EQUITY DIRECTORS IN NEW JERSEY SCHOOLS: A CONTEXT-RESPONSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE POSITION

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative multiparticipant case study examined the roles, responsibilities, superintendent expectations, and evolution of the equity director position in New Jersey school districts through context-responsive leadership theory. In response to national calls for racial justice following the death of George Floyd, many districts created equity director roles to address systemic inequities. Despite this, limited research on the equity director position exists.

The study involved 11 participants from six New Jersey school districts, including five superintendents, five equity directors, and one person serving as both superintendent and equity director. Data were collected through semistructured interviews to answer the main research questions: What were the roles and responsibilities of equity directors? What were the superintendent's expectations when establishing the role? How has the equity director position evolved within the district since its origination? How do internal and external school contexts impact the equity director?

There were four major findings from the research: (a) the equity director position was multifaceted; (b) superintendents expected equity directors to integrate equity into all aspects of the school district; (c) the equity director position evolved from reactionary to intentional work; and (d) internal and external contextual factors influenced equity work.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, whose love, patience, and belief in me carried me through every step of this journey.

To my wife, Dr. Zaina Banihani, your constant encouragement, strength, and support inspire me daily. Your belief in me, even during the most challenging moments, gives me the confidence to keep pushing forward. None of this would have been possible without you.

To my son, Cyrus, your arrival gave me renewed purpose and perspective. Your smile reminded me daily why this work matters. I hope this achievement makes you proud one day. To you and my future children, may this work serve as a reminder always to stay curious, nurture a lifelong love of learning, and believe that nothing is impossible, no matter what anyone tells you.

To my parents, thank you for your unwavering support in everything I've ever set out to do. Mom, our daily calls often end with me rambling about new aspirations, but you always listen with love and encouragement. Your support has been an anchor throughout this journey. Dad, you've always led by example; your tireless work ethic and dedication showed our family the true meaning of perseverance. You've been my biggest fans every step of the way.

This work represents my efforts and the enduring belief, guidance, and love of those who stood beside me.

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To my committee members, Dr. Keri Orange-Jones and Dr. Jolene R. Battitori, thank you for your time, expertise, and commitment to my research. Your perspectives enriched this study and strengthened its foundation. I am also grateful to the superintendents and equity directors who participated in this study. Your willingness to share your experiences and insights made this research possible. Your dedication to advancing equity in education is both admirable and inspiring.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many schools across the United States are confronted with educational inequalities affecting historically marginalized students. In 1954, the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* stated that public school segregation violated the 14th Amendment and was unconstitutional. However, southern White politicians defied the decision. In 1956, Senator Byrd ordered a summons for "Massive Resistance," which enacted legislative measures going against the Supreme Court ruling to disrupt the school integration process. The case was a pivotal point in United States history for efforts to improve the lives of marginalized groups. Since 1954, there have been government-implemented acts to address educational inequalities.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states that individuals in the United States cannot be excluded from participating in, denied benefits from, or subjected to discrimination under any program or activity that receives federal financial assistance, based on race, color, or national origin (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). A year later, the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 was passed to support low-income students and challenge school segregation (Gamson et al., 2015). This act allotted more than $1 billion a year in aid from the federal government, identified as Title 1 money, to enhance the educational experience for students of low socioeconomic status (Klein, 2015).

Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination in education, stating, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, n.d.c, para. 1). Title IX encompasses various forms of discrimination, such as sexual

harassment; the lack of equitable athletic opportunities; sex-based bias in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) courses and programs within schools; and discrimination rooted in pregnancy. Next, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a U.S. law that protects people with disabilities from discrimination and defines "individuals with disabilities … as persons with a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006, p. 1).

In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which assisted states in protecting individuals with disabilities. This law was later changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990, "a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b, para. 1).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) was a law from the federal government regarding student achievement and school responsibility. NCLB's objective was to enhance the competitive edge of the United States and reduce the educational disparity between underprivileged and minority students and their more privileged counterparts (Klein, 2015). The law specifically emphasized the need for states and schools to enhance the academic outcomes of particular student groups, including English-language learners, students in special education, and those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds, whose performance tends to lag behind their peers on average. While states were not obligated to adhere to the updated standards, failing to do so put them at the potential risk of losing federal Title I funding.

Then in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). ESSA requires states to assess reading, math, and science.

States decided the testing format and how they would inform parents about the results. States needed an online platform that reported students' performance. States were required to share their per-pupil expenditures and identify the amount of money designated to teach each student (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a). Further, the purpose of ESSA was to provide states and education agencies with more options to navigate ways to improve low academic performance through redesigning systems, supports, and interventions (Ayscue et al., 2022). Chu (2019) found that most states generated plans revolving around allocating resources and effective educators; only some focused on equity in the classroom (Ayscue et al., 2022).

Despite all these government initiatives, education inequalities affect schools today. Terrell et al. (2018) found that educational leaders have been cautious in navigating how to best meet the needs of diverse students since the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. Diem et al. (2014) highlighted that NCLB recognized race by acknowledging a racial achievement gap. The achievement gap is the performance gap between student groups based on disaggregated testing data (Gilmour et al., 2018). Other scholars found that the policy did not recognize the educational system as structurally racist and further placed the burden on failing schools where the majority of students were low income (Leonardo, 2007; Welton et al., 2013).

According to Brooks and Theoharis (2019), research from the social sciences has revealed that educational policies and practices connect with institutionalized racism in the United States. On average, marginalized students perform lower on standardized tests and graduate at a lesser rate. Additionally, students of color receive harsher and more frequent disciplinary actions than their White peers. Liu (2023) found that Black children were 3.8 times more likely to receive a school suspension in K-12 schools.

Further, United States student demographics are consistently becoming more diverse. Colby and Ortman (2015) projected that by 2044, Whites will comprise less than 50% of the population. Across the United States, a primary concern of schools and policymakers is how best to meet the needs of the growing diverse student population (Mattheis, 2017). The data have also shown a lack of diversity among school staff, which can lead to the inability to effectively meet the needs of students of color. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), 79.3% of U.S. teachers in 2017-2018 were White and non-Hispanic. A lack of teacher diversity can lead to implicit bias impacting students. Implicit bias refers to attitudes about age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, sexuality, disability status, and nationality that impact the lens through which one views people (Harrison-Bernard et al., 2020).

This leads to schools facing many challenges, and it becomes school leaders' responsibility to navigate them. School leaders are responsible for their schools' success and must ensure that equitable policies and procedures are in place for their students and staff. One approach some school districts have taken to combat inequities and racial issues is creating district-level equity leadership positions. Some titles used in New Jersey for these positions include supervisor of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), chief equity officer, or director of DEI. In this dissertation, the position will be referred to as equity director.

