From Neoliberal Turnaround Toward Liberatory Cultivation:
Countering Color-Evasive School Reforms Through Equitable Partnerships For Educational Justice

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Dedication

To Beatriz Adriana, Magdalena Esther, and Guadalupe Sara. Together, you are a constant and ever-growing reflection of that to which I aspire, and the impetus to reach forward. I am so grateful to be a part of the world we share. None of this work would have been possible without you, and it is to the three of you that I dedicate this project.

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Abstract

This critical ethnographic case study is focused on centering racial equity in efforts to improve schools labeled as low-performing, providing a counternarrative to the color-evasive, neoliberal policies that have dominated school improvement and Turnaround reforms over the past two decades. The research seeks to examine partnerships between community leaders, school leaders, and district leaders toward racial equity and educational justice and explore the conditions that support diverse stakeholders in co-creating liberatory policy and practice. Through a theoretical framework incorporating Critical Race Theory and Thirdspace Theory, and a conceptual framework drawing upon Community Equity Literacy, Community Cultural Wealth, and Boundary-Spanning Leadership, the author explores multiple facets of Equity work in a large urban public school district in the United States. The primary aim of this doctoral dissertation is to contribute to academic literature that informs research and practice in enacting liberatory, anti-racist practices to advance educational justice in school systems that have historically failed students and communities of color.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nearly twenty years ago, during my first year of teaching, I rode the train to a bus line that carried me through a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood to my school. The building was nested within a public housing complex, which in its earlier days was described as a "thriving and desirable village" by a colleague of mine but by then had been labeled by news media and local residents (both from outside and within the complex) as dangerous, run-down, and dominated by drugs. I taught at a KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) academy, one of four small schools recently founded following the building's designation as a "failed" school and subsequent closure and reconstitution. This was one of the first examples of such an action in the years immediately following the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. I entered my career here as an idealistic, young, white male educator who had studied philosophy, including Critical Race Theory, in college. Considering myself committed to social justice and to becoming increasingly knowledgeable about historic fights toward racial equity, I was ready to contribute my efforts to these fights in the 21st century. Having chosen education as the area to which I would dedicate my career, I signed on to the culture described in KIPP Academy's 2002-2003 Application for the No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Schools Program:

> The school has established a team-like environment that simply wills itself, through a relentless pursuit of excellence via hard work, to achieve outstanding results. For example, teachers are on-call 24 hours a day, providing students and families with their cell phone numbers so that students may call in the evenings for homework help. The prevalent attitude that students, teachers, and parents will do whatever it takes to realize the school's goals is the mission that guides all members of the KIPP team and family (p.7).

The environment I entered in my first teaching job at KIPP drew me into a culture where members took on an article of faith: that people who truly cared about improving the lives of students racialized as Black and Brown who came from families labeled as Low-Income went to work in so-called "No Excuses" schools such as this.

What I did not understand was that I was entering into an already decades-old progression of public school systems being pulled under the umbrella of neoliberal racialized capitalism. I did not realize that this trend had been championed by local, state, and federal leaders from both major political parties. I did learn early on that KIPP and its founders had been a significant part of then Governor George W. Bush's approach to education policy during his campaign for the White House, with one of the founders appearing on stage to introduce Laura Bush at the Republican National Convention in 2000. While I knew several of my former teachers were distressed by the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act known as "No Child Left Behind," I did not yet grasp what President Bush's signature Education policy would mean for the communities that educational institutions had least well served. I certainly had no concept of the ideas about KIPP that Bettina Love, a future hero to me who started her teaching career at roughly the same time, would eventually articulate in *We Want to Do More Than Survive* (2018):

> Charter school networks such as Success Academy and KIPP popularized aggressive, paternalistic, and racist ideological teaching practices on dark bodies. The boards of directors operating these charter schools are typically composed of wealthy philanthropists, corporate foundations, and Wall Street hedge fund managers who believe dark children need discipline, character education, rudimentary academic skills, and full submission to White economic demands. (p.30)

While progressive critiques of neoliberal educational policy and practice approaches existed in those years (Meier et al., 2004; Wells, 2002), I was not aware of them. I was jumping into teaching, simply not yet able to see a disconnect between my hero worship of bell hooks and Paolo Freire and my daily work. Instead, I pursued the idea of the heroic teacher in the KIPP classroom. While, as a beginning teacher, I played only a minor role in the story of the closure of a "failed" school and its reconstitution into four newly created schools, I was part of a much larger trend in school reform policy. Over the subsequent decades, I would experience, explore, and eventually strive to interrogate this trend through the arc of my career and my academic studies in education.

Indeed, the challenge of improving educational outcomes and associated life opportunities on behalf of students in our nation's lowest-performing public schools is one of the most enduring and intractable problems of practice in American education over the past sixty years, reaching back at least to an era that saw the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 and the release of the Equality of Educational Opportunity study, more commonly known as the Coleman report (Coleman, 1966). After more than a decade of scholarly debate about schools' effects on student outcomes following the publishing of the Coleman Report, and amidst waning support for school desegregation efforts two decades after the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), an emerging body of research on effective schooling began to shape policymakers' focus on school-level characteristics and accountability for student achievement (Edmonds, 1979).

By the early 1980s, this developing research on "Effective Schools" began to fuse with neoliberalism, a broad-based policy philosophy that centers deregulation, privatization, competition, and market-based choice principles as the means to address nearly any aspect or

problem of public life (Lipman, 2011; Nygreen, 2016; Trujillo & Renée, 2015). Notably, while African-American educators built the foundation of the Effective Schools movement through working intentionally on behalf of African-American students, neoliberal framings of school reform based on this movement minimized racial and cultural elements. These neoliberal framings of Effective Schools research were heavily relied upon, alongside the co-opting of powerful instruction mastered by Black educators in service of Black children (Love, 2023), in forming the foundations of schools such as KIPP and other similar school organizations in the 1990s.

Within this context, in 1983, the Reagan Administration published A Nation at Risk and solidified a focus on schools' primary responsibility for addressing large-scale social problems through narrowing opportunity and achievement gaps. It also shaped waves of education reform developed under a neoliberal policy framework over the subsequent twenty years. This neoliberal school reform paradigm broadly refers to a set of approaches to improving schools that includes implementing practices codified by the effective schools movement, school competition and choice, high-stakes test accountability with sanctions for underperformance, and the privatization of many educational services (Nygreen, 2016, Lipman, 2011). By the turn of the 21st century, this approach had taken root at the federal education policy level, leading to the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), signed by President George W. Bush in 2002. In the years to follow, in response to minimal progress in persistently low-performing schools (primarily serving communities of color) across the country, public education systems began to implement high-stakes accountability measures based on school performance, including school turnaround and closure or reconstitution as the dominant approach to this challenge. While race and institutionalized

racism were almost never mentioned in neoliberal policy outlines, Briscoe and Khalifa (2015) note that "most of the schools judged as failures by these neoliberal criteria are located in economically disadvantaged and minority-majority schools" (p. 744).

In 2009, President Barack Obama launched his signature education initiative, Race to the Top, which further codified neoliberal education policies and incentivized four models of intensive school reform: Turnaround, Closure, Transformation, and Restart. For the purposes of this paper, Turnaround appears with a capital T when it refers explicitly to the Race to the Top model, while turnaround with a lower case t refers to the set of neoliberal policy approaches to drastically improving schools labeled as persistently low achieving (additional definitions of key terms appear later in this introductory chapter). Race to the Top reform models, aimed at generating rapid and significant improvement in the nation's lowest-performing five percent of schools (as measured by standardized academic achievement and school culture metrics), represent the most intensive interventions of neoliberal education policy (Dobrick, 2014). While the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act introduced more flexibility at the state level to design interventions for low-performing schools, neoliberal school turnaround reform models are still largely entrenched throughout the country. As Nygreen (2016) observes, neoliberal policies and practices have become "so thoroughly normalized that they seem to be natural and inevitable, rather than expressions of a particular ideological perspective" (p. 204). The structures of neoliberal school reforms, including their adoption of a race-neutral approach to solving problems of equity that are inextricably intertwined with issues of racism and their focus on data and accountability to improve performance, have developed a seemingly gravitational pull on public school districts and school management organizations that has proven extremely difficult to break.

Proponents of turnaround reforms have trumpeted increases in student achievement and outcome metrics such as proficiency scores and graduation rates. Critics have asserted that these reforms have narrowed, weakened, and privatized public schooling to the detriment of already marginalized students and communities (Trujillo & Renée, 2015). Brought to bear on these arguments has been an unprecedented flood of formative and summative data utilized to drive federal and local policy as well as decision-making and management at the district and school levels. However, no matter how carefully disaggregated and analyzed, these data say little about the actual experiences of individuals or groups of students in a school or system. They also say little about the impact of school turnaround and closure on the families that comprise the school community or the local neighborhoods that surround schools marked for turnaround and closure. As we progress through the third decade of the twenty-first century, scholars have a critical opportunity to dig more deeply into the development and impact of our efforts to "turn around" schools marked as failing. Against the backdrop of a national disruption in our educational institutions brought on by the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, occurring simultaneously with crises at breaking points relating to racial injustice, economics, politics, and climate, it is essential that scholars critically examine how we arrived at this point, the impacts of what has been tried so far, and how we might move forward to realize racial equity and educational justice for students in our lowest performing schools.

Prior to further exploring neoliberal school turnaround reforms, it is helpful to elaborate on important notes of historical context related to the evolution of inequality in cities and schools. Public education in the United States has been marked by systemic racism since its earliest iterations, and against the backdrop of the 20th-century American metropolis, it has coexisted with wave after wave of racialized oppression in housing, employment, health care,

nutrition, and many other areas of public and private life. While its stated purpose is often to equalize opportunity and level the playing field, education has frequently been an instrument whose effect has been to bolster and perpetuate, rather than ameliorate, societal inequity.

Erickson (2016) characterizes educational policy and inequality in the context of political economy, observing, "In each of its phases, segregation and inequality have been supported and sustained by the interactions between schooling and capitalist markets in land and labor" (p. 315). Schools' orientation from the outset of the common school movement toward developing citizens and productive workers inextricably ties them to the political economy of the cities where they are located. However, the trend of schooling in the United States exacerbating inequality of opportunity has been particularly salient in recent decades as the ideal of education as a public good - developing students as citizens and strengthening democracy - has lost standing relative to the goal of education as a private good - developing students as wage-earners and strengthening political economy (Trujillo & Renée, 2015).

The highly spatial organization of schools makes them inextricably tied to segregation in housing. Within this context, it logically follows that schools are likely to reproduce the opportunities and inequities present in the metropolis. As Erikson observed, however, schooling took on an even deeper role in the post- *Brown v. Board of Education* and post-Coleman Report era of school desegregation:

> Surely in Nashville as well as in desegregation cases both South and North, powerful white individuals and institutions shared in racist ideology that made them unable to see – much less credit or support – black communities. But their stunted vision was as much material as cultural; their racism a system of power as much as a matter of individual feeling. Basic structures of economic and political power in the metropolis supported,

> and at times depended upon, disregarding or destroying black communities and institutions, in schooling as in other venues. (p. 9)

As a result of the interaction of white-supremacist capitalism and the political economy of public schooling, desegregation and other efforts to improve educational opportunity throughout the 20th century not only failed to meaningfully progress toward the stated goal, but actually contributed to schooling's participation in deepening inequality.

While Erikson's research focuses on Nashville, similar trends have been observed in nearly every major metropolis in the nation. Building additional context, Dougherty (2008) describes the ways in which the impact of decades of housing discrimination, deindustrialization, and backlash against school desegregation efforts led to the transformation of public education "into a commodity to be bought and sold through the private real estate market" (p. 255). As a result, white flight and the expansion of suburbanization contributed greatly to re-segregation, disinvestment and the decline of institutional resources and public education opportunities for minoritized communities in urban centers.

As an important note, this salient trend over the past half-century is a profound and devastating manifestation of the Critical Race Theory tenet of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). While families with means (mainly white) sought to purchase educational opportunities in suburbs or private schools, families who remained in struggling urban systems found their schools and students increasingly neglected, labeled as "failing," and subjected to perennial efforts to "fix" public education. However, over the past two decades, suburbs throughout the United States have seen significant demographic shifts. As a result, suburban schools and school districts have increasingly grappled with issues of race, power, privilege, accountability, and performance. As this trend has accelerated, white families have found new ways to utilize their

whiteness as capital in advocating for and securing privilege in educational opportunities for their children (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020). As a result of these and intersecting systems of oppression, racialized economic inequality and inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes have persisted and often deepened over the past 50 years across nearly all contexts (Ewing, 2018; Horsford et al., 2019; Love, 2019; Todd-Breland, 2018).

Within this context, neoliberal school reform efforts have evolved in the United States since the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983, taking significant attention and resources away from community-based and grassroots efforts to improve educational opportunities. As Todd-Breland (2018) recounts, beginning in the 1980s, "By obscuring and appropriating the intentions of a Black self-determinist politics of Black achievement in service of a neoliberal political agenda, corporate education reformers positioned urban education as a new market for private investment and capital accumulation" (p. 181). However, private investment and the application of market-based principles to public education have had limited success in bringing about improved educational opportunities or outcomes. Scott and Holme (2016) conducted an extensive review of research on some of the most prominent "market-based" reforms in education that emerged toward the close of the 20th century and expanded into the early 21st century. While these reforms are aimed at equalizing educational opportunity, the authors observed that such efforts "reflect, rather than interrupt, patterns of urban racial segregation" (p. 279). The research presented in this study seeks to interrogate these reforms and the narratives that support them, exploring possible alternative approaches and counternarratives to some of neoliberalism's most pervasive ideas and practices.

One of the central themes of school reform policy in a neoliberal context is seeing schools and school systems as carrying full responsibility for the existence and amelioration of

the achievement gap (Lemke 2020; Nygreen 2016; Trujillo & Renée, 2015). As a result, little attention is focused on addressing or problematizing the broader and interrelated systems of oppression and systemic inequality that contributed to the existence of unequal educational opportunities and outcomes. Some scholars argue that it is precisely by ignoring the legacy of inequitable political, economic, housing, health, and other social structures that school systems create policy reforms that maintain systems of inequality and segregation (Apple 2020; Ewing 2018). This apparent conflict between the goal of education as expanding opportunity and ameliorating inequality and the empirical reality of education's role in accomplishing the opposite merits significant reflection. While this is particularly important with respect to examining our nation's most intensive efforts to improve schools labeled as persistently low-achieving, no school or school system should consider itself exempt from this type of inquiry.

Another important theme of school reform in a neoliberal context explored in recent years is its reliance on the market-based philosophy of neoliberal capitalism to frame reforms as race-neutral or "color-evasive." Consistent with the framework of Critical Race Theory, color blindness or color-evasiveness must be problematized and connected to the extremely detrimental dynamic of racial erasure (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). According to Welton and Diem (2021), "Color-evasive policies maintain the racial status quo through the adoption of race-neutral policies that *deny* the role race and racism play in perpetuating structural inequities" (p. 7). These policies interact with and contribute to extremely troubling trends of increasing segregation and income inequality, further placing the burden of structural racism on communities of color with limited access to resources (Lipman, 2011). Wells (2014) sums up the interaction between neoliberal education reform and color-blindness as follows "NCLB…is, quite simply, a reflection of the most popular 'colorblind' approach to addressing racial

disparities in education: Ignore stark racial inequality when implementing policies and then bemoan vivid racial inequalities in educational outcomes" (p. 1). Color-evasive school reform policies, through their insistence on not naming the presence of systemic racism in every level of our educational institutions, delay necessary efforts at deconstruction and reconstruction. They also deny (even if not intentionally) the lived experiences of students and families of color while allowing for white supremacy to persist unchecked.

Considering the entrenched structures of neoliberalism throughout public and private entities throughout the United States, there do not appear to be any simple or straightforward paths to stemming the tide of neoliberal school reform at scale. However, academic study and practice in public school systems are beginning to frame alternative approaches. The research presented in this study seeks to build upon this growing body of literature by examining the ways in which community, school, and district leaders might come together to counter color-evasive neoliberal approaches and improve learning opportunities for students who attend schools labeled as low-performing.

Problem Statement

The broadly-framed problem that this dissertation seeks to address is as follows: four decades after A Nation at Risk was published, and after two decades and billions of dollars invested in neoliberal school reform initiatives since the passage of No Child Left Behind, we have seen some progress in individual cases but minimal progress at scale in improving the educational outcomes of our children in communities that have been least well served by public and private institutions and by our public school systems. Not only has this central goal of neoliberal school reform failed to materialize, but research increasingly points to harm done to

children who attend schools labeled as low-performing and to the communities in which their schools are nested.

With this problem in mind, it is necessary for researchers and practitioners to explore a different path if we aspire to realize sustainable improvements in lived experiences, learning opportunities, and measurable outcomes for students and communities that have been marginalized and minoritized. This path must include work that brings community, school, and district leaders together in collaboration to co-create reform efforts in a way that explicitly centers racial equity. To explore this hypothesis, the central research question guiding this study is: How can community leaders, school leaders, and district leaders work together in equitable and inclusive partnerships to cultivate growth in schools labeled as low performing? In Chapter 2, I present a theoretical and conceptual framework for the study and in Chapter 3, I explore themes within research literature that provide an empirical foundation for the work.

In Chapter 4, I outline my methodological approach to conducting research to explore this question through a critical ethnographic case study aligned with the theoretical and conceptual framework presented for this research. In selecting data collection and data analysis methods, I focus particular attention on exploring the cultures and discourses that emerge within equitable partnerships that engage stakeholders in co-designing policy and practice centering racial equity and liberatory educational justice. This study is carried out in a large urban public PreK-12 school district (one of the 25 largest in the nation) with a significant history of neoliberal school reform including school reconstitution and the proliferation of school choice under No Child Left Behind and Turnaround schools and School Improvement Grants (SIGs) under Race to the Top. It is also a district that has developed, over the past several years, a formalized and robust commitment to Equity and has a number of influential community

organizations and community leaders who are involved in various reforms focused on racial equity. However, as a large and incredibly complex district entity that is still organized around a number of hierarchical neoliberal structures, it evidences the challenges as well as the promises of aspiring to enact liberatory change efforts that center racial equity and educational justice.

Through conducting interviews and focus groups, analyzing artifacts, and engaging in participant observations, I gathered evidence that suggests six major findings that address key elements of what the title of this study refers to as "Liberatory Cultivation." These findings reflect major themes emerging from the data including: the importance of acknowledging harm done by neoliberal school reforms; the infrastructure required to sustain liberatory reforms; the type of discourse necessary to move beyond neoliberal systems of community engagement; the deep identity work, the "soul work" that must be done by stakeholders building relationships that enable equitable collaboration; the need to resist the pull toward damaging dynamics seen in neoliberal school reform; and the nature of the accountability the district entity must take on in order to support and sustain liberatory cultivation. Chapter 5 of this dissertation explores these findings in depth primarily through the collective discourse that arose through participant interviews. Chapter 6 elaborates on and adds depth to the findings through exploring three cases of co-creation toward liberatory school experiences: operationalizing an Equity framework, developing an Equity-focused accountability policy, and community design teams co-creating visions for schools labeled as low performing. In Chapter 7, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of this study and situate it within the context of emerging scholarly research as well as relative to the current educational landscape in our nation.

Definition of Essential Terms

It is important at the outset to provide succinct working definitions for essential terms that are explored more deeply in the chapters that follow. Below is a list of essential terms with working definitions, as well as the key sources from which these working definitions are derived.

- **Neoliberal Philosophy/Neoliberal Democracy** – An economic, political, cultural approach to society and the public sphere, focused on free-market principles, privatization, and divestment from public institutions (Casey, 2016; Lipman, 2011, Love 2023).
- **Neoliberal School Reform** – A bipartisan approach to school systems focused on data, accountability, choice/market-based competition, corporate management principles, and privatization of/divestment from public schools and districts (Horsford et al., 2019; Nygreen, 2017; Todd-Breland, 2018; Welton & Diem, 2020).
- **Turnaround/Transformation** – A punitive approach to accountability aimed at drastically improving schools labeled as low performing through removal of staff, changes in governance/management authority, a focus on outcome metrics and providing grant funds and technical assistance partners. Codified in federal policy through No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top (Dobrick, 2014; Trujillo & Renee, 2015).
- **Color-Evasiveness** – An approach to law and policy that minimizes the role that systemic racism plays in society & institutions, often having the effect of maintaining and deepening racialized disparities (Annamma et al., 2017; Crenshaw et al., 2019; Welton, Diem, & Lent, 2023).

- **Equitable Partnerships** – Collaborations that challenge deficit framings of expertise, engage in capacity and relationship building, and engage families and communities as educational leaders and co-creators (Ishimaru, 2018 & 2019; Welton & Freelon, 2018).
- **Liberatory Education** – A holistic, humanizing approach to learning opportunities that centers student agency and voice, acknowledging and confronting intersectional systems of oppression, building inclusive and democratic communities, and pedagogy that is critical and emancipatory (Jefferson et al. 2018; Mascareñaz & Tran, 2023; Richardson, 2023).
- **Educational Justice** – Endeavoring to realize political and civic equality, deconstruct oppressive systems, and balance power across all lines of identity through enacting equity in systems, schools, and learning opportunities that activate student potential and community cultural wealth (Allen & Reich, 2013; Colina Neri et al., 2023; Kissel, 2021; Yosso, 2005).

Chapter 2 – Epistemology, Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This research study is guided by a theoretical and a conceptual framework rooted in critical epistemology, which provides a contrast with the positivist and interpretivist approaches (Capper, 2019) taken by color-evasive neoliberal school reform. My particular approach is informed by Collins and Stockdale's (2018) articulation of the essential role that both theory and conceptual frameworks play in structuring qualitative research in a way that allows for rich knowledge production and connection to a broader world than that illuminated by the specific research question, methods, and data at hand in a discrete project. Additionally, this epistemological approach is heavily influenced by Green's (2017) articulation of the journey from positivism and interpretivism to critical theory in education leadership.

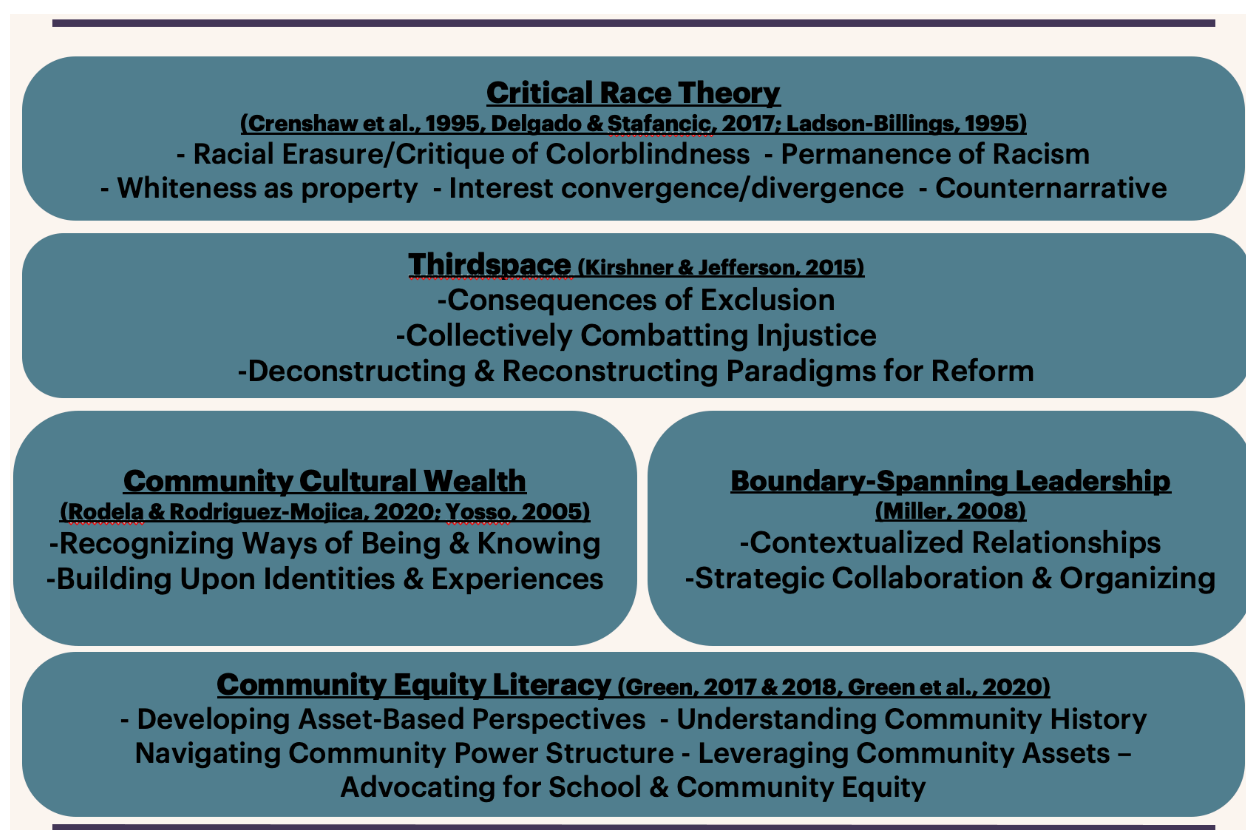
Critical Race Theory (CRT) comprises the foundation for the theoretical framework for this work (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021). Several key tenets of CRT are aligned with the study's focus, particularly racial erasure/critique of color-blindness (Gotanda, 1991), whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), racial realsim/permanence of racism (Bell, 1993), interest convergence/divergence (Bell, 1980), and counternarrative (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Thirdspace Theory (Gutierrez, 2008; Kirshner & Jefferson, 2015) is a theoretical frame aligned with CRT that helps bring forth a vision for equitable, inclusive collaborative environments that do not often exist within neoliberal reform spaces. Woven together, these elements form a lens through which co-created educational leadership and policy work can be viewed and understood in a way that addresses dynamics of power, privilege, oppression, as well as liberatory possibilities.

This theoretical framework, then, is utilized in concert with a conceptual framework that incorporates the concept of Boundary-Spanning Leadership (Miller, 2008), and additional CRT-

aligned concepts Community Equity Literacy (Green, 2017), and Community Cultural Wealth (Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020; Yosso, 2005). Each of these concepts provides essential guidance to endeavors focused on cultivating strategic, asset-based approaches to developing inclusive partnerships that engage community, school, and district leaders in liberatory co-creation. Layering these elements provides the theoretical and conceptual organizational structure for this study, as visualized in figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework



In this chapter, each element is discussed individually and in conjunction with others to articulate the specific theoretical and conceptual framework that is utilized to situate existing research and inform future work. This integrated theoretical and conceptual framework guides the present study's approach to reviewing literature, posing research questions, implementing a

critical qualitative research methodology, and developing findings. In a recursive manner, it drives each aspect of data collection and analysis and serves as a lens through which to view and discuss results.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this project is rooted in Hill Collins' (2019) articulation of the power of critical social theories:

> Because theories explain the social world, they affect the social world, even though their influence may not be apparent. Some social theories have the power to oppress, and do so quite effectively, without most people realizing the power of theory in maintaining an unjust social order. Other social theories have sparked considerable social action, providing critical explanations of the social world that catalyzed rebellions small and large…critical social theory both explains and criticizes existing social inequalities, with an eye toward creating possibilities for change. Stated differently, critical social theories aim to reform what is in the hope of transforming it into something else. (p. 4-5)

Neoliberal school reform efforts have been marked, in many ways, by an absence of social theory and critical consciousness; to the degree that theory has been present, it has primarily been rooted in neoliberal economic and market-based theories that are themselves rooted in logical positivism. However, these market-based approaches to solving complex social problems leave both problems and proposed solutions insufficiently understood. An approach to school development that truly centers racial equity and educational justice must be based on a much more sophisticated and multi-faceted understanding of the historical, moral economic, and social dimensions of inequity and injustice in our schools (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Below is a brief

discussion of Critical Race Theory and Thirdspace Theory as the essential theoretical underpinnings of the proposed research.

Critical Race Theory

With roots in the legal field, Critical Race Theory incorporates a set of precepts that guide an understanding of the ways in which the social construction of race has impacted institutional and micro-level structures throughout society to oppress people racialized as Black and other people of color and impacted the lived experiences of all people in the United States, including those racialized as white (Crenshaw, et al., 1995). In the current political moment, reflecting on the ways in which Critical Race Theory has been misconstrued and weaponized by conservative politicians and school district stakeholders, it is particularly important to situate CRT appropriately as part of the essential theoretical core of the proposed research. While much of the backlash against CRT in the context of elementary and secondary school systems has been focused on a fundamental misunderstanding and mischaracterization of CRT as part of a K-12 curricula, there has still been little dialogue about CRT's very important place in informing the manner in which our educators seek to shape and improve our school systems on behalf of children who have been least well served by our institutions. Below is a brief outline of how key tenets of Critical Race Theory connect with the endeavor of humanizing and centering racial justice in school development efforts.

Critique of Colorblindness/Color-Evasiveness

Simply put, as will be addressed in the literature review, Color-blindness (Gotanda, 1991) or color-evasiveness as it has been more recently known (Annamma et al., 2017), serves both to devalue the lived experiences of those racialized as Black, and to prop up white supremacy.

Policies that embrace color-evasiveness, while claiming to reach toward an idealized post-Civil Rights era vision, serve in practice to accomplish the opposite.

Permanence of Racism/ Racial Realism

Central tenet of Critical Race Theory, the permanence of racism and the necessity of racial realism (Bell, 1991) are essential elements in considering how to counter color-evasive attempts to improve schools labeled as low-performing. While acknowledging the presence and persistence of racial achievement gaps, color-evasive school reform refuses to grapple with the socio-historical omnipresence of racism in setting the conditions in which racialized achievement gaps came to be as well as the degree to which racism must be confronted in order to consider meaningful and sustainable solutions to pursue equity in educational opportunity and achievement.

Whiteness as Property

A closely associated tenet of CRT, addressing the property function of whiteness (Harris, 1993), has additional resonance when considering the work of improving schools marked as low performing. Quite literally, public school systems' resources are derived from property wealth, and the unconscionable racism in housing policy and practice over the course of the past century have led whiteness to hold very real as well as theoretical property value. Housing segregation and associated segregation in public school systems have led to dramatically inequitable resource distribution and contributed directly to disparate outcomes for schools and students. An additional element to consider in relation to both the permanence of racism and the property function of whiteness is the degree to which inequities persist even in integrated schools that are regarded as high quality (Diamond, 2015).

Interest Convergence/Divergence

A third tenet connected particularly to neoliberal and color-evasive school reform efforts is interest convergence. Perhaps most notably framed by Derrick Bell in reflecting on the history of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1980), progress toward racial equity "is possible to the extent that the divergence of racial interests can be avoided or minimized" (p. 24). As neoliberal market strategies came to be adopted to solve social problems in the latter part of the twentieth century, and as these strategies came to be the primary focus for school improvement in the early twenty-first century, a tremendous amount of political interest and financial capital came to be available for neoliberal reformers through private investment as well as government grants. However, as has been discussed previously in reviewing literature on school reform, these reforms, even when enacted in partnership to some degree with communities of color, have been primarily developed and deployed in a manner that privileges whiteness and dominant culture. Success has often been heralded by reformers, and failure has regularly been placed on the backs of communities, primarily communities of color with limited access to political and financial resources with which to drive their own approaches to reform. CRT gives a theoretical frame through which to interrogate whose interests are being served by the surface-level interest convergence of school reform efforts.

Counternarrative

Here, it is critical to consider a fifth key tenet of CRT aligned with this study's aims, Counternarrative. The voices of youth as well as communities (Pazey, 2020; Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015) speak volumes in opposition to the claims made by corporate, non-profit, and school district reformers about school turnaround and transformation efforts. As articulated by Solórzano & Yosso (2002), Counterstory is a method for telling stories that have not been

frequently told, particularly from the perspective of children and communities that have been racialized and minoritized. Additionally, Counterstory can serve as a powerful means to challenge dominant paradigms and power structures; in this case, the color-evasive neoliberal paradigms that have dominated education reform narratives, policies, and practices over the past several decades.

Thirdspace Theory

As articulated by Kirshner and Jefferson (2015), “In its various iterations, Thirdspace has offered alternative approaches to understanding the negative consequences of leaving people out of policy decisions that affect them directly” (p. 11). When considered in conjunction with Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality, Thirdspace helps to drive home, from a theoretical perspective, the possibility for “histories of exclusion and enactments of power are acknowledged and used to guide the construction of new practices… that are not limited by traditional or contemporary notions of school reform” (p. 12). Given the tremendously unequal dynamics between school district leaders and reform partners and the communities in which the schools they lead are nested, Thirdspace theory helps to articulate the need for an intentionally created environment within which stakeholders might counteract educational and intersectional racial injustice. This provides an important theoretical frame through which to envision an environment within which equitable partnerships between school and community leaders may come together in a way that does not match the most frequently seen dynamics of community engagement as tacit support for district reform policies or as organized opposition to these policies.

Conceptual Framework

In addition to a theoretical framework rooted in Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality and Thirdspace Theory, three key conceptual elements aligned with Critical Race Theory contribute to a conceptual framework that guides this research. These three concepts, Boundary-Spanning Leadership (Miller, 2008), Community Equity Literacy (Green, 2018), and Community Cultural Wealth (Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020; Yosso, 2005) inform school development for racial equity and educational justice are each outlined briefly below in the context of the study.

