaboration" (e.g., family and community engagement practices). Two of the EDs did engage in leadership practices consistent with the "equity innovations and development" role (Irby et al., 2021). Rick and Darren had a mature and robust equity reform agenda and their influence in the district was facilitated by proper support mechanisms (e.g., budget, office staff). Differently, Mary who worked more in an "equity seeding role" (Irby et al., 2021) for one year, is still trying to develop entry points for the work without a budget or office staff and is still in the process of co-defining her roles and responsibilities. While we see the need to learn more about these roles, we also see great value in understanding the day-to-day activities of the ED.

Our scholarship also theorizes about the purposes behind the practices. When we explore purpose, we ask *why*. If we understand why EDs do what they do, we can better develop, communicate, support, guide, adjust, and grow the work of the ED. We also see a connection between the purposes and the potential development of standards or competencies specific to the ED position or leadership positions tied to equitable outcomes. Additionally, the purposes may help district leaders consider leadership practices beyond the eight listed above. For example, one of the six purposes of the leadership work is to help others in the district recognize inequity. district leaders might ask their teams a purpose-oriented guiding question such as, "What are potential practices that we (and/or the ED) can do to help our school personnel identify and understand inequity?" Similarly, districts might be able to identify purposes that need practices. Given the permanence of racism (Bell, 2018), we suspect that equity leadership practices might change but the purposes behind the practices will remain.

Irby and colleagues (2022) dive into purpose a bit but they align purpose with the larger role of the ED not specific leadership activities. Beyond Irby, we did not locate literature specific to the purposes behind leadership practices in part because the literature on leadership for systemic reform in schools often arbitrarily labels leadership work. There does not seem to be agreement on what constitutes (or delineates) leadership "purpose," “competency,” “skill,” or “ability.” In this paper, we assert clear criteria for leadership practice and purpose. We suggest a literature review that posits a clearer differentiation among such terminology may help us better understand the work of the ED.

We also find it important to recognize that the eight leadership practices did not yield eight different purposes. In fact, we kept returning to the same six purposes. We wonder if more

purposes will be revealed over time – as the work evolves - or if leadership activities for systemic equity will always hinge on these six purposes. Based on the data, we surmise that ED's are crafting multiple ways to address inequities within the district. For example, professional development and equity resource development work collectively to help guide the enactment of equity-based practices in the district. Professional development serves as the what—or the content which helps raise the awareness of practitioners. Equity resource development is the how—it helps facilitate the enactment of equity-based practices. Notwithstanding, we believe that identifying the purpose can guide us in choosing leadership practices and shed light on leadership work that is unique and critical to equity leadership (e.g., building a coalition with the community, compelling the work against resistance).

To be clear, this scholarship only scratches the surface of the work and potential of the ED; there are many lingering questions, yet to be answered. Further, it should be noted that we encountered some philosophical tensions throughout our research process. As scholars who have engaged in research of systemic, equity-focused, and liberatory educational leadership for years, we wondered about the utility and underlying assumptions associated with districts hiring equity directors. Specifically, is this reform effort another reactive, district-based initiative that, like other reforms, will fade away with time? Does the ED position have the potential to catalyze sustained equity systems change? Does hiring the ED absolve others from taking ownership of the equity work in school districts? Moreover, what does it mean to hire people of color into these often highly contested positions? Of course, answers to these questions are deeply contextual and worth further examination in future research.

Additionally, we do offer some caution to districts, communities, and scholars. School communities should not be "waiting for superman," in the form of an equity director. We must contend with the possibility that hiring equity directors may not secure increased equity for all students, families, and communities.

Finally, we offer a few recommendations for school districts, leadership preparation programs, and future research. School districts should leverage this framework to adjust their support mechanisms for existing equity directors. School boards and other central office leaders can use this scholarship to re-evaluate current role configurations and expectations, and to expand the impact of their equity efforts. Further, leadership preparation programs should consider this scholarship to prepare future ED's. Four of the ED's in this study ascended into their roles from the principalship; it is imperative that leadership preparation and licensure programs are aware of the responsibilities, expectations and demands of this role. As previously stated, this scholarship is exploratory and emergent. Therefore, future research should more explicitly investigate the racialized hiring patterns and lived realities of ED's; examine the development of the ED position over time; employ more immersive methods (e.g., ethnography) to explore the day-to-day experiences of ED's; and study the impact and influence of their work in school-districts. We hope that this scholarship catalyzes more support *for*, and research related *to*, the critical role of district equity directors.

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