Researchers agree that many school leaders need additional education or development to engage in equity and racial justice work (Dover et al., 2020; Gorski, 2019; Irby et al., 2021). Scholarship and practice have been expanding, signifying the need for school leaders to have transparent conversations about race and equity to address educational disparities (Carter et al., 2017; Horsford, 2014). United States school districts have combatted systemic educational inequalities that result in anti-Blackness, racist practices, and White supremacy (Anderson, 2020;

Love, 2019). Capper and Young (2014) found that when school environments are inclusive and equitable, students are likely to have higher academic achievement.

Irby et al. (2021) found that many superintendents who managed equity work were unprepared to engage in race conversations and lead district equity initiatives. Additionally, many school leaders pursuing racial justice work were unaware of the challenges attached (Gorski, 2019). Racial equity work presents unique challenges, as school leaders will inevitably face resistance from stakeholders (Villavicencio et al., 2022)

Multiple stakeholders guide education, including politicians, taxpayers, principals, teachers, and families, complicating the work politically (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018). Irby and Clark (2018) found that White-dominated school spaces created a status quo of not discussing race within their work due to their race-neutral lens. On the other hand, some schools and districts have committed to focusing on DEI efforts and training teachers on implicit bias and anti-racism (Fensterwald, 2021; Howard, 2020). Welton et al. (2018) shared that racial and equity efforts should be a primary concern in schools and society.

Villaviencio et al. (2022) noted that conservative groups had criticized school districts' efforts on racial equity work. The current sociopolitical climate in the United States has created additional obstacles for school districts to create a path forward with equity work. Diem et al. (2022) contended that anti-racist education needs to be better understood to dismantle racism in educational systems. Further, Welton et al. (2018) argued that redeveloping current racial policies in schools must align more deeply with an anti-racist approach. Certain states and school districts had support from their stakeholders and school administrations to address educational inequalities.

As previously noted, one approach some school districts have taken to combat inequities and racial issues is the creation of equity director positions. Irby et al. (2021) published one of the first empirical contributions to scholarship on equity directors; they found that districts appointed equity directors to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes by designing and implementing policies to improve the experience for historically marginalized students. However, as the existing literature lacked comprehensive coverage of the roles and responsibilities associated with district equity leadership in school districts, Irby et al. recommended a more in-depth investigation of equity directors.

Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery have increased awareness of systemic racism in America. These events became critical points for many people and organizations. Protesters took to the streets of American cities in support of Black Lives Matter, and many organizations felt pressured to make public statements speaking out against systemic racism. Some school district superintendents spoke against racism and supported their marginalized students, while others did not. At the same time, there was an increase in school districts creating district equity director positions. Irby (2022) found equity position hiring to be reactionary and a "knee-jerk" response to anti-Black violence.

There is limited existing literature examining PK-12 equity director positions throughout the United States (Irby et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2023; Meyer et al., 2023; Weiler & Stanley, 2023). At the time of this study, there was no literature examining superintendents' goals when creating such positions.

The current study was also informed by New Jersey's commitment to DEI. On March 1, 2021, New Jersey passed an act mandating that educational instruction should emphasize and

endorse diversity, encompassing economic diversity, equity, inclusion, tolerance, and a sense of belonging (New Jersey Legislature, 2021). It specifically addressed gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, disabilities, and religious tolerance. Instruction was required to explore the impact of unconscious bias and economic disparities on both individual and societal levels. The act encouraged the establishment of safe, welcoming, and inclusive environments for all students, regardless of race or ethnicity, sexual and gender identities, mental and physical disabilities, and religious beliefs. Additionally, the Commissioner of Education was tasked with providing school districts sample learning activities and resources aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion.

According to a 2017 report by UCLA's Civil Rights Project, at that time New Jersey had the most segregated schools in the country (Nieto-Munoz, 2025). In 2023, the New Jersey Superior Court judge ruled that New Jersey did not take on its responsibility to handle school segregation, but the issue was not statewide (Kelley, 2023). The case was led by the Latino Action Network and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 2018, which stated that students were withheld their rights to a "thorough and efficient education in a diverse setting" as a result of school segregation (Kelley, 2023). Throughout the case, Judge Robert Lougy found that schools were not segregated in every district throughout New Jersey. However, there was evidence that the state had not worked to make improvements to segregated districts (Carrera & Gomez, 2023). Although there have been numerous government actions to improve the educational experiences of all students, still, today, there are court cases regarding school segregation in New Jersey and areas that need to be improved for marginalized student groups.

This research examined New Jersey district superintendents' expectations when establishing equity director positions, the evolution of the positions since their creation, and the internal and external contexts that impacted equity directors.

Equity, Fairness, and Social Justice

This dissertation study was rooted in social justice, equity, and fairness principles, recognizing the work districts engaged in to address systemic barriers for students. By examining equity director positions, this study explored how leadership, policy, and practice intersected to create more inclusive and equitable student learning environments. Superintendent and equity director perspectives provided insight into the challenges and successes of equity work within their districts. Ultimately, this study highlighted the need for schools to focus on fairness, equity, and socially just practices, and this was shown through districts' commitment to sustained equity efforts.

Research Questions

The main research question for this study was "What are equity directors' job responsibilities and roles within PK-12 school districts?" The following three questions helped guide the research:

1. What were the superintendent's expectations and intended goals when establishing the position of equity director?
2. How has the equity director position evolved within the district since its origination?
3. How do internal and external school contexts impact the equity director?

Framework

Figure 1

Dissertation Framework

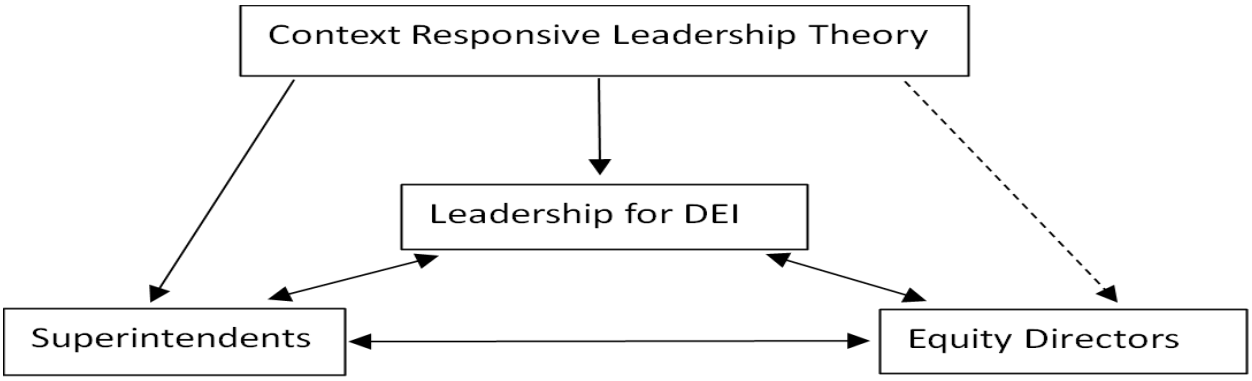

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the framework for this study, showing the interconnectedness between the parts of school district equity work that were examined through context-responsive leadership theory. Varying contexts impacted leadership for DEI and superintendents, represented by the arrows. The dashed line connecting context-responsive leadership theory to the equity director position illustrates the focus of this dissertation, examining the equity director role through the lens of context-responsive leadership.