Boundary-Spanning Leadership

One of the core failures of neoliberal school reform, as articulated previously, is the (sometimes unspoken) belief that schools are solely responsible for the existence of and amelioration of gaps in educational opportunity and achievement and by extension, hold primary responsibility for breaking cycles of poverty and racial inequity in society. While schools can and absolutely should play a central role, in light of a theoretical framework provided by Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality, this belief causes severely missed opportunities for true partnership across sectors and stakeholder groups. As articulated by Miller (2008), Boundary-Spanning Leadership is an important framework by which leaders dramatically enhance the reach and effectiveness of their work by building connectedness and contextual relationships through strategic collaboration with the communities they serve. As Miller articulates, these leaders become "institutional infiltrators organizing for community advancement" (p.353) and help create sustainable architecture for boundary-spanning work within their communities.

Community Cultural Wealth

In order to appropriately situate efforts to develop schools toward racial equity and educational justice, Community Cultural Wealth (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2023; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica; 2020, Yosso, 2005) challenges deficit narratives to assert that Communities of Color possess rich experiences, expertise, and cultural capital. While Community Cultural Wealth consists of invaluable assets and can make a remarkable contribution to education at all levels, it is too often devalued, ignored, or erased. This concept provides a call for leaders to interrogate and mine their own ways of knowing and/or build ways of knowing in order to recognize the essential ways that student and community identity and experience must necessarily drive the work of a school. Rather than a nice add-on, Yosso (2005) integrates the concept of Community Cultural Wealth with Critical Race theory to assert that this an essential conceptual pillar of effective school leadership toward social justice.

Community Equity Literacy

Green's (2018) theoretical and practical conception of Community Equity Literacy (discussed in greater detail in the review of literature), integrates the socio-historical, racial, and political landscape of a community as well as its own goals. Aligning with and extending the concepts of Boundary-Spanning Leadership and community cultural wealth, Community Equity Literacy calls on leaders to cultivate their own critical epistemology, identity, and values and to develop and employ a deep understanding of the communities in which their schools are nested in order to "advance equitable outcomes in and outside of schools' walls" (506). Green outlines five essential constructs that comprise Community Equity Literacy: develop asset-based

perspectives; understand community history; navigate community power structure; leverage community assets; and advocate for school and community equity (491).

Taken together, these theoretical and conceptual lenses interact to create a framework for developing equitable partnerships between community, school, and district leaders toward school development for racial equity and educational justice. Aligning these concepts brings into focus the type of work that might take place within a “third space” that charts a path toward just and humanizing school development that diverges from and creates a Counterstory which illustrates a path that diverges from color-evasive neoliberal school reform. This theoretical and conceptual framework guides exploration into the study’s primary and secondary research questions investigating how community, school, and district leaders work together to support schools labeled as low performing and the cultures, discourses, and lessons that emerge from this work.

Chapter 3: Review of Literature

Process and Overview

To investigate where school turnaround reform efforts have been in the recent past and explore possibilities for how to chart a different future path, this literature review identifies salient themes within extant literature and organizes them utilizing the theoretical lens of Critical Race Theory. To identify the most relevant literature, I searched the JSTOR, ERIC, and EBSCO Education Research Databases for literature published with keywords "School Turnaround," "Neoliberal School Reform," "Color-Evasive," "Race-Neutral," "School Improvement Grant," and "Race to the Top." I then narrowed results to peer-reviewed articles and books, focusing on those published between 2008 and 2024, to focus on academic literature illustrating efforts at intensive school reform in the current neoliberal federal and state policy context. After reviewing abstracts and citations to gather an understanding of the major approaches to school turnaround research and the major themes addressed by this research, I identified roughly 50 texts that make significant empirical and conceptual contributions, as well as adding necessary context. To support a comprehensive understanding of research literature, I also reviewed the references of each published study to identify additional research that would add substantive understanding; roughly 15 additional articles were added through this process.

Synthesizing the major themes that emerged from extant literature, and connecting to the framework of Critical Race Theory, I proceed as follows. First, I explore research focused on color-evasive or race-neutral school reform policies, connecting this theme to Gotanda's (1991) foundational CRT text, "A Critique of Our Constitution is Color-Blind". Second, I reviewed research assessing the outcomes for students of neoliberal turnaround reforms under Race to the Top, connecting this theme to Bell's (1975) "Serving Two Masters." Next, I reviewed research

that specifically articulated conditions and factors associated with the success of turnaround reforms, where it has been observed. This is explored through the CRT tenet of Interest Convergence/Divergence (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2013) Departing from more traditional quantitative and mixed-methods research, I explored how literature written from a critical epistemology informs our understanding, both theoretical and practical, of the impact of school turnaround and closure on families that comprise the school community or the local neighborhoods surrounding schools. This theme is connected both to the CRT tenet of Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 2019), and to that of the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Finally, I review the emerging body of research that seeks to illuminate a departure from neoliberal turnaround reforms and improve schools through focus on equity, justice, and partnerships with school communities. I connect this theme to the CRT tenet of counterstory (Miller, et al, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002;) as well as Community Cultural Wealth (Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020; Yosso, 2005). In closing, I offer thoughts on the implications of current research literature and gaps, as well as multiple directions for future research in the area of inquiry focused on centering equity and engaging students, parents, and community members as leaders in enacting school reform aimed at improving persistently low-performing schools and advancing racial justice.

Color-Evasive and Race Neutral School Reform and Scholarship

The hegemony of neoliberal school reform brings with it a number of profound paradoxes, perhaps the most glaring of which is the degree to which is the stated goal to close racial achievement gaps, while not truly engaging with issues of race and racism (Diem and Welton, 2020; Wells, 2014; Lipman, 2011). Neoliberal framings, with their focus on outside expertise, data, accountability, and market-driven solutions, comprise a positivist approach to

solving issues that due to their roots in discrimination, oppression, and structural racism, necessitate a critical approach. Often framed as color-blindness, which is frequently discussed as a positive or desirable characteristic in post-civil rights discourse, Annamma et al. (2017) articulate a case for framing this trend as color-evasiveness, which allows scholars and practitioners to appropriately problematize and counter reform efforts that are proposed as race neutral solutions. Countering color-evasiveness, then, is an essential aspect of this needed shift from positivist to critical interventions.

Kohli, et al., (2017), in a comprehensive review of scholarly literature focused on racial inequity perpetuated by educational institutions' evasion of addressing systemic and intersectional racism, found that recent scholarship highlights that educational institutions have been complicit in maintaining and even worsening racial inequities in education in part, by embracing concepts like color-blindness and race-neutral meritocracy, major hallmarks of neoliberal ideology. Summarizing a series of studies that examine this trend at a systemic level, they find that:

> A collective analysis of these studies pushes us to understand a new form of educational racism that is masked by equity language and driven by capitalist, market-driven goals. This literature reveals how rhetoric of equity and justice is being used to promote neoliberal-driven educational laws, policies and institutions that, in fact, protect and exacerbate racial inequity in and through K–12 schools. (p. 189)

While decrying the persistence of the racial achievement gap in education, neoliberal reformers have continuously worked to focus on approaches to "fixing" schools without addressing the broader context of systemic racism in which schools and school systems exist. Further articulating this dynamic, Goldin and Khasnabis (2022) summarize work across a number of

classroom, school, and system contexts and argues "when races is overlooked in the design and/or implementation of educational equity efforts, those efforts may be more than ineffective. They may actually be weaponized by racism to cause harm. This can occur despite the intended or spoken purpose of educational efforts to promote equity" (p. 1). As has been the case with other historical trends, color-blindness as invoked by neoliberal reformers in the post-civil rights era as a positive and a path toward greater equality has actually become a tool, in color-evasiveness, that perpetuates white supremacy and racialized oppression (Annamma, et al., 2017).

Given the focus on ameliorating the racial achievement gap, regardless of the methods used or their unintended effects, it is necessary to explore whether academic research regarding school turnaround yields evidence that neoliberal school turnaround reforms have resulted in progress toward this goal; this is the focus of the following section.

Assessing the Success of School Turnaround Reforms

Reflecting on the tremendous expansion in funding for school turnaround reforms represented by Race to the Top in 2009, one might hope to find a clear and consistent base of research indicating their efficacy in improving student achievement outcomes following the initiation of School Improvement Grants with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002. Instead, an examination of the intensive reforms enacted in the years following the passage of NCLB to improve high-stakes assessment data and transform the often chaotic and toxic environments in our nation's lowest performing schools led to frequently unsatisfactory results (Payne, 2008). In response, sanctions for schools consistently failing to make adequate yearly progress under NCLB led to interventions referred to as school turnarounds. While the term "turnaround" was utilized imprecisely prior to the formalized definitions provided through Race to the Top in

2009, it consistently referred to making drastic changes to the organization, staffing, and governance of schools to attempt to improve student outcomes (Redding & Nguyen, 2020). In some cases, academic research literature points to examples of "turnaround success" under NCLB sanctions in which an individual school achieved a successful turnaround, increasing the percentage of students meeting standards on tests by 60 or 70 percentage points over a period of four to five years (Maxwell et al., 2010).

Given the expansive body of research literature on high-quality organizational and instructional practices under the umbrellas of the Effective Schools (Edmonds, 1979) and Comprehensive School Reform (Borman et al., 2003) movements, it is certainly encouraging that exemplars of such dramatic school improvements emerged in scholarly literature. However, the case for district and state-led intervention to push turnaround reforms under Race to the Top as the Obama Administration's signature education policy was advanced much more by education non-profits such as Mass Insight and philanthropic organizations such as the Gates Foundation than academic research. A 2009 article in Education Week in the "Eye on Research" section (Viadero, 2009) pointed to the shallow, inconsistent research base on school turnaround, particularly in the context of major national policy initiatives centering turnaround reforms, and academic literature reinforces this perspective (Trujillo & Renée, 2015).

Over the past ten years, several scholars have studied outcomes of neoliberal school turnaround reforms as enacted under the four intervention models formalized by Race to the Top (US Department of Ed, 2010) in order to understand the impact of these reforms on student outcome measures.

These models are:

- Transformation, which requires the replacement of the school principal and the adoption of evidence-based practices to improve organizational performance.

- Turnaround, which requires both of the components of the Transformation model and requires the replacement of at least fifty percent of the staff.
- Restart, which removes all staff and transitions management of the school to a school management organization (sometimes but not always to a charter operator) who relaunches the school and assumes responsibility for the governance, educational practices, and accountability measures.
- Closure, which closes schools for persistently low achievement, and entails a commitment to enroll impacted students in higher performing schools based on academic achievement metrics or local district school quality ratings.

Consistent with the stated goals of Race to the Top, studies analyzing trends in outcome measures tend to focus on metrics most traditionally associated with neoliberal reform efforts, such as student achievement, attendance and graduation rates. As states were tasked with competing for Race to the Top funds, a significant body of literature has emerged focusing on results at the state level. Several studies (Carlson & Lavertu 2018; Player & Katz, 2016; Zimmer et al., 2017) found positive results for student outcomes in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math achievement associated with state-organized efforts funded by School Improvement Grants (SIGs) under the Turnaround model. Additional research has illustrated positive outcomes associated with SIG-funded Turnaround models implemented at the school district level (De la Torre et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2017). Data across studies of systems implementing three-year SIGs illustrate a common trend of uneven results in year one, and increased improvement in year two and the most pronounced results in year three of intervention (most school improvement grants supporting Turnaround have a three-year timeline). Another trend emerging from systems that implemented both Transformation and Turnaround models indicate that results tend to be more pronounced in schools that implement the Turnaround model, particularly in math achievement (Dragoset et al., 2019).

However, additional studies have utilized quantitative methods such as regression discontinuity analysis and comparative interrupted time series approaches that have yielded mixed results, frequently demonstrating a lack of meaningful or sustainable progress toward improving student outcomes through school turnaround efforts (Heissel & Ladd, 2017; Henry & Harbatkin, 2020; Strunk et al., 2016). These studies have illustrated the complexity and challenge of achieving consistently significant gains in student outcomes across contexts that have experienced persistent low performance over many years. In some cases, even when success is observed in certain metrics, others decline. For example, connected to the disruptions in school community and climate that accompany school turnaround reform efforts, increases in chronic student absenteeism and mobility have been observed (Heissel & Ladd, 2017; Henry et al., 2020; Redding & Nguyen 2020). Additionally, even when turnaround reforms demonstrate success on stated outcome targets, they may do so by narrowing curriculum and educational programming to meet the immediate pressures of accountability policy at the expense of comprehensive and democratic schooling structures (Trujillo & Wouflin, 2014). Troublingly, this dynamic may set schools in motion to improve relative to their starting points, but not to make meaningful, sustained growth beyond initial quick wins and surface level gains, or to progress toward closing achievement gaps with higher performing schools.

Relatively few studies have looked at results across a national sample of schools or districts implementing Turnaround reforms. However, given the need to assess the impact of such significant policy priorities and fiscal investments at the federal level, an emerging body of research looks at results from a national picture. Two recently published contributions to the literature (Dragoset et al., 2019; Redding & Nguyen, 2020) provide critically important learnings that are helping to fill this gap. Through a meta-analysis, Redding and Nguyen (2020) identified

and analyzed 35 quantitative studies of systems implementing Turnaround reform models under Race to the Top. In their analysis, the meta-analytic effects of Transformation, Turnaround, and Restart models indicated positive though slight trends for attendance (.41 percentage points), Math (.081 standard deviation units) and ELA achievement (.04 standard deviation units), and graduation rates (9.8 percentage points). The Closure model, as well as state takeover of school districts as "turnaround districts" were not associated with statistically significant impacts on student outcomes. A particularly salient question that comes from this research is whether the benefits of implementing one of the four Race to the Top models are worth the costs of such intensive systemic disruption.

In another study seeking to assess results at the national level (Dragoset et al., 2019), scholars aggregated and analyzed data utilizing a regression discontinuity design (RDD) to assess the impact of Turnaround, Transformation, Closure, and Restart models funded by Race to the Top funds allocated through the American Reinvestment and Renewal Act. This study yielded data that across a national sample, persistently low achieving schools (in the lowest 5% of achievement nation-wide, and/or graduation rates below 60%) who received funding and implemented one of the four models did not attain statistically significant growth in student outcomes when compared to persistently low achieving schools that did not implement SIG-funded reforms. Further, evidence aggregated at the national level indicates that with few exceptions, the intervention models (Turnaround, Transformation, Restart, and Closure) did not attain statistically significant differences from one another in outcome measures (Dragoset, 2019).

Taken as a whole, the uneven outcomes evidenced by extant literature appear to be consistent with the conclusion that school turnaround models and SIG funding to support

associated interventions are not, in themselves, sufficient to ensure significant improvements in educational opportunities and outcomes for students who have been least well served by our nation's public school systems. In part, this may be attributed to findings in the literature that turnaround interventions and funding are not necessarily correlated with the implementation of effective practices (Sun et al., 2017; Redding & Nguyen, 2020). Additionally, some academic literature indicates that the measurement tools themselves used to evaluate school turnaround reforms are biased and thus reformers must take a critical approach to countering color-evasiveness in assessment and accountability practices (Randall, 2021). As we continue to explore trends in work toward improving schools labeled as low performing, while research does not indicate success at scale, it is important to consider instances that are considered successes and inquire as to what might be learned from them. In the next section, then, I explore learnings from academic literature regarding conditions and practices that are associated with success when it is achieved in conjunction with turnaround reforms.

Conditions Associated with Success in Improving Persistently Low Achieving Schools Through Turnaround Reform

Multiple studies within the research literature seek to identify conditions present in or practices employed by school and turnaround partner organizations that contribute to success in school turnaround efforts. However, implementation of effective practices has been highly uneven. Distressingly, research focused on national trends has not found significant alignment between School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding and the number of SIG-promoted practices utilized by schools and districts implementing one of the four Race to the Top models for improving persistently low achieving schools (Dragoset et al., 2019). Still, studies illuminate

trends in mediating conditions and effective practices that are associated with improvements in traditional outcome measures as a result of school turnaround reforms.

Within the research literature, several studies explore both outcomes deemed successful and strategic themes that are associated through either correlational or causal analysis with those outcomes. One exemplar study carried out by Player and Katz (2016) utilized a quasi-experimental design to analyze the progress of 22 schools in Ohio that participated in a structured school turnaround program over multiple years. This was in partnership with an external agency, the University of Virginia's School Turnaround Specialist Program (STSP) which focused their work on three essential turnaround principles: effective school leadership, district and school ownership of the turnaround process, and data-driven management (it is worth noting here, that these three principles are strongly aligned with recurring themes in neoliberal school reform efforts more broadly). Through a comparative interrupted time series (CITS) approach, the authors gathered data that were consistent with a causal link between implementing turnaround reforms and increases in overall student proficiency and attendance rates. Additional research (Redding & Nguyen, 2020; Peurach & Neumerski, 2015) have identified similar elements of instructional programming and school/school system infrastructure and focus that support leaders and teachers in raising the performance of persistently low performing schools. Perhaps the two most significant themes that emerge from the research literature are institutional capacity and the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders, each of which are explored in the subsections below.

Institutional Capacity - District and Partner Organizations

While singular turnaround success stories are present in the research literature at the individual school level, school turnaround reform as conceived of in Race to the Top requires

significant institutional capacity, well beyond that of nearly all individual schools. In most cases, research literature highlights the development of a network structure such as Tennessee's iZones (Zimmer et al., 2017) or San Francisco's "Superintendent's Zone" (Sun, Penner, & Loeb 2017) to support turnaround reforms in schools receiving SIG funding. This supports turnaround reforms through the development of shared frameworks and approaches, such as tailoring the 5 Essential Supports (Bryk et al., 2010) to inform the specific implementation of Transformation and Turnaround models, which was done as part of a system-wide needs analysis that drove professional learning, resource allocation, and progress monitoring in San Francisco (Sun, Penner, & Loeb 2017).

Many large urban districts with a significant number of persistently low achieving schools also collaborate with a Lead Turnaround Partner such as Success for All to develop the infrastructure, organizational framework, and institutional capacity to support school turnaround reforms (Peurach & Neumerski, 2015). One tension emerging from their research is between the policy imperative of dramatically improving schools quickly and research in organizational development that indicates sustainable infrastructure for change in schools takes roughly seven years to build. Thus, the Lead Turnaround Partner serves the role of providing the turnaround-ready infrastructure to support school leaders and teachers in implementing dramatic change and achieving "quick wins" toward improved outcomes, while assisting school and district structures to build capacity that can sustain ongoing organizational improvements beyond the scope of the three-year Turnaround, Transformation, or Restart funding and support.

Talent Management - Teachers and School Leaders

Consistent with research indicating that the most significant school-level factors impacting student outcomes are teacher quality and school leadership quality (Leithwood et al.,

2010), studies have formally tested the role of teacher and principal effectiveness on turnaround reform outcomes (Henry et al., 2020). Especially given the intentionally significant staff turnover in year one of a Turnaround or Restart model, the quality of teachers and principals that comprise the staff replacing displaced professionals is a significant part of the theory of action supporting the intervention. Study results are consistent with the hypothesis indicating that teacher effectiveness is a significant mediator of turnaround results, first through the hiring of effective teachers in year 1, and then through the retention of effective teachers in subsequent years. Conversely, among the trends present in the literature associated with a lack of success in school turnaround outcomes are a lack of qualified teacher candidates in year one, and a persistently high rate of teacher turnover in years two and beyond. Where positive effects are observed as a result of Turnaround and Transformation work, research indicates schools become more likely to retain teachers based on effectiveness and less likely to retain teachers based on seniority (Sun et al., 2017). This trend appears to be correlated with increased instructional support, increased accountability for implementing research-based instructional practices, and incorporating student outcomes into evaluation and accountability systems.

The quality of school leaders hired at the outset of a Turnaround intervention has also been shown to be a significant mediator of positive outcomes, provided that these leaders remain in place for the duration of the turnaround and post-turnaround years (Henry et al., 2020; Liu, 2020). This finding certainly makes intuitive sense, as school leadership is a critical factor in the selection and development of staff and the management of all aspects of a school's instructional program, culture, and operations. However, research on turnaround leadership also highlights the importance of leaders as both signalers of, and catalysts for, the significant change that must take place for a school turnaround process to be successful. Hitt and Meyers (2018) synthesize

turnaround school leadership research to identify five domains as essential not just for initial turnaround success, but for sustained improvement through school turnaround:

1) Vision - Designing an inspiring vision and efficacious short-term goals informed by data;
2) Organizational Engagement - Transforming the organization;
3) Organizational Advancement - Leading instruction; helping teachers to advance and evolve;
4) The Student Experience - Insisting upon a high quality learning experience for all students regardless of their background; and
5) External Environment - garnering support from partners. (pp. 24-25)

Further research integrates these domains into specific competencies that school leaders must exhibit within a school turnaround setting, and demonstrates a significant relationship between these competencies and improvements in student achievement scores over a two-year turnaround period (Hitt et al., 2019). These seven competencies are grouped into four broad categories:

a) How these principals approach the improvement process (initiates and persists);

b) How they interact with teachers and other constituent groups (inspires and motivates others, builds capacity with support and accountability, and elicits intended responses);

c) Which cognitive processes they rely upon to inform their work (crystallizes problems and creates solutions, uses inquiry to frame and solve problems); and

d) Their internal states and mind-states (commits to students). (p.205)

This framework for the competencies that lead to success in the highly specialized leadership actions needed in each phase of a school turnaround process is seen as related, but distinct from,

existing frameworks for the professional practice of school leaders. While additional leadership research is certainly needed, extant literature points to both the critical importance of high-quality school leadership to school turnaround efforts, as well as essential areas of practice that school leaders must master.

Research literature exploring characteristics and practices contributing to success in school turnaround where it occurs is nearly silent on impacts on the surrounding community or connections to intersectional injustices connected to school turnaround reforms. This is consistent with the position, frequently held by proponents of neoliberal school reform, that the work of school improvement is to improve schools within a broader system that is assumed to be just, so that impacts of school reform on communities are not taken into account. However, a developing body of research literature assesses the impact of school turnaround efforts from a critical perspective and adds significant depth to our understanding of school turnaround reforms.

Assessing the Effects of Turnaround Reforms on Students and Communities Through Critical Epistemologies

Across the literature on school turnaround, very few quantitative studies look at measures of progress or benefits for students measured in ways other than those displayed in accountability systems (student achievement and growth metrics, attendance, and graduation rates, etc.). Written most often from a structuralist or interpretivist epistemological framework, almost none make mention of the broader political economy of school reform or impact on local communities surrounding schools identified for turnaround beyond cursory stakeholder engagement. Moving beyond student achievement and other outcome measures, a growing body of qualitative research literature has emerged over the past several years that problematizes neoliberal school

reforms through critical epistemological lenses and articulates detrimental impacts on students and communities identified for school turnaround efforts (Dobrick, 2014; Johnson, 2012; Pazey, 2020; Trujillo & Renée, 2015).

One significant theme illustrated by this body of literature is the disproportionate impact of school turnaround efforts on low-income communities that have been minoritized by dominant power structures (Dobrick, 2014; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). While district and state policy narratives articulate school turnaround reforms as technical decisions motivated by the priority of improving student achievement, the impacts are almost always felt by communities who have been marginalized by racial, economic, and political inequities. Meanwhile, significant amounts of money are flowing to outside "experts" tasked with "fixing" failed schools, and by extension, their communities. Scholar Bettina Love (2019) describes the totality of this system as follows:

> All of this reform implemented by the educational survival complex has made billions for the testing industry, the hedge fund industry, the textbook industry, the housing industry, and elitist non-profit organizations that perpetuate and operate from a stereotypical master narrative regarding dark children and their families but, without fail, leave dark families struggling to survive. (p. 33)

Taken together, communities whose schools have been most heavily impacted by neoliberal school reform efforts articulate school turnarounds and closures as a form of "social and civic death" (Johnson, 2012). The impacts of neoliberal school turnaround reforms are often experienced by school communities as instances of state-sanctioned racism. Additionally, the burden for historical failures as well as for the failures of Transformation, Turnaround, Restart, or Closure to lead to dramatically different outcomes for students is placed not at the feet of

policy makers, school management organizations, or philanthropic organizations who drive and profit from the reforms, but on the backs of the communities themselves.

Contributing to this argument, a significant body of literature has arisen focusing on the damaging nature of the deficit narrative applied to schools identified for turnaround reforms. Arising from multiple critical perspectives including DisCrit (Pazey, 2020), Critical Race Feminism (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015), and Critical Discourse Analysis (Carey, 2014), authors have highlighted the ways in which deficit-driven reform efforts invariably have a negative impact on students whose schools are labeled as underperforming or academically unacceptable. These studies illuminate a vexing situation for school communities: while neglect by school systems have helped to create and perpetuate schools that consistently underperform on accountability measures, the attention and resources brought to a school through school turnaround reforms often overlooks and serves to erase the social, cultural, and historical capital that has been built up in their school communities. A paradox that emerges here is that, while neoliberal theory prioritizes choice and competition, turnaround reforms do not. From a critical perspective, actions to “rescue” students and communities from schools labeled as “failing” represent a colonial and paternalistic approach by which outside experts decide when a school is not good enough for families to have the opportunity to choose.

In this process, the strong emphasis placed on achievement and achievement gaps creates a discourse that is rooted in deficit and (dis)ability that burdens schools (and by extension, everyone associated with them) with labels that are placed on them that do not make space to recognize the assets and human value that is present (Pazey, 2020). As a result, school turnaround reforms act to silence the voices of those in impacted school communities, further marginalizing people who have been labeled as deficient by neoliberal school reform rhetoric

and practice (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015). Further, the persistently deficit-focused discourse focused on remedying these deficiencies leaves little room to critically interrogate the dominant cultural norms and white-supremacist, gendered, capitalistic systems of oppression that gave rise to discrepant outcomes to begin with (Carey, 2014; Johnson, 2012). Arguments emerging from this literature hold that, far from being benign, the policy of mandatory sanctions for schools and systems who do not meet accountability standards, not unlike the policy of mandatory minimum sentencing standards in the era of mass incarceration, amounts to state-sanctioned racism.

Additional literature (Shiller, 2018; Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015) has utilized participatory action research and critical race discourse analysis methods to surface deep counter-narratives to districts' rationales for neoliberal school reforms. These rationales reflect a dominant culture and are carefully stated in race-neutral terms by administrators who meticulously craft language that articulates concern for children's education and positions school turnaround reforms as ways to "protect" or "rescue" students from bad schools and "do right by our kids." Speaking of this discourse, Johnson (2012) assesses that "Although they may appropriate the language of social justice movements, 'instrumentalist and technocratic' reforms tend to ignore the historical, material, experiential, and embodied dimensions of racially segregated schools, as well as the social and cultural capital invested by students and communities in their schools" (p. 251). The powerful counter-narratives coming from the lived experiences of communities undergoing turnaround reforms add additional depth to descriptions of Turnaround, Restart and Closure reforms in particular as implements of institutional racism that reinforce white supremacy and the disposability of predominantly Black communities, while simultaneously ignoring and/or

erasing culture and valuable assets such as relationships, connection to place, and sense of belonging.

Another dimension emerging from a review of recent literature critiques ways that neoliberal school turnaround reforms have diminished democratic involvement in public schools and exclude communities from democratic participation in schools (Kirshner & Jefferson, 2015; Meens & Howe, 2015; Trujillo & Renée, 2015). Through critical policy analysis, these studies illustrate how the neoliberal market-based reform system undermines the civic and democratic purposes of public education, excluding democratically elected bodies and the public from participating in deliberation about the desired aims of education and replacing them with choices as determined by outside actors. As a result, students and community members are limited to a role as impacted stakeholders rather than as decision makers and actors in school change. Further complicating matters, some empirical research finds that school leaders, the formal authorities who are best positioned to engage stakeholders in democratic processes, are stifled by federal, state, and district policy even when they desire to do so (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015). Johnson (2012) states, "The kinds of internal and structural changes desired by school communities, such as administrative stability, teacher retention, improved facilities, more advanced curricula, and respect of student dignity, can be at odds with accountability demands and unaccounted for in private interventions" (p. 251). As a result, communities to whom public schools rightfully belong are rendered without a voice in articulating the outcomes, priorities, and structures of their educational systems.

In light of critical paradigms, neoliberal school turnaround reforms viewing schools through an economic lens, with inequality and inequitable outcomes disconnected from systemic discrimination, are dangerously incomplete and flawed. Seeing failing schools as aberrations in

an otherwise just society and school change as disconnected from a broader and interconnected struggle against systems of oppression misses an essential need for oppressed peoples to contribute to the construction of a more just and humane society (Nygreen, 2016). If meaningful improvement is to be made toward equity in opportunity as well as outcomes, in education, authentic incorporation of communities will be a critical step (Johnson, 2012; Lemke, 2020; Pazey, 2020, Trujillo & Renée, 2015).

Equity-Focused Strategies for Improving Schools Labeled as Low Performing

Focused on the drive to incorporate critical epistemologies and equity into school reform, some authors have researched counterstrategies aimed at meaningful and sustainable improvement of struggling schools that does not involve the collateral damage of neoliberal school turnaround practices. Recent literature provides examples of students and community members engaging as leaders in owning the very difficult work of improving struggling schools; they make meaningful and sustainable change through the development of equitable partnerships together with school and district leaders (Ishimaru, 2018; Kirshner & Jefferson, 2015). In order to do this, they must partner to deconstruct the institutionalized and racialized scripts that operate in traditional school systems and structures that view school communities as impacted stakeholders rather than true contributors to change efforts.

A key question in this work is whether minoritized communities can meaningfully disrupt colonial and deficit-focused scripts to leverage existing school system structures in enacting equity-focused reforms. Utilizing ethnographic field methods, researchers have studied the ways in which parents and students have shown progress in improving schools, thereby developing potential arguments for challenging or subverting the hegemony of neoliberal school reform paradigms that have become nearly universal in federal and local education policy (Ishimaru,

2018; Nygreen, 2016, Trujillo & Renée, 2015). One of the most consistent contributions of these studies is that they seek to position students, families, and community members as agents of change, and not passive recipients of change. This helps to counter the deficit-minded approach that turnaround reforms often take, which view struggling schools and their stakeholders as problems that need to be fixed. However, additional research has shown that as community stakeholders build capacity in organizing and advocating for equity, they may sometimes be limited or co-opted by neoliberal authority structures, becoming an add-on to enhance neoliberal reforms rather than a full challenge to them (Nygreen, 2017). To avoid this pitfall and drive toward meaningful, sustained change that advances educational justice, it is necessary to center school communities and democratic aims into reform efforts, rather than to view community engagement as a tool for broadening stakeholder support for existing aims.

Additional empirical studies cast a broader focus beyond the walls of the school, positioning school reform and community revitalization as necessarily linked if reform efforts are to lead to meaningful and sustainable improvement. Drawing on a conceptual framework of Community Development Leadership and Cross-Boundary Leadership, Green (2015) identified four key levers that are linked to success: Developing a broad vision for the school and community; Positioning the school as a spatial community asset; Championing community concerns at the school; and Changing school culture (p. 703). While still relying heavily on the school principal as the key organizational leader in school improvement, this approach identifies community assets and interests as central to the work of a school nested within a specific community. This approach paints a markedly different picture of the leadership moves from the deficit-picture of turnaround reforms under neoliberal policies which focus narrowly on instructional shifts and data-based decision-making to move the needle on accountability metrics.

Interestingly, authors have found that schools employing such an approach have also been successful in dramatically improving outcome metrics associated with the accountability indicators articulated by No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top (Green, 2015; Ishimaru, 2018).

Empirical research has also investigated the possibility of leveraging community-led efforts to improve failed schools within which educational opportunities and student learning are constrained by out-of-school factors such as the effects of deindustrialization, neighborhood disinvestment, and municipal and school district resource allocation decisions (Green & Gooden, 2014). Studies such as these illustrate the shortcomings of Transformation, Turnaround, Restart, and Closure reforms enacted following Race to the Top, which have done little to acknowledge, let alone address, the systemic impacts of racism, disinvestment, and inequitable school district policy that have disproportionately harmed communities of color with limited economic and political power in urban environments. Utilizing theoretical frameworks such as critical urban theory, this research suggests that school improvement efforts should be rooted within broader movements toward a more just and equitable society. Through this lens, school leaders' work should be focused heavily on building asset-based partnerships within their school community and advocating for equitable policies impacting the out-of-school factors that impact students' educational opportunities (Bertrand & Rodela, 2018; Green & Gooden, 2014; Ishimaru, 2013).

At the district level, then, the work of improving schools can become less reactive (providing sanctions and mandating interventions based on low performance) and more proactive (providing supports based on an understanding of community needs) and may lead to a dramatically different model for partnership between municipalities and public school districts. This approach represents a significant departure from traditional school district-community

relationships and is consistent with frameworks suggested by literature on community organizing as a meaningful form of school leadership for educational and racial justice (Welton & Freelon, 2018). This literature suggests that utilizing community organizing practices in engaging students and community members as experts in their experience of the impacts of school district policy can disrupt the marginalizing forces of neoliberal turnaround reforms. Critical success factors in this type of shift include prioritizing collaboration and resource-sharing rather than choice and competition in school improvement and valuing existing cultural resources within communities rather than expecting community engagement to entail conforming to dominant norms (Fuentes, 2012; Nygreen, 2016; Welton & Freelon, 2018).

Where school districts have engaged in comprehensive reform aimed at addressing the needs of the communities they serve as a centerpiece of school district reform, research literature points to significant complexities and challenges. For example, in 2011 Oakland Unified School District began the endeavor of a comprehensive policy initiative to operate all of its schools as full-service community schools. While an exemplar of the type of educational infrastructure necessary for sustainable improvement (Peurach & Neumerski, 2015), this effort was significant in its departure from common district reforms that focus on standards, data, and market-oriented accountability models, and its focus on prioritizing change anchored in helping and partnering with communities. However, the shift was not universally welcomed with open arms. While equity-focused and democratic in design, the experience of moving forward with community schools as district reform encountered resistance from stakeholders who had a lack of trust in the district as an institution after over a decade of reform stemming from neoliberal policies (Trujillo et al., 2014). As a result, ongoing capacity building and training is needed for community stakeholders and school leaders alike to foster effective collaboration rather than adversarial

activism between schools and communities (Ishimaru, 2014; Nygreen, 2017; Welton & Freelon, 2018).