Significance of the Study

The number of New Jersey PK-12 equity director positions has increased since 2020, but little is known about the position. This first-of-its-kind multiparticipant case study aimed to fill this gap regarding how New Jersey districts have configured their equity director positions and examine their attempts to improve the educational experiences of marginalized students and students of color.

The research by Irby et al. (2021) was one of the first studies to examine equity director positions. Their findings from 13 equity directors highlighted how the position was distinctive from traditional-level leadership positions. Moreover, early findings showed that the roles of the

position were often misaligned with the expected leadership tasks. Similarly, the demands of the position sometimes shifted the leader's priorities to stakeholder needs, which disrupted the focus on addressing existing inequalities in the district (Mattheis, 2017). On the other hand, Lewis et al. (2023) found the position comparable to traditional roles for school improvement, such as assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, director of curriculum and instruction, or superintendent of teaching and learning. Equity director positions did not have a one-size-fits-all approach.

Each district's creation and utilization of the position varied. The literature mentioned some of the difficulties that equity directors faced. Irby et al. (2021) uncovered that many districts in their study did not provide the position with enough power or resources to meet the expected objectives of the role. Similarly, Starr (2020) discussed the need for equity leaders to have an elevated position in the district and have their own budget and staff with people with expertise in various areas of policy, stakeholder engagement, and legality. Rice-Boothe and Marshall (2022) suggested, "They are essentially building the plane as they fly it, which we can all agree is a stressful, frustrating and at times counterproductive position to be in" (p. 20). Irby et al. (2021) added that districts needed to be "more careful not only to what they expect equity directors to accomplish but also to the configuration of the role and its intersection with institutionalized racial-gender oppression at all levels of school organizations" (p. 419).

Equity directors have faced resistance and pushback in certain U.S. states that have tried to regulate or restrict their work. For example, Najarro and Peetz (2024) reported that 18 states banned or restricted instruction on race and gender in public schools after the federal government banned some diversity training in federal agencies. DEI work was found to be politically dividing based on an examination of 1,300 district mission statements from the Pew Research

Center, which found 34% of them referencing DEI; of the statements from Democratic voting areas, 56% mentioned DEI, while only 26% of statements from Republican voting areas did (Navarro & Peetz, 2024). Because political points of view influenced perspectives on DEI work, public school districts navigated this political landscape to focus more on improving the education experiences of their students, especially students of color and marginalized students.

The current research contributes to the existing literature on the equity director position by exploring the origin of this position, how it evolved, why superintendents created the position, and the goals and expectations of the position. Further, by examining the equity director position, this research highlights how districts navigated equity work in their districts. For district leaders who are unprepared to address issues of race and equity (Dover et al., 2020; Irby et al., 2021; Gorski, 2019), this research may provide insight into how equity directors have navigated these topics.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The theoretical framework of this study was context-responsive leadership theory. Bredeson et al. (2011) defined context-responsive leadership theory

> as practical wisdom in action, which reveals a complex mix of knowledge, skills, and dispositions appropriately deployed by effective leaders as they engage in fluid conversations with dynamic situational variables. Context-responsive leadership is expressed through action, the way the leader behaves, not any one predisposed style consisting of de-contextualized qualities or leader actions. (p. 20)

Examining leadership practices through context is not new. Bossert et al. (1982) discussed how context affected leadership, but found that "the model was not explicit about how these context features shape school leadership" (p. 7). Their model did not clearly connect context to school leadership practices. Hallinger (2018) shared that understanding context is crucial for effective school leadership, as it empowers leaders to go beyond mere knowledge of actions and guides them in applying their understanding of distinct leadership models and styles to enhance educational results within their schools. While the need to comprehend how context influences school leaders was raised more than two decades ago (Gronn & Ribbins, 1996), this subject has only recently received attention from scholars (Okilwa & Barnett, 2018). While examining context and leadership practices, Fancera (2022) found that various situations called for distinct leadership styles, and the adaptable nature of context-responsive leadership allowed diverse types of leaders to arise within various school and organizational environments.

The existing literature from leadership scholars has examined various types of contexts within organizations (Bredeson & Klar, 2008; Clark & O'Donoghue, 2016; Hallinger, 2018; Oc,

2018; Okilwa & Barnett, 2018; Roegman, 2017). Oc (2018) described two levels of context: the omnibus level, focusing on where, when, and who was being led, and the discrete level, focusing on the task, social, physical, and temporal. Omnibus and discrete levels were a framework for how context impacted leadership. Hallinger (2018) focused on six contexts: institutional, community, sociocultural, political, economic, and school improvement. Okilwa and Barnett (2018) examined societal contexts and school contexts. The societal contexts were cultural values, social trends, economic trends, and government policies, while the school-level context focused on the school community. Okilwa and Barnett (2018) and Hallinger (2018) had overlapping contexts of cultural values, government policies and politics, and community. Additionally, Clarke and O'Donoghue (2016) examined situated, professional, material, and external contexts in schools. Roegman's (2017) contexts were organizational, personal, and occupational. Gronn and Ribbins (1996) listed three types of contexts: categorical, interpretive, and relational. Pashiardis et al. (2018) examined school socioeconomic, educational, and family contexts; socioeconomic context in their research was similar to Hallinger's (2018) economic context and Okilwa and Barnett's (2018) economic trends. While the literature on context-responsive leadership theory examined various contexts that impacted leadership, Oc (2018) observed that scholars had not agreed on the specific contexts to examine, which was evident throughout the review of the literature.