Alongside these trust barriers, research on federally-funded Promise Neighborhoods in large urban centers such as Las Vegas has demonstrated significant obstacles arising in community-driven school reform stemming from gaps in capacity for collaboration and the complexity of engaging all stakeholders in democratic processes, particularly community members who have been most marginalized by dominant power structures and who have the least educational, economic, and political capital (Horsford & Sampson, 2014). Additional questions have emerged from this research around the efficacy of community capacity building as a strategy to improve schools identified as persistently low performing, and the ways in which improved schools may interact with efforts to relieve poverty.

On the other hand, in cases where there has been sustained engagement and capacity-building in creating and managing socially just schools that center equity and community, neoliberal accountability structures and district bureaucracy often derail sustainability. Scholar David Omotoso Stovall (2016) articulates this dynamic poignantly:

> The complex, moving pieces that comprise the CPS central administration creates an instance where [the School of Social Justice, or SOJO] is continually at the whim of neoliberal sentiment and White supremacy, largely through standards-based school reform and budget cuts. Through a very engrained technology of racism as state policy, the most radical of educational projects are soon framed as failures, while corporate "reformers" are not only given the opportunity to fail, but fail on numerous occasions if their political alignments are in concert with the mayor's office. (p. 139)

This case is particularly striking, as Stovall discusses the fate that befell a school that grew out of a neoliberal school reform initiative, Chicago's Renaissance 2010. In cases such as these, it seems as though there may be very little space for true equity and true participation by communities that are supposed to benefit from neoliberal reform. In response, one may wonder, as does Lipman (2011), what possibilities exist for structuring a new vision of public institutions that is truly inclusive and equitable.

One particularly promising recent conceptual development in this area is the Community Equity Literacy framework (Green, 2017; Green et al., 2020). Through a line of emerging research, Green situates work in school improvement and school-community relationships within a framework of five elements: Understanding community history; Working from asset and structural-based perspectives about community; Recognizing and leveraging community assets; Navigating the community power structure; and Advocating for community and school equity (2017, pp. 381-382). When applied to assessing needs for dramatic reforms in schools identified for turnaround, the Community Equity Leadership Literacy Assessment, or CELLA (Green et al., 2020) may provide an avenue for school and district leaders to root improvement efforts in persistently low-performing schools in equitable partnerships with communities and aligned with broader aims to redress structural, racial, and economic inequities that continue to pervade society in the United States. When combined with frameworks for including parents, students, and community members as transformational leaders in educational spaces (Bertrand & Rodela, 2018; Ishimaru, 2018; Welton & Freelon, 2018), this work has the potential to inform the generation of genuinely new ways for communities and districts to approach necessary improvements in their schools that have historically been characterized as persistently low achieving.

Summary and Implications for Further Study

Several key learnings emerge from a review of the literature in the spheres of neoliberal and equity-focused approaches to school turnaround. First, the practical implications of neoliberal policy initiatives are widely explored yet not well understood, and do not illustrate a comprehensive picture supporting Transformation, Turnaround, Restart, and Closure reform models as they have been enacted under Race to the Top as the best way to improve low-performing schools. Additionally, research literature has begun to grasp the intensely negative impact of school turnaround reforms on students and families and the local neighborhoods that comprise the school community, which frequently reach far beyond the explicit/planned elements of reforms. Furthermore, extant findings taking a critical perspective have formed a compelling argument for equitable partnerships with communities as a missing element of turnaround reforms. However, there is not yet a sufficient empirical research base to fully understand the current landscape, or the necessary steps required to recalibrate and reshape educational policy toward turnaround reforms that are rooted in a paradigm of educational justice and participatory democracy. This paradigm may be most fully understood through the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory as outlined in Chapter 2, incorporating the Permanence of Racism/Racial Realism, Whiteness as Property, Interest Convergence/Divergence, Critique of Color-Blindness (or the more contemporary color-evasiveness), and Counterstory.

One gap in this emerging body of literature is that, while compelling to researchers and practitioners who already see the work of schools through a critical lens, these arguments do not yet put forth enough evidence of improved outcomes over time associated with equitable reform models to catch the attention of policy makers and practitioners on a broad scale. Thus, while

recent literature provides outstanding case studies, additional work is necessary to develop a more robust research base of equity-focused school improvement efforts. In order to accomplish this, it will be necessary to formulate and articulate the democratic aims and intended outcomes of school turnaround efforts that are rooted in a paradigm of educational justice and participatory democracy. Further research is necessary to study the ways in which this work can meaningfully improve learning opportunities and outcomes for students through the co-construction of practices by students, family members, school officials, and policy makers that enact educational equity as part of a broader struggle to achieve racial and social justice. From a policy advocacy perspective, much more research in this area is needed to build up a robust enough body of empirical literature to pose a substantive challenge to the "hegemonic status of the neoliberal paradigm" (Nygreen, 2016).

To summarize, the purpose of future recommended research is to contribute to literature informing both policy and practice by suggesting ways in which equitable reform, enacted by a coalition of stakeholders, can provide a model for improving low-performing schools that stands as an alternative to the four turnaround models enacted under neoliberal federal school reform policy. Equitable reform in this context refers to school change efforts that explicitly challenge systemic racism and the interconnected systems of oppression that contribute to opportunity and achievement gaps in public schools. The research proposed for this study will aim, through its findings, to provide an additional dimension of empirical evidence related to such a challenge. It will attempt to articulate the paradigms, discourses, and outcomes that are observed in school communities enacting equitable reforms that engage stakeholders as co-creators of school improvements and compare and contrast with paradigms, discourses, and outcomes found in institutions enacting district-owned neoliberal school turnaround reforms. Broadly framed, the

results of this research will contribute to an understanding of and capacity to enact conditions that support district leaders and stakeholder leaders in pursuing educational justice on behalf of students and communities whose school systems have historically failed them.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

Overview

Over the past twenty years, the dominant approach to improving schools labeled as "low performing" has been organized around a color-evasive, neoliberal framework. From the beginning of the process, in the language utilized to describe its purpose, this approach has served to reinforce harmful deficit thinking about schools and communities targeted for reform efforts. Further, the outcomes of neoliberal school reform, taken on a systemic level, evidence little progress in meaningfully improving public schools on behalf of the students whom these systems have least well served. While community engagement is sometimes referenced as a tangential element of school improvement processes, it is rarely viewed as a central component and much of the most significant research exploring community engagement describes communities coming together to fight against the hegemonic power of district systems. Additional scholarly research on community engagement indicates a trend of districts co-opting community organizations that build strength, attempting to utilize them to lend credibility and add momentum to their own goals. In discussions this researcher has had about where authentic community-engaged work in schools and school systems is happening, academics and practitioners alike struggle to identify a place where any real momentum exists.

Neoliberalism moves to provide free reign to the markets to solve significant problems. Large-scale societal problems that had begun to be addressed in the United States through significant liberal investment in public institutions and structures from the New Deal under Roosevelt through the Great Society legislation under Johnson began to be turned over to neoliberal approaches in the Nixon years and beyond. As described by Lipman (2011),

> Put simply, neoliberalism is an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatization of social goods and withdrawal of government from provision for social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient (p.6).

Neoliberalism holds that significant problems will be most effectively addressed utilizing a utilitarian market-based approach on the macro level to improve large systems at scale, but these large-scale systems approaches mask incredibly inequitable and stratified opportunities and results along racialized lines due to institutionalized structural oppression. The "invisible hand" cannot fix inequities; it is not inherently progressive. The "invisible hand" allows for white supremacist capitalist patriarchy to continue unchecked as the "unbiased" system perpetuates intersecting systems of oppression.

This research study questions whether a neoliberal approach to school reform, most prominently practiced through school turnaround interventions, which influences assessment and accountability practices in virtually every school district in the nation, is capable of bringing about meaningful transformations in our schools, let alone sustained improvement. It questions whether what is most common and accessible for us to measure is actually what matters most in public education. Additionally, it questions whether those in traditional decision-making positions actually have the necessary wisdom and perspective to articulate the nature of change that is needed. This research asks: What if the reason that we see neoliberal reform and accountability not working in many schools and districts is because we are measuring the wrong

things, assessing our schools and our students based on goals articulated by the wrong stakeholders?

The purpose of this research is to explore a fundamentally different approach to what the education profession has conceived of as school improvement, one that begins with and stays centered upon the moral and professional imperative to establish and nurture public schools that lift up the humanity and lived experience of the communities in which they are nested and the students for whom they exist. In the structure of this research, both participants and language are extremely important. The terms "school improvement," "school turnaround," and "school transformation" are problematized, particularly with regard to any deficit connotations that have come to be associated with them. Inspired by Green's (2020) work on Community Equity Literacy and Grant's (2020) work on radical hope, the collaborations explored in this research are discussed as "equitable partnerships" and "inclusive partnerships." These partnerships aim to engage in co-creating visions, priorities, and plans focused on enacting school systems that reject neoliberal hegemony. They also work to counter practices that reinforce dominant culture at the expense of already marginalized and minoritized communities and students whom color-evasive neoliberal school reform practices have (though not explicitly and perhaps not intentionally) further marginalized and minoritized.

In this chapter, I first discuss the foundational elements of the research project, including research questions, sub-questions, and study design. I then outline the organizational and practical elements of the study, articulating the approach used for purposeful sampling and site selection, engaging participants, and methods and techniques for data collection and data analysis. Following this is an articulation of additional considerations central to the research

including trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and researcher positionality. I conclude with a discussion of the study's limitations and significance.

Research Questions

The primary research question this study strives to address is: How can community leaders, school leaders, and district leaders work together in equitable and inclusive partnerships to cultivate growth in schools labeled as low performing? Related research questions that this study strives to address in order to develop knowledge illuminating the primary question include:

Question #1: In what ways do school and community leaders work together to improve school performance relative to opportunity and achievement gaps?

Question #2: What organizational conditions support equitable partnerships between district, school, and community leaders toward co-creating goals, policies, and practices?

Question #3: What conditions undermine efforts at co-creation?

Question #4: In what ways do community, school, and district leaders' discourse and practice interact with deficit framed, color-evasive, white supremacist, and neoliberal school reform discourses?

Question #5: How can school systems close the gap between stated commitments to racial equity and meaningful improvements in the lived experiences and educational opportunities of students in communities who have been least well served by our educational institutions?

Question #6: In what ways do community, school, and district leaders' lived experiences impact their interaction with school cultivation work?

Question #7: How do student voices guide school cultivation work?

Study Design

The methodological approach for this research is a Critical Ethnographic Case Study. At its core, this study aligns with the definition of Critical Qualitative research provided by Garoian and Gaudelius (2008) in seeking to surface and interrogate discriminatory practices and inequities that are at play in nearly every facet of daily life. As this study seeks to problematize dominant ways in which data, assessment, and accountability have been framed within a neoliberal context, and explore approaches to school development work that do not yet have well-established quantitative metrics associated with them, a qualitative research design is most appropriate. Further, because this research seeks to interrogate and counteract the visible and invisible ways in which a neoliberal, color-evasive framing of work in schools has served to maintain white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal structures and perpetuate intersecting systems of oppression in communities that school reform efforts purport to serve, a critical approach to qualitative research design is necessary. Finally, as a Critical Ethnographic Case Study, this research seeks to explore the culture, norms, and discourse alive in a specific context and a specific time informed by the theoretical and conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 2.

In order to reach the depth of analysis necessary to address the research aims and questions, a critical ethnographic case study design was selected to facilitate a deep and multi-layered exploration of a large, complex public school district system. Consistent with Carspecken's (1996) approach to critical ethnography, this design requires working toward understanding of "Economic, political and cultural structures; Social integration via face-to-face interactions; Cultural milieu supporting continuous setting negotiations, thus social routines that reproduce system relations; and System integration of site within a society of multiple sites" (p. 39). To provide additional structure to the design, Critical Ethnography is integrated with

elements of qualitative case study design. Creswell (2007) defines case study design as "the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e. a setting, a context)" (p. 73). This fusion of these qualitative methods approached from a critical epistemology aligns most closely with the research aims articulated above.

As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) observe, and consistent with Carspecken's (1996) approach to critical ethnography, the unit of analysis in defining the boundaries of a system is essential in all ethnographic and case study research. For the purpose of the current study, the unit of analysis is the local school district, as this entity is tasked with developing policy, procedure, and supervisory structures that translate the world of law and politics into the work of schools. The district system selected as the site for this research is a large urban PreK-12 public school district (one of the 25 most populous school districts in the United States). While each school system is unique, ideally this study will contribute to critical research on school change by illuminating inequities in power, privilege, and institutional structures and exploring locally focused practices that can make a difference for students and school communities across diverse contexts.

To enrich and deepen the inquiry and findings generated from this critical ethnographic case study, I also utilize tools derived from critical policy analysis (Apple, 2019; Diem, et al., 2014; Welton & Mansfield, 2020) and critical discourse analysis (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015; Mullet, 2018; Welton et al., 2023). The study includes this fusion of critical qualitative methods to deepen opportunities for consideration of similarities, differences, and common themes within a bounded context. Through these elements, the study explores issues of power, privilege, history, and partnership through multiple data collection methods including, most prominently, participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and document/artifact analysis. Its purpose is

to examine ways in which school district leaders and community leaders engaged in school improvement and/or transformation work interact with the color-evasive and dominant culture normative discourse and practices that pervade most school reform work in the current age (Nygreen, 2016). Through this series of document, archive, and artifact reviews, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and structured participant observations aligned with Yin's (2018) articulation of data collection methods for case study research, this study seeks to develop what Marshall and Rossman (2016) refer to as "contextualized deep understanding" of a bounded system.

Examining these data sources through a criticalist lens and connecting to a theoretical framework rooted in Critical Race Theory, the study seeks to contribute to an emerging body of research literature that explicitly identifies existing inequities and surfaces discourses and practices that perpetuate those inequities. From this foundation, the research begins to articulate, utilizing a rigorous critical epistemology (Carspecken, 1996), discourses and practices that meaningfully dismantle inequities from an anti-racist and anti-oppressive framework (Galloway, et al., 2019). Overall, this research aims to contribute to systemic change that is conceived of and enacted with, not for, or to, communities that have been minoritized and marginalized by neoliberal discourse and policy.

To do this research, it is necessary to acknowledge the connection between neoliberalism and colonialism as enacted in public education and educational research spaces, as articulated by Patel (2014). This work strives to exist in a space that genuinely questions the notion of what constitutes educational expertise, cleaving from neoliberal hierarchies of expertise while simultaneously recognizing that "we still exist inside powerful structures constantly reproducing the very injustices we are contesting" (Sandwick et al., 2018, p. 489). In this way, the research

endeavors to investigate cultures, conditions, and promising practices that are beginning to illuminate a path forward that explicitly rejects color-evasive, neoliberal approaches to improving schools labeled as low performing. If done successfully, this research then can provide essential elements of Counterstory to neoliberal school reform as a Critical Race Theory methodology (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Miller et al., 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Sampling and Site Selection

While neoliberal school reform structures are deeply embedded in school districts across the country (Nygreen, 2017), the most intensive neoliberal reform efforts continue to focus primarily on large school districts in major urban centers. As these districts frequently serve a high proportion of students identified as students of color whose families are identified as low income, particularly in schools marked as "lowest performing," they have attracted significant attention from researchers interested in studying issues of equity. However, issues of racism and equity in schools are certainly not limited to urban contexts. In fact, scholars have identified suburban contexts as important spaces for generating new knowledge to inform policy and practice (Diamond, Posey-Maddox, & Velázquez, 2020), citing them as "locations for the interdisciplinary interrogation of key issues confronting U.S. communities - such as (re)segregation, economic inequality, and white supremacy" (p. 249) and recognizing that many issues commonly thought of as the challenges faced by major urban districts are increasingly found in suburban and even rural contexts.

Building on the conceptual framework laid out by Diamond and Lewis (2015) in *Despite the best intentions: how racial inequality thrives in good schools,* which carefully explores the racial and cultural dynamics at play in schools perceived as "good schools," this research will

explore the dynamics at play when systems make explicit and concerted attempts to close opportunity and achievement gaps through directly addressing issues of race, equity, power, and privilege. However, this research focuses on surfacing, interrogating, and addressing these issues in schools that are not thought of as “good schools,” at least based on formal criteria.

With this in mind, site selection for the proposed research took place through a purposeful sampling process, considering district demographic makeup, school/district ESSA performance levels, and stated commitments to equity. From a demographic perspective, the aim was to identify a district entity serving diverse student populations across racial and economic lines (no racial/ethnic group comprising more than two-thirds of the student population, and more than one-third of students overall identified as “low-income”). Narrowing further, site selection focused on districts identified as low-performing or have a significant number of schools identified as low-performing through their state’s ESSA criteria, however, such distinctions are articulated by their state education agency. After developing a set of potential district entities, high potential districts were identified through the presence of a demonstrated commitment to equity – either a formal equity policy in place, or a dimension of their strategic plan explicitly devoted to advancing equity – as well as a demonstrated commitment to community engagement in the development of policy, procedure, and strategic planning. Of particular relevance in this process of identifying potential district entities was whether there is a stated commitment to racial equity and/or anti-racism in the district’s publicly available plans and/or discourse. This may be a powerful indicator that such a system is engaged in work to counter the pervasive trend of color-evasive policy and practice in public school districts. However, as discussed later in this study, there often exists a significant gap between a stated

commitment to equity and meaningful positive change in the lives of those who have been least well served by our public school districts.

After identifying a small set of districts meeting the sought-after criteria, I connected with colleagues working in school district offices of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (though these departments are known by several names) to inquire about where there might be both a strong fit based on research aims. Further inquiries focused on systems where individuals or groups might be open to serving as participants in the proposed study as well as help provide access to various opportunities for participant observation and engagement with stakeholder groups. Following outreaches to four different districts, a strong connection was made with a colleague in the department of Equity of a major urban school district in the United States - one of the 25 largest in the nation – which serves as the site for this research. The goal is to provide an optimal balance between the opportunity to dig deeply into a bounded system and the opportunity to examine similarities, differences, and trends in culture, perspective, discourse, and views on policy within multiple facets of a large and complex system aiming to center racial equity and educational justice in its work.

Participants

Participants were identified through interpersonal interaction and recommendations and selected for semi-structured interviews and focus groups through a stratified, purposeful sampling process (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This allowed for multiple perspectives to contribute to a multidimensional picture of the system. Participants were selected from three groups within the district entity. One group represents the district-level leaders responsible for strategic plans and school improvement plans, navigating between state/federal level requirements, school leaders, and community voices to drive policy around equity and

accountability. The second group represents community leaders (who may or may not be parents of students at schools within the system) who are participating in some kind of recognized way in the process of informing and/or interrupting school visions, priorities, and strategic plans. This participation may be in an official capacity as part of a board of education, district-facilitated community group, or school-level parent/community leadership committee. It also may include community members who play a part in a community-based organization that focuses aspects of its work on the local school district. A third group of participants are school-level leaders, who are responsible for codifying school-level visions and priorities, as well as management and communication on a daily and weekly basis. This group is made up of principals. In total, twenty-two participants engaged in the study: eight district-level leaders, seven school leaders, and seven community leaders. All participants are referred to in research findings using pseudonyms in order to protect confidentiality. A summary of participant demographics and characteristics is outlined in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1:

Summary of Interview Participants and Demographics

Stakeholder Group	Total Number of Participants	Pseudonyms	Racial/Ethnic Identities Represented	Gender Identities Represented
Community Leaders	7	Malika*, Sean, Carlos, Jessica*, Juan*, Carmen*, Taylor	4 Black 1 Latinx 2 White	4 Female 3 Male
School Leaders	7	Sunita, David, Marcus, Aaliyah, Joshua, Michael, Amanda	3 Black 1 Latinx/ Multi-Racial 3 White	3 Female 4 Male
District Leaders	8	Ana*, José*, Brian, Ashley, Aisha*, Jordan, Ahmed, Lauren	3 Black 2 Latinx 1 Asian/ Multi-Racial 2 White	1 Nonbinary 4 Female 3 Male

Note. While participants are identified with only one stakeholder group in the table above based on their current stakeholder role, they may have experiences directly related to other categories and stakeholder roles. This is related to the concept of boundary-spanning leadership, as outlined in Chapter 2, and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

*Community leaders and District Leaders whose pseudonyms marked with an asterisk also have experience as school leaders.

_ Participants whose names are underlined are also parents of children in the school system.

Table 2:

Summary of Focus Group Participants and Demographics

Stakeholder Group	Total Number of Participants	Pseudonyms	Racial/Ethnic Identities Represented	Gender Identities Represented
Community Leaders	2	Jessica*, Juan*	1 Latinx, 1 Black	1 Female, 1 Male
School Leaders	2	Amanda, Joshua	2 White	1 Female, 1 Male
District Leaders	2	Lauren, Ashley	1 Black 1 White	2 Female

Note. While participants are identified with only one stakeholder group in the table above based on their current stakeholder role, they may have experiences directly related to other categories and stakeholder roles. This is related to the concept of boundary-spanning leadership, as outlined in Chapter 2, and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

*Community leaders and District Leaders whose pseudonyms marked with an asterisk also have experience as school leaders.

_ Participants whose names are underlined are also parents of children in the school system.

Data Collection Methods and Techniques

This study utilized four data collection methods to gather qualitative information. These data collection methods include interviews, focus groups, document/artifact review, and participant observations. Interviews and focus groups took place sequentially (interviews before focus groups), and participant observations occurred based on the schedules of opportunities in district and community/school sites. Artifact and document review was conducted on an

ongoing recursive basis during the study. Throughout the data collection process, analytic field notes were generated as a way of reflecting on data collection activities and considering ideas, themes, and connections as they emerged in real-time. Each of these methods is discussed in greater detail in the sections that follow.

Interviews

The first set of data is comprised of interview data generated directly from participants in each of the three groups – district leaders, school leaders, and community leaders. Through a semi-structured interview process, the researcher gathered individualized and multi-layered accounts of lived experience and perspectives focused on school improvement and transformation efforts, as well as possible directions for future work. Twenty-two interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 40-60 minutes. Interviews were conducted according to the protocols in Appendix A, focusing on the participant's history and experience with the district and with school reform and improvement work. While the intent was for interviews to be conducted in person at a school, community site, or public space of each participant's choosing (such as a public library) where they feel most comfortable meeting, the researcher conducted a portion of the interviews virtually due to public health, travel schedules, personal preference, and other concerns that in some cases limited in-person engagement.

At the outset of each interview, prior to starting the question protocol, the researcher outlined the purpose and intentions for the study, outlined structures to ensure confidentiality (such as using pseudonyms), reviewed informed consent and the purely voluntary nature of participation, and discussed the priority of supporting each participant's emotional and psychological safety while learning from their unique and important voice and experience. As interviews were conducted as semi-formal interviews using a semi-structured protocol, there

were opportunities for the researcher to ask follow-up questions and for the participant to offer additional topics for discussion as areas of interest arose. Each interview was audio-recorded with the permission of the participant and with the knowledge that they can stop at any time, and recordings were transcribed using transcription software. Interview recordings and transcripts are kept in a secure computer file by the researcher and were used in conjunction with the researcher's own notes taken during interviews for data analysis purposes. The twenty-two participant interviews were conducted between July of 2023 and March of 2024.

Participant Observations

A second set of data were gathered through participant observations of working meetings including community-engaged design sessions and school leader professional development sessions. The purpose of these observations was to add a deep element of interpersonal communication and interaction to an understanding of context, collaboration, discourse, and culture within the system.

The researcher prepared detailed field notes during and after participant observation sessions, following Merriam and Tisdell's (2015) framework for structuring "highly descriptive" accountings of the setting, activities, behaviors, and language used by participants. Additionally, the researcher prepared analytic memos immediately after each observation to connect the content of the meeting to the researcher's actions, reflections and feelings, and connections between the observation and theoretical and empirical frameworks relevant to the research project. In total, six participant observation sessions were conducted between July of 2023 and March of 2024.

Focus Groups

A third set of data were generated by focus groups, which took place after participant interviews were complete and which drew on insights gleaned from interviews and participant observations. While in some ways, interviews and focus groups may have overlapping purposes, focus groups in this research study are additive in that they provide an opportunity for research participants to interact with each other while focusing on specific plans and policies. While the interviews help illuminate individual experiences and perspectives, focus groups help illustrate the discourse that arises as community, school, and district leaders engage in partnership work aimed at improving schools for children. In contrast with individual interviews, focus groups provide an opportunity for discussion and debate and provide opportunity for examining discourse in a shared experience, which adds significant depth to the individual narratives gathered during interviews. Additionally, as school change work cannot be undertaken by a single person, partnership work must inherently be done in collaboration, focus groups allowed for data collection to include interactive as well as individual data.

Two focus groups were conducted in March of 2024. The protocol for the focus group, shown in Appendix B, is structured around integration of two key resources: Green's (2018) five domains of Community Equity Literacy (CEL), and Diem and Welton's (2021) "Protocol for Anti-Racist Policy Decision-Making," particularly elements focused on efforts to "understand the sociopolitical and racial context of the district and community" (p. 143) and "Conduct a Critical Policy Review" (p. 144). Admittedly, the risks to participants are potentially greater in focus groups than in interviews due to the possibility for interpersonal conflict or social and/or emotional issues to surface during interactions. However, the proposed benefit to participants of participation in the focus group was that they were able to practice applying frameworks of

Community Equity Literacy and Critical Policy Analysis to their work on behalf of students and schools, and this, combined with structured facilitation, may add value to their future collaboration.

As with interviews, the intent was for the focus groups to be conducted in-person at a school district or community site. Due to multiple circumstances and participant preferences one focus group was facilitated virtually, and one was facilitated in-person with an option to participate virtually. Following the outlined plan for facilitating focus groups found in Appendix B, the researcher paid particular attention to evening out potential power imbalances that may be present due to privilege based on position, formal authority, race, and educational and economic capital. Focus groups were recorded with permission from participants, with the intent of capturing the interaction between participants. As with interviews, the focus group recordings were transcribed for data-analysis purposes, with videos and transcripts kept in a secure computer file by the researcher. As outlined in Table 2, Two district leaders, two school leaders, and two community leaders participated in focus groups.

Document and Artifact Review

The fourth set of data were developed through a document collection and artifact review comprised of publicly available information such as district policy, strategic planning documents, school/district improvement planning artifacts, and other artifacts such as recorded Board of Education meetings. Primarily, these artifacts were collected from among publicly available sources such as the district's website, though the researcher also asked leaders in each stakeholder group for the opportunity to review artifacts or documents related to school improvement planning and equity-focused leadership work. Additional searches for relevant artifacts included local news publications that cover stories related to the local school district and

associated community organizing efforts. The purpose of this fourth set of data was to gather a robust collection of artifacts that illuminate discourse relating to improving school performance and improvement processes, however, this is characterized within the district as a bounded system. Documents and artifacts were gathered and reflected on in a recursive process throughout the study to triangulate and add context to findings generated from interviews, participant observations, and focus groups.

Field Notes/Analytic Memos

Overall, the researcher's goal was to weave these sources of qualitative evidence into a fabric of "rich and thick description" that is called for by Carspecken's (1996) vision of critical qualitative research. Throughout the study, analytic memos (voice and written) and field notes were generated during and/or after data collection activities, with the goal of integrating and connecting data as they are collected in order to weave information together A field notes template can be found in Appendix C. While not considered a data collection instrument, these notes and memos helped to enrich and focus data collection in a recursive process and provided points of context in identifying and connecting themes during data analysis.

Analytic Approach

Data analysis began with a review of all texts, including artifacts, documents, transcripts, field notes, and analytic memos, aligning with Mullet's (2018) *General Critical Discourse Analysis Framework for Educational Research.* This process began with an inductive coding process to identify themes and develop associated descriptions based on keywords, phrases, and quotations drawn from data sources and aligned broadly with research questions. With these as an overarching framework, texts were then analyzed for external relations, or interdiscursivity, with an eye toward drawing out discourses that represent ideological positioning. Next, texts

were examined for “internal relations, or patterns, words, and linguistic devices that represent power relations, social context, (e.g., events, actors, or locations), or speakers’ positionalities” (p.124). Of particular importance here were field notes gathered during participant observations of both leadership development and community-driven design sessions.

In reviewing focus group and interview transcripts, analysis followed a closed/deductive coding process building upon the themes, discourses, ideologies, and power relations uncovered in preliminary findings from a critical discourse analysis of documents/artifacts and observations. Once codes were utilized to organize data from interviews and focus groups, these were summarized and shared with participants so as to inform a collaborative process to explore and understand significant themes, discourses, ideologies and power dynamics found within the bounded system of the district. Following this process, the researcher collaborated with participants to review and revise findings, engaging in a series of “member checks” to explore the accuracy and validity of findings.

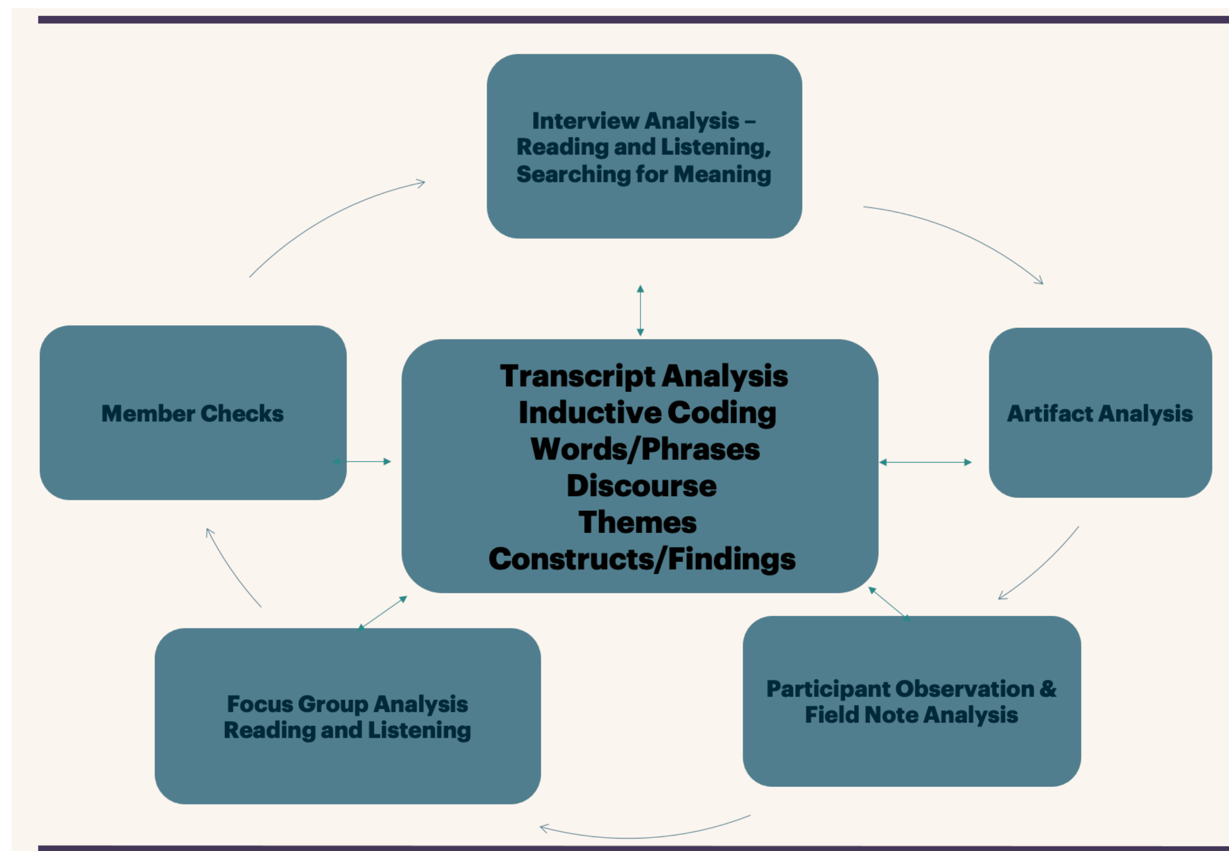
In analyzing interview data and developing findings, each interview transcript was reviewed in detail through an inductive process and aligned with each research question. Once this was process was complete, words and sentences were coded to identify themes. Within each stakeholder group (community leader, school leader, and district leader), themes were woven together to develop aggregate constructs for each group. Finally, in alignment with critical discourse analysis, the aggregate constructs were analyzed through an interdiscursive process to identify similarities and differences across stakeholder groups, examine dynamics of power and privilege in alignment with the theoretical and conceptual framework, and synthesize the results into major findings. To ensure that participants’ voices directly inform and drive findings, extended quotations that encapsulate some of the most powerful themes and aggregate concepts

related to each research question were identified and aligned to each research question and with each major finding.

As data collection processes overlapped temporally during the eleven months of field work, data analysis occurred in a cyclical, recursive process, moving between interviews, artifact analysis, participant observation, focus groups, and member checks. At each step in this process, connections were made between data sources and the developing codes, themes, and constructs, informing the next phase of data collection and analysis in a continuous cycle. A visual representation of this recursive process is displayed in figure 2 below.