This study examined school district superintendents and equity directors through the lens of context-responsive leadership theory. Roegman (2017) called for future research to look at the impact of school leaders and their equity-focused initiatives, focusing on how context interacted with the initiatives. There is little research focused on context-responsive leadership examining how district-level leaders' contextual literacy impacted their effectiveness (Fancera, 2022).

Gronn and Ribbins (1996) found that context was undertheorized in leadership literature. Hallinger (2018) called for school leadership research to expand their lens of context. The literature indicated inconsistencies regarding the varied school environments that influenced how school leaders fulfilled their duties (Fancera, 2022).

Successful school administrators utilized various tactics and exhibited behaviors aligning with their traits and values (Gurr et al., 2017). Angelle's (2017) study found that beliefs and values were pivotal in creating a sense of community for students. These beliefs and values were shaped by the context in which they operated.

Studies of principals have found that contextual factors impacted their leadership decisions. Gurr et al. (2017) found that for less successful principals, contextual factors had a more significant impact on their leadership, presenting challenges to overall success for their schools. Okilwa and Barnett (2018) examined how principals read, comprehended, acknowledged, and interpreted situations; each of these steps influenced their leadership decisions and allocation of resources. Klar and Brewer (2013) examined the importance of the local context. The principal in their study used their understanding of the local context to inform decision-making, develop strategies, and ensure leadership practices were responsive to the changing school conditions over time. Pashiardis et al. (2018) also found that school principals' leadership practices responded to and were influenced by local context. For example, they found that the local socioeconomic status impacted the schools in their study. Moreover, Klar et al. (2019) stated that school leaders must be contextually literate to effectively respond to unique school environments. Similarly, Reed and Swaminathan (2016) highlighted that principals' ability to respond to contextual variables influenced their effectiveness in urban schools.

The community context emerged as a key context in studies examining principals through the lens of context-responsive leadership. Okilwa and Barnett (2018) investigated four consecutive principals from a high-needs elementary school and analyzed the school and community contexts. The principals used their analysis to implement measures to improve school programs and practices for student achievement. They focused on the context of community engagement. The principals knew this through observing, evaluating, and responding to the school and community contexts. Angelle (2017) found that the ethnic and socioeconomic profile of the community surrounding a school influenced the school and its relationship with the students, and emphasized the need for principals to create positive and inclusive school communities in order to build and nurture these surrounding communities. Additionally, Klar and Brewer (2013) highlighted the importance of the local context and the community, observing that principals needed to fully understand the community to address the needs of students and teachers within their school effectively.

Reed and Swaminathan's (2016) study investigated an urban high school principal within the context of the community's socioeconomic status, which led to a focus on equity and resources for marginalized students. The community's perception of safety and discipline influenced the principal's focus on creating a positive school climate. Pashiardis et al. (2018) also found that the socioeconomic status of the local community influenced principals' leadership practices.

School principals' decision-making and actions were often influenced by the specific contexts in which they operated. Throughout the review of literature on principals and context, principals' ability to adapt their leadership practices became evident (Adebiyi et al., 2019; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Klar et al., 2019; Pashiardis et al., 2018; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). The

principals in Klar and Brewer's (2013) study adapted their leadership practices to the specific challenges of their school context. For example, they created a sense of community and a shared vision and addressed some of the negative rhetoric around the school's ability to create positive outcomes in a high-poverty setting. Other principals had to adapt to address community resources and poverty (Klar et al., 2019). Klar et al. (2019) found that school leaders needed to adapt practices to their specific institutional, community, sociocultural, political, and economic environments. Contextually responsive leadership practices allow leaders to adapt to their schools' specific needs (Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Pashiardis et al. (2018) stated that school principals must adapt their leadership practices to their schools' specific socioeconomic and educational contexts. Adebiyi et al. (2019) observed that when there were evolving situations throughout school communities, principals adapted their leadership behaviors to respond to the security challenges in their schools.

Much of the literature on context-responsive leadership in schools has focused on principals. There was limited research on school superintendents (Bredeson & Klar, 2008; Bredeson et al., 2011; Roegman, 2017) or district-level administrators (Fancera, 2022) through the lens of context-responsive leadership theory. However, in the existing literature, Roegman (2017) examined how superintendents navigated equity work in their districts and created a framework for understanding how context affected this. The framework had four elements: organizational, occupational, personal, and social contexts. The superintendents' leadership approaches were shaped by how the four contexts interacted. Roegman pointed out that contexts do not work in isolation; rather, there is an interplay between them. Further, the leaders' personal contexts influenced their understanding and practice of equity. Thus, the success of district initiatives focused on equity may differ based on the superintendent's organizational context and

the personal context. For superintendents who lead equity-focused initiatives, understanding how contexts interacted was pivotal in the overall success. In 2017, Roegman examined principals and central office administrators to understand how administrators used data and how context influenced their use of data. The findings showed that the accountability movement greatly influenced administrators' use of data. All participants shared that their data engagement was to meet state requirements.

Bredeson and Klar (2008) also examined the connection between context and superintendent leadership. Like Roegman's (2017) framework of interplay between four contexts, Bredeson and Klar (2008) created a framework with five intersecting and interactive dimensions: personalized role, professional knowledge, purpose, people, and place. Bredeson et al.'s (2011) findings on superintendent leadership aligned with the principal literature on the importance of adapting leadership practices to the specific context (Adebiyi et al., 2019; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Klar et al., 2019; Pashiardis et al., 2018; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Superintendents improved their leadership by understanding and responding to the unique contexts of their districts, such as demographic changes and funding challenges. Context-responsive leadership entailed comprehending and engaging with the dynamic variables in a given situation (Bredeson et al., 2011).

Further research on district-level administrators was conducted by Fancera (2022), who studied a first-year assistant superintendent transitioning from a principal position through the lens of context-responsive leadership theory. The study examined the internal and external school contexts that influenced the leader. The findings supported that district-level leaders used their graduate education and professional experiences to navigate omnibus and discrete contexts.

Superintendents and Equity

The highest level of leadership within a school district is the superintendent. The superintendent has multiple roles, such as meeting external educational policy requirements, fulfilling local school board obligations, and liaising between the school district and the community (Holme et al., 2013). The superintendent oversees budgets, systems, policies, and procedures. Historically, much of superintendents' work has been focused on increasing student achievement, which can inhibit other initiatives that work toward what is best for students. Some superintendents have concentrated on creating more inclusive spaces and engaging stakeholders, which are not measurable achievements. Over time, superintendent responsibilities and expectations have expanded and become more complex (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021).