Figure 2:

Recursive Data Analysis Cycle



Once the data analysis process was completed, the researcher next drew connections between the discourse, practices, and concepts that arose from different contexts and stakeholder groups to examine similarities, differences, and explore trends that emerged. The researcher then engaged in the development of aggregate concepts for presentation in major findings, connecting to extant literature and recommending possibilities for further empirical exploration.

Trustworthiness

The design of this research study builds toward validity through an intentional and ongoing triangulation among and between artifacts, observations, and human interactions. Through constantly engaging in reflexivity and striving to surface interactions between discourses, both those that confirm or reinforce or those that disconfirm or conflict, data collection and analysis sought to establish validity within research findings. Additionally, a significant amount of the trustworthiness of this research comes from the collaborative nature of the study, as questions, data, and analysis was shared with participants to ensure validity of concepts, constructs, and codes. This approach to member checking attempted to enhance credibility of the research and relies heavily on the respect and rapport the researcher was able to establish with study participants.

Ethical Considerations

It was essential, as this research focuses heavily on working with people, to ensure that all work is carried out with respect as a primary driver of design and implementation. Marshall and Rossman (2016) assert that his includes respect for “their privacy, their anonymity, and their right to participate – or not – with their free consent” (p. 52). To the maximum extent possible, this research was also transparent to both participants and stakeholders, to minimize concerns about the purpose and nature of the study taking place.

Additionally, in undertaking this project of critical qualitative research, it is necessary to begin with full ownership of the ethical elements of school improvement research carried out with communities of color who have not been served well by public schooling institutions. An ethical commitment must be undertaken to serve and partner with a community, to strive to understand and heal rather than re-inflict harm that has been lived. As outlined by McGuire (2020), "Particularly when engaging with marginalized communities, this is a commitment to study such individuals as fully human beings – or in DuBoisan terms, studying sociological problems that humans experience and not humans as problems unto themselves" (p. 77). It is also essential to consider the researcher's historical role in reinforcing the colonizing nature of researcher-subject relationships, as well as the nature of bias that the researcher may bring into the work. As Chadderton (2012) articulates, the researcher must take responsibility for naming and responding to the power dynamics and socio-historical structures at play in any interpersonal interaction, including interviews, focus groups, and other spaces that do not become neutral spaces simply because the aims of the research profess to be focused on social justice. In this way, the ethics of the present research project were intended to mirror practices for enacting equitable partnerships with communities that help to redress past educational inequities through critical social engagement.

Positionality

In undertaking this research, it was incumbent upon me to address my positionality as a white, cisgender heterosexual male whose demographic and cultural identity, as well as educational, economic, and professional capital contrast sharply with the individuals and groups who are the intended beneficiaries of most critical qualitative research in education research, including this project. Further, during the course of the doctoral journey, I have traveled a

professional path through school and district leadership roles fully organized around neoliberal school reform to the leadership of a neighborhood school nested within a school district that remains organized around neoliberal principles.

With this in mind, a genuine reflection about the worth and value of the doctoral project was necessary. In completing a dissertation with the goal of earning a terminal Doctor of Philosophy degree in education, was I as a white researcher simply continuing to participate in the accumulation of opportunity and privilege at the expense of students and communities of color? Or, was it possible that I might contribute to a different process, as Patel (2014) questions, exploring ways in which "educational research could, in fact, become something other than colonizing, if an entity borne of, and beholden to, colonization could somehow wrest itself free of this genealogy" (p. 358)? In reflecting on this question, a connection between research and practice became inescapable; giving up on this research process felt as though it would necessarily lead to a capitulation that white educators cannot do more good than harm on behalf of the students and communities they profess to serve. Self-reflection and self-reflexivity were essential throughout this research project, ensuring that I was able to bring expertise and competence to the execution of the project that de-centered his own biases and experiences from the process and the results of the research.

Chapter 5: Major Findings – Participant Interviews

Over the course of Chapters 5 and 6, I present and illustrate major findings developed through recursive cycles of analysis integrating all sources of data collected. Taken together, these major findings address the study's primary research question: How can community leaders, school leaders, and district leaders work together in equitable and inclusive partnerships to cultivate growth in schools labeled as low performing? I begin by introducing the study's six major findings, followed by an in-depth exploration of key ideas and themes aligned to these findings utilizing evidence from interviews, participant observations, focus groups, and artifact analysis to illustrate and support conclusions. As the voices of participants are the heart of this critical ethnographic case study, Chapter 5 focuses primarily on interview data, beginning with a brief introduction to the participants and the three stakeholder groups they represent.

Then, growing out of an exploration of major findings through interview themes, Chapter 6 explores three areas of work within the system that emerged from interviews and initial artifact reviews as particularly important cases to examine in depth: Equity Policy, Accountability Reform, and Community Design. Each of these cases illustrates dimensions of equity-focused collaboration within the local education environment toward realizing greater educational justice, adding further depth and support to each of the major findings. In addition to being informed by interview data, Chapter 6 identifies additional themes through artifact analysis, participant observations, and focus groups that add valuable layers of understanding to the study's major findings.

Introduction to Major Findings:

As outlined in Chapter 4, I developed semi-structured protocols consisting of fourteen questions, slightly modified for community leader, school leader, and district leader stakeholder

groups. The questions comprising these protocols were intentionally structured to elicit responses that would provide insight relative to the seven sub-research questions. These are:

Question #1: In what ways do school and community leaders work together to improve school performance relative to opportunity and achievement gaps?

Question #2: What organizational conditions support equitable partnerships between district, school, and community leaders toward co-creating goals, policies, and practices?

Question #3: What undermines efforts at co-creation?

Question #4: In what ways do community, school, and district leaders' discourse and practice interact with deficit-framed, color-evasive, white-supremacist, and neoliberal school reform discourses?

Question #5: How can school systems close the gap between stated commitments to racial equity and meaningful improvements in the lived experiences and educational opportunities of students in communities who have been least well served by our educational institutions?

Question #6: In what ways do community, school, and district leaders' lived experiences impact their interaction with school cultivation work?

Question #7: How do student voices guide school cultivation work?

In many cases, participants responded to questions in complex ways that addressed multiple research questions. With this in mind, I began by coding words and phrases utilizing an open process and developed these codes into themes. In keeping with Critical Discourse Analysis methods (Mullet, 2018) I considered all language to be purposeful, and paid particular attention to themes that spoke to issues of power, privilege, oppression, and social inequalities, consistent with Carspecken's (1996) approach to Critical Qualitative Research. Utilizing these lenses, I re-

read transcripts and listened to recordings in order to identify passages during which participants spoke powerfully to the themes. I then aligned each passage to the seven research questions listed above. Paying particular attention to connections between themes that spanned multiple research questions, I developed key ideas that fit together and aligned with elements of the study's theoretical and conceptual framework to create aggregate concepts, which I refer to as Major Findings for discussion purposes in this study. The six major findings that emerged from this critical discourse analysis are outlined below, and followed by an in-depth analysis of the data that support them.

Major Finding #1: In order for school systems to engage in authentic collaboration with communities and enact change that centers racial equity and educational justice, historical (and ongoing) harms enacted by oppressive educational systems with institutionalized racism in their DNA must be explicitly named and reckoned with.

Major Finding #2: Liberatory school cultivation requires an investment of resources and intentional infrastructure to be built over time in order to develop equitable partnerships that can drive and sustain the work; these must include systems beyond the walls of the school.

Major Finding #3: District and school leaders must be ready to engage parent and community leaders from an asset-based perspective, must be ready to receive challenges and divergent viewpoints, engage without a predetermined outcome, and must be open to real accountability for follow-through on co-created priorities and plans.

Major Finding #4: Personal experiences, student voice, identity, and wellness must be at the heart of intentional relationship-building and capacity-building for all stakeholders engaged in liberatory school cultivation work.

Major Finding #5: All stakeholders (community, school, and district) must maintain vigilance against the seemingly gravitational pull toward misalignment, mistrust, fragmentation, and a regression to the way that things have happened in the past under neoliberal school reform paradigms.

Major Finding #6: Enacting and sustaining educational justice within a school system requires the district to take an equal measure of accountability when schools are not performing well for students. They must commit to providing resources, personnel, technical expertise, and other necessary elements to ensure that the school can realize a vision for all students that is co-created by and responsive to the voices of the community.

These findings are supported by themes and key ideas emerging from the voices of community, school, and district leaders, and aligned with elements of the theoretical and conceptual framework in the sections that follow.

Introduction to Stakeholder Groups

Community Leaders

The seven community leaders interviewed for this study came from diverse and varied backgrounds. Each spoke passionately and with rich knowledge about their community, their schools, and the local and societal forces shaping education. Carmen served as a Turnaround school principal for six years, and for the past eight years has been deeply involved in pushing the philanthropic community to "back the fight for equity" in four key sectors, with education being one of the primary areas. Sean is focused on community organizing and developing sustainable community school support systems for traditional neighborhood schools, with the

specific purpose of working toward an excellent and fully resourced public neighborhood school in every community. Jessica is a former school leader who has been focused for the past four years on building parent involvement to push the district toward more inclusivity of parents and community members in developing policies and plans. Carlos and Malika (a former school leader) are focused on cultivating authentic community engagement in their school communities, in partnership with principals. Taylor is a graduate student who is deeply engaged with developing equitable partnerships for educational change. Juan is a former school leader that now works to develop individual and collective identities to support deep diversity, equity, and inclusion work in schools. While they have different areas of focus and expertise, all demonstrate exceptional commitment to children in our schools and to the communities in which our schools are nested. All embody the concept of community cultural wealth (Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020), in their own lives and work and in the way they value each member of the school community. In outlining the common purpose of their advocacy and co-creation, I quote Malika below, whose words were arresting in their simplicity and depth:

> *I know that's easier said than done, but when you really think about the purpose of schools, it is, for me, it is very community centered. It is to create better communities than the ones that we had before. And what we have right now is not that; we actually have some regression in some of our most needy communities... It's unlearning all of those things and really putting the students and their families at the center and asking them, getting their voice: what do you want for your child? Because no matter the socioeconomic level, no matter the language barrier, no matter what your zip code is, every single parent wants better for their child. Every single time you're going to ask*

> *them. If you ask them, do you want better for your kid, they're going to answer yes, no matter who they are.*

This sentiment captures the call to truly cultivate our schools to reflect and serve the communities in which they are nested, and to see all children as our children. Through their interviews, each of the community leaders shared profound stories of caring for and working on behalf of their communities, often over many decades.

School Leaders

The seven school leaders interviewed all have experience as school leaders under the neoliberal school reform umbrella; Sunita, Aaliyah, and Michael in formal Turnaround settings, David, Joshua, and Marcus in schools that had characteristics of a turnaround setting when they arrived without being an official Turnaround. Amanda leads a charter school that launched in Restart-like circumstances. Two, David and Joshua, successfully fought the district multiple times to prevent their schools from being closed. All have also worked to evolve their leadership practice away from neoliberal school reform and toward greater racial equity and educational justice over the past several years. Three moved to leadership positions in different schools, one stayed with their school and co-led the community in a successful organizing campaign against the district's plans to displace its students and repurpose it as a high school serving wealthier children from a nearby gentrifying neighborhood, and three stayed with the same school through the transition from the Turnaround school management organization back to school district control. All were able to share powerful examples of their own leadership development in working to engage parents and community members as co-creators. Additionally, all spoke extensively about the challenges of working for racial equity, educational justice, and authentic, equitable partnerships

with families and community while simultaneously working to meet the needs and demands of the school district. David synthesized this tension:

> *...that isn't to say that principals shouldn't strive for the work to do the work and to help every single student thrive. And it isn't even to say that it can't be done. It is to say though, that no principal should have any illusion or delusion that they can dramatically impact student outcomes in a short amount of time given the current framework of the system.*

School leaders frequently described the extremely difficult work of managing what one participant described as “disconnects between aspiration and reality.”

District Leaders

The eight district-level leaders interviewed come from two departments whose chief officers report directly to the superintendent. One department is focused on Equity and community engagement and the other department is focused on school oversight, accountability, and data management. They represent a broad cross-section of personal and professional experience. In addition to the chief of each department (Aisha and Jose), interview participants include the directors leading the equity team (Ana) and the accountability team (Brian), a data strategist (Ahmed),, a community outreach leader (Lauren), a professional learning leader (Ashley), and an equity systems analyst (Jordan). Across each of the district leader interviews, a passion for and belief in the equity-focused work of the district and the ways in which it is going about that work was clearly evident. This attitude was expressed clearly by Lauren, who works closely with community and school leaders on engagement projects and considers equity work central to her history and identity:

> *We really do want to do what's right by our students, and we really want to do what's right by the city…we are here because we deeply care and this is how we show up in the world and we want other people to show up in the world like that too.*

Recognizing that perceptions of the district are often not positive, the District leaders represented in this study consistently espouse and reference work toward earning trust and more positive perceptions from stakeholders. They recognize this as essential to realizing ambitious goals for meaningful change toward actualizing equity in the district and the city.

Exploration of Major Findings Through Key Ideas and Themes Evidenced by Participant Interviews

Major Finding #1: In order for school systems to engage in authentic collaboration with communities and enact change that centers racial equity and educational justice, historical (and ongoing) harms enacted by oppressive educational systems with institutionalized racism in their DNA must be explicitly named and reckoned with.

Interview data aligned to this major finding provide a deep, rich, and painful set of perspectives on the legacy of neoliberal school reforms. Throughout each interview with community leaders, the harm done by neoliberal school reform (even if not called by this name) was evident and deeply felt. While each participant spoke to the systemic damage done to communities by waves of reform, no conversation captured the racialized history of our nation and interrogated the dominant, hegemonic approaches to "fixing" our public schools as profoundly as the response quoted at length below from Malika:

> *Yeah, we have to acknowledge, especially as a country, that there's been harm*

done and there continues to be harm done to our black and brown communities, and it's done to them. We have to recognize that the path still exists in the present, in the ways that the disenfranchised communities who are operating really have started a hundred years behind. And if you think about it in that way, then you start to think about what this achievement gap actually is. It's not really an achievement gap. If you look at it from a timeline perspective, it's not an achievement gap, it's a timeline gap. And so, how do we make up for the time if we don't even acknowledge that the time was lost? And I feel like we're still at a place where we're not acknowledging that the time is lost and that the more that people who are making decisions for our kids, whether that be the US Secretary of Education, or whether that be the local superintendent, as long as they still espouse the bootstrap mentality, there's not going to be any kind of achievement.

I didn't want to keep calling it achievement gap, but just for intents and purposes, the gap will continue to be that way because of the way that the problem is being addressed. So I think that first is acknowledging that there's a real problem, and that is not actually an achievement gap, but taking a look at timeline and taking a look at resources and taking a look at what it means to start with nothing. Black people in this country, we started with nothing when slavery was signed off as a no-go, we weren't given anything to help us build. We were left on the side of the road. My ancestors were literally put outside and said, and told to go figure it out with no money, no land, no resource, nothing. And so that has to be acknowledged, and then the plan has to be worked. There has to be a backward plan based on that.

The other problem with these top down initiatives Race to the Top, No Child Left Behind is that they're not talking to communities. They're not talking to the people where they're

the most impacted, not only by these policies, but by the aftermath of these policies. And when you're not talking to the people who are on the ground, who are directly impacted, then you're making decisions that work for you and you're not making decisions that work for them. You're not talking to them about the actual challenges that they're facing. You're making assumptions. And as long as we keep doing that, then we're going to keep creating policies that are not going to make any headway or have any impact in the way that I want to see there to be impact. Because this isn't just politics for me, this is my community, and this is the perception of my community. This is the way that my community is going to be able to thrive, is honestly through this way of communal education, this way of communal learning. And how do we bring in just as we did way back when we had nothing, when the whole community was involved in life lessons and survival lessons in all aspects of our children's lives. What does that actually look like for us? Because for us, that's embedded in our ancestry and our DNA. And when you don't call upon that, then you have a system that's not built for us."

The consistent clarity and conviction with which community leaders interviewed for this study articulate the past several decades of neoliberal school reform, and the several decades that preceded them, is arresting in its clarity and serves as a powerful counterstory to any notion that communities do not have the capacity to drive change in our schools.

Throughout interviews with community leaders, the act of naming harm done by the district to communities through policies, decisions, resource allocation, and other means was called out as critically important. Several also discussed naming and taking ownership for mistakes made and harm done as a prerequisite for agreeing to work with the district on an array of priorities, as Jessica recounted:

> *For me, I was not going to take on that project if the district didn't acknowledge that harm was committed through previous policy. And that part was really important because we were asking stakeholders again about a policy, wanting to get into why they should be really trying to, I think at the time the district was trying to, I don't want to use the word market itself, but really trying to put their walk, the talk. And there was a tremendous amount of distrust, and I just knew that in order for us to do this and to do it the right way, the district needed to say that there were mistakes, that there were mistakes made.*

Without question, the first and most prevalent organizational condition identified by district leaders in order to support the development of equitable partnerships was the naming of past and present harm done to communities, particularly communities of color in the city.

Naming harm, however, without further engagement, is insufficient for healing to take place and the seeds of inclusive collaboration to grow. Once harm is named, it is critical to truly listen to stakeholders' full articulations of their experiences with the district that have led to eroded trust over the years. In listening to district leaders describe their experiences working to co-create policy through equitable partnerships with community stakeholders, an image of peeling back layers upon layers of wallpaper came to mind. It's as if each new initiative, each new person who came to the community, simply papered over the previous structure, plan, initiative, etc., without truly connecting to the community that they purported to serve. Naming harm, truly engaging in courageous dialogue about it, and taking ownership with the vulnerability of past and present harms seemed to allow for the district to peel back all of the layers and start with a bare wall; this creates an opportunity for a new, honest, and unvarnished connection with the community.

However, vulnerability and ownership of past harm are only part of the essential conditions. It is critical that the district take accountable action in response to what is shared by the community in order to develop the conditions for equitable partnerships that co-create goals and policies. This cycle of action that is truly accountable to the voice of the community creates trust that builds and strengthens itself with each iteration. Ana continued to speak powerfully to this theme.

> *Public Schools [have] caused a lot of harm to groups, to individuals who live in the city, particularly to certain communities within the city… particularly the black community. We name it…we've caused harm. And some people in some ways, we continue to perpetuate that. And then when we say, well tell us how we can do it better, the community also tells us, Why? We've told you for the past 10 years, you've had so many superintendent changes, so much transition and you don't listen to us. So when we walk in there with our little community toolkit and say, but let's talk about healing. How do you begin that conversation when people in the community have been there and can tell you, this is what this superintendent told us. This is what this superintendent told us. This is what this superintendent told us. And now you sit here and now you want us to tell you again. Like that is, that's real. And it's like, why should they believe you now? Like why are you different? Really starting with that is like building the relationship in order for us to listen and in order for us to have healing. And then the critical part is that we must act and we must hold one another accountable to say, this is what you said, this is what we heard, this is what we're gonna do. And then come back to say, we actually did it. And that last part is not happening. Or if it does happen, it happens in pockets. Um, so*

as a district, it needs to be the full circle. No matter what transition is happening anywhere, it's still about the community.

Again, and this cannot be overstated, based on qualitative interview data, taking the time to acknowledge and connect with community history in conjunction with the history of the school district is essential in order to build (or rebuild) relationships with community stakeholders. However, it is the accountable action over time that allows for this harm to begin to be redressed.

While community leaders most often voice an understanding of the harm done under this paradigm that has been consistent all along, many school leaders in contrast articulate a change from the way they understood their work when they began to the way that they see it now. This evidences a notable evolution of perspectives regarding neoliberal paradigms and practices. Participants' voices across stakeholder groups provide context and depth to the historical and ongoing harms enacted by neoliberal school institutions on racialized and minoritized communities that are the focus of Major Finding #1. Additionally, they illuminate the level of collective learning and unlearning necessary to reckon with those harms.

While district leaders appeared confident, and almost comfortable, countering deficit-framed characterizations of students, communities, and schools, and utilizing and defining equity, it appeared much more difficult to engage directly with the harms caused by white supremacy and the permanence of racism. Almost every conversation included comments about enacting equity through "providing the tools, resources, support systems that no matter what that person needs are individualized for them to further advance…" and ensuring that we see "everyone getting exactly what they need to reach the destiny that they want to go to." However, when race entered the conversation, comments such as "Race…This is a very complex, complex

question…" and "...we still have a very, very, very long way to go, but we are beginning to get it right" were most common. Jordan, a policy analyst, was more explicit than most:

> *The way that white supremacy in particular works is it not only creates these very strong lines of like division and separation, but it creates this feeling of absoluteness and that that there is, that the way the things operate now, there is no way that they can or should operate outside of that, that it is always something that is fixed. Um, and when it comes to like advancing, you know, shifting ultimately, you know, the world and the context that we live in so that, you know, these underperforming schools become these safe places, become these places of liberation and thinking for our students, there is a very deep challenge that has to come with the sort of permanence that is manufactured and then embedded to these schools as these low performing places where like, you're only ever going to go to this place if you're a failure. You're only ever going to come out of this place as a failure. Um, you're only ever going to work a dead end service job where your back is gonna be thrown out by the time you're in your thirties and lead to all these other hosts of problems on top of the life outcomes that are already affected by the zip code where you were born. For any sort of shift to happen, the sort of like permanence of what currently is has to be something that is like not just questioned, but like fully uprooted. And that's difficult because at the end of the day, like you're still, you know, we're a cabinet level office so that we can disrupt the system and I think that we do do that. And at the end of the day, that does not, nor will it ever change that we are still working inside of a school system mm-hmm. And that when we talk about the system doing harm, I'm now part of that system, right. That's just the reality. Um, and the challenge then becomes to me, how do you walk the line between like reality and possibility so that you*

are currently, you are always moving towards possibility, right? Mm-hmm, like that's the, that's the tension there.

While all district leader participants had a clear and mostly consistent view of equity, Jordan's statements showed the most significant acknowledgment of the intense challenge of uprooting deficit perspectives and changing racialized realities that harm students racialized as Black in the city (in particular, when those detrimental realities are directly or indirectly caused or perpetuated by the district entity).

Major Finding #2: Liberatory school cultivation requires an investment of resources and intentional infrastructure to be built over time in order to develop equitable partnerships that can drive and sustain the work; these must include systems beyond the walls of the school.

Interview data aligned to this major finding point powerfully to the specific type of infrastructure needed to enact liberatory school cultivation. Participants' voices powerfully articulate the degree to which schools cannot stand alone in the work of actualizing commitments to equity and that partnerships must include systems beyond the walls of the school. As observed in the introduction to this study, one of the failures of neoliberal school reform is its tacit assertion that schools are solely responsible for ameliorating achievement gaps. Further, there exists an unspoken assumption that fixing schools and erasing these gaps will lead to equalizing opportunity and that all will be well in an otherwise just and equitable world. However, this approach fundamentally misunderstands the gravity of intersecting systems of oppression and ignores the system's accumulated education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) on behalf of the communities that it purports to serve. Jordan expounds on this dynamic:

If you gimme the zip code of a school, I could tell you, you know, whether or not you can walk to that school, whether or not there's air quality in that school, in in the air, whether or not it's unhealthy for students to be outside at recess. Those things are so inextricably linked that it feels impossible to get to equity without having that conversation first.

Research literature indicates that communities that have been minoritized and marginalized experience interlocking systems of oppression, and these systems cannot all be addressed by improving schools (as neoliberal school reform might suggest).

Without exception, community leaders' interviews evidence the need to understand the complex, interconnected systems that interact with our communities that have been minoritized and the intersectional challenges that they face. While, as previously discussed in the literature, neoliberal school reform has often elided these systemic elements in framing school reform as primarily about the need to fix schools, community leaders in this study consistently discuss the need to address all systems that impact our children and our communities. From this perspective, converting a school into a Turnaround school as a result of alleged "failure" clearly harmed communities in the specific way that it was carried out. Concurrently, it was seriously insufficient as a strategy for increasing student achievement and life opportunities at scale because it did not press on a holistic set of systems needed to help heal communities that have been systemically harmed due to racism, racialized capitalism, and neoliberal disinvestment. Carmen elaborates on this concept:

It really is holistic in nature. And so it doesn't account for any one thing being a driver to community healing or community wellness or really takes into account the myriad of things that influence a kid's life or a community's life. So that's investing in things that happen in schools or investing in community programs and organizations that foster

wellness or a food pantry or work at [local] County Jail that affects kids' parents who are in jail, that affects the kids. Really trying to look at the holistic nature of what communities face, what kids face, and not trying to boil it down.

In this passage, Carmen drives home the point that schools do a disservice to children when they do not take the time to know, let alone take into account, the full array of factors affecting them, their families, and their communities. These diverse and interconnected factors, interacting with societal factors, have a profound impact on children that school systems must endeavor to be responsive to.

As Dr. Terrance Green frequently states on his podcast, Racially Just Schools (2021-present), community members are rightly fed up with school systems that pour resources into schools and expect those resources to yield "four-minute problems to four hundred-year problems." The short-term investments of neoliberal turnaround reform, with their narrow focus on fast and dramatic quantitative results, all too often lead to a lack of investment in what Carmen refers to as "holistic healing" and a lack of patience for the long timeframe that such healing requires.

A critical theme that emerged across all of the district leaders' interviews is that the work of liberatory school cultivation cannot stop at the doors to the school; it must be connected to and interdependent with all of the systems within which racial oppression, inequity, and injustice. Jose elaborates on this theme and what will be required:

I think it's, it's understanding that this work cannot be done just at the school level. Uh, there is a lot of other factors that are important. Um, we are going to be working with the city very closely with the city, uh, in many aspects that some people may not necessarily think have to do with education. Uh, but I think are, are similarly linked on how to look

at housing, how we start looking at transportation, how we start looking at, uh, you know, even, even grocery stores around each one, one of the neighborhoods.

There was consistent acknowledgement that multiple systems need to be addressed and changed in order to reach toward racial equity. However, participants indicated that efforts in this direction are in their early stages and that there is not yet much momentum toward creating this type of intentional, intersectional macro-systemic racial equity.

In addition to the necessity of a holistic and longitudinal approach to improvement, a key concept relative to closing the gap between stated commitments to equity and lived reality is the essential element of infrastructure to support progress and change. As pointedly asked by Jessica, “When we say we want, when we say we want to design a system that's fair and inclusive, that sounds good and inspirational, but s- -t, what does the project plan look like?” This infrastructure must include efforts at the district level that are committed to matching aspirational commitments to fully resourced systems to operationalize them. It must also include grassroots efforts such as building up and supporting more educators from the communities that have been least well served by our institutions and multi-faceted partnerships to bring resources from multiple sources into schools as centers of the community that meet not only student needs but the needs of families and communities who also support and directly impact the lives of our students.

Sean, who has extensive experience developing and implementing a community school model that takes all of these factors into consideration, gave the most comprehensive example of what this might look like:

I think our full service community school model is a direct strategy to address issues of inequity in at least like a regional approach or an individual school approach. And we

have done this by first obviously the very authentic community engagement, shared leadership, creating opportunities for parents and students to work alongside teachers and administrators to understand the needs. You can't really address issues of equity if you don't understand what's inequitable and what the needs are, and then be able to create a plan of action to address those needs through the school infrastructure itself. And so then where there are gaps to fill those gaps with resources, all of the programs and services we provide are external.

So we're bringing in resources as we're building school infrastructure with support and resources from outside...there's clear opportunities to really build the resources and build the capacity of the school to address these needs and challenges and to move towards equity, right? Because we can't have equity without resources, period. There has to be more resources brought to the table in order to actually implement an equity model.

While not deeply explored in this study, Sean's articulation of a full-service community school model, and the growing concept of "sustainable community schools," is an idea that is gaining interest at both the city and district levels and there is work to explore the feasibility of this at scale, as a way to build the kinds of systematic intersectional institutional equity as well.

A highly practical theme related to infrastructure for co-creation that emerged with community leaders is the importance of collaborating in a structured way to ensure that voices are heard, that needs are clearly identified, and that plans are developed such a way that infrastructure supports implementation. As Sean recalled:

We began working with a consultant who kind of walked us through the development of a community-based research project, a needs assessment process, really deeply understand all of the concerns and needs of the community, and then develop a plan, a strategy with

the teachers, with the administration, with this core group of parent leaders and student leaders, and then began to implement it.

Intentionally introducing structured processes to engage all types of stakeholder voices and pursue projects that are truly community-based to be implemented in schools and in support of schools, with the principal in full support and participation, was consistently seen as an evolutionary and iterative process, with powerful impact over time.

From district leaders' perspectives as well, the use of common protocols and processes for facilitating co-creation emerged as a key idea relative to the infrastructure needed to support equitable partnerships. This was summarized most succinctly by Brian, a district leader who focuses on inclusive policy design:

There are three big aspects of effective engagement and policy making. One is translating complex policy ideas into accessible media for your typical stakeholder to access or to engage with. Two is to identify and convene the right people for the conversation you want to have. And three is to make meaning of what you hear in those convenings so that you can translate that meaning into action.

While the simplicity of this framing is clear and sounds simple at the outset, ensuring that each facet of partnering with community leaders is done well (making complex ideas accessible, bringing the right people to the table, and making meaning that leads to action) requires skillful facilitation and a solid understanding of the political and relational contexts of each community. Intentionally building skills for facilitating this type of engagement is an essential condition for equitable and inclusive partnerships.

Beyond supporting presence through several strategic logistical decisions, however, are major questions about setting up the conditions for families to be fully engaged in equitable

partnerships. Intentional infrastructure for capacity building needs to be dedicated to equipping families with the knowledge and skill necessary to do so at a high level, as Jessica forcefully advocated:

> *How can we launch some sort of education reparations for parents so that they can become co-creators in the system? We've left communities out from understanding how the system works, and so now we want to be all righteous and include them. There needs to be a really, a comprehensive plan for how we're going to both leverage the brilliance that already exists in community and also continues to basically help people understand how the system works and what their role in it can be.*

What begins with convincing community members to participate by naming past harm and cultivating relationships that see, hear and value them, must continue to remove practical barriers as well as knowledge and skill barriers for full participation in equitable partnerships that cultivate liberatory school experiences for children.

Another critically important theme that emerged necessary to support efforts at co-creation is having the infrastructure at the system level and skill and confidence at the leader level to enact robust collaboration that can make lasting change, even if there is a change in personnel. Again and again, remarks on the impact of leadership turnover were common among community leaders. Carlos reflected on this:

> *Leadership turnover, at the school and district level is ... it's a killer. And our hope is that we can do enough good work that a little bit of leadership turnover once that work is done does not undo because there's been this diverse representative team of the community who's done this together.*

Leadership turnover, and more specifically, the entrance of new leaders into the system and school level, who want to make their unique mark on systems, was consistently seen as a factor that undermined co-creation efforts that were in process. However, as stated in the goal above, there is a hope and a theory of action that if the work of co-creation is robust enough, its fruits will last because they come from a deeply rooted, established, and sustainable coalition that is consistent and steadfast over time at the community level.

Major Finding #3: District and school leaders must be ready to engage parent and community leaders from an asset-based perspective, must be ready to receive challenges and divergent viewpoints, engage without a predetermined outcome, and must be open to real accountability for follow-through on co-created priorities and plans.

School leaders' interview contributions illuminated a multitude of ways that school, community, and district leaders have worked and can work together to help schools improve dramatically. A common thread, however, is that we must see parents and community members as bringing valuable perspectives to the table. In doing so, an incredibly powerful priority is identifying what specific community members see as priorities that they can work to impact. Malika's comments effectively illustrate this point with the following:

> *I've been doing this for 25 years. I've been inside of a classroom, inside of a school since I was 21, and I feel like I have felt like I'm still fighting the same fight. And there just has to be this quality that says I want to do something different. And the only way that I can do something different is to try the thing that everyone is afraid to try, which is to bring in community members, whether they be parents, grandparents, whether they be the neighbor down the street, whether they be your, you are the probation officer who's in*

your high school all the time because our kids or whoever it is, your [board] member, your PAC member, your PTO president, whoever it is, it's scary to bring these people around the table because not only are they going to give you a fresh perspective that you never thought of before that may have you questioning your whole life choice of being an educator, but they're also coming in and you're allowing them to be at a level playing field with you, with their expertise, their experience, what they're bringing to the table.

Malika's reflection on the vulnerability that is required of leaders to open their practice and their schools to stakeholders provides an important insight into the type of boundary-spanning leadership that is necessary to foster truly inclusive partnerships.

An associated key element of taking the step into co-creation with parents and community leaders is true openness, and an acknowledgement that school (or district) leaders do not have all of the answers. For example, Michael talked about a partnership that emerged early in his Turnaround leadership, focused on reducing violence in the school community:

A [community leader] proactively came in and said, I want your 10 most at risk boys. I'm going to meet with them at least once a week, if not twice a week. And he had their cell phone numbers and they had his, and out on weekends and nights, they were texting, or there were ministers in the neighborhood. When we have, we lost so many kids to gunshot violence. And they would proactively close the support system around the family and the kids and would alert us and come to these meetings. And we had a dry erase board where the ministers would, we'd make a social map of who knows who, the ministers would add to it. The [community leaders] would add to it, and the school people would. And by doing all of that, we could see what could possibly happen next.

Had Michael been closed to this community leader's offers, a significant opportunity to keep students safe and improve school culture would have been missed.