When racial and equity conversations or issues arose in a school district, it became the superintendent's responsibility to address them. Equity work in a district depends on the leader (Diem et al., 2015), which places the responsibility for equity initiatives on the superintendent (Irby et al., 2021). Despite this being the case, research examining the experiences of superintendents supporting equity work is scarce, and many scholars have yet to pay much attention to the area (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Expressing a commitment to equity, particularly addressing matters related to race and racism, has raised concern for superintendents because it may lead to strong criticism and resistance from the broader community (Villenas & Angeles, 2013).

One of the recurring challenges throughout the literature is the uncertainty that leaders face when engaging in equity work (Diem et al., 2015; Maxwell et al., 2013; Whitt et al., 2015). Tienken (2021) found that many superintendents who addressed equity work district-wide were unprepared. Diem et al. (2015) found that leaders discussed racial differences in one district but

not the importance of race. However, one of the districts in their study utilized local policy to approach the work by being culturally responsive. Moreover, Whitt et al. (2015) found that when superintendents were presented with inequities in their districts, many diverted their responsibilities to principals and teachers. Whitt et al. studied three superintendents' self-efficacy and instructional leadership in schools serving students of color with achievement inequalities and gaps. The superintendents did not take responsibility for the low student achievement, but did claim they were effective instructional leaders. Superintendents shared that teachers, families, and other employees were responsible for student achievement. They felt it was the responsibility of principals to provide instructional leadership to staff. Not taking responsibility for student inequalities showed that superintendents deflected the blame during uncertain times.

Additionally, Maxwell et al. (2013) examined three equity-focused superintendents in large school districts that were 65% or more economically disadvantaged students and half students of color. One superintendent in the study was sometimes unsure of how to respond and would distance themselves from problems in their schools, resulting in deteriorating conditions. Another superintendent considered himself learning and figuring out his perceptions of equity. The third superintendent found that the job was "wearing her out." Each superintendent in the study struggled with equity work and the demands of the superintendency.

Similarly, Roegman (2017) studied three superintendents working on systemic, equity-focused improvements. She found that the equity initiatives were tailored to the district's specific needs. Equity work cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach. There were disparities found in the student data, but the two superintendents did not target the groups in their initiatives. Each of the superintendents' experiences was different, and their lived experiences had an impact on how they viewed the world. For example, one participant faced resistance from stakeholders while

working in two different districts and sometimes struggled to understand the perspectives of stakeholders. Another superintendent used their lived experiences to implement support systems for the students they led. Roegman concluded that superintendents needed assistance in identifying inequalities, such as completing equity audits and having conversations.

Kruse et al. (2018) further explained the challenges of equity work and found that when discussions became complex and uncomfortable and there was a lack of knowledge and trust, these challenges became exhausting even for committed superintendents. They called for superintendents to spend time creating a plan for equity work, especially at first.

In addition to uncertainty, unpreparedness, and discomfort came resistance and pressure. Irby et al. (2021) found superintendents did not engage in this work because of resistance and public pressure. Due to political pressures, equity leadership needed to be fully understood and the obstacles connected. Such political pressure can come from the local board of education. Sampson (2019) found that school boards had a significant say in equity-related reforms. School boards were powerful and held the right to fire a superintendent who did not align with their visions (Trujillo, 2012). Coviello and DeMatthews (2021) examined superintendents' experiences in politically complex districts and observed a tension between discreet and explicit advocacy for equity. For example, some superintendents walked a "fine line" when engaging in equity conversations. Board members and community stakeholders could influence district equity initiatives. Coviello and DeMatthews also found that superintendents did not want their changes to be seen as radical. When superintendents made decisions that did not align with the board of education, it could lead to superintendent removal or board refusal to support an equity policy or program. This led to some superintendents being strategic in their messaging to the public to advance equity initiatives.

The importance of building community partnerships while navigating equity work was another area highlighted in the literature (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021; Petersen et al., 2008). Coviello and DeMatthews (2021) shared, "Leaders should give serious consideration to embracing, rather than avoiding, contentious public conversations around equity since they may have long-term benefits for a community grappling with these issues" (p. 594). Moreover, they found that equity work had a deep connection to the community. Petersen et al. (2008) agreed that the relationship between the superintendent and the community was vital to a district's overall success.

On the other hand, certain superintendents focused on equity through instructional changes (Beard, 2012; DeMatthews, 2016; Roegman, 2017). DeMatthews (2016) studied a superintendent leading the implementation of dual-language programs in a district. These programs benefited more affluent schools at first, although the superintendent made this curricular change to help students at all socioeconomic levels in the district. Moreover, the superintendent envisioned the dual-language programs being culturally relevant and assisting students with career openings. In Beard's (2012) study, the superintendent concentrated on differentiated instruction to improve instruction. They hypothesized that curriculum and focusing on equitable instruction would assist in overcoming academic achievement disparities. Finally, Roegman et al. (2017) examined superintendents' implementation of instructional rounds to address inequities for students.

Leadership for DEI

Leadership for DEI can be taken on in various ways. At the school leadership level, culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016) has gained popularity recently, along with social justice leadership (Gümüş et al., 2020; Theoharis, 2007), equity leadership (Rodela &

Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020; Virella & Woulfin, 2023), and culturally sustaining leadership (Bonanno, 2022; Newcomer & Cowin, 2021; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016). Scholars have contended that education has the potential to reduce disparities in opportunities among various groups, ultimately fostering the creation of a fair and equitable society (Arar, 2015; Blackmore, 2016; Shields, 2010). Educational leaders are critical in promoting social justice.

Culturally responsive leadership and social justice leadership aim to improve marginalized students' educational and life experiences. Gümüş et al. (2020) wrote that although studies have been conducted on social justice in various fields, there is no agreement on what social justice means (Arar et al., 2017; Berkovich, 2014; Shoho et al., 2005). Theoharis (2007) defined "social justice leadership to mean that these principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision" (p. 223). Dantley and Tillman (2010) defined social justice as "deconstructing those realities to disclose the multiple ways schools and their leadership reproduce marginalizing and inequitable treatment of individuals because their identities are outside the celebrated dominant culture" (p. 22). Virella and Woulfin (2023) shared that the definition led them to focus on being equity-oriented to become social justice leaders.

Khalifa et al. (2016) provided a framework for culturally responsive leadership with four tenets: promoting culturally responsive/inclusive school environments; developing culturally responsive teachers; engaging with students, parents, and indigenous contexts; and participating in critical self-reflection specific to their leadership behaviors. They found critical self-reflection essential when creating and maintaining a culturally responsive school, and noted that social

justice leaders were responsible for creating a culturally responsive school environment and worked to increase the achievement of all students.

Theoharis's (2007) qualitative study of seven principals in urban Midwestern districts found that engaging in social justice resulted in positive student outcomes. The principals in the study were social justice advocates who pushed for English language learners and special education students not to be placed in segregated programs. Additionally, principals led professional learning for staff on race and equity. Theoharis observed four positive outcomes: a strengthened school culture and community, improved school structures, raised student achievement, and recentered staff capacity. This research highlighted that social justice actions did correlate with promoting equity.

There are multiple ways that school leaders can engage in equity leadership. Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica (2020) examined how Latinx school leaders used their cultures to make schools more equitable. Virella and Woulfin (2023) studied principals in New York City who focused on equity-oriented leadership in support of Puerto Rican students after Hurricane Maria. Green (2017) implemented community-based equity audits and examined how educational leaders could use the data to achieve fairness within their school communities. Shields (2010) examined two principals' social justice practices through transformative leadership practices. Throughout the literature, there was no one-size-fits-all approach to improving the lives and educational experiences of marginalized students.

Partnerships between school and community are critical to social justice and equity-oriented work. Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica (2020) focused on community cultural wealth, or the knowledge, skills, and abilities of people of color that are utilized to face oppression. The leaders in their study focused on the strengths and contributions of their culturally diverse

communities. Virella and Woulfin (2023) focused on the needs of students after a hurricane impacted the community. They observed that school principals were responsive to the community's needs and identified four dimensions of equity-oriented leadership: self-reflection, influencing sociopolitical context, resource allocation, and modeling. Green's (2017) community-based equity audits emphasized how schools and the local community were connected. He examined community inequities such as racial segregation, poverty, and violence. The audits assisted by identifying community assets and organizations that could partner with the school. Collecting and assessing data from the equity audits provided an understanding of how educational leaders could make improvements and reach fair student outcomes.

Voulgarides and DeMatthews (2024) examined how the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd impacted a school district in the northeast region of the U.S. that was making organizational improvements for educational equity. Community members with conflicting political perspectives challenged the superintendent in the study, which impacted the district's equity work. Their study discussed how superintendents needed to build strong communication and ties to the community, along with strategic planning to manage the pushback on equity work. Voulgarides and DeMatthews shared the difficulties that school districts could face if they were not prepared for all areas of equity work.

Throughout the literature, principals could not make these equitable changes alone. Swanson and Welton (2019) recommended that principals work with grade-level or department chairs to help have racial conversations. Marshall and Khalifa (2018) found that if superintendents and assistant superintendents were not greatly involved in equity work, it would not lead to substantial change. Therefore, top district-level leaders were an integral part of district equity work. Principals in Virella and Woulfin's (2023) study focused on resource

allocation and strategically utilized personnel to demonstrate equity-oriented leadership. Voulgarides and DeMatthews (2024) examined a superintendent who made a statement resolving to continue the district's equity work even though the behind-the-scenes financial aspect was limited. The school district had a DEI director before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the DEI director's work shifted during that time frame: for example, they created an anti-racist task force. The critical takeaway from this study was the support of equity work from the top position of superintendent.

Other studies dealt with transformational leadership in social justice and equity work. Marshall and Khalifa (2018) focused on instructional and transformational leadership, and found that there needed to be trust between the instructional coach and the teacher for meaningful, equitable change. Shields (2010) found that transformational leadership involved questioning justice, critiquing inequitable practices, and addressing the public good. Additionally, Theoharis (2007) found that principal-led professional learning for staff was impactful in providing additional knowledge on race and equity.

However, this work did not come without challenges. Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica (2020) found that Latinx administrators' vision and district equity initiatives often conflicted in their study, which led to some tension with officials. One of the discrepancies was that equity was defined narrowly as just assisting students of low socioeconomic status, while not addressing the more extensive cultural needs of the community. Voulgarides and DeMatthews (2024) described a superintendent working toward organizational improvements for equity who was challenged by community members who second-guessed their work.

Additionally, educational leaders took different approaches to implementing equity work and engaging others in it. Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica (2020) studied four administrators who

used their backgrounds to assist in their equity work. Their study highlighted the importance of understanding the leader's sociocultural background while engaging in equity work. Virella and Woulfin's (2023) study of New York City principals showed that equity-oriented leaders engaged in self-reflection and growth. Shields (2010) highlighted that redistribution of power and inclusive pedagogical approaches impacted principals' social justice work. Similarly, Voulgarides and DeMatthews (2024) wrote, "Racial equity work requires that educational stakeholders understand racism, become antiracist, challenge White supremacy, and constantly push back against racist policies, practices, and beliefs in schools to improve schooling conditions for Black and Brown students" (p. 5).

Throughout the examination of the literature, Voulgarides and DeMatthews (2024) found that cultural responsiveness (Khalifa et al., 2016) and social justice (Theoharis, 2007) were integral parts of equity work. Diem and Welton (2020) shared that research on anti-racist school reform was expanding, emphasizing the need to simultaneously address the White supremacist and racist ideologies embedded in the personal, interpersonal, and structural aspects of the schooling process.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy and leadership are built on the foundation of Ladson-Billings's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, Gay's (2010) culturally responsive teaching, and Khalifa's (2018) culturally responsive leadership. Ladson-Billings (1995) described culturally relevant pedagogy as teaching that supports students' cultural competence, academic growth, and critical consciousness. Gay (2010) held that instruction could be more effective by responding to students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. Paris (2012) then called on educators to go a step further from culturally relevant pedagogy to culturally sustaining pedagogy. Santamaría and Santamaria (2016) wrote:

> Culturally sustaining leaders critically think about issues of access and equity by analyzing why things are the way they are, and how they can be remedied, and by adding innovation or change through action that will reverse or eradicate identified inequities toward overall improvement for all learners involved. (p. 5)

Santamaría and Santamaría observed that culturally sustaining leaders prioritized parent and community involvement by actively striving to understand the families and neighborhoods of their students through deliberate efforts. Leaders committed to cultural sustainability offered educators and staff professional development and instructional assistance. This support encompassed languages and cultures prevalent in the community, and was proven to enhance the academic success and overall well-being of all students under their care (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016). Newcomer and Cowin (2022) found that culturally sustaining leaders supported a curriculum that would meet the educational, social, political, and cultural needs of all students.