That said, it is also important to recognize which community members are going to best serve the interests of the school and community as an integrated whole. Michael recounted two very different experiences early on in reaching out to cultivate community engagement:

> *I mean, it's sort of the story of two [community leaders]. One pulled me in and said, I'm glad to meet you. Glad we're here now. I'm going to need 20 jobs, so tell me where these 20 jobs are at; her concern was getting her people jobs. She had no concern and didn't even want to discuss the fact that kids in several of the buildings in [our community] couldn't read or do math. Contrast that with another [community leader] in an equally underserved, actually even more underserved neighborhood than the first one who brought us in proactively, what can I do? Who can I connect you with? She would show up to meetings, and she would stand up when there was resistance to things and she would just fearlessly say, this is what's going to lift our kids up.*

Navigating the challenges of engaging with differing motivations of community members in order to realize benefit to both the school and the community in which it is nested is a critical and complex skill.

One of the most important themes that arose with community leaders was the value of intentionally bringing in people who can voice concerns and perspectives that have not been welcome in many settings; someone who is willing to speak truth to power and to make sure that the concerns and experiences of the community are heard, alongside what is necessary in order to bring about the experiences that are needed. Juan described such a person:

You need an advocate, in any education space, that is not gonna to tell people what they want to hear. She's gonna tell people the truth as a person that is in the community that feels like they've been pushed out of the conversation about what makes a school, the school that they want to send their kid through. You know? So in this same conversation, I also think about folks like that, like a [community leader] who is gonna have that community unbiased perspective because she's not worried about letters behind her name and how she comes off. She's gonna give it to you straight. She's gonna be honest. But she's also gonna be graceful in her approach. She's not gonna be, in any way offensive, but she's gonna give that other perspective. And I think that that's really, really important for educators to hear so that they're not having conversations within a guided and facilitated bubble.

Simply put, an essential prerequisite for equitable partnerships and co-creation is a tolerance (and even an enthusiasm) for stakeholders who speak difficult truths and push uncomfortable ideas.

A powerful way that school and community leaders partner is to engage in authentic conversations about what is most important to them and build up organizing capacity to ensure that those concerns and conversations are heard at the district level. This must be prioritized even if this is not directly welcomed or organized in concert with the district; in fact, it is a necessary step to prevent the system from sliding back into well-traveled neoliberal paths. David, who fought for his school to remain open, recalled:

But as the momentum, as parents sort of took the lead in organizing, they then attracted community members who were not part of the [local] school community, but lived nearby or had heard about it and got involved in helping us or helping parents to do things. So there were other connections that parents formed as a result of some of the public

advocacy, some of the public demonstrations...getting into the streets, going to other places in the community where there were events focused on trying to keep [other neighborhood] schools open. So there were all these connections that parents were able to make. And I think that forced the district to make a lot of pivots and a lot of concessions that they might not have otherwise made and forced them to have a more public conversation that I don't think they wanted necessarily to have, but that we successfully forced them to have.

David's story indicates that in addition to openness, an essential way that school leaders can engage in equitable partnerships with community stakeholders is to step back and invite (and encourage) family and community stakeholders to take the lead.

The need for co-creation of conditions for partnership, without the district or school entity presupposing and predetermining the structures and rules of engagement, emerged as a critically important theme relative to this Major Finding. Jessica, in discussing her partnership as a community leader working with the district on inclusive partnership, recounted her focus on setting the stage for inclusive collaboration:

We also did not want to assume how we wanted people to be engaged, but we needed to ask people how they wanted to be engaged and then build an engagement process that was responsive to the way that people said that they wanted to be engaged, not the way that we assumed they wanted to be engaged.

Jessica's pointed words also indicate a critically important element of organizational conditions that are a prerequisite to fostering inclusive partnerships: that people need to feel heard and seen and in relationship with the people alongside them.

Several participants brought up the simplicity of setting up conditions for co-creation, making statements such as "it's not rocket science or particularly profound, but really, creating the space to just do it, making sure that each person there feels that there's some expertise that they're bringing, that they're not sort of lesser than anybody else," as Carlos shared. Another participant, Malika, stated, "You don't need a Ph.D. to figure this out. You have to make people feel heard and trusted and feel like they are also the expert in the room."

While simplicity shines through in community leaders' remarks, complex and deep lessons about the intentionality of structuring collaborative spaces are also evident. To this, Malika remarked further:

> *Our relationships with people, our relationships with organizations, how we structure our processes, all of these things tie back to making people feel, like, seen and heard. And again, not us…issuing some edict from on high of: here's what we think you should be doing on the ground within your community but rather, how are we learning from you, honoring your voice, and helping support [and] do the work that you do?*

The element of intentionally cultivating relationships between community, school, and district leaders was absolutely essential as a theme. This is something that doesn't need to (and perhaps shouldn't, based on participant input) be coordinated by the district or school leadership team. Carlos described his approach to facilitating intentional relationship building:

> *Whether you're a parent or a longtime educator or a new teacher or a boys and girls club or another community partner, we try to create a ground that involves equal footing, a lot of space for folks to share and be known to others that they just haven't had a chance to get to know. We'll do some identity work in that space upfront so that people*

can unpack a little bit of who am I showing up as in this space for good, bad, ugly? How's that going to influence what perspective I'm bringing others?

Incorporating perspectives such as these in developing collaboration sessions emerged as an incredibly important and effective method for involving community leaders in co-creation and design initiatives.

A simple but important element that emerged in developing conditions for equitable partnerships involved enabling full participation, from removing simple logistical barriers to ambitious ideas for supporting full engagement plans. When parent participation was limited in a certain arena, a community leader simply asked a few questions and acted: "We offered childcare that was identified as a major barrier to parents participating in programming themselves, it's like, who's going to take care of my children, my non-school aged children, my babies?" While this concern might have been noted by the district or school leaders, community leaders could immediately respond and develop a structure for supporting parents' presence.

Major Finding #4: Personal experiences, student voice, identity, and wellness must be at the heart of intentional relationship-building and capacity-building for all stakeholders engaged in liberatory school cultivation work.

Interview data aligned with this Major Finding point to the importance of connecting with all stakeholders at a human level and bringing one's full self to bear in the work of racial equity. As indicated by this finding, understanding one's own experiences and identity are key to the work of building relationships and partnerships with children and community members that develop the capacity to realize success. Often, these dynamics require a much more

expansive view than the "laser focus" on academics frequently called for in neoliberal school organizations.

The theme of personally experiencing a lack of resources, a lack of quality, a lack of connection, and many other ways in which systems, including schools, have failed many of our minoritized communities was consistently present in interviews. Many participants shared their experiences of coming to recognize these dynamics as characteristic of the structural racism that it is their mission to interrupt and dismantle. Malika recounted a powerful personal narrative:

> *My journey in education actually begins when my mother passed away. I was seven, and years one to seven we lived in a small community, well, not really small. Richmond is actually a pretty large city in the Bay area, but it was blighted once the jobs left, the industrial jobs left, the waterways jobs left, then the city just really was forgotten. And so education for the black and brown and really just the multi-ethnic people who landed there…we were a multicultural community, but we were poor and we were black and brown and we were forgotten. And my experience then was that I was the smart one. I was the one that, I was the teacher's pet. My mother really poured into me and made sure that I was above grade level. And always I was a reader from the beginning. And so my experience in black and brown communities, in schools that were socioeconomically blighted was that I was a rock star.*
>
> *But when my mother passed away, I went to live with my dad, his mother, my grandmother in a homogeneously white upper middle class town, also in the Bay Area. And I wasn't the smartest girl in the room anymore. And I realized then that there was a difference, even at that age, there was a difference between the ways that black and brown poor people were educated and the ways that white upper middle class kids got*

educated. I realized that very early on because I was no longer the smartest person in the room. And so I've carried that with me...that education is different in different places for different people. And so my experience is personal, and I tie my mission to the fact and the belief that no one's parents should have to die in order for you to get a high quality education, which is what happened to me.

Malika's story is a particularly poignant and powerful illustration of the consistently present theme of naming divergent educational experiences and community resources experienced by students and families in racially, economically, and otherwise segregated cities.

Another common sentiment that emerged from interviews with community leaders reflecting on their stories was a deep desire to surface and counter internalized deficit messages received from society. As Jessica recollected:

We lived in poverty. We lived in a community that was full of love and full of violence. And I sort of remember growing up feeling like, well, I guess this is just where we landed. And I think my parents felt like our life was just solely a reflection of their choices…I see the inequity.

Jessica's story highlights a profound insight: once community members begin to see the racism inherent in societal structures, they unlock a tremendous amount of power to take action that can subvert them.

Just as many teachers can say that they recall educators who have been powerful influences in their lives, each school leader interviewed for this study spoke to ways in which their own experiences provided insight into and skills to connect and support the children in their care. Juan, who had experienced housing instability as a child, reflected:

About 60% of the kids were STLS [students in temporary living situations] students. I, myself was an STLS student, the majority of my career as a youngster, uh, coming up through [the district]. Um, and I know what that experience was like. So to see a kid coming out of a temporary living situation or a couch surfing or in a shelter, those are things that I experienced as a kid. So I knew there are some basics that we're missing here. But the only thing that we're talking about is buying certain types of curriculum materials because we've got low level students.

While few described experiences as difficult as Juan's housing instability, virtually all school leaders articulated some set of lived experiences that helped them directly see and relate to the students whose educational lives are entrusted to them.

District leaders expressed a wide variety of experiences as students and adults interacting with education systems and larger societal systems. Participants were highly reflective about their own positionality and what they brought to their work. Several participants shared traumatic experiences that they had lived through as students, and that their families had lived through, and articulated the ways in which these experiences motivated them to work in order to avoid others having to live through similar experiences. Aisha, who leads multiple teams engaged in equity and family engagement work, represented this theme powerfully.

Education was really a high priority in my household, regardless of the fact that I grew up in a household with a single mom, um, essentially, uh, lived in, in what we would now know as poverty. I didn't know that growing up... When you get into college, it's like, hmm, do you actually know what you need to know? Or what does that preparedness look like? I think about my experience, um, but just college, like struggle that whole first year really feeling like, do I belong in this place? Why am I not as prepared as peers who are

sitting across from me? And so I ask myself, what am I doing to supplement to make sure, um, that my child has what she needs to do, whatever it is that she decides to do. But that's a privilege that I've come to have to be able to do that. And I also know that it's not the privilege that someone who was in the position of my mother did not have in terms of navigating this complex system to ensure that their children have exactly what they need to be, whatever it is that they choose to be, um, after they come out of our system.

Again and again, district leaders reinforced a desire to work hard and provide outstanding opportunities to all children so that parents don't need to struggle in the way that their parents did, and children do not have to struggle in the way that they did.

Other participants described growing up in very diverse, integrated communities and schools that were highly accepting and affirming of all identities and cultures. Ahmed recollected his experience:

…super diverse, very integrated, um, race identity culture was never really, or like race and identity was never discussed explicitly, but it was like almost assumed that all of us were so different, which makes all of us like very, like, organically similar... felt very like accepted and very, uh, uh, invited into spaces. Never felt excluded in any, any setting.

After experiences such as these in their formative years, Ahmed and other participants expressed a sort of shock upon arriving in the city that elicited deep reflection. Ahmed recalled working with a student who was struggling to connect with school or find any type of academic success:

The only, and like the only dynamic difference between me and this, this young man was like what we were born into. And, uh, the fairness of that was very frustrating. Um, so it was like that encounter and many others like that, that were very shaping and formative of like what I care about, what I'm passionate about.

Whether they came from backgrounds similar to or different from the communities they worked to serve, district leaders described their work as trying to push the system to develop more equitable culture divergent from its history of segregation and unequal schooling.

Seeing the importance of academics, but focusing equally if not more on wellness, was another key idea that emerged from community leaders' interviews about equitable partnerships to cultivate liberatory school environments for children. Academic progress is absolutely a priority, but not at the expense of true belonging and wellness, which in many cases was discussed as a secondary priority (at best). Carmen described this challenge:

> *Back in 2021, we spent two years working with [the district], working with community members, principals, teachers, parents to try to put together what could a blueprint look like for wellness, not just for students, which is important, and what does it look like for teachers and for those who are in the school community. And that's one of those things that I think got off to a great start. And then the superintendent transitioned, and then we've sort of been in this, I don't want to call it purgatory, but it's been a little bit shaky in terms of where is this going and where is it not? But again, the real purpose behind it again was how do we think about healing? How do you think about wellness overall? Because you [can give the best curriculum and school environment, and]all these things are incredible in schools and with communities, but if people are not well, it doesn't really matter. We've decided to focus a big chunk of our time and effort into that vein of work and calling it what it is, in terms of healing work.*

As was the case with many other stories, Carmen outlined how an authentic and equitable partnership took root over multiple years and made groundbreaking strides to benefit students

and schools across the system. However, this momentum was interrupted by a change in leadership that set priorities into a holding pattern (or lost them altogether).

Interview data supporting this Major Finding are also consistent in their insistence that partnerships, priorities, and practices toward liberatory school cultivation must have student voices and needs at their heart. However, there is no one comprehensive statement about what student voices tell us or how our systems must respond. As evidenced below, there are a great many messages that we must be open to learning from and with our students if we are going to work together toward educational justice.

Community members were clear, even if students didn't necessarily have the words for it, that authentic caring from adults is the first and most important thing that their children are looking for in teachers and school staff. Malika shared her perspective here:

> *They want adults who care for them and care about the future that's there, the possibilities for them, and they want those possibilities to be nurtured. And sometimes that means that adults have to take a step back. This can't be a power struggle if you actually care for this person. This can't be a challenge to your authority. They're 13. Their frontal lobes don't work. It's not that. So understanding where your kids are and what they need, they just want hearing natal. That is the trend. That is it. That's all. Now, there are different ways that we can show them we care, and so we can hold them accountable, we can have high expectations for them, and then we can still hug them in the end. But all of those things matter equally when we are showing care and love for our children, which is all they're asking for.*

As simple as this sounds, community members again and again articulated that this type of teacher, often referred to as a warm demander (Bondy & Ross, 2008), is absolutely essential to the social, emotional, and academic growth of our children.

While caring is first and foremost in community leaders' discussions of student voice and need, the next emerging theme is a lack of relevance and connectedness to school and learning, as heard frequently by Carlos.

> *The challenge we're seeing is inconsistent, disconnected experiences, students feeling like they have a lack of voice, a lower sense of belonging. And especially when we talk to our middle and high school kids, a lack of relevance, just not feeling like school is connected to anything or much that they care about or seems important to what's next. And I think related to all that, kids generally… there tend not to be structures for kids to get involved in school-wide decisions to have regular input or to take some level of real ownership over their school improvement efforts.*

Rigor and relevance are good for all children, and community members offered a clear mandate that while they could do some work outside of school to counteract harmful messages from media and other negative influences (or influencers), school staff needed to also do more to connect their standards-based work to the real world.

One key practice that emerged over and over in co-creating with students was working intentionally on mindset. Sunita described her anguish, leading to motivation, when she encountered the depth of economic and emotional challenge her students brought to school.

> *You can see that kind of poverty in the eyes of the students, in the hopelessness of the parents, in the deterioration of the community, you can see hopelessness. And because of that, I felt the drive and the purpose to make a difference, making sure that they were*

built up, that they felt like they were just as good as anyone else in the world. So my goal was to build them up, build their spirit, their countenance.

To a person school, leaders saw their role as ensuring that all students had a person who believed in them and who they felt they could trust to build them up and not give up on them at school. Most principals, in addition, referenced the importance of intentionally building teams aligned with this priority, as they recognize that they can't carry this task on their own.

Regarding student voices, multiple themes emerged from district leaders' interviews. The importance of understanding students' experiences and hearing their voices, as well as centering work on students' needs, is a consistent theme. In doing so, several participants discussed students' candid positions on inequities and injustices they observe and perceive, particularly across schools in the district. Jordan describes their observations:

And one thing that I have noticed is like, it, it really feels like if there's anything that [our] students will do, it's like they will really utilize their agency and collective power to make their voices heard…I think what I'm consistently seeing, and it feels like it's increasing, is the students feeling empowered and actually taking steps to make their discontent known and then affect changes from that place…a consistent presence and consistent increase that when the students feel like it is unjust, when something is inequitable, when something is racist or whatever it might be is happening, they are taking initiative to make their voices heard. And it's not just two or three students, it's like hundreds of students at a certain high school or at a certain school are all collectively walking out...I definitely continuously see that, that agency.

Knowing that students feel enough agency to make their voices heard was seen by many participants as a point of pride, and something to be encouraged.

In order to cultivate agency, another theme is the importance of seeing children as whole human beings with struggles, challenges, and needs and placing their well-being first. This requires placing the student's metrics (test scores, attendance, credits, etc.) as a lower priority in some cases. As Lauren articulated, this approach is not common in practice:

> *But we haven't even asked them, how do you feel? Have you ached today? Have you seen your parents? What's going on in your house? I'm sorry you lost your mom, your aunt, your uncle, your cousins and half of your family in COVID because you all lived in a small apartment and now it was just you, your aunt, and your mom. I'm sorry that this…we don't address, we address the social emotional learning parts as a last resort after we've tested and oh, now, this is low performing.*

Recognizing, as Lauren does, that sometimes the system loses track of human needs and human connection, and identifying ways to more intentionally hear student voices was a critical theme that was reinforced again and again by several participants.

Major Finding #5: All stakeholders (community, school, and district) must maintain vigilance against the seemingly gravitational pull toward misalignment, mistrust, fragmentation, and a regression to the way that things have happened in the past under neoliberal school reform paradigms.

Interview data aligned to this major finding illustrate the pitfalls of sliding back into the damaging effects of some neoliberal structures and practices. In particular, the ideas expressed by participants in this section illustrate the importance of vigilance in combating the consistent pull toward regression to fragmented, top-down, neoliberal processes that undermine equity-focused work.

Over and over, a lack of trust due to inauthentic engagement over many years emerged as a consistent focus and one that will not dissipate anytime soon. In particular, the quotation below from Sean, which alludes to the idea that engagement is welcomed when there is an agreement with what the district has already prioritized or already tried to do clearly undermines any attempts to build equitable partnerships.

> *So they've spent years creating barriers for parent engagement, hiding from parents not creating the space for parent engagement outside of three parents being able to come to a board meeting and shout at them. [Then] they created this thing [focused on] family and community engagement...they sort of created all these superficial, kind of fake meetings where nothing actually gets done where they don't actually allow community engagement. They don't actually listen to any of the criticisms or any of the concerns, but they sort of create an agenda and follow Robert's rules. And then you're just never really able, parents just are never really able to express themselves unless they agree with them, unless they agree with what the district is selling…So to the extent that they're inauthentic engagement strategies, it's that if they encountered resistance in the engagement, so let's say there's authentic engagement going on, but then there's resistance to their overall strategy, what they're trying to employ, and then they're able to pull the plug on the engagement and make it inauthentic. You know what I mean? So I think that there's both very inauthentic efforts and there's also authentic efforts, but that have an escape or pressure valve that they can pull or twist. And then it sort of takes away the shields, the overall project from criticism. And so we've had to create our own engagement models and our own engagement strategies.*

In particular, Sean and others spoke to this tension between authentic and inauthentic engagement and inconsistent readiness to truly co-create with stakeholders rather than engage through seeking approval of already-crafted priorities.

Even with the presence of organizational conditions, protocols, and structures for engagement, several district leaders discussed the nearly gravitational pull to fall back on past ineffective means of engaging stakeholders. This often involved engaging stakeholders only to explain policy that had already been developed or to discuss proposed plans and gather input, when a decision about whether and how to proceed was already made. As Jose, who oversees the department responsible for innovation and accountability, articulates:

> *We are really good in education at creating plans. And we come up with solutions. We identified root cause analysis, and we come up with solutions, but we never go to the communities or engage communities, number one in, in co-creating those solutions. Or even when we go to communities, we just present the point, the plan is done, we're gonna act on it whether you like it or not. It's also the lack of trust that exists in the district for anything that we do as a result of the school [turnarounds and closings], as a result of the lack of equity, um, along the way. And as a result of the fact that we have treated our communities as recipients of information, rather than people that actually have the information and sometimes the tools that we need to actually, uh, improve that particular community or those particular schools.*

Interview responses indicate that two of the surest ways to lose stakeholders' interest in co-creation efforts are to come with a plan already created and ask for a rubber stamp approval, or to create a plan in partnership, and then either not follow through with that plan or choose to implement something else. Genuine inclusion requires the ability to truly listen and respond, and

this is something that district leaders acknowledged that they are still not doing well with consistency.

Community leaders also discussed the damaging impact of families' negative experiences at school stemming from deficit views of their capacity to engage and a diminishment of their advocacy that is often seen under neoliberal reform paradigms. Jessica remarked about this dynamic in discussing parents feeling thwarted in their attempts to ensure that their children have excellent teachers in front of them:

> *For me, I think that parents have no way, there's currently zero mechanism for parents to know if their child has a high quality teacher. Parents want to know that their children have high quality teachers. We don't have a way for them to know that. And when you have parents who are coming up to the school and they're like, something isn't right, this doesn't feel right, and their intuition is telling them that their child, something is going on in their classroom, and they're basically being gaslit and treated poorly and as though they don't know what they're talking about when in actuality, no, actually they were right the whole time.*

Whenever parents bring a concern that is minimized or pushed aside, particularly around essential elements of the school experience, such as concerns about their children's teachers, trust in the system is undermined. The message is received that parents are not seen as having the capacity to accurately assess, participate in, and contribute to their children's education as advocates as well as partners and co-creators at the school level.

Perhaps the most robust and deeply complex feelings shared by school leader participants in interviews were connected to this Major Finding. They grappled candidly with the way they entered into school leadership within a neoliberal district context heavily focused on Turnaround

to address the issue of low-performing schools. Several articulated how they grew to understand the work and their relationship to it in a much more complex way over a period of years as they moved from a neoliberal toward a more sophisticated and liberatory mindset. Carmen recounts:

> *I think about how I came into this work and how I became familiar with this work at a deeper level, and this is not about a fault or a blame, but similar to I think a lot of folks fell into this, I think over idealized, oversimplified, dream state of if you just get the principal in the right space and interim assessments and some social emotional X, Y, Z that schools can then shift. And I think where it missed the mark was really understanding...so you go in there and you think it's one thing and you realize, oh wow, this is actually a much more complex puzzle that cannot just simply be solved with interim assessments. And it wasn't until I got into the work and became, I kind of saw inklings of it definitely at [my first school], but being the leader at [my second school] and seeing some of the, whether it was day-to-day violence or seeing how kids were so traumatized in their environment or realizing the complexities that parents were navigating in socioeconomic ways or just what had happened in the community, that it wasn't just a matter of what we had been sold in terms of how to make a school go up on some school quality or index or forth. It was much more complicated than that.*

In a succinct and clear-eyed way, many school leaders were able to articulate the ways in which their preparation for school leadership (most often aligned with neoliberal philosophies) was inadequate to equip them to lead for true equity, and not merely for boosts in test scores or other metrics that were considered to be of high value by the system.

One school leader, Sunita, who launched a Turnaround school as principal and then oversaw, nearly a decade later, the transition back to traditional district leadership, recounted her reflections on the first days of her work as a Turnaround Principal:

> *When I first came into Turnaround, I felt like it was a lot on my shoulders because my first day of school, the parents wouldn't leave the building. So they all swarmed the building, and I had to stand on top of a desk in the hallway with a megaphone and address them. They didn't know me. They didn't know any of my staff, and I felt like that was an opportunity for the district to really come in and support in a different kind of way. But that was left on my shoulder to settle the community down to create a partnership with them. I think that a lot of times we are left with the ball holding the ball. I think that for us going in, we impacted a community by releasing the staff, keeping the students, the parents in the community, people that they had attached to and trusted. And we did not take our resources to train those that were there.*

After getting to know the community and the landscape, Sunita and others recounted successful efforts in building relationships and stability at the school with multiple stakeholders. However, after establishing a stable climate and building adult teams focused on building students up holistically, Sunita learned that her school would go through another massive change: the transition from Turnaround school back to traditional district governance. Recalling this process, Sunita added:

> *They had a good plan. It was a great plan the way that they thought it through, we're going to take the schools and put them back in their networks, but they didn't think about the impact that that was going to have on the community of the schools. They didn't think about an effective transition…they didn't consider, they just didn't consider the*

community part of it. So I think the impact is the same [as it was when] we turned the schools around, the way that the schools were fighting to stay open. I think that it had the same kind of impact because it just wasn't done well.

Now, a few years into the switch back to district governance, the same school has been identified by the district as a low-performing school needing additional support and intervention. In a brief reflection, Sunita stated, "I think that it seems new, and I appreciate them calling them progressive schools, but honestly, it's the same thing. This is why I say that history repeats itself…" This move away from the Turnaround model as practiced in the district, and the disruption to communities in returning schools to local governance, while still labeled as underperforming, was not addressed specifically by district leadership in articulating harm done. This type of cyclical action, illustrated here through a community experiencing the trauma of a school becoming a Turnaround school, then experiencing the trauma of transitioning back to district governance, and years later still being labeled as a low performing school in need of intervention is heartbreaking. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, this is an example of the permanence of racism and the property function of whiteness playing out in school district policy at the expense of schools and communities that have been minoritized and subjected to systemic oppression..

Having lived a similar leadership story, Marcus reflected on his perspective on the Turnaround work that he began his leadership journey in, and how he has evolved in his thinking.

I believe that the turnaround model… was based in systemic racist practices. Here is the reason why it engaged or did not engage the family members and community members, um, from a certain perspective that we call…an inequality framework. Anyways, um,

engaged from a deficit perspective, the status of human community, you know what, and this was in all the communities, all the, um, Latino communities, and Black communities, um, it was, let us educate your kids. We all just get out the way, which is why there was such a, a big push for there not to be [traditional governance] in [Turnaround], schools because of the fact that there was a, a hidden deficit view about the voice of and the capacity, um, of parents and the community to actually influence positively on the academic outcomes. To me, today's work… it engages differently. Um, and it's structured to engage differently. So, for example, I know of schools who were low performing that partner with parents and partner with community organizations to actually enrich the resource allocations to the learning body of their particular schools. We partner heavily, heavily with the community. Um, and when I say community, the parent, um, the city council, um, and even local establishments within the neighborhood to enrich the entire academic program for our students. Um, that's, that, that's not what Turnarounds did.

While some school leaders recounted some strong practices that came out of Turnaround management systems, structures, or resources, all acknowledged that the neoliberal approach taken by the district had done a great deal of harm and expressed internal conflict about the part they played in it.

Major Finding #6: Enacting and sustaining educational justice within a school system requires the district to take an equal measure of accountability when schools are not performing well for students. They must commit to providing resources, personnel, technical expertise, and other necessary elements to ensure that the school can realize a vision for all students that is co-created by and responsive to the voices of the community.

Among district leaders, questions about how community and school leaders can work together to improve school performance relative to opportunity and achievement gaps elicited responses that were consistently equity-focused and reflective of the district's responsibility and accountability to school stakeholders. Their answers utilized the language of moving beyond the initial imperative step of naming harm to identifying barriers, disrupting barriers, and aligning a deep understanding of what is happening within local communities with a novel and collaborative approach to allocating resources. District leaders recognized in their responses the role of the district in inviting community members into the process of co-creating policy and practice, as articulated below by Ana, a member of the Office of Equity:

> *As I think about equity, justice, race, and about improving schools identified as low performing, it's really about listening to what the people want/need, and then how are we as a district being responsive to that and being truthful and healing the, the hurt that we as a district have caused and naming that...That's a really powerful step that I, I almost can't imagine the district doing 10 years ago. What are the structures and systems that they need in order to support them? And then what are the barriers that are impeding them? Our [approach to community] partnerships will say, who are the people that are at the table? Because it's not about the district making these decisions, but how is the community, the members in that community, whether it's a student, a parent, the person that owns a little corner store, like how are they informing [Our Public Schools] about the resources that are needed in that specific community to really inform what the plan is? I would imagine a world where we consistently hold up the mirror to the district, everyone, um, sees their role and how they play towards equity, how they play, um, towards justice, and that everyone is acting upon what they, they can do to make a*

difference for our students as a collective for the students … a world where everyone would understand that that is important and that they all play a role."

In reflecting on ways in which community leaders show up in spaces with the district where co-creation is the intention, several participants referenced the honesty with which people raised their voices and concerns regarding trust and doubt of the system. In hearing this, district leaders deeply felt the need to be a part of a healing process shoulder to shoulder with community stakeholders, with everybody "showing up."

In terms of organizational conditions that the district must be responsible for, school and community leaders voiced a number of different critical reflections. One theme, with multiple dimensions, deals with the relationship between schools and school communities and the local district entity. On the one hand, there needs to be district support for authentic and equitable partnerships between schools and communities, as shared by Carmen: "There has to be complete buy-in from those district level leaders to support the work…this takes planning, logistical planning, structural planning, and the district needs to also leave the space open for their school leaders to do the work." At the same time, as they are providing support there is a need for the district (as well as school) leaders to be open to real feedback and accountability that holds the district responsible for living its aspirational values in reality. This was articulated by Marcus:

There has to be a level of accountability back to parents…where they can hold school leaders and districts accountable to meeting basic needs, period. Because they're a governing entity and to me they should feel empowered and know how to be empowered.

A relationship between district, school, and community stakeholders that is characterized by full support for co-creation, and full openness to the results of that co-creation (with accountability), is indicated as critical for success in this work.

Another element that emerged in terms of organizational conditions for which the district must take ownership was the importance of district leaders' capacity to cultivate partnerships with parents and community members, which is not necessarily a skill set that is commonly taught but must be intentionally sought out. As Marcus observed:

> *The leadership, at the district level as well as the school level has to be well versed, well versed in being able to galvanize community resources…to get resources into the building. That's one condition that there has to be a competent, political…network-enabled type of leader to be in communities that are most marginalized.*

Through this work to skillfully develop networks and identify resources to bring to and cultivate within the local school community, district leaders can build strong momentum to support efforts at co-creation of liberatory school experiences.

While articulating a number of key levers that support equitable partnerships that cultivate strong schools, school leaders' interviews also pointed to several emergent themes that undermine efforts at co-creation. The first focused on observing a reluctance on the part of systems of authority to be willing to authentically hear and make changes in response to community needs. This came up again and again in interviews, as articulated by Carmen below:

> *I think that the onus of this, a lot of this lies within the structures that are set up in school systems and the power dynamics that are set up there. So a community of school leaders can come together all day and every single day and have a thing, but [if] the people who are on the other end of it who sit in districts aren't actually primed to listen, or the budget doesn't align to actualize those plans, those people come up with nothing fundamentally changes. And I think that is the crux of all this. I think the challenge is really in the powers that be and how do they perceive risk? What is their own understanding of race*

and inequity in our country, all of those things. And so I think that that flip side of that coin has to really be dealt with in order for whatever that group comes up with to actually land and make a difference. Without that, it's just folks coming together.

The most pronounced theme that arises here is that school leaders are calling for a real readiness on the district's part to understand school and community leaders' needs, and to tangibly support their efforts at co-creation.

A key idea that helped articulate this major finding was the importance of ensuring that the district shifts its focus for accountability from one that is punitive with regard to schools toward a structure that holds the district accountable to supporting schools with the time, resources, and people necessary to realize a liberatory vision for students' experiences. Brian succinctly summarized this point: "When the district is allocating resources and supports, our effectiveness should be evaluated based on the extent to which we support schools in their work getting closer to that shared vision." Simply put, there must be shared responsibility between the district and schools to ensure that visions are met; it cannot be the school's responsibility alone to enact change and actualize a liberatory vision.

An additional theme that emerged from district leaders relative to this major finding is the importance of working through strong systems and structures and toward clearly established goals in collaboration with community members. The two primary processes that were referenced within this theme are the development of the district's Equity policy and reforming its Accountability system; each of these cases is introduced here and then explored in greater depth in Chapter 6.

A second theme regarding organizational conditions that came up in nearly every district leader interview is the existence of a robust and clear equity framework or policy, which in this

particular district, was itself the product of significant community engagement (this process is explored in more detail later in the chapter as a case study in co-creation).

Through operationalizing the equity framework, district and school and community leaders have a common language, vision, and toolkit that they can utilize to guide their partnerships and decisions, as well as assess the impacts of planned actions. One district leader who focuses on community outreach and partnership, Lauren, described an intentional push to “lean in” to the equity framework and utilize its toolkit as resulting in the ability to meaningfully change the nature of partnerships between the district and its community members:

> *…actually bring people to the table to have a conversation that [comes] to a resolution in which everyone [feels] comfortable. And then, we’re able to be like, all right, this door may be closed, but the road is still open, and we’re now walking together.*

As a sub-element to this organizational condition, an organizational structure that places an Office of Equity (if the district is large enough) or an Equity leader that reports directly to the district superintendent at the cabinet level emerged as significant. This was discussed as supporting an organizational culture that places equity at the heart of every decision, action, and policy, and can work both internally and externally to ensure that the community is truly involved and heard.

The development of the district’s Equity policy was discussed as the first time district leaders engaged community leaders in developing policy together. This diverged from prior attempts at community engagement described by one participant: “We just [provided] the spaces for people to vent and say something…and then the district [didn't] necessarily respond to what they were saying.” Through this process, community members and district leaders engaged to identify four primary dimensions for the equity policy: liberatory thinking, equitable

partnerships, fairness in resource allocation, and just policies/systems. While each of these dimensions are explored in greater detail later in the next chapter, district leaders consistently referenced the community's call for the district to operationalize this framework during collaborative working sessions. They also referenced that several members of the Equity Office came to be considered indispensable in order for co-creation to take place.

With regard to accountability reform, district leaders recognized this as the first major attempt at co-creation with families and community members under the district's Equity framework: "...using the work, to co-create solutions…I think the first time ever that the district has gone through that process has been through the accountability [reform]." District leaders continuously came back to the community's insistence that prior incarnations of accountability passed down from the district were biased against and unfairly punished schools identified as low-performing. Several participants referenced the need to continually acknowledge and take ownership of harm that has been done to communities of color through more robust systems for holding the district accountable for supporting communities and schools. Further, they referenced the need for affirmative commitments with explicit follow-through to signal that historic harms will not be perpetuated through the new systems that communities are being asked to co-create.