In Bonanno's (2022) study, there were multiple culturally responsive leadership approaches, but these approaches were not sustaining. Bonanno found that without culturally sustaining leadership, transforming systems was difficult for principals because they needed sustaining efforts for meaningful, socially just changes. The shift from responsive to sustaining leadership required "a disruption of power between authority figures and school members such as (in the case of restorative justice) adults co-creating and revisiting school expectations" (Bonanno, 2022, p. 100). Newcomer and Cowin (2021) built on the existing research and explained that culturally sustaining school leaders understood the knowledge and resources of students and their families to establish robust partnerships, promoted the use of students' home languages and cultural practices in the classroom, fostered inclusive environments in classrooms

and schools, developed a curriculum that prompted students to think critically about equity-related issues, supported learning through consistently high expectations and a belief that all students could succeed, and engaged in continuous professional development to sustain these efforts.

Equity Director

Driven by the collective frustration of their communities and an intense desire for improvement among some educators, many school districts have participated in comprehensive reform initiatives focused on equity at the systemic level (Weiler & Stanley, 2023). The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests increased the number of school districts hiring equity directors (Irby, 2022). District-level equity positions have various titles, such as chief equity officer, director of DEI, or supervisor of equity, but for the purpose of this dissertation, any district-level equity position will be referred to as the equity director. PK-12 districts have appointed equity directors to "support the design and implementation of district-wide equity reforms that will make educational experiences and outcomes more equitable and just for racially, ethnically, and linguistically marginalized students" (Irby et al., 2021, p. 1). At the time of this study, no research has reported the number of equity directors nationally. However, Greene and Paul (2021) reported in a study examining 554 school districts that 79% of districts with more than 100,000 students had an equity director position. Despite the number of equity directors, little research has examined the equity director role (Irby et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2023; Meyer et al., 2023; Weiler & Stanley, 2023).

Creating equity director positions after the 2020 protests was a reactionary response by school districts. Irby (2022) wrote, "The position first gained popularity as a knee-jerk response to episodic anti-Black violence rather than bold vision, proactive goodwill, or even

acknowledgment of long-standing education inequities" (para. 4). Rice-Boothe and Marshall 2022) noted that when hired in the context of a racial incident, new equity directors entered a climate of tension and hostility from the beginning. Nevertheless, Irby (2022) believed that equity directors were critical for improving the educational experience of marginalized students.

The literature showed various reasons for hiring equity directors. For example, equity directors were committed to interrupting racism, supporting a culturally responsive school environment, and centering the community's voice in district-level decision-making (Weiler & Stanley, 2023). Lewis et al. (2023) observed that the position was developed and adopted to respond to historical and systematic inequities. Irby et al. (2021) agreed with Lewis et al. (2023), but a significant finding from their research was that school boards and superintendents expected equity directors to address systemic issues and inequities that could not be solved in the past. Moreover, Meyer et al. (2023) stated, "Equity directors lead work to correct systemic inequities in educational opportunities, including educating personnel on racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, and working at systems level to address the impacts of these oppressions on students" (p. 493).

The roles of equity directors varied depending on the school district. Rice-Boothe and Marshall (2022) worked with over 50 equity directors and found that different districts had different structures and expectations for the role. Ishimaru et al. (2022) found that equity directors were responsible for multiple tasks, such as policy development, professional development, coaching, community and family engagement, strategic planning, and handling issues of racism and injustice. They explored equity directors' structural and psychological vulnerabilities and highlighted that school districts needed to consider "labor-related racial and

gender oppression" (Ishimaru et al., 2022, p. 417) when generating the expectations for the position.

Lewis et al. (2023) found that equity directors addressed inequities within their school districts in various ways, including professional development and resource development. Lewis et al. also examined role documentation from four districts (Fort Worth Independent School District, New York City Department of Education, Rochester City School District, and Syracuse City School District) and observed that the equity director role was similar to some already existing district-level positions. Irby et al. (2021) shared three types of equity director work from their study: "the work they were expected to do as determined through codified responsibilities, the work they were assigned to do as defined by their role configuration, and the work they wanted to prioritize because they believe it would effect change" (p. 426). Specifically, Irby (2022) wrote that equity directors' roles included hiring and retaining a diverse teaching staff, leading professional development sessions, creating community partnerships, and fostering two-way communication for marginalized parents and students. A study conducted by Mattheis (2017) on district equity leadership found that the leader had to balance state requirements, budgets, and program implementation, but also needed to stay aware of changes in the district, such as demographics, values, and community needs. Following this, Weiler and Stanley (2023) found that equity directors engaged in systemic changes, focused on building capacity across departments, schools, communities, and other stakeholder groups. While the literature showed that equity directors were tasked with many different responsibilities, Irby et al. (2021) found that these roles were often misaligned with the expected leadership tasks.

Irby et al. (2021) identified four forms of organizational power in equity directors' work: (a) supervisory responsibility and authority, (b) influence on superintendents and board relations,

(c) financial resources and budgetary discretion, and (d) influence on district professional development related to curricular and instructional matters. Furthermore, the role configurations varied depending on how the district positioned the equity leader in the organizational chart. Some leaders were responsible for introducing equity ideas into districts' documents and policies, referred to as equity seeding configurations. Irby et al. wrote that their work entailed drafting and shaping policies, providing presentations, finding resources, and organizing district data for stakeholders. Directors also participated in cabinet-level meetings. A lack of supervisor obligations was a limitation to directors configured for seeding.

In Irby et al.'s (2021) research, four districts configured the role as being an equity collaborator, responsible for supporting and collaborating with a broad range of stakeholders for equity progress. Many equity directors in these roles focused on supporting or implementing equity initiatives by conducting professional development (Irby et al., 2021). Equity collaborators had limited supervisor responsibilities and did not interact with superintendents or board members often. Many reported a limited or nonexistent budget.

Equity management and compliance was another way the role was configured. These equity directors reported having a "high-level" connection to the superintendent (Irby et al., 2021, p. 431). Their work was managerial and compliance-focused, and they had more supervisor responsibilities than directors in the collaboration configuration. One of the responsibilities was to improve district programs or initiatives. Equity directors in this role configuration could be too busy to engage in work that would create meaningful change. For example, one equity director reported their responsibilities as supervising 16 people and programs, being a family liaison, coordinating positive behavioral interventions and supports, being in charge of homelessness, being a disciplinarian, and more (Irby et al., 2021). This

example shows the overwhelming amount of work equity leaders were responsible for within the equity management and compliance configuration.

The fourth configuration described by Irby et al. (2021) was equity innovation and development. Directors in this role often had high levels of supervisory authority and responsibility, interactions with superintendents and board members, financial resource control, and decision-making independence. One participant in the study explained that they reported directly to the superintendent and directed African American Male Achievement, Latinx Student Achievement, African American Female Excellence, and Asian-Pacific Islander Student Achievement. The constraint to the position was the inability to influence "teaching and learning, talent investment, research assessment, and data" (Irby et al., 2021, p. 440).