Relative to this finding, several school leaders seemed less hopeful in their responses than district leaders, sharing significant questions about what they could do from their vantage point to press for district accountability for liberatory cultivation. They expressed the intensity of the demands on their time and priorities as given by their direct supervisors, and limited capacity to reach beyond what they are already attempting to do to realize racial equity. Some, like Marcus, had doubts about whether it is possible to close the gap between aspiration and reality:

> *I have secret shadow questions about whether our efforts to see real racial equity come into the education sector are even worth the effort or not, because the system is doing exactly what it was designed to do. It wasn't designed for, um, our students, which is the reason why we're seeing such, um, marginalization and racializing outcomes, you know? Um, and so for me, I, I, I just, I wonder, you know, does there need to be an overhaul, a complete gut and overhaul about the whole notion of traditional education?*

The concept that the system is getting the results it gets because it is intentionally designed to get those results was a frequently referenced idea. Stemming from this idea, Marcus's question about whether a true deconstruction and reconstruction is the only way to achieve greater racial equity is a profound and troubling question; one that highlights the critical importance of the district's willingness to take equal measures of accountability for inputs and supports for schools in enacting liberatory school experiences.

Chapter Summary

Reflecting on the interview themes presented above in alignment with each of the research questions, we find that deep reflections are needed in order to meaningfully utilize the key findings presented at the outset of this chapter. It is clear that simply naming historical and ongoing harms is not sufficient for sustainable, liberatory school cultivation work to take place. District and school leaders must engage in ongoing, recursive, deep listening to the voices of parents, families, and community leaders. They must consistently demonstrate understanding and respect for the people who have been harmed and who are coming to the table in partnership through engaging in accountable action that honors co-created plans and visions. What's more, it cannot ever be assumed that harm has been resolved and laid to rest; a retrenchment or

oppressive action at any point may renew harm and unravel progress that has been made. Resources and infrastructure to support liberatory school cultivation must be intentionally created, maintained, and rooted in the communities in which the school system is nested, and in so doing, become insulated from destabilizing factors such as leadership changes and local and state policy.

In Chapter 6, I build upon the findings and themes presented in this chapter through an in-depth exploration of three cases within the system: Equity policy, Accountability reform, and Community design. These cases emerged through participant interviews and artifact review as areas of work that illustrate progress relative to enacting equitable partnerships toward educational justice, and that also illuminate major challenges that emerge along the journey, particularly in a large, complex urban school system.

Chapter 6: Major Findings Illustrated by Cases Within the System

Throughout interviews and initial artifact review, three major cases within the system emerged as examples of co-creation and powerful drivers of school cultivation efforts that center racial equity and educational justice. Each case incorporates support for and adds depth to the study's major findings, yielding additional insight in moving toward an answer to the study's primary research question. Taken together, these cases also add an important measure of realism to the major findings, illustrating the challenges and complexities of enacting equitable partnerships that center racial equity and liberatory design in practice within a large and complex urban school system nested within a city that has a profound history of intersecting systems of racialized oppression.

Two of these cases are rooted at the system level: the development and operationalizing of an Equity policy and the development of an equity-focused Accountability system. The third case is rooted at the school level: a facilitated, community-driven design process. Each of these cases provides powerful illustrations of the major findings outlined in Chapter 5 and contributes to developing an understanding of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings. This chapter builds on themes emerging from interviews that support major findings through a case-based analysis, incorporating additional qualitative data including artifact analysis, participant observations, and focus groups. The first case study explores the development and operationalization of an Equity policy through participant interviews, participant observations in school leader professional development, focus groups, and an analysis of the policy and related artifacts. The second case explores the development of a co-created and equity-focused Accountability policy through participant interviews, focus groups, and an analysis of the policy document and related artifacts. The third case explores a Community-driven design process

centering liberatory school experiences through participant interviews, participant observations in community design sessions, and artifact analysis.

Chapter 5 introduced and explored this study's Major Findings through the voices of interview participants, illustrating key ideas and themes related to each finding. Each of the three cases presented in Chapter 6 draws on multiple sources of data and stands on its own as an example of substantive work that represents key ideas and themes in action. Each case analysis contains meaningful connections to many or all of the Major Findings introduced in Chapter 5, bolstering each finding by pairing narrative with action. Additionally, the three cases provide a practical dimension that adds depth and complexity to an understanding of the implications of the major findings on the study's primary question: How can community leaders, school leaders, and district leaders work together in equitable and inclusive partnerships to cultivate growth in schools labeled as low performing?

Developing and Operationalizing an Equity Policy

The district's Equity policy was developed over a period of multiple years, beginning with a race and equity working group and coming to fruition through the creation of a district-level office of equity. The development of the Equity policy involved educators, students, community leaders, and others, and prioritizes a number of precepts, including leading with a focus on the students who have been most marginalized by our schools and systems. One community leader, Carmen, who was involved in this process describes the (then) superintendent's efforts to launch this process:

She created a cabinet level position to have the first ever chief equity officer, she was really signaling a thing and then she could have just signaled that thing and sort of let it

go and it could have died on the vine. But she also pumped, it was her decision to pump resources into that to build that office out. And then came the equity framework, which then really informed a lot of the decision making on hearing of community voice and shaping everything. They were trying to really start and get people to just look at things differently as it relates to equity... The theme of the tale is that it takes a lot of time to get to where you're trying to go, and it's not going to happen overnight. And there are no quick solutions by any stretch of the imagination to get to the North Star here.

In thinking about this "North Star" concept, Carmen may be referring to the district's development of an equity vision that specifically articulates the move beyond a universal design approach as the way to enact anti-racist schooling and close opportunity and achievement gaps that have persisted across time and many different iterations of school policy. The framework specifically names a goal of locating the students who have been located farthest from opportunity and ensuring that policies and plans are built to meet their needs. In doing so, the district asked and answered questions that mirror those found in Diem and Welton's (2020) work on critical policy analysis, particularly around identifying who the intended beneficiaries of a policy are by design.

The equity policy is also explicit about the need to shift from understanding students, schools, and communities through a historical lens which perpetuates inequities (directly or indirectly) toward an equity lens which explicitly seeks to deconstruct and counteract deficit narratives and alleviate inequities. This language mirrors a key precept of Green's (2020, 2017) Community Equity Literacy (CEL) framework: working from an asset- based perspective about communities. Describing this need, the policy states: "The equity lens… helps us create the conditions that enable students to advance toward the universal goal. The lens questions and

unpacks the current situation, and reimagines it in a supportive and inclusive way that prioritizes those who are furthest from opportunity" (p.27). The articulated elements of and need for the equity lens align tightly with the goals articulated by critical literature that interrogate the detrimental impacts of color-evasive school turnaround reform (Godin & Khasnabis, 2022, Welton, Diem, & Lent, 2023).

In order to mobilize the necessary elements for an equity lens to be enacted systemically, four elements are outlined: liberatory design, equitable partnerships, resource allocation, and fairness in policies and systems. The first element, focused on liberatory design, is explained as follows: "Liberatory thinking goes beyond simply changing mindsets to creating concrete opportunities for others to experience liberation. The opportunities provide cover for and center underrepresented and marginalized people" (p.28). It is in this space that the term liberatory seems to have first emerged in the district's discourse.

In order to actualize liberatory opportunities, the framework places a priority on working through equitable and inclusive partnerships. In defining inclusive partnerships, the framework provides the language and prerequisites for co-creation, stating:

> *Inclusive partnerships (IP) value and prioritize the diverse voices of students, families, caregivers, and communities when making decisions that affect their lived experiences. This relationship requires the people and institutions who hold power to account for past inequities and to create conditions for healing and co-design* an equitable future (p.30).*

This articulation of partnerships that account for past inequities aligns with necessity of naming and reckoning with harm that has been done, a key theme that provides support for Major Finding #1. Codifying the language into the Equity framework may have been an essential foundation of District leaders' work to name historical harm in launching a new kind of authentic

and equitable approach to community engagement. Elaborating on this lens, the document goes on to articulate: “Inclusive partnerships bring together a diverse array of stakeholders to engage in authentic, collaborative experiences and codesign *community-centered solutions to complex and challenging issues caused and upheld by systemic oppression” (p. 30). Of the four essential elements of the district’s Equity Framework, inclusive partnerships is the one that most directly connects with this study’s primary research question. Equitable and inclusive partnerships, if engaged in authentically and well, can steer the other elements toward liberatory change for students, schools, and communities. As a community leader, Juan elaborated on the Equity Framework’s inclusive partnerships lens, reflecting that his “Favorite part of the equity framework is the inclusive partnerships piece. That is the part that I feel like really does create some shifts.”

Particularly when considered with respect to schools labeled as low performing, the Equity framework’s articulation of a liberatory approach that leverages equitable partnerships to co-create solutions to pressing issues represents a dramatic departure from previous problem-solving and school improvement planning structures. One critical question is how inclusive partnerships can be leveraged to shift mindsets and cultivate change in the subset of schools labeled as low performing. In considering the structures may be put into place to help schools identified in this way to evolve as humanizing spaces that support higher levels of student belonging and success, Jessica noted: “I think the importance of the equity framework was so critically important because it put a stake in the ground and named a value that the district had that then we could build infrastructure around.” The third and fourth elements of the Equity framework, aligning resources equitably and building fair policies and systems can be seen as an essential part of that infrastructure for change.

The equity policy and aligned tools to operationalize it are powerful and consistently recognized by participants as an exemplary model of systemic work to counter the effects of decades of institutionalized racism and disinvestment in neighborhood schools. However, a profound dissonance arose in some cases where the district's stated equity goals came into conflict with the momentum of neoliberal structures within the district. An example of this dissonance was pointedly shared by a school leader, David, describing his experience at the outset of the Equity policy work when his school in a nearly all-black neighborhood was in danger of being closed and repurposed as a high school to serve an adjacent neighborhood that was gentrifying quickly:

> *As we were going through the fight to save [our school], [the superintendent introduced the equity framework...so this is hundreds of principals in a room together. So she led us through some conversations and table activities related to this concept of equity, And so out of that conversation and proceeding conversations, the equity framework was born. it was just sort of all happening at the same time that we were fighting for our school and stuff. But I thought it was interesting that she would lead a conversation about equity while at the same time there's a principal in the room who's fighting to keep his school open against the plan that is, in my opinion, and that of my community, so obviously anti-Black. And so in that respect, I think it's incredibly difficult for any district level leader to have an honest conversation about equity unless they're also willing to radically redefine and reimagine what schools look and feel and operate like.*

While David's experience was on the more negative end of the spectrum, it is a powerful narrative that illuminates the challenges of shifting from neoliberal to liberatory approaches to running a major urban school district. This serves as a particularly acute illustration of the

fraught interaction between the elements of people, place, policy, and politics (Welton, et al., 2023), that must be navigated in the implementation of equity-focused change in school systems. Additionally, it is a profound example of the perilous nature of the CRT principles of interest convergence and divergence, which can have damaging effects on communities of color even in contexts where there is a stated commitment to Racial Equity.

Participant Observations - School Leader Professional Development on Operationalizing the Equity Framework

During a full week of professional development for school leaders across the district in July of 2023, I was able to engage in a participant observer in four sessions aimed at operationalizing the equity framework. Each session was facilitated via zoom, with Principals joining sessions from their school sites. Sessions were co-facilitated by members of the Equity Department.

The first session, facilitated by Lauren and Ashley, outlined an overview of the history of and unpacked the content of the framework. In sharing some of her concerns about the framework's roll-out, Sunita articulated one of the main reasons why this session was so important:

> *I definitely think that the whole equity framework is an amazing framework. I've seen it, read through it. I think that it's amazing. What I think though is with a system this large, that's why I was saying with the system this large, it is difficult to funnel that real information from school to school. It is not going to be fully effectively executed at every school. It's just not, because, as I stated, you are funneling information through someone else.*

Acknowledging that many people had experienced the Equity framework in different ways and stating that "It'll take us several years for everyone in this district to live and breathe and operate

with equity," the facilitators articulated the purpose of the first session as threefold: to make meaning of the framework, to engage with peers about the essential concepts, and identify specific practices to implement and embed within the school community. They shared the norms of curiosity, urgency, resiliency, vulnerability, and empathy, and asked for participants to prepare to " experience discomfort in this space…and in conversations about racial inequity, it's inevitable to happen. We want to hear what's on your heart and mind now, and not just saying what you think other people would want to hear." The facilitators worked diligently to model the language of the Equity framework as well as the norms they laid out as they traced the history, development, and concepts that comprise this approach to realizing the district's vision.

As they proceeded through sessions about operationalizing the Equity framework, mobilizing community engagement, and case studies in leading with a racial equity stance to benefit those farthest from engagement, members of the Equity team continued to model and embody the language, lenses, and values of the Equity framework. Principals engaged candidly in exploring how students and communities are situated within the system, and ways in which school leadership actions are never neutral; they either push toward or away from greater equity on behalf of the students who have been least well served by our educational institutions.

Engagement levels were high in each of the sessions, and interaction was almost universally positive. In one session, a principal embraced vulnerability and asked, "With liberatory thinking…How does one free their mind of all of these presumptions and all these assumptions and of biases and things of that nature before addressing a situation or commenting on a situation?" Responses to this and other honest questions illustrated a highly supportive community of school leaders striving together to unpack their perspectives and to work in ways that truly reach the students who have been farthest from opportunity and success within the

school system. In another session, a principal shared several questions that had heads nodding vigorously:

> *My question is like, well, how do we know that we're doing equity? How do we know that our instructional practices are inclusive? How do we know that all of our kids feel very welcome at the school? And we're not asking or answering any of those questions..I would love to learn from schools that think they've engaged in Equity work, in Anti-bias and Anti-Racist work and have done it really well. What does that mean? What does that look like? What is the vision that we would hold ourselves accountable to over the next three or four years?*

As principals shared similar questions, facilitators deftly elicited responses from participants that illuminated their experiences and helped to build a structure for colleagues to explore equity-centered problems of practice with each other. As the sessions continued, participants continued to make it clear that they needed more time with each other and more opportunities to learn from exemplars from within the district that have operationalized the Equity framework.

In the final stretch of the last session that he facilitated, Ahmed gave the participants a charge to take on and share with each member of their school communities:

> *Real, sustained systems change for racial justice is only possible when everyone within the system is leading for equity. Each one of us has an important role to play in reducing disparities in opportunity and creating a more equitable district.*

In closing, participants were asked to reflect on this clear statement of shared responsibility, and to discuss initial plans for enlisting everyone at their sites in the process of converting equity learnings into practice. As they shared their reflections and plans, principals expressed gratitude for the sessions and for the opportunities to grapple with the challenges of leading for Equity in

schools. Engaging in these sessions as a participant observer, I was able to see clear evidence of a district entity committed to building the capacity and clearly communicate the responsibility of its leaders to take up the mantle of leading for racial equity and educational justice.

Developing an Equity-focused Accountability System

A key area of work within the system that emerged in interviews, observations of public board meetings, and review of artifacts is the priority of moving from a neoliberal, data and rigidly data-focused Accountability system that punished schools for what was labeled as "unacceptable" performance to a more holistic and culturally responsive model. In the fall of 2020, the district's Board of Education gave district leadership a clear message that its current accountability system, in place since 2013, was not working in the interests of students, schools and communities. Indeed, it was creating and perpetuating harmful impacts on schools and communities through its punitive approach. After voting down a revised "2.0" version of the system, they provided a mandate not just to revise the system, but to recreate it. The district's primary point person for the accountability system, Brian described the board's position as follows:

> *And they talked about how [the accountability system] was not working. It was, it was a punitive, a source of a lot of trauma, and they voted; they didn't vote to pass it, and it took them a second vote, to pass the reform, the revisions, frankly under a little bit of duress. And, they did so conditionally, and they said, we will pass this if you come up with something better that is not punitive, that is focused on supporting schools instead of punishing them, and is designed in collaboration with stakeholders. So that essentially*

established a board mandate under which I began operating, um, to make policy differently.

As described by one local nonprofit that was identified to help lead community engagement, this mandate constituted a dramatic departure from previous policy initiatives. Recruiting participants, they indicated that the work would lead to a new and more equitable way of assessing educational opportunity and school quality that reflected the voices and perspectives of full spectrum of the city's communities.

In launching the process of co-designing a new and more equitable accountability policy, acknowledging past harm was a critical initial step. Brian, who led the district's efforts in this process, articulated his approach to this naming of harm and reckoning with it as he recounted the early days of the accountability reforms:

And, addressing that collective trauma was a big part of what we needed to do in terms of capacity building and framing the engagement as part of the redesign. 'cause if we didn't, then we were gonna fail... So we started out with an acknowledgement of harm, and we started out with an acknowledgement of that trauma... it does make people feel heard. And that level of candor just opens up, um, folks' mentalities to it. It, it is a prerequisite to creating a space for collaboration, [this] acknowledgement of past harm.

Consistent with themes emerging from interviews and supported by the Equity framework, this naming of harm represents an additional practical example illuminating Major Finding #1: the need to explicitly state and reckon with historical and ongoing harms in order to truly engage stakeholders in inclusive and equitable partnerships.

Additionally, interview participants from multiple stakeholder groups indicated that in order for there to be true collaboration and co-creation of both process and product related to

accountability reform, there was a critical need to develop infrastructure to facilitate the work in alignment with the board's mandate. This is consistent with Major Finding #2, which outlines the necessary investment of resources in infrastructure for equitable partnerships. Those involved in the design of the reform efforts noted that infrastructure for co-created accountability reform had to be intentionally designed with process, and not product at the center. A community leader, Jessica, who was deeply involved in this work describes this effort:

> *And so really as opposed to designing a policy that I thought would be effective, I designed the process to get to the policy ensuring that students success and students were centered and in students being centered, that the district, again, going back to what I said initially, was working to align their aspirational values and their lived values. And so yeah, the stakeholder engagement design team was really the result of this idea that we can't just continue to talk about equity and inclusion and targeted universalism and not ever include the people who are most proximal.*
>
> *So the spaces in which we're trying to create and implement change, it was just agreed upon that the district was never just going to run with something and not follow the process, that they were going to listen to stakeholders, that they were going to follow up, that they were going to do what they said they were going to do basically, Or we wouldn't be part of it. And they did. And I think what I found in the process is, and I think what I was most was encouraged and surprised by was just the fact that we did push the district that when more time was needed, the district had to be responsive to that because we were learning. So we're saying we're going to create this entirely inclusive process, and the district was used to saying, okay, great. Let's survey the city. We need the data, we need it done by next Tuesday. And this was like, it's not going to be done by next*

Tuesday or next month or even three months from now. Because if you want this to be really inclusive, then there are steps to this. Number one is we're bringing people to the table who've not been brought to the table together before, which means that there is probably a learning curve that we need to attend to in a way that's fair.

Jessica's articulation of the process of building an infrastructure for co-creation also weaves together advocacy actions that connect to Major Finding #5, which outlines the need to push against dynamics leading toward regressing to past practices shaped by neoliberal school reform paradigms. In this case, the district entity's tendency to have little patience for processes that take a lot of time to develop properly is a barrier that can significantly hinder authentic co-creation that centers racial equity and the communities most proximal to impacts of inequity. In order to achieve desired results through equitable partnerships and co-creation, this barrier had to be overcome through advocacy and pressure coming from community stakeholders.

As articulated by Brian, who manages the district's accountability and data department, the conclusion of the accountability reform process yielded an unequivocal success story: "after three plus years of work in April [2023], we codified a new framework that was recommended by an advisory group of very diverse stakeholders, and their recommendations were informed by, an unprecedented level of stakeholder engagement." Brian went on to recount a standing ovation that the team received after presenting the new Accountability policy to the Board of Education.

The Accountability policy itself begins in a fairly traditional way; outlining the purpose as providing a means for measuring performance, identifying schools in need of support, and communicating information to stakeholders about the degree to which schools' practices and growth indicators meet expectations. However, it quickly pivots and states that it will do away with ranking or marking schools with summative ratings (numeric or otherwise), and that it

mandates implementation in alignment with the Equity framework. In an additional departure from traditional accountability policies, it articulates consideration for inputs as well as outputs and explicitly incorporates district accountability for supporting and cultivating schools. Aligning with key ideas and themes that emerged from participant interviews, this policy provides codified support for Major Finding #6, which asserts that in enacting and sustaining educational justice, districts must take accountability in equal measure with schools for liberatory cultivation.

Additional innovations evidenced by the Accountability policy that focus on students include assessments of student wellness and experience alongside assessments of learning and academic growth. Innovations focusing on adult inputs are also described, including leadership practice and instructional capacity. Separate sections include groundbreaking outlines of expectations for community engagement, marked by inclusive structures, a culture of healing, social-emotional supports, and partnerships including out-of-school opportunities. Each element of the accountability policy articulates a definition and an expected standard of practice, a theory of action articulating its importance to achieving the district's vision, and explicit district accountability supporting success. Taken together, the elements of the accountability policy amount to a clear and definitive departure from neoliberal accountability structures, and are particularly powerful because they were the result of deep collaboration and co-creation with community stakeholders.

In describing the impact he expected the new policy to have, Brian began by articulating that its first and most important impact would be the clear and coherent vision across the district of what is most important.

This is, this is the vision. This is the shared vision of the city. And so that is a codification of our shared description of what we want our schools to be. And that's really important because if you have that grounding, then it prioritizes the work you then need to do. SO, all of our structures should be aligned with stakeholder vision of school excellence…These are the things that we think make up a good school in terms of daily learning practices, in terms of supports and resources, in terms of all these things…this is what [the district] things makes a good school. This is what, this is what we think of all of our babies should have access to every day.

He then went on to describe the organization and mobilization of multiple facets of an incredibly large and complex organization around the vision:

System coherence really is only possible with, with a shared vision. Now that we have that shared vision, we need to organize ourselves around it. And I think that's, that's the work that's happening now. I think there's a lot of good things happening. I think a lot of good smart people are doing a lot of really cool things, each of which individually is designed and likely to help students, but we're still kind of pointing in different directions, uh, and, and, and we still haven't figured out not only the direction we want to go to, but how do we, how do we work together across the system, not just across different central de central office departments and offices, but between networks and schools and between schools and central office. And so when, uh, schools evaluate their practice via their, uh, continuous improvement work plan processes, they should be evaluating against their, that shared vision. When the, uh, district is allocating resources and supports, uh, our effectiveness should be evaluated based on the extent to which we support schools in their work getting closer to that shared vision.

As a study in co-creation, the district team and board of education seemed to see the policy as a clear success, and an example that they would need to follow moving forward for additional stakeholder engagement and policy design. Along with the equity framework, this policy is believed to have the potential for making major progress with students and communities in supporting success with an asset-based framework.

In discussing the impact that she expected the policy to have, Jessica articulated a perspective, consistent with participant interviews, that the district's accountability for supporting schools, as articulated in the new policy, is essential.

> *If we're talking about a long game, we have the first policy that actually looks inside the school and holds the district accountable. Now that we have the policy in place, it gives us a leg to stand on in terms of advocacy. When a school isn't performing, what does just accountability look like for the district, for funding, for resources? We can educate parents, we can educate stakeholders to understand what this policy means for them, and then they can push the district to create those changes.*

Again, in policy as well as in practice and rhetoric, district accountability for enacting and sustaining educational justice, as outlined in Major Finding #6, is an essential part of developing liberatory school cultivation.

As part of the district's accountability, the theme of infrastructure surfaced again when talking about the implementation stage, as it did at the engagement stage,

> *What I was trying to do, and what I continue to do is really talk to the district about the importance of building the infrastructure to, we have this progressive policy, but if we still have the same old staffing structures, the same old way to execute on it, it's not going to be as successful as it could be otherwise.*

Consistent with Major Finding #2, the theme of infrastructure and intentional building of capacity to carry out the policy as intended was voiced several times in this case as well as through interviews.

A particularly important theme emerged from district, school, and community leaders in reflecting on the future relative to accountability reform: the importance of recognizing opportunities for choice and self-definition for schools relative to accountability priorities, in alignment with the shared vision for quality and for accountability. Brian elaborates his perspective from the district leadership level:

> *There's some self-evaluation that's appropriate. There's some top-down evaluation that's appropriate. Once, once that evaluation of current state is completed, then you prioritize the gaps you want to get better at. 'cause you, if you've got 10 things that you need to get better at, you can't get better at 10 things at the same time. So you pick three or four of those, and that should be a school decision. The school, uh, should be, uh, developing plans around those three or four things. The district should be prioritizing its supports and budgeting and strategic plans around all of the three to four things that [each of the] schools identify. And then schools should be evaluated on the extent to which they implement their plans. Districts should be evaluated on the extent to which they support the implementation of those plans.*

Brian's description of a high-functioning system under the new accountability structure illustrates a departure from top-down accountability, while staying true to his vision of effective improvement processes. Further elaborating on this point of choice and self-definition in shared accountability processes from the school leader's vantage point, Joshua described his hope for the district's next step:

I think what they need to do is they need to create a menu of different kinds of metrics that school [communities] choose, and then that's what they're held accountable for... I think there should be a range of accountability metrics that really fit the context of where schools are at and stretch them in a reasonable way.

Joshua's wish for the district to allow for real choice relative to defining accountability at the school community level while maintaining a role in guiding the menu of options provides a practical next step relative to this theme. Taking up the point of choice and definition from a community leader's perspective and adding depth to the concept, Juan made a straightforward and powerful statement of where he hoped accountability reform would lead:

The community needs to tell the story of these schools [rather] than the school system telling the story about these communities through the school… I just think there's got to be a deeper conversation around how we're actually designing schools to fit the needs of those particular spaces and communities, and then how we're assessing their quality.

Juan's statement is particularly compelling, especially because it articulates a fundamental departure from the accountability paradigm that pervades neoliberalism and neoliberal school reform. Taken together, and in light of the content of the Accountability policy, these three perspectives provide interesting context for Major Finding #3, which indicates that district and school stakeholders should engage communities in equitable partnerships from an asset-based perspective, without a predetermined outcome, and be ready to share accountability for what is developed.

While there is a great deal of work ahead in order to fully implement this Accountability policy, both the process undertaken and the product that was developed connect to key themes that emerged from interviews across stakeholder groups. This case illustrates what it looks like

to operationalize the elements of the District's Equity framework and highlights what elements of each of the study's six Major Findings may look like in practice.

Focus Group Findings: Exploring the Exploring the Equity and Accountability policies through a Critical Policy Analysis and Community Equity Leadership Lens

Near the conclusion of my field work, during an overcast spring break, I convened two focus groups (one virtual and one in-person with a virtual option) to engage participants in exploring the design, practice, and initial outcomes of efforts to co-create Equity and Accountability policies. The first focus group conversations took place virtually, with one community leader, Juan, joining by Zoom and one school leader, Joshua, engaging by phone.

The second focus group convened in person with a virtual option in the nearly empty Maria Hernandez Academy. Four participants joined this session. Amanda, the principal of Hernandez, and Rachel, a district leader, participated in person. Jessica, a community leader, and Lauren, a district leader, joined via Zoom. The conversations were dynamic, and participants expressed appreciation for the option to participate across various locations and time zones.

After she buzzed me in, Amanda expressed appreciation for the aroma coming from the containers of arroz con gandules and tostones that I brought with me as I walked up the long stairway to the main office and greeted me with a warm hug. Located in a historically Puerto Rican neighborhood that takes great pride in its heritage while fighting the accelerating pressures of gentrification, Hernandez is a combination of Charter and Turnaround school, launched in 2011 in a catholic school building that had long been closed. Amanda led the founding team and has seen the school through waves of change both at the district and charter management

organization level (which has included significant scandal). She has been recognized both by state and district entities for leadership awards and distinctions, and was the charter school representative during the process of Accountability reform. The building is compact and vertical, with bright examples of student work on nearly every available space. While the building was quiet, the voices of students were visible in every space.

Each of the focus group conversations engaged in a brief set of introductions (or reintroductions, as some participants had interacted previously). I summarized the steps taken in my research in the time span and outlined my hopes and suggested norms for the session. Sharing elements of Welton and Diem's (2021) framework for conducting Critical Policy Analysis and Green's (2017) framework for Community Equity Literacy (CEL), we began with participants sharing reflections on the racial and political context of the school system.

Juan spoke powerfully to the city's racial and political context as he sees it, particularly with regard to the education system and the disparities he sees.

> *It's concerning to observe a trend where, particularly in [this city], many children from marginalized communities, including Black children, often receive substandard services. This indicates a broader systemic issue that requires urgent attention to ensure that all children receive the support they deserve.*

Juan also spoke specifically about the Black community, referencing his identification with this particular demographic within the city.

> *We still got a trust issue. We have a pride issue in our communities. We have a customer service issue for sure in our communities. We have a resource issue in our communities, and a reality is that when we look at the data, we already know Black student achievement currently faces significant challenges that need to be addressed…Why is it*

not a citywide effort to really focus in on something that we know is a pain point in our city?

Naming this stark reality in terms of lived experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for the Black community is essential in ensuring that discourse and action cannot fall back to color-evasive approaches that blame, rather than uplift, communities that have been racialized and marginalized.

Other participant contributions covered a range of perspectives, many connecting to the need to acknowledge and respond to the harm that's been done (outlined in Major Finding #1). Lauren communicated this point eloquently, responding to a comment about historical harms:

We have acknowledged that it's there. We are trying to be as transparent about the steps as possible, and I think that acknowledgement is the first step. And we're also from the district's lens, I feel like we are asking families of color to trust us again so that we can make the necessary changes. I think in [our city] as a parent of a [public school] student who talks to lots of other parents, there is a lot of historical harm there. And so it's gaining that trust again so that we can make the necessary changes that need to be made systematically for our students.

While further discussing the current political and racial context and the ongoing need to build trust through acknowledging and apologizing for trauma caused by the school district's actions, Lauren spoke about a recent community engagement session that she'd recently facilitated:

The community came ready to battle because of the historical things that have happened [there] where the district has made promises, and has done something else. And then this community is always the last community to find out what's happening or the last community to get those resources…They want an apology for what happened…When the

district, the Black and Brown schools in the district were decimated, the communities were decimated. And until that happens, and until we acknowledge that we may, and we will probably continue to make some mistakes on this way of creating an equitable system, then we're going to always run into some resistance. And in all actuality, all they want to hear is, I'm sorry… in order for them to heal and help do this work, they need to have it. There's so many layers.

Another shared perspective of racial and political context was the important role that progressive policies play in creating a context that makes it possible to enact positive changes combating historically institutionalized racism. Speaking from the district leadership perspective, Ashley summarized what she was hearing and shared her views:

I will say that racial disparities still exist, and it is not because our students lack talent or aspirations or anything. It is the system that causes the disparity and it is years and years of disinvestment in their communities, not only by the school system, but by the city...But then when we're on the political side in [the city], we are situated, we have every opportunity to make change because our state has progressive equity educational laws, our city does right now, our board of education is more progressive than it's ever been... while the challenges persist and there's much work to do, we're situated much better than other school districts across the US And then I would say even our state, our state is situated for this work. We can say the word equity, we can talk about race in a real way. We can teach culturally responsive education; we can teach black history. Thank you, Florida.

While the jab at Florida elicited laughter from the group, the point was acknowledged as an important one. Participants discussed states passing laws and school boards adopting policies

restricting educators' ability at all levels of a system to advocate for, or even discuss, racial equity. Acknowledging this reality, Jessica remarked that "while [our city] is more progressive, I also feel like pretty good isn't good enough…I'd like to see us operationalize more of our aspirational values." Conversation highlighted the interconnectedness of political and social context on work for racial equity and supported both law and policy as key elements of infrastructure for this work, elements aligning to Major Finding #2.

As the conversation shifted from policy analysis to the elements of community equity literacy, Jessica expressed that there has been progress toward understanding community history, but that there is a long way to go:

> *I see a desire to understand what's happening in community...I think there's efforts to challenge traditionally held notions of expertise, and I feel like we're at the very beginning. Parts of that is, communities have historically been left out from really understanding how policy works and how systems work. And so the effort to, when I think about the kind of education reparations that community needs, that's a long game for me.*

By education reparations, I interpret Jessica to mean proactive and ambitious engagement with stakeholders to build knowledge of all elements of the educational system and skill in navigating them. This idea of investing in community members' capacity to engage with the system also came from a personal place, as Jessica acknowledged that "My parents didn't understand how the city worked…there was so much that they did not understand because no one ever taught them." Participants showed agreement with the need to empower and build the capacity of "those most impacted by decisions," as Ashley stated. This concept emerged as an important dimension of Major Finding #2, which articulates the need to build infrastructure over time to develop equitable partnerships that can drive and sustain liberatory work.

Ashley picked up this thread of challenging expertise and engaging community members in policy processes, asserting:

We need to move towards empowering folks. So they must understand these policies. They must see themselves in them. They must have practical examples. They must be a part of the process…we are at a table together and we are making decisions together around what this means in our school, what this means for our network of schools.

Taken together with Jessica's articulation of challenging traditional notions of expertise, this thread of conversation echoes and aligns with Major Finding #3, articulates the essential dynamics of seeing parent and community leaders through an asset-based perspective and engaging community members without predetermined outcomes.

In asking a question from Welton and Diem's (2021) Critical Policy Analysis protocol for anti-racist leadership, digging into the alignment of policy intentions with realities in practice, focus group conversations surfaced a disconnect between the equity vision and the systems and structures that school leaders are experiencing in their day-to-day lives. Joshua shared his perspective on this disconnect:

We get a lot of high level support for it or presentations that say support for it. But we haven't seen, we've asked for it and we have seen nothing that is actually [about], well, how do you implement this? I see the policies, I love the sort of 20,000 foot direction the district's going in, but in terms of the actual lane, the rails for the train to get there, it's not there…The word equity is used constantly, but again, I don't see any operationalizing.

While acknowledging that this disconnect may have been in part a function of his own supervisor's focus within their network of schools, Joshua's sentiment was echoed and

reaffirmed with nonverbal gestures such as head nods from other participants. Responding to this concern, and adding a perspective from the district level, Lauren articulated,

> *So, they've created this toolkit, and I think that's part of the thing that gets us stuck is that there's so much innovation happening in different places, and then you have to go through the 75 layers of approval… So by the time that someone at the top says, yes, we have to go in the back and make adjustments for the current climate. And so I think that's a good place where we often get stuck and parents and families or students don't get what they need in the meantime.*

Participants agreed that a key action item in addressing this disconnect is finding ways to remove layers of approval needed from various district leaders across departments in order for support and tools aligned with the Equity framework to be fully integrated into principals' lives and practice. This is one important action indicated by Major Finding #5, which calls on stakeholders to fight against misalignment, mistrust, and fragmentation.

Toward the end of the focus group at Hernandez Academy, some participants acknowledged feeling pessimistic about the degree to which progress is slow and not linear, as well as about the state of the world and the challenges faced in this city and in our broader society. Jessica acknowledged a feeling that "we're on the verge of a collapse as a civilization, and this is us really building the foundation of the new world." There was silence for a few moments, and then Rachel shared a story of her parents' struggle for her to access a quality public school education in the city a generation ago. She acknowledged the history of so many Black families' efforts to advocate for their children's education through inequities faced "because they live in disenfranchised neighborhoods." Heads nodded vigorously as she shared that her motivation is to continue working to change the system so that successive generations

don't have to go through what previous generations had to go through (and in too many cases, the current generation continues to go through) for their children to have the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Connecting to and sharing this motivation, participants expressed appreciation for the time together, and we closed the conversation with wishes to come together again soon.

Community-Driven Design for Liberatory Educational Experiences

Community-driven design is additional and powerful example of community, school, and district leaders coming together to engage in co-creation toward liberatory school cultivation focused on improving schools labeled as low performing. During interviews, multiple participants referenced the work of a local organization which grew out of a school management organization that had previously contracted with the district to operate Turnaround schools and that was deeply engaged in co-creation efforts with school communities. In partnership with a principal supervisor who was looking for innovative ways to cultivate schools under her supervision that had been labeled as low performing, they were engaged in facilitating community design sessions with school leaders, parents, and community members. Building on connections made during interviews, I was able to arrange two full day participant observations to see this process of co-creating visions, priorities, goals, and plans with racial equity and collaboratively developed visions for students at the center of the work.

Participant Observation –Community Design Session - Empathy Interviews, Graduate Tenets, Student Profiles

Driving up to Andrew Stark Elementary School on a brisk, overcast Saturday morning in February, I was struck by how institutional the exterior looked. A square building, appearing to be built during the mid-twentieth century with little of the architectural flair of earlier iterations of public schools, with an intimidating black iron fence around the perimeter, Stark was identified to be a turnaround school and transitioned to the governance of a private nonprofit school management organization under the Race to the Top restart model in 2011. It is located in a historically black neighborhood known across the city for high levels of gun violence, many vacant buildings, and a lack of corporate or public investment in grocery stores or basic services, and seen with a deficit framework that obscures, for outsiders, the rich cultural and communal wealth within the community.

More than a decade later, and years after being returned to the governance of the local school district, Stark has been in the lowest level within the state accountability system under ESSA from 2018-2022 and was identified in 2022 as a "progressive school" by the district, indicating that it would need to undergo an unspecified set of improvements supported by an unspecified set of resources, according to the Principal's supervisor. Eighty-six percent of Stark's students are identified as low-income, ninety-three are identified as African American, and 7 percent are identified as Hispanic. Unlike many schools in the neighborhood, (Stagg's) enrollment has remained relatively steady over the past five years, though it is still listed as an "underutilized" school by the district, at less than 50 percent of "ideal" capacity.

Walking up to the iron door indicated as the main entrance, I picked up a few pieces of scattered trash and deposited them in a round metal trash can. I peered through the door's

window, covered by a metal lattice, rang the bell, and stated my name and purpose before hearing the familiar click of the door as it opened. Once inside, I was struck by the warmth of the main entryway as I was greeted enthusiastically to Stark by a man at the security desk. He directed me toward the gymnasium, and as I began to walk through the hallway I was overwhelmed by the powerful murals covering the walls. Painted by a local black history museum, they featured well-known luminaries in black history, as well as local figures who are little-known to anyone outside of this particular area but have been instrumental in building the fabric of the city and impacted nearly every facet of its development. These murals lead to a massive tribute to the great migration of the early 20th century during which millions of Americans racialized as Black and terrorized under the Jim Crow South left their home states for the Northern and Western United States. As these impressive murals ended, bulletin boards celebrating Black Ancestors, Black Authors, and work from Stark's students proclaiming "My Black Is Powerful" line the walls.

Walking into the gym, I was greeted by the powerful pulse of upbeat music, bringing energy and optimism to the space. Spread throughout the gym were rectangular tables covered with pastel yellow tablecloths, bringing a calm and bright tone to the gathering of principals, assistant principals, clerks, community members, parents, grandparents, and students. On this morning, the Stark team was joined by three other teams from schools who have been identified on one of the lower rungs of the state accountability system and identified by the local district as needing intensive "Progressive" support, coming together for a community design process that would be a part of their plans for improving. At the front of the gym were two large screens projecting the question "What does a liberated school experience look like, sound like, and feel like?" Beginning with a question, any question, posed to community stakeholders, is a departure

from the prescriptive neoliberal approach relying on data, accountability, and plans brought by outside experts. But, beginning a session with a question framed around articulating what constitutes a liberatory school experience invites a dramatic change and the development of a Counterstory about what it takes to improving schools identified as "Progressive," "Intensive Support," or whatever the deficit designation may be.

As the session started, the facilitator set the intention for the day as working collaboratively to "change the game" and "completely rethink the system in which we operate." invited participants to answer this question in a collaborative online platform, developing a word cloud in which the words "Freedom," "Collaborative," "Student-Centered," "Safe," and "Innovative" emerged to be featured most prominently. Building on this visual, the facilitator invited participants into a space of imagination, not just to think about what can be different in our schools and communities, but to imagine what we could build if the system didn't exist and we had tools with which to build it ourselves. To delve deeper into this theme, she then shared powerful audio from a Black History Year podcast published by PushBlack entitled "How to Bend Reality with adrienne maree brown." This included the following text:

> *"What if I told you that the ability to imagine is humanity's most powerful tool, and our most dangerous weapon. Oppressors used imagination to build a world where black bodies were enslaved as chattel. After hundreds of years of enslavement, Harriet Tubman imagined and manifested what seemed impossible: a life of freedom. What if we could do the same? What if, like Tubman, we could bend reality to fit a more just, beautiful, liberated vision for black life unlike anything we've seen in our lifetimes?"*

After sitting with these words for a few moments filled with emotion and possibility, the facilitator framed the day as a call for everyone "to bend reality, because our kids need it."

Through these few moments of skillful leadership, the facilitator brought the community together into a space that rejected a color-evasive approach to change and rejected the notion that school turnaround or transformation should be about making schools more successful within the existing system that has served them so poorly, but rather reinventing a system with our children at the center and then building that system for them. Participants were invited to "dream, then strategize."

At this point, building on the foundation that had just been laid, three norms were shared: "Be aware of personal biases; seek understanding with curiosity; and embrace hard feedback with courage." Then, the objectives for the day were outlined: "Unearth key insights from empathy interview data; Provide essential feedback to help school design teams refine student dispositions; and Further sharpen the portrait of an 8th-grade graduate." Teams were then provided a protocol for analyzing data that was provided to them from a comprehensive series of "empathy interviews" that had been collected at each school from students, teachers, parents, and community members, illuminating perspectives on all aspects of life in the school.

Over the next hour, parents, students, teachers, principals, assistant principals, school staff members, and community leaders sat shoulder to shoulder, literally and figuratively leaning into the process as they poured over the words of their stakeholders. They asked questions of themselves and of the words on the pages in front of them, making meaning, synthesizing data into themes, connecting those themes to personal experiences and narratives, and collaboratively sorting their collective learnings into five categories matching the local district tenets of a successful high-school graduate: "Ethical and Collaborative Leaders; Inquisitive Learners; Empowered Decision Makers; Engaged Community Members; and Adaptable and Independent Thinkers." Then, they began to make statements aligned to each of these five tenets to describe

their ideal portrait of a scholar at their school. Along the way, dialogue was spirited as personal anecdotes were shared in connection to the qualitative data, and reflective questions were heard frequently, such as “Why is this so hard?” “What statements can we make from this? And “Whose story is represented here?”

After each school team developed their statements describing their ideal portrait of a student and that student’s experiences (framed in I statements), all participants were organized into mixed groups to review the work of each school and provide feedback utilizing a structured protocol for probing, questioning, and affirming. This allowed each participant to work with people they didn’t know, providing feedback on similar yet aligned statements gaining insight and perspective to bring back to their groups. After debriefing the feedback process, school teams then reunited and took all of their feedback to separate classrooms to refine their statements and profiles and enter them into a working document that systematically captures all of the design process elements. The two breakout sessions in which I observed and participated were primarily led by principals and assistant principals, with an overwhelming focus on keeping everything centered on students and drawing connections between the aspirational statements that they created and current practices and realities at their school sites.

Finally, teams reconvened in the gym and received instructions on their next steps from the facilitator: to go out into their communities and solicit feedback on their work, so that as many people as possible were aware of this process and the vision that design teams are creating, and could provide additional input. Teams discussed not only how to systematically collect feedback from all stakeholder groups within their schools, but how to bring local aldermen, community advisory councils, partner organizations, bringing broad and deep collaboration to

their work. Plans in place, participants enjoyed lunch together, laughing, listening to music, dancing, and leaving with their heads held high.

Participant Observation –Community Design Session - Turning Graduate Tenets and Student Profiles into "Look-Fors" to drive liberatory cultivation

Three weeks later, the same group of school stakeholders from across three of the four schools came together to share the feedback they had gathered from their communities and take the next step in their design work. This session was held at Lancaster Academy, located just a few blocks north and west of Andrew Stark Elementary. The school's name was recently changed from that of a famous figure of the Renaissance to that of a trailblazing African American female politician and lawyer who came from the school's community. Lancaster is located in the same part of the city as Stark, less than two miles west of an interstate highway that was built straight through a predominately Black community that had already been plagued for decades by racial violence, redlining, and disinvestment. Ninety-eight percent of its student population is identified as low-income, 87% are identified as African-American, and 13% are identified as Hispanic (this group is largely comprised of recent immigrants; particularly migrants who have arrived in the city in the past two years). As with many schools in this part of the city, enrollment has been declining steadily, and (Langford's) 2023 enrollment is less than two-thirds of what it was in 2018. In addition to being marked as a "progressive" school, Lancaster is also listed as an "underutilized" building, enrolled at between 31% and 37% of the building's "ideal" capacity according to the district's website.

Nonetheless, Langford is a beautiful architectural gem located on a quiet tree-lined street and built in the style of so many urban public schools in the early 1900s, with an exterior of

ivory brick and an interior filled with beautiful woodwork and bright wood floors throughout the building. As I walked up to the main entrance, a security guard opened the door for me and greeted me with a warm handshake, welcoming me to the "home of the Lions." Walking the halls, inspiration is everywhere - benches with portraits of luminaries such as Nikki Giovanni and Nelson Mandela, alongside their inspiring quotations about excellence, education, and love for community. Each stairstep between the school's three floors has affirmations written on it that become visible as one climbs: "You are a scholar…you matter…you are loved…we believe in you…we won't give up on you…you are enough." In the middle of one hallway is an arrestingly beautiful mural with a peace sign mosaic in the middle of it, painted by a local artist in partnership with parents and students from the school.

This community design session was focused on synthesizing feedback gathered through focus groups and other means of connecting with stakeholders and moving into specific "look-fors" connected to each tenet of their ideal student profiles. The session began in the school's auditorium, still decorated from the previous night's Black History Month Celebration and Fashion Show, with balloon arches on the stage, and the walls covered with banners and artworks made by students and professionals highlighting Black Joy, Black Excellence, Black Creativity, and Black Heroes (both well known and lesser known). Again, the facilitators had positive music playing, and participants steadily walked into the auditorium to an uplifting beat. To kick off the session, the facilitator situated the day's work as continuing previous efforts and refining next steps in order to prepare for a major community showcase and celebration to officially present their visions to all community members in May.

As with the previous design session, racial justice and equity were placed front and center in launching the work. The facilitator began by referencing a quotation from Dr. Robin Kelley's (2022) work:

> Surrealism recognizes that any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World, with how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships, with unleashing our desire and building a new future on the basis of love and creativity rather than rationality (which is like rationalization, the same word they use for improving capitalist production and limiting people's needs).

In referencing this wisdom, the facilitator asked that all participants work to root everything they do in equity for kids, and to root their efforts toward equity in imagination. She pressed the participants to begin their collaborative work by asking "What if? What if barriers, policies, rules, funding, etc. didn't exist? What would we want the reality to look like?" In small groups throughout the auditorium, participants began talking about kids dreaming big dreams, all achieving above grade level, about parents, teachers, and community members REALLY partnering, about parents and community members being fully educated on how to best help their children grow, about opportunities for innovation and cultivating passions. While most participants leaned into this conversation (literally and figuratively) one participant indicated that it also "hurts to think big because then you have to come back to reality." After a pause, one participant responded, "What does it mean to try something new and different through creating spaces through which 'what if' becomes reality?"

From this foundation, the facilitator launched into a discussion entitled "Equity in Action," deftly bringing imagination to play a part in building systems that allow children to fit and feel like they belong in any context, to live life on their own terms. She then discussed how

our work must be leading toward building not just equitable systems but equitable classrooms for each and every child, removing barriers and other factors that get in the way, placing race first, front, and center in this charge. She stated:

> *We've tried the things that we've seen happen in education… we've been throwing everything but the kitchen sink at the students and expecting them to know what we want!... but in order to pull this off, what fundamentally different things do we need to imagine, and what needs to happen, and happen 100% of the time? And what will be the result we see when it does?*

With this in mind, community design teams were given the task of taking their draft student profiles, aligned to the district's tenets, and develop "look-fors." These are meant to identify what an observer should be able to see in the way every student has the opportunity to show up at the school to demonstrate that they are living up to their shared vision for liberatory school experiences.

During this part of the session, I joined a community design team that included two parents, three community members, four teachers, two administrators, and one non-instructional school staff member. We met in a teacher work room, and spread out empathy interview notes, draft student profile statements, and guidelines for successful "look-fors" on the long wooden tables. As they began to dig into the assigned work, community members in particular were notably excited about the process, making comments such as "This is so good and so necessary, because we've been at some stalemates and running into brick walls in other settings." Another community member looked at the draft statements and reflected, "Society impacts our students more than we do, and this impacts the ways that students see themselves. I'm seeing it before my eyes, seeing students in their element. Society will play a role, but school and home have to

be louder than the other noise that they hear." Yet another participant asked, "How do we do that?" She responded, "This…this here - what we are doing is one way. If everyone engages in this, this helps us meet their needs." Discussion continued to include spirited dialogue about what student needs might be, and how meeting those needs would be visible in each setting in the school, through options, leadership opportunities, the freedom to engage in productive struggles and see themselves as capable of moving beyond things that they haven't been able to do before.

As the conversation continued, the facilitator walked into the room and stated observations about the healthy laughter and friendly competition she saw, noting that she heard participants say that they feel good about what they've accomplished and affirming that "we've been putting in the work!" and "I love this - we have the blueprint right here." The facilitator then asked the team to continue to dig down and identify specifically what these priorities will look like in classrooms. One participant responded that the process felt like digging into layers of an onion, and not just any onion; "you know that deep fried onion, that blossoms? That's what this process is." The team then went through another round of revisions based on the facilitator's feedback and their own feedback to each other, in the process identifying neighborhood resources that can advocate for and partner in the processes of enacting this work. Prior to going back to the auditorium for the next step, one participant reflected that, while she was tired and it was difficult to get in the work mindset on a Saturday morning, it was valuable to "share ideas and get on the same page…everyone had a part and a voice."

Back in the auditorium, the facilitator reflected on some of her observations, highlighting that "Inclusive" and "Universal" themes resonated with her throughout all of the team conversations. She then pressed the teams to provide feedback to others, coming back again and

again to the why and the equity imperative of the work, through a "pressure test" protocol that asks specifically, if we enact x, and see it in the classroom regularly, how does that create equity?

Participants then mixed themselves up so that each feedback team was comprised of members from each school team.

As these teams circulated to provide feedback on each school team's work, discussions organically developed around ways in which communities can be working together to enact what is needed for students to experience equity in the lived experiences of their school lives. They discussed how to move students toward the "look-fors," creating an atmosphere that bridges gaps between all members of the school community, and in doing so challenged each other to refine their statements to ensure that students' perspectives were centered. While feedback discussions were collegial, community members were not reluctant to press each other, often eliciting responses such as "You're really challenging us now!" and when the challenges had been addressed, responding "We come to play - that's how we show equity!" (followed by high fives).

One notable dynamic during these conversations is that the school administrators present in each feedback group stepped back and specifically encouraged community members and parents to lead both the presentations of look-fors and the feedback, offering their suggestions in response after other voices were heard. Conversations continually cycled through academic priorities, social-emotional priorities, and ways in which communities can become more involved.

After each group finished their work to refine their visions and look-fors, the facilitator began with reinforcing that his work is all about bringing opportunities for students to experience liberated school experiences; experiences that bring equity to life in schools. She also again

highlighted candidly that we need to directly engage with issues of race, space, and how we reach our students with these issues in mind. But not just students; she then brought home the importance of taking this work to more and more stakeholders: “We need to come back to the people who will be impacted - this will not work if you don’t get feedback from your stakeholders! You have to talk to people and see if this feels right with stakeholders.” She then outlined a clearly structured process through which community design team members would specifically outline from whom they would solicit feedback, where and when that would happen, and through which means of gathering information. She also reminded the group of the importance of approaching stakeholders, especially parents, with genuine interest and a supportive approach, stating “If I’m a parent who went through a system that didn’t work for me, I don’t know how to access resources for my child in the system. We need to ask and listen, and not make guesses based on our own history and bias.”

She finished her closing remarks by highlighting that once the work is finalized and owned by the full design team with input from the community, they would support graphic designs to make the work visible throughout the school community. After these would be presented at a large showcase at a local community in May, it would then be all about implementing with consistency, with design teams and others showing up consistently and constantly coming back to the why, how, and what of their collaborative work - imagination, then vision, then structure and implementation. On this note, the facilitator asked for and responded to clarifying questions about process and next steps, and as these died down, she asked for final words. Participants shared words and statements that highlighted the importance of this series of sessions.

*“Gratitude. Thank you.”

*"This allowed us to look at what we are hoping for."

*"I know a lot of people and organizations in this area, and a lot of them need a swift kick in the butt. I see people here dedicated to making an impact in the community. You are the salt…you don't often get appreciation - I appreciate you."

*"Gratitude to everyone in the room for valuable feedback. We don't have the opportunity to do this…it sets the tone and expectations for us, and how we are preparing students."

*"Community schools are products of the community, so the community needs to be involved. We need to ask, not only what impact does this have on our students, but what impact does this have on the community? And, how can the community provide more supports to buildings so that this work builds on itself? "

* I appreciate that we're not just critiquing, but making sure that elements are observable and showing each other the how. We want to tell our students that we want to see them win; we want to see them be great, and this is how we communicate that."

At this point, the principal supervisor for the group of schools, who had been sitting in the back, was moved to come forward and address the group. She was beaming as she came up and took the floor, explaining that she was in her "Saturday" clothes and hadn't planned to address the group, but was moved to speak, to celebrate the readiness of these school communities to engage in pilot work, particularly the community members and parent participants. Showing a true sense of collaboration and humility, she went on:

We don't have all of the answers…our babies deserve it, and you chose to give it, to come out on Saturdays throughout the year, and that comes with honor…People are going to support this work because this is what happens when schools and communities get

together…I honor you, I celebrate you - now it's time to do the work, to do everything we've said we're looking for, and we will be proud of our students becoming the profile that we've dreamed for them. When they get there, we can say 'Job well done' and know that they will do this for others.

This remark inspired spontaneous applause from the assembled teams, and the chief responded by acknowledging that many have a deficit mindset about our schools and the communities within which they are nested. She highlighted that people need to understand that our communities' desire to do great work on behalf of kids is always there, and we just need to cultivate the space for this to happen, which is what has been done. The chief then closed by previewing how excited she is for the May showcase during which each community design team would present its work to the broader community: "We will show the art of the possible when we come together as a community with our kids. I've got everyone coming - from the schools, from the city council, and THAT'S what needs to be on the news."

On this note of inspiration, team members were dismissed, but few moved to leave. School teams mixed up to share contact information and ask follow-up questions about what they had seen, principals connected about how to make sure that the plans were shared effectively with their parent advisory councils and other groups, and about how to integrate the design session work with priorities already in motion at their schools. The air was light as upbeat music carried everyone into their afternoons with optimism about the immediate and longer-term future.

The culture, language, and interactions at these community design sessions could not have been more different than the community engagement meetings of a decade before, when schools like Stark had become Turnaround schools. In those meetings, leaders from the school

management organization brought parents and community members together to acknowledge that the school was identified as a Turnaround because it had failed children, to reinforce the need for change and argue the case for replacing the entire staff, and to articulate the fully-developed strategy that would be implemented, including a significant infusion of resources from the school district (that had notably not been provided prior to the Turnaround designation). Those meetings were top-down and did not open up opportunities to enact any of the four dimensions of Green's (2020, 2018, 2017) vision for driving all aspects of school leadership and improvement through the framework of Community Equity Literacy (CEL).

The structures and constructs at work during the community design sessions, however, strongly represented a "theoretically rich and powerfully practical" (as Dr. Green can frequently be heard reminding us on his podcast, *Racially Just Schools*, that school change efforts need to be) enactment of the theories and constructs of CEL (Green, 2020):

> *Boundary spanning cross-boundary leadership; Navigating community power structure and leveraging community assets
>
> *Community-Based educational leadership; Developing asset-based perspectives, understanding community history, advocating for school and community equity
>
> *Community leadership development fused with school reform; Developing asset-based perspectives, leveraging community assets, advocating for school and community history
>
> *Leadership for organizational equity; Understanding community history, navigating community power structure, advocating for school and community equity. (p. 419)

While these sessions took place within school buildings, and while school administrators would ultimately be responsible for making sure that the fruits of the collaborations were in place, the enacting of the community design sessions provided outstanding opportunities for a Thirdspace

to emerge (Kirshner & Jefferson, 2015). This cross-boundary leadership as parents and community members were brought into the process of examining exactly what it is that they believed schools should be and what students should experience within and get out of them, was seen as unique and powerful.

The cultivation of this intentionally created space enacted opportunities for leadership to be shared across roles and to enact equitable partnerships in leading work that would counteract educational and intersectional racial injustice. This work was unapologetically rooted in ensuring that asset-based and anti-racist perspectives led the dialogue, and ensuring that leadership was community-based, and fully engaged in "Working from asset and structural-based perspectives about community." (Green, 2017, p. 381). The acknowledgment that work must be informed by, developed by, and owned by community members and parents as well as school staff members fully developed Notably absent from these sessions were mentions of the quintessential elements of Neoliberal school reform; test scores, attendance rates, accountability systems, external expertise imposed, and other color-evasive constructs were never brought up. There were no conversations about moving the data or of meeting specific quantitative benchmarks in order to validate this work or show progress, though it seemed to be understood that at some point, collaboratively developed ways of measuring growth would be needed, in conjunction with the district's redesigned accountability structure. These sessions were an inspiring demonstration of school reform driven by "community development leadership" and "leadership for educational equity," (Green, 2020, p. 381).

While still unfolding, this community-centered design is a powerful practical exemplar of work that provides a direct answer to this study's primary research question: How can community leaders, school leaders, and district leaders work together in equitable and inclusive

partnerships to cultivate growth in schools labeled as low performing? This work has powerful connections to each of the study's Major Findings. It shows great potential in illuminating opportunities to bring the district's Equity framework and Accountability policy to life in ways that lead away from neoliberal reforms and toward liberatory school cultivation.

Chapter Summary

As will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, the district has established areas of work with powerful momentum to move away from neoliberal school turnaround to liberatory co-created cultivation of schools and the communities in which they are nested. This work has elements in inclusive design of policy and is growing roots in practice. However, as with any large and complex system that is nested within a city (like virtually all cities in our nation that have any level of racial diversity) that has been designed to oppress, disinvest in, and systematically harm its Black population and others who have been minoritized, progress is slow and there are many barriers to success. Nonetheless, the culture and discourse being created through increasingly significant levels of co-creation in equitable partnerships between community leaders, school leaders, and district leaders, provide significant cause for optimism.

Chapter 7: Discussion

Overview

A major aim of this research is to contribute to a body of knowledge about improving schools that is meant to be utilized by communities in which schools are nested to engage in developing the policies that will impact them. It also provides major insights into the conditions that school and district leaders must enact in order to facilitate the type of inclusive partnerships with community leaders that can co-design liberatory educational experiences for students in schools that are labeled as low performing. This contrasts with a much more common use of research under neoliberal paradigms: providing information to equip those policy makers and formal authority figures who are tasked with educational leadership on behalf of school communities. This project purports to add to existing literature in expanding knowledge and practice of anti-oppressive school leadership across traditional borders of expertise. It is also meant to challenge researchers, leaders, and community members to think in new ways about their work toward improving schools on behalf of students.

Summary of the Study

Employing a critical ethnographic case study methodology, this study deeply explored elements of work within a complex district system engaged in efforts to move away from color-evasive neoliberal policy and practice toward Racial Equity. Through participant interviews, artifact analysis, focus groups, and participant observations, powerful themes and key ideas emerged that support six major findings relative to efforts seeking to engage community, school, and district leaders in inclusive, equitable partnerships toward liberatory co-creation of policy and practice. Through participants' voices and through examining three powerful cases of

liberatory design work within the system, a powerful story emerges that provides insight into cultures, discourses, practices, and organizational conditions that support liberatory design work undertaken by inclusive, equtiable parternships between community, school, and district leaders.

This study concludes that there is tremendous power and potential in efforts to co-create visions for what communities want for their schools in partnership with school and district leaders. These efforts, in their explicit work to center racial equity and educational justice through fully embracing the expertise and rich contributions of parents and community members provides a powerful Counterstory to the hegemonic color-evasive neoliberal school reform efforts that have dominated educational policy and practice over the past two decades. This Counterstory, informed by the critical ethnographic case study presented in this dissertation, provides significant insights to inform the work of moving toward liberatory school experiences for our children, our schools, and the communities in which they are nested.

Theoretical Implications

To set the conditions that enable liberatory school cultivation to take root, there are six Major Findings suggested by this research; each have important connections to the theoretical and conceptual framework that guides the study. I re-introduce the findings and outline these theoretical implications below.

Major Finding #1: *In order for school systems to engage in authentic collaboration with communities and enact change that centers racial equity and educational justice, historical (and ongoing) harms enacted by oppressive educational systems with institutionalized racism in their DNA must be explicitly named and reckoned with.*

This first, and perhaps most important, Major Finding is related to building trust between parent, community, school, and district stakeholders. Again and again, the necessity of counteracting decades of eroded trust through naming harm done by the school district and addressing the related accumulated trauma emerged as an essential prerequisite and ongoing necessity for liberatory co-creation. This finding has a close theoretical connection to CRT tenets of racial realism and the permanence of racism. While this harm cannot be undone, and while these tenets state that we will always be contending with the historical, economic, socio-political, and moral dimensions of our nation's accumulated education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006), avenues to some level of trust may be built through explicitly and courageously naming harm and acknowledging the permanence of racism and continuously reckoning with racialized harm through fighting to counteract it. Additionally, this Major Finding provides empirical support to the theory that engaging in racial erasure or color-evasive engagements with communities that have been minoritized serves to worsen racialized trauma and bolster white supremacy.

Major Finding #2: *Liberatory school cultivation requires an investment of resources and intentional infrastructure to be built over time in order to develop equitable partnerships that can drive and sustain the work; these must include systems beyond the walls of the school.*

This second Major Finding articulates the necessity of building infrastructure for engagement that has the community at the center and has a strong connection to the conceptual frame of Boundary-Spanning Leadership. Skillful navigation of relationship across traditional organizational lines and conceptions of expertise, as well as spanning multiple systems beyond the educational system is required in order to close the gap between an aspirational commitment to racial equity and realizing progress in lived experience. Capacity building at every level of

the system and with all stakeholder groups will be essential in order to enact community-designed visions and realize meaningful outcomes for our students that have been racialized, minoritized, and least well served by our systems.

Major Finding #3: *District and school leaders must be ready to engage parent and community leaders from an asset-based perspective, must be ready to receive challenges and divergent viewpoints, engage without a predetermined outcome, and must be open to real accountability for follow-through on co-created priorities and plans.*

The third Major Finding provides a strong connection to the conceptual framework for this study through Community Equity Literacy and Community Cultural Wealth. This must incorporate asset-based visions of students and communities as the foundation for liberatory cultivation efforts, rather than beginning with top-down accountability to drive improvement plans. As evidenced by the "Inclusive Partnerships" lens of the District's Equity Policy, "Inclusive partnerships bring together a diverse array of stakeholders to engage in authentic, collaborative experiences and co-design community-centered solutions to complex and challenging issues caused and upheld by systemic oppression" (p. 30). This type of engagement does not happen by chance, and it does not happen over time without intentional systems to support it. The community design sessions that were the subject of participant observation support this construct; it will be important to monitor and learn from their development over time.

Major Finding #4: *Personal experiences, student voice, identity, and wellness must be at the heart of intentional relationship-building and capacity-building for all stakeholders engaged in liberatory school cultivation work.*

The particular way that this Major Finding calls upon community, school, and district leaders to mine their own identities and experiences, connect them to student voices, and build relationships to foster inclusive co-creation provides a powerful empirical connection to bolster Thirdspace Theory. There simply are not many (if any) spaces within neoliberal paradigms that bring together those impacted by policy as co-creators in the way that the Equity framework, Accountability policy, and Community design work explored in this study do.

Major Finding #5: *All stakeholders (community, school, and district) must maintain vigilance against the seemingly gravitational pull toward misalignment, mistrust, fragmentation, and a regression to the way that things have happened in the past under neoliberal school reform paradigms.*

The need for explicit engagement with racism and placing the fight for racial justice at the center of school cultivation efforts from an asset-based perspective is at the heart of this fifth construct suggested by the research. While neoliberalism largely attempts to avoid engagement with race as a result of a tacit assumption that market-based policies are the best way to make progress toward racial parity, the tenet of Critical Race Theory outlining the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992) illustrates the fallacy of this assumption. As outlined by Welton, Diem, and Lent (2023), the practical effect of this color-evasive approach is that "racial inequities remain unresolved because they are largely a byproduct of institutionalized and structural racism…the systemic privileges that white students maintain are predicated on the further subordination of racially minoritized students" (p. 5). We cannot ignore that the impacts of racialized capitalism and its gravitational pull toward neoliberal reform practices (Casey, 2016; Lipman, 2011), especially in the context of color-evasive policy moves that obscure race, have an unquestionably detrimental effect on students and communities racialized as Black.

Major Finding #6: *Enacting and sustaining educational justice within a school system requires the district to take an equal measure of accountability when schools are not performing well for students. They must commit to providing resources, personnel, technical expertise, and other necessary elements to ensure that the school can realize a vision for all students that is co-created by and responsive to the voices of the community.*

Among other implications, this sixth Major Finding calls upon the district to fundamentally change its approach to Accountability in a way that requires grappling with the CRT tenet of whiteness as property. It is unmistakable that schools in our nation's cities, where we continue to see accelerating wealth stratification along racialized lines, there is a devastating cycle of schools that primarily serve students of color whose families are labeled as "low income" as low performing schools, receiving punitive accountability measures, losing students and resources, and falling into a downward spiral at the expense of students and the communities in which these schools are nested – this is whiteness as property at work in many of our nation's large urban school districts. Engaging the district in accountability for supporting every school, with heightened accountability for inputs supporting schools labeled as low performing, may provide an empirical platform from which to deconstruct whiteness as property. This Major Finding and its theoretical implications are strongly supported by the case within the system of the process and initial outcomes of Accountability system reform.

This line of thought builds theory related to policy and research incorporating Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Praxis (Welton, et al., 2023). More specifically, the findings revealed in the current research provide a scaffolding by which future research can fundamentally shift the way in which policy is examined at the community level, and participant voices are heard in order to construct Counternarratives in critical qualitative research.

Furthermore, with regards to theory, there are several additional ways that this research validates theoretical frameworks presented in extant research. For example, the findings provide a qualitative test and bolster work related to scholarship on the ever-present racial and historical politics of implementing policy in the context of recent years' attacks on Critical Race Theory (Henry, et al., 2023; Welton, et al., 2023; Crenshaw, 2022). Second, these research findings contribute to emerging research on the development of open systems (Mascareñaz & Tran, 2023), through which we aim to "liberate ourselves from the closed systems of the pasts through interrogation of ourselves, the organizations we work in, and our broader communities" (p.10). Third, findings add to current research theorizing new approaches to school cultivation through concepts such as "racial knowledge breakthroughs" (Irby, 2022, p. 214).

Implications for Practice

The current research highlights multiple practical implications for community leaders (including parents), school leaders, and district leaders, both together and related to their respective stakeholder roles within the overall system. These provide important connections to and opportunities to build upon Green's (2020, 2017) Community Equity Literacy Framework. In addition, findings point toward opportunities to leverage Green's Community Equity Literacy Leadership Assessment (CELLA) to help anchor reflections on equitable partnerships with community stakeholders to drive (rather than merely receive) priorities for school cultivation.

Implications for community leaders

This research indicates that Community Leaders are essential to the success and sustainability of liberatory school cultivation efforts, and that these efforts need to strike a delicate balance. They need to participate in co-creation efforts facilitated by school and district

entities, while at the same time refusing to let their voices and power be co-opted into a rubber stamp approval of the priorities that the district has already identified. At the same time, they must keep speaking truth to power through pressing the local district on disconnects between aspirations and practical realities in schools without making their engagement about protesting against the district.

Implications for school leaders

As the stakeholders most responsible for uniting priorities and necessities received from the line authority of the district with the voices, priorities, and narratives of the communities in which their schools are nested, school leaders must maintain a steady vigilance against the threat of losing sight of racial equity in the crunch of seemingly endless administrative requirements. Along with principal supervisors, school leaders must press the district to make their priorities practical realities for schools through consistent alignment and centering of racial equity in school cultivation work.

Implications for district leaders

Perhaps the most critical practical implication for district leaders engaged in liberatory work to support and cultivate schools is the necessity of alignment throughout the system. As indicated by multiple community and school leader participants, there is great admiration for the vision outlined by both Equity and Accountability policies. However, there is also a significant level of agreement that implementation has not been tightly integrated into school leaders' worlds. A key facet of this disconnect in large districts, as indicated by this case study, appears to be a lack of alignment between district-level offices of equity and accountability and the principal supervisors who drive the majority of priorities imposed on school leaders from the district level.

Additionally, district leaders must have not only the commitment to support inclusive partnerships toward enacting anti-racist equity, accountability, and authentic engagement policies and practices. They must be willing to recognize and deconstruct actions and plans that are anti-Black in nature. This connects to one of Green's (2017) key constructs within Community Equity Literacy, challenging deficit framings of communities. It is important to note that in addressing community history, the district must not be entering the space with a preconceived plan for how to move forward, being willing to interrogate the racist impacts of policy even if this is not the intent. Importantly, districts must also engage in a sustained commitment to school cultivation plans that are rooted in stable community co-creation and ensure that these efforts are not subject to the changing tides of shifting top-level leaders.

Limitations

While the findings from this research are robust and have been triangulated and reviewed for internal as well as external consistency, there are a number of limitations. First and foremost is sample size. As this research was carried out with a relatively small number of participants within a large and complex bounded district system, it is limited in its ability to present the full picture of the district or to across local school and legislative contexts.

A second limitation is in the timeline. While data were collected over a period of ten months (from June 2023 through April 2024) and allowed for some observation of developments over time, the time frame was not sufficient to engage with stakeholders over multiple years. More sustained fieldwork would allow researchers to build more significant relationships and follow the evolution of inclusive and equitable partnerships over time as well as capture associated longitudinal trends. A longer field study would also allow for an analysis of role

transition at the school and district level; a number of participants changed roles, left organizations, or were impacted by such movement even with the relatively short duration of this study. Additionally, there have been a substantial number of changes at the board governance level, including a near-complete turnover of board members since the onset of this research. While the new board composition has evidenced strong support for the proliferation of co-creation and movement toward racial equity through fully supporting excellent and fully funded public schools in every neighborhood in the city, it remains to be seen how the interaction of new governance and the policies and practices explored through this study play out over the coming years.

Third, while the essential elements studied through this research have been co-created and well-established through robust and inclusive processes, they are still in their very early stages of development. The district is still working to operationalize its equity framework through professional learning communities with school leaders, in order to fully embed the lenses and toolkits in practices throughout the system. The new accountability process, while formally adopted in April of 2023, is not scheduled to be formally implemented until August of 2024 for an initial enactment and August of 2025 for complete actualization. As a result, the findings in this study, while robust and consistent with its design as a critical ethnographic framework, cannot be contextualized within the results of the policy's implementation (initially or longitudinally). Additionally, the community design processes toward liberatory school experiences will be completed near the date of this dissertation's completion, so there has not been an opportunity to study the effects of school culture, inputs, or outputs as the graduate portraits, "look-fors," and related strategic plans are implemented.

A fourth limitation is that there has not yet been an opportunity to see the integration of co-created reforms into school improvement plans. While the district is engaging in a system-wide strategic planning process that will culminate in 2025, it is unclear yet how elements such as the Equity and Accountability policies or movements toward co-creation in equitable partnerships will factor into this plan. As a result, it is difficult to assess how school-level strategic plans will incorporate this work systemically, rather than at the discretion of individual principals or principal supervisors.

Finally, a limitation of this research is that, in order to protect confidentiality, there were limits to the depth and specificity of information shared. It was not feasible within the context of this study to explicitly address specific historical trends, the full context of the school district and organizations with the city, or to fully unpack several of the artifacts reviewed without breaking confidentiality agreements. As a result, there are data collected that are highly relevant to addressing research questions that were not able to be incorporated into analysis and findings.

Significance

While employing a Critical Ethnographic Case Study approach to research, the major findings of the study and the three cases within the system described in Chapter 6 comprise a powerful Counterstory to the still dominant neoliberal reform efforts seen throughout public systems across the United States. As described by Sandwick, et al. (2018), the findings of this study strive to "present some of the complex ways that knowledge, like learning, are far from perfect but contain within them the ever-present possibility to collapse categories and unsettle epistemic borders" (p. 496). In this way, the research presented in this study create a bridge in theory and practice from the neoliberal school improvement systems of the past several decades

that rely on experts and assume equity through color-evasive approaches toward community-engaged systems that rely on equitable partnerships for developing our schools and school systems as anti-oppressive and humanizing spaces.

As early as they are in their development, the practices in place in this district system are incredibly powerful in illustrating the potential of deconstructing top down systems of leadership and accountability. Through enacting the Major Findings developed through the themes and key ideas identified through this study, school systems can profoundly engage community, school, and district leaders in work that is more humanizing, liberatory,

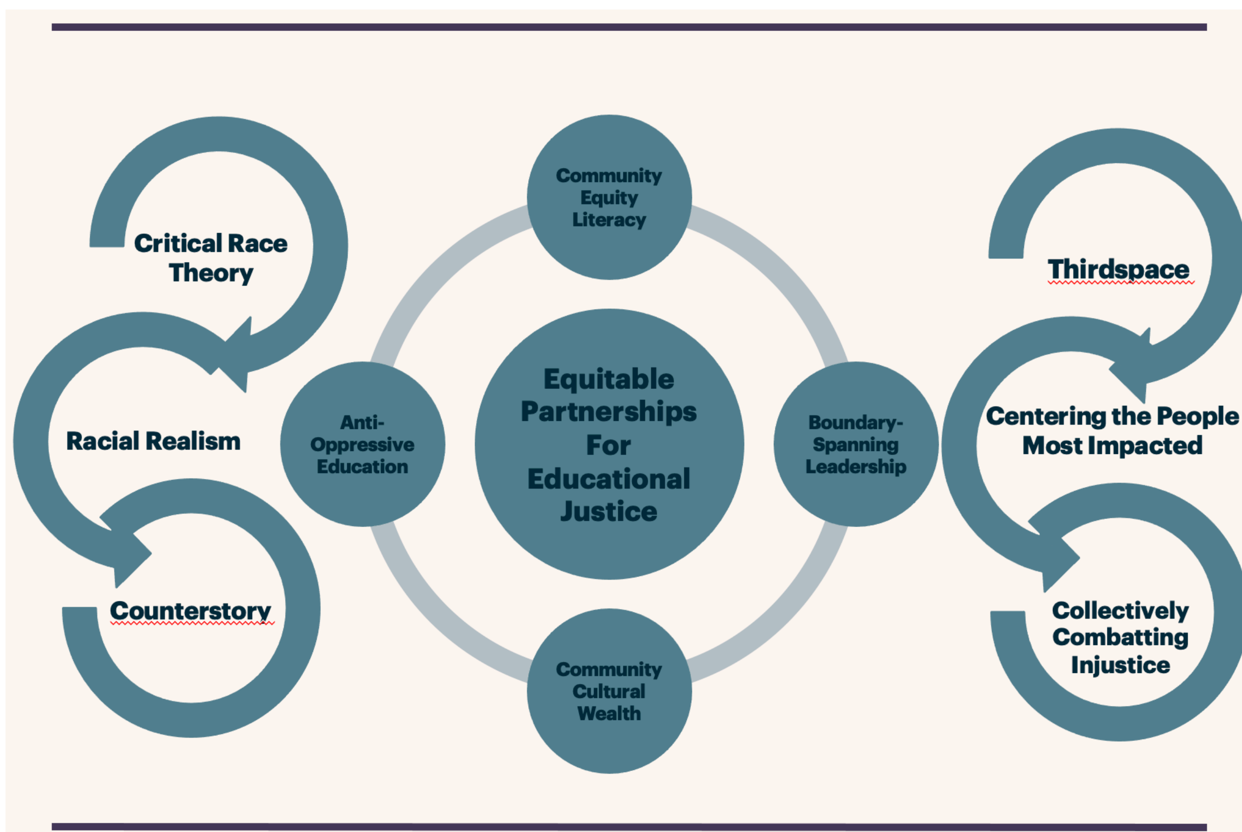
Revisiting the Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

In light of the Major Findings that emerged over the course of this study, and in light of their implications for theory and practice, I've developed a revised theoretical and conceptual framework. In the center lies the "North Star" concept of Equitable Partnerships for Educational Justice. This North Star is supported from the conceptual foundation of Community Cultural Wealth, which presses community, school, and district leaders to continually challenge traditional conceptions of expertise, strengthening co-creation through bringing multiple ways of being and knowing to bear on their work. It progresses under the guidance of Community Equity Literacy, which calls upon us to leverage the community's history and power structure in order to advocate for equity at the school and the community level. It is bolstered on one side by an Anti-Oppressive approach to education informed by Critical Race Theory, racial realism, and liberatory Counterstory. On the other side, it is bolstered by Boundary-Spanning Leadership, enabled through Thirdspace Theory that calls us to constantly center those most impacted by

policies in collective efforts to combat injustice. This integrated and recursive framework is visually represented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Visualization of the Revised Theoretical and Conceptual Framework



Directions for Future Research

In addition to the limitations and significance as discussed above, and aligned with the revisited theoretical and conceptual framework, there are several promising opportunities for further research stemming directly from the current research findings. While this study, configured as a Critical Ethnographic Case Study, captured a number of elements of culture, discourse, policy, and practice at work in the district, future research may take on additional depth and dimension over time through extending into additional methods. Two particularly promising research methods would be Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR) and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), (Bertrand, 2018; Sandwick, et al., 2018; Welton & Mansfield, 2020). These approaches would provide powerful opportunities to co-create efforts to enact change in alignment with the equity framework and accountability policy that directly emerge through identifying specific needs and problems directly with community members and young people who are impacted by the system's policies and decisions.

One specific direction for future research indicated by the study, which was brought up in interviews, focus groups, and participant observations, would focus on the critical exploration of teacher quality within the context of liberatory school cultivation. As articulated by multiple participants, at the district, school, and community level, teacher quality is absolutely essential if we are to make significant progress in the lived experiences and academic opportunities of our young people, and there are few ways for professionals, let alone parents, to truly assess this element without relying on neoliberal accountability metrics (e.g., value-added metrics). Particularly as teacher quality rating systems throughout the nation are largely built around subjective practice metrics combined with student growth metrics (which vary widely across contexts), this research would be a particularly rich area for the application of Critical Policy Analysis combined with Community-Engaged Research (Welton & Mansfield, 2020).

Further research in the interest of liberatory cultivation of schools fused with the priority of allocating resources to help close the gap between a stated commitment to realizing racial equity would focus on the development of sustainable community schools. As outlined in the findings, there are powerful aspects to this, but there was not sufficient data collected about this to develop more significant findings. This would be a powerful opportunity to fuse critical policy analysis, engaging local as well as state-level stakeholders, engage in CPAR to identify needs and priorities, explore funding options, and develop strategies for building capacity in partner organizations based in neighborhoods throughout the city to operate the model.

As these policies and practices are in their early stages of implementation, an important additional direction for research building on the findings of this study would include comparative case studies of multiple systems utilizing mixed methods. This would be particularly salient with regard to identifying equity-focused methods for assessing progress over time resulting from liberatory school cultivation efforts. Significant work still needs to be done to align systems of assessing progress, including district and school level accountability systems, with co-created visions for students and goals surrounding racial equity.

Conclusion

Within a few weeks of the completion of this dissertation, our nation will recognize the 70th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. While this is rightly celebrated as a legal masterpiece, and it is difficult to argue with the genius of Thurgood Marshall's systematic development of the case against legalized segregation, our nation's educational system is still grappling with the practical effects of this decision after seven decades.

In the first decade after the decision, many thousands of Black children were harmed by "school desegregation plans aimed at achieving racial balance, whether or not those plans will

improve the education received by the children affected" (Bell, 1995, p. 5). A significant contributor to this harm was that thousands of Black educators lost their livelihood and their access to the middle class because while children were legally required to be integrated, adults were not (hooks, 1994; Love, 2023). Of course, this took place where desegregation efforts actually happened, particularly in the wake of the *Brown v. Board of Education (2)* decision in 1955 which opened the door wide to segregationists to avoid "root and branch" elimination of racial inequality by the requirement that they merely "proceed with all deliberate speed". Against this backdrop, our nation saw the most profound years of the Civil Rights movement, leading up to the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights and Elementary and Secondary Education Acts in 1965.

Over the roughly two decades between the publication of the Coleman Report (1966) and the publication of A Nation at Risk (1983), the nation saw waves of attempts at integration, racial retrenchment, progress toward integration realized through busing, met by white rage and violence against the practice, and debates about the impact that schools could have. Meanwhile, districts across the nation engaged in policy that was explicitly or implicitly anti-Black, but this did not stop innovative efforts to realize Black excellence in many instances. In the two decades after the publication of A Nation at Risk, we saw waves of Neoliberalism take hold of our nation's institutions, and weave tightly together toward a neoliberal hegemony in education policy through both Republican and Democratic Administrations. These years also saw the full devastation wrought by the War on Drugs, begun during the Nixon years, the acceleration of Mass Incarceration after the 1994 crime bill signed into law by President Clinton, and massive levels of white flight, further hollowing out urban infrastructure and leaving our cities and schools more segregated and unequal than they had been in decades.

Against this backdrop, color-evasive neoliberal school reform reached its first apotheosis in the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002. This launched an unprecedented wave of school turnaround reform, privatization through the proliferation of charter schools, vouchers, and other means, and market-based reforms prioritizing not only school choice, but a reliance on data, accountability, and outside expertise imposed on districts. Six years later, after schools and communities had begun to experience sanctions, closures, and reconstitutions experienced as "Social and Civic Death" (Johnson, 2012), Mass Insight published "The Turnaround Challenge" (2008), standing in stark contrast to Charles Payne's *So Much Reform, So Little Change* (2008). By this time, there was substantial non-academic literature trumpeting the success of school turnaround reform and solidifying the already substantial support of neoliberal-leaning philanthropic foundations and nonprofits; this stood in counter to an increasing body of academic literature sounding alarm bells. In a devastating trend aligning with the CRT tenets of the Permanence of Racism and Interest Convergence/Divergence, this wave of reform also brought about a new wave of displaced Black educators; perhaps most profoundly seen in New Orleans during the complete disruption of the public school system in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Henry, 2016, 2023).

If there were any questions about the direction of education policy at the federal and state levels, they were answered within the early days of President Obama's first term in office, as Race to the Top introduced immense amounts of funding provided to neoliberal school reform efforts aimed at dramatically improving outcomes in the lowest 5% of our nation's schools. During this time, I moved from teaching roles into school leadership roles, training with a nationally known Principal Preparation program fully aligned with President Obama and Secretary Duncan's education agenda. As the nation's state education agencies and public

school districts became fully immersed in color-evasive neoliberal turnaround and transformation reform aimed at (among other goals) eliminating achievement gaps, I was similarly immersed in roles a the school, network, and district level, developing and implementing turnaround reforms and leading waves of school leaders in curriculum, assessment, data, and accountability structures informed by turnaround-oriented school management organizations. During this decade, I began my doctoral studies at the University of Wisconsin, stepping away for several years as the demands of increasing work responsibilities, co-parenting young children, and my own struggles with depression made it too difficult to make progress. Nonetheless, the seeds of disconnect between my aspirations as an educator and my impact as an educator were planted and began to take root.

Ten years after the launch of Race to the Top, after waves and waves of school improvement grants spent billions of dollars on neoliberal transformation, empirical evidence showed minimal improvement at scale (Henry, et al., 2020). At this time, political will for Turnaround work had waned, and our nation saw waves and waves of teacher strikes from coast to coast, signaling that something different was being demanded by our educators. Concurrently, I had reached a point of reckoning not only for myself, but in reflecting on the disconnect between the aspiration of the previous fifteen years of work aimed at closing achievement gaps and improving academic and life outcomes for children. I grew to understand the reality that it had not only failed to make meaningful progress toward this goal, but had actually caused significant trauma as well. It was at this point that I returned to a role as Principal in a neighborhood public school that might have been a candidate to become a Turnaround ten years earlier, where both of my daughters are enrolled, and I returned to my doctoral studies, leading to the current research.

Over the past five years, during the course of researching and writing of this dissertation, we have as a society witnessed and experienced multiple intersecting pandemics reaching catastrophic points. We've seen racial justice demonstrations and reckoning at an unprecedented scale after the murder of George Floyd, on the heels of the murders of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and so many others. These profound and widespread demonstrations led to promising windows opening up for transformative change, only to see violent and virulent retrenchment at the local, state, and federal levels. Such a response is directly aligned with the White Rage (Anderson, 2016; Love, 2018) typical of the essential Critical Race Theory Tenet of retrenchment against racial progress and civil rights advancements. In this case, retrenchment and white rage and outrage was likely a direct result of the progress toward a racial reckoning and historic openness to unpacking our history's racial violence and institutional as well as personal racism.

During this time, a new deficit narrative of learning loss, citing significant regression in academic advancement among our nation's children during COVID-19 school closures, brought out both an urgency to change our practices to help students feel belongingness and succeed at school. Many major municipalities and urban school districts have seen the need to meaningfully move beyond color-evasive reform while struggling against infrastructure that is substantially organized around neoliberal structures and struggling to break free of the accumulated legacy effects of neoliberal reforms. At the same time, K-12 school systems have become even more intense flashpoints in the political discourse around Race in America, particularly as relates the content and epistemological framing of students' learning experiences. Perhaps most salient among these is the backlash against Critical Race Theory, led by conservative actors from local parent and school board organizations up to the United States Congress. These protests may

have been catalyzed by intense protests against COVID-19 restrictions, which led to extremely contentious, and sometimes verbally or even physically violent school board meetings. The crusades were largely led by conservative and white actors, asserting claims of freedom being curtailed in an unjust way.

Similarly, protests against Critical Race Theory - which were named by Carmen as a "Red Herring" distracting and blocking us from the real work that needs to happen in our schools around equity - were led by largely white, largely conservative groups. These groups claimed, without evidence and without any true understanding of what CRT actually is, that Critical Race Theory would be used to indoctrinate our nation's children into a view that fundamentally conflicted with a sanitized, uniformly noble view of our nation's exceptionalism. Having failed, blamed, and then punished our students and communities racialized as Black over and over again, the backlash against teaching a true and accurate history of our nation, and laws passed restricting the teaching of anything that makes students (framed in a color-evasive manner, but clearly indicating White students) feel uncomfortable or guilty is a clear act of racial erasure, inflicting direct harm on our children and communities who identify as BIPOC.

As early as the fall of 2021, political contests such as the Governor's race in Virginia demonstrated that K-12 education was a powerful driver of Republican voter support turnout and would lend legislative and governmental credence to efforts to ban CRT, ban books, and take other steps directly harming efforts centering racial equity and moving toward liberatory educational justice. This trend has already resulted in a number of draconian policies limiting discourse, curricular aims, content, professional development and leading toward a frightening climate of banning books with any material that may be objectionable to a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal through advocating for innocuous sounding bills such as such as "The

Parents' Bill of Rights Act." The view of the world espoused by these bills was accelerated when, in the summer of 2023, the Supreme Court ruled that race-conscious admissions in higher education were not constitutional. Reaching far beyond the specific realm of college admissions, this decision had sweeping impacts for Affirmative Action in extremely broad strokes, rolling back decades of precedent and policy aimed to directly right historical wrongs of intersectional racialized oppression.

This additional action is consistent with court rulings in recent years trending toward a strict adherence to the notion that "our nation's constitution is color blind" and "the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race" (Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No.1, et al., 2007). In less than a year's time, it has already resulted in significant impacts on organizations across the country in states that have now become free to ban, for example, departments focused on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) as well as any trainings or activities in organizations focused on DEI. Some states have continued even more aggressive campaigns to limit any actions in public schools that prioritize equity or racial justice. Carlos noted that he works with community leaders in many states whose districts and partners cannot even say the words "equity" or "systemic racism" without being excluded from governmental or school district partnership.

Within this political climate, efforts explored through this study to directly engage with racial equity toward educational justice are even more courageous and necessary than they were when the project began. So, here we are, seventy years after *Brown v. Board of Education,* having seen waves of harm inflicted on communities of color that have again and again caused the promise of the Brown decision and the promise of the most active years of the civil rights movement to remain unrealized. Unsurprisingly, our school systems at scale continue to, in the

words of Dr. Bettina Love (2018, 2023), "spirit murder" our children (p. 34), yielding the results they were designed to yield. More than twenty years after the neoliberal promise to raise achievement levels for all through the color-evasive, market-driven, and deficit-framed reforms enshrined in federal policy through No Child Left Behind, and 15 years since President Obama and Secretary Duncan launched Race to the Top, we are still witnessing the title of Dr. Charles Payne's (2008) *So Much Reform, So Little Change*.

Our nation is in a state of political crisis, and we are seeing a new iteration of the backlash and retrenchment against progress toward racial equity outlined by Crenshaw (1987, 1995) nearly 40 years ago. However, city and district systems like the one that provides the context for this study are blazing the trail toward something new. However imperfect they may be, and whatever challenges lie ahead, the district's Equity framework and Accountability policy have the potential to operationalize each of the Major Findings identified through this study in the coming years. Both initiatives represent structures produced by inclusive co-creation, and both have the potential to enact liberatory cultivation with the theoretical and practical effect of increasing educational justice within the district while guarding against neoliberal retrenchment.

Additionally, just four days before the defense of this dissertation, I was able to travel to the community showcase previewed by Malika at the final Community Design session in March. The air was electric at the local community college located in the neighborhood where the network of schools are nested. Parents, community members, crossing guards, teachers, counselors, clerks, administrators, and many more stakeholders filled the room as they presented to each other and to the broader community their co-created designs for liberatory school experiences. The principals' supervisor lauded the group as trailblazers and indicated a fervent desire for their work to become a model for the rest of the district to engage in inclusive

partnerships toward educational justice. Malika stood before the room and reminded everyone that "Liberatory design, in its simplest definition, at its core, is making sure that those who are the most impacted by decisions are the ones who are making those decisions." In a room full of diverse stakeholders with diverse backgrounds, diverse lived experiences, a shared commitment to their schools, and a shared identity as the very people Malika was talking about who would be impacted by the decisions they had made together in their communities on behalf of their children, it seemed as if everyone's head was nodding affirmatively and everyone's voice was calling out their enthusiastic agreement. It was a moment of power, potential, and joy that I will never forget.

Later on, while reflecting on the power, potential, and joy present in that celebratory space, I found myself feeling uneasy. As indicated by the title of this study, liberatory cultivation of educational justice through equitable partnerships that explicitly center racial equity in co-created efforts to improve schools that have been labeled as low performing runs counter to color-evasive, neoliberal school turnaround reforms. As neoliberalism is still the dominant paradigm around which most school districts across our nation are still organized, this type of liberatory work may be perceived by the dominant system as an affront and lead to some type of serious backlash. I thought back to comments that Sean, Juan, and a few others had made during interview conversations about how the district had a clear identity relative to schools labeled as low performing when it implemented the Turnaround model but that there was no such cohesive plan or identity anymore. Given this lack of identity, and the clear, equitable, inclusive, liberatory vision of the design work, there is a real risk that the neoliberal system will lash out in some way at this threat, not just in this district, but in other spaces where similar types of liberatory co-design work is happening.

As I continued to think about how the neoliberal structures for school governance, finance, and authority may respond to a perceived threat such as this, I felt increasing trepidation. I pulled up a copy of James Baldwin's A Talk to Teachers (1963, 2008), as I find it often has deep resonance in moments such as the one I was experiencing. I read the opening aloud to myself:

> *Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced, not by Khrushchev, but from within. To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to "go for broke." Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won't happen.*

As I read and re-read Baldwin's familiar address, I thought about how many participants had discussed the need to name and reckon with harm done to communities of color through color-evasive neoliberal reforms, and reflected on the fact that they were talking about the past 20 years, and not the accumulated "generations of bad faith and cruelty" that Baldwin was referencing 61 years ago. I thought about each of the research participants with whom I was so honored to partner during the course of this study, and how deeply I want them to succeed, through whatever challenges or resistance may arise. I thought about the ways in which the permanence of racism still permeates so many facets of our education system, and about the need

to reckon with racial realism while holding onto one another in equitable partnerships and reaching for racial equity.

Now is the time for courageous researchers as well as leaders at the community, school, and district levels to deepen the co-created liberatory Equity, Accountability, and Design work explored through this study. In so doing, we will be charting a new course toward enacting liberatory school cultivation through equitable partnerships that advance racial equity and reaches toward educational justice. We will also encounter resistance as we counter color-evasive neoliberal policy and power paradigms. While it is not yet clear exactly what success will look like or how we will know we've succeeded, we must "bend reality" as Malika urged us and cultivate new paradigms in order to deconstruct and reconstruct systems that are designed equitably to realize equitable results. Now is the time to "go for broke" so that we may collectively lift up the full humanity and success of our children and communities who are most in need of liberatory school experiences and justice in education and beyond.

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Appendix A **University of Wisconsin - Madison**
Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Study Title: Countering Color-Evasive School Turnaround Reforms: Equitable Partnerships Toward Educational Justice
Principal Investigator: Tina Salzman (Phone: 608-263-2773) (Email: tmsalzman@wisc.edu)
Student Researcher: Joel Pollack (Phone: 773-551-4185) (Email: jrpollack@wisc.edu)

Description of the research
You are invited to participate in a research study about how school, community, and district leaders engage to improve schools identified as "low performing." The reason you have been asked to participate because you are a stakeholder working to help schools and school systems in your district better meet the needs and achieve the goals of students and the local community. The purpose of the research is to inform efforts to forge equitable partnerships between community leaders and school and district leaders in order to create systemic change that enhances student experiences and outcomes.
Participants in this study will include district leaders who are responsible for translating policy into expectations for school change, school leaders who are responsible for carrying out those expectations, and community stakeholders who participate in school change efforts. This research will be conducted at a mutually agreed upon site within the local community. This may be a school or district site, a community site (e.g. library), or another public location of your choosing (e.g. cafe, etc.).

What will my participation involve?
If you decide to participate in this research, you will be invited to engage in one interview (individually) and one focus group session (together with 6-8 participants total). The interview will last between 40 and 60 minutes, and the focus group will last between 60 and 90 minutes. Participation in both an interview and the focus group is requested, as this will allow for more in-depth contributions from participants (data from participation in interview and focus groups may be linked for individuals who participate in both sessions to deepen analysis in the research). However, participation in both sessions is not required and participants may choose to only participate only in the interview or only in the focus group. If participating in both sessions, the full time commitment will be roughly 100-150 minutes in total.

Recording information
With your permission, an audio recording will be made of your participation in the interview, and a video recording will be made of the focus group. These recordings will be available to and used by the only approved personnel who are working directly on the research project. The tapes/recordings will be kept for up to one year while the research project is still in progress before they are destroyed.

Are there any risks to me?
There are minimal risks anticipated in this study. Interview and focus group engagement will involve topics that are complicated and sensitive, including discussion of race, racism, power, and approaches to change within the local community and school system. While efforts will be made to protect confidentiality (outlined below), there is a risk of a breach of confidentiality. While confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a group setting, the research team will ask all

members of the focus group not to discuss the conversation outside of the group. Participants will be able to skip questions and/or stop participation at any time.

Are there any benefits to me?
There are no direct benefits to participants in the study. However, a potential benefit of this study is greater insight into ways to strengthen partnerships between school, district, and community members in the best interests of students.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
This study is confidential. Neither your name nor any other identifiable information will be published. Only approved personnel who are working directly on the research study will have access to the data, including audio and video recordings and any transcripts that are developed from these recordings. All data will be stored in a locked location and in a secure, password-protected computer system, including audio and video recordings and any transcripts. All participants and site locations will be referred to using pseudonyms to protect privacy and confidentiality. If you participate in this study, we would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name. If you agree to allow us to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

Whom should I contact if I have questions?
You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think that participating in the research has hurt you, talk to the research lead, Joel Pollack, at (773) 551-4185 or contact the Principal Investigator, Tina Salzman, at (608) 263-2773.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or have complaints about the research study or study team, call the confidential research compliance line at 1-833-652-2506. Staff will work with you to address concerns about research participation and assist in resolving problems.

If you decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study, you may do so at any time and without penalty.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Name of the Participant (please print): ________________________

Signature: ______________________

Date: _________________

(initial) ________ I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without my name.

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocols

Protocol 1 – Community Member

1. Please tell me about yourself.

2. How would you describe your experience as a student in elementary and secondary school?

3. Please describe the ways that you engage with your local school and school district.

4. From your perspective, what are the primary struggles that schools in this district face?

Possible follow-up – What do you see as the causes of these struggles?

Possible follow-up – In your view, what needs to be done to address these struggles?

5. How does the local school district work to partner with community stakeholders?

6. What, from your perspective, are the main priorities of the local school district?

7. What are your goals and priorities for the local school district?

8. What does race mean to you?

9. What does equity mean to you?

10. How does the local school district engage with issues of race and equity?

Possible follow-up - In what ways does this resonate with you?

Possible follow-up - Where do you see tensions arising?

11. How do you believe students in this district view their educational opportunities?

12. What comes to mind when you hear terms like school reform, school improvement, and school turnaround?

13. If you could make any change to support greater racial equity and justice in the district, what would that change be? Please elaborate.

14. What haven't I asked about that you think is important for me to understand?

Protocol 2 – School/District Leader

1. Please tell me about yourself.

2. How would you describe your experience as a student in PreK-12 schools?

3. What is your experience in working to support schools or school systems that have been identified as "low performing?"

4. What, from your perspective, are the primary struggles that schools in this district face?

    a. What do you see as the root causes of these challenges?
    b. What are the most essential methods that the school district is utilizing to address these challenges?

5. In what ways do community stakeholders participate in partnership with the local school district?

6. What, from your perspectives, are the main priorities of the local school district?

7. What, if any, priorities would you like to modify or add? Please elaborate.

8. What does race mean to you?

9. What does equity mean to you?

10. How does the local school district engage with issues of race and equity? In what ways does this resonate with you? Where do you see tensions emerging?

11. How do you believe students in this district view their educational opportunities?

12. Please describe this district's approach to improving schools identified as low-performing, and the goals of these improvement efforts.

13. If you could make any change to support greater racial equity and justice in the district, what would that change be? Please elaborate.

14. What haven't I asked about that you think is important for me to understand?

Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol

5 Minutes – Review the purpose of the study, describe the purpose of the focus group, review norms for participation (confidentiality, equity of voice, accepting non-closure)

10 minutes – Connection – facilitator will lead an icebreaker to hear everyone's voice and help shape the context of the session (six word story protocol)

20 minutes – Introduce Diem & Welton's (2021) "Protocol for Anti-Racist Policy Decision-Making" (p. 138-149), and ask two questions from "Step 3 – Understand the Sociopolitical and Racial Context of the District and Community" (p. 143)

-What is the political context of your school and community?
-How has racial equity and anti-racism been addressed in school and district policy?

20 minutes – Introduce Green's (2017) Community Equity Literacy framework. Lead participants in evaluating their district's work relative to the five components of CEL:

-Understanding community history
-Working from asset and structural-based perspectives about community
-Recognizing and Leveraging community assets
-Navigating the community power structure
-Advocating for community and school equity

30 minutes – Bring group's attention to existing School Improvement Plan/Policy. Ask three questions from Diem & Welton's "Step 4 – Conduct a Critical Policy Review" (p 144-146).

-What are the intentions of the policy and what does it aim to accomplish?

-How do the policy intentions align with what happens on the ground in day-to-day practice? Are the policy intentions realistic?

-Who benefits from the policy and who is negatively affected? how does this policy affect racially minoritized groups?

5-10 minutes – Reflective activity to summarize the discussion and hear everyone's voice in closing the session – ask for input from each member on the most important next step in partnering to work toward greater racial equity on behalf of students.

Appendix D: Field Notes Template

Date/Time:	Location:	Type of Event:
Descriptive Notes –	Reflective Notes –	Connections -
Clarifying Questions	Probing Questions	Key Ideas