Weiler and Stanley's (2023) findings from a study of six equity directors led to four themes: planning and development, professional learning, data use, and family and community engagement. They found that equity directors worked with superintendents and district-level administrators to create a vision for their work. Their roles resulted from equity data, and it became their responsibility to create a map forward for a more equitable district. The equity directors also shared that they spent a great deal of time with policy. One director formed a 30-member task force to create a district equity policy; another spent much time analyzing the code of conduct and making changes. Strategic planning for the community and school was essential to the work. District strategic planning involved collaboration with the central office and community leaders, while school equity planning was different depending on the district. For example, one equity director worked closely with a principal to create a plan. For professional learning, much of the equity directors' work involved professional development; one district started the school year by having staff report to multiple three-hour-long equity sessions. Equity

directors also worked on resource development to support school personnel. Another part of the role was to collect, analyze, and present data to stakeholders. Finally, equity directors engaged with families and community members in various ways: for example, one of the directors was responsible for engaging stakeholders through social media. These findings from Weiler and Stanley built on the limited existing work by Irby et al. (2021).

Since equity directors were tasked with multiple responsibilities, there were numerous challenges that impacted their overall success in their roles. Irby et al. (2021) found that equity directors had limited say and resources needed to create policy changes. Meyer et al. (2023) also observed that they had limited resources such as funding, staff, and time, which presented significant challenges for a position tasked with dismantling institutional racism within a school district. Further, some equity directors lacked support systems depending on their role configuration (Rice-Boothe & Marshall, 2022). Starr (2020) discussed the need for the equity director to have an elevated position in the district and have their own budget and staff with expertise in various areas of policy, stakeholder engagement, and legality.

Resistance from staff and stakeholders was common throughout the literature on equity directors (Irby et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2023). Engaging stakeholders in discussions of race, racism, and inequities was difficult work. Meyer et al. (2023) specifically investigated how gender and sexual diversity topics were integrated into DEI work and reported resistance from colleagues and community members who were against gender studies education. However, Irby et al. (2021) found that equity directors faced less resistance from the public than superintendents. They also differed from superintendents because they had the knowledge and skills to lead equity work. These findings suggested that the position could be more impactful in overcoming systemic barriers when facing less public resistance.

Weiler and Stanley (2023) expressed concern about the longevity of the equity director position: “Is this reform effort another reactive, district-based initiative that, like other reforms, will fade away with time?” (p. 10). Lewis et al. (2023) questioned the meaningfulness of the position, comparing it to that of chief diversity officer in higher education, and shared the concern that once these positions became more mainstream, they would become symbolic and not remain committed to creating meaningful, equitable change.

At the same time, Irby et al. (2021) described how equity directors’ role configurations were viewed as active and evolving in the school district. “Understanding the role as a continuously changing process is important because, if the role continually evolves (and is evolved), this feature should be acknowledged as a defining structural characteristic of the role itself” (Irby et al., 2021, p. 448). Weiler and Stanley (2023) called for future research to examine the development of the equity director position over time. This dissertation study sought to fill that gap by investigating the position’s development and evolution. Weiler and Stanley also looked at the equity director position through a different lens and explored the purpose of the position: “If we understand why EDs do what they do, we can better develop, communicate, support, guide, adjust, and grow the work of the ED” (Weiler & Stanley, 2023, p. 9).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Since the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests across the United States, there has been an increase in school districts hiring equity directors. Green and Paul (2021) found that 62% of the 100 largest school districts in the United States had the position. However, limited research has examined PK-12 equity directors (Irby et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2023; Weiler & Stanley, 2023). The equity director position is often a district-level senior administration position (Weiler & Stanley, 2023). Irby et al. (2021) discovered that equity directors' work did not always align with the intended roles at the position's inception. Irby (2022) found hiring of equity directors to be reactionary, and Rice-Boothe and Marshall's (2022) findings from working with more than 50 equity officers across the U.S. suggested equity directors were "essentially building the plane as they fly it" (p. 20). The existing literature did not provide a clear understanding of the position and roles.

This study aimed to fill this gap in the literature examining PK-12 equity directors. Specifically, I interviewed PK-12 equity directors and superintendents in New Jersey to examine equity directors' responsibilities and roles within their districts, the evolution of the position, and the superintendents' expectations and intended goals when the position was established.

Research Questions

The main research question for this study was "What are equity directors' job responsibilities and roles within PK-12 school districts?" The following three questions helped guide the research:

1. What were the superintendent's expectations and intended goals when establishing the position of equity director?

2. How has the equity director position evolved within the district since its origination?
3. How do internal and external school contexts impact the equity director?

Research Design

This qualitative multiparticipant case study examined five superintendents, five equity directors, and one superintendent and equity director who held dual roles, all from New Jersey. Superintendents and equity directors participated in semistructured interviews to provide data to answer the study's research questions. A qualitative research design was appropriate for this study because little research had explored the equity director position.

Semistructured individual interviews were conducted with 11 participants from six school districts. Interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom. All participants were asked the same set of questions in each interview (Appendix A). However, time was allowed for follow-up questions and areas of interest that contributed to answering the research questions.

Theoretical Framework

Context-responsive leadership theory (Bredeson et al., 2011; Klar et al., 2020; Oc, 2018) framed this study as the theoretical framework. In the interviews, superintendents were asked about their expectations and intended goals when creating the equity director position. Equity directors shared their roles, responsibilities, and the evolution of the position. Context-responsive leadership theory examined the contextual factors that influenced school leadership decisions. Hallinger (2018) wrote that understanding context is crucial for effective school leadership, as it empowers leaders to go beyond mere knowledge of actions and guides them in applying their understanding of distinct leadership models and styles to enhance educational results within their schools. This study categorized the contextual factors that influenced district equity work as internal and external school contexts.

Description of the Research

As the researcher, I understand my position as a White male. I am a former elementary school teacher of 7 years who worked in a community where 47% of students were economically disadvantaged and about 65% were students of color. Additionally, where I was born, raised, and attended K-12 education, the elementary student population was 95% students of color. Throughout my lived experiences, I have witnessed the barriers these students and families face regularly. In this study, I examined the critical work that school district superintendents and equity directors engaged in to remove barriers for students of color and provide a more equitable educational experience.

Sample

The unit of study for this research was the school district. The participants in this study were PK-12 public school superintendents and equity directors from New Jersey. While the titles of the positions varied, anyone holding a district-level equity leadership or superintendent position at a PK-12 public school district in New Jersey was eligible to participate.

Participants were included in the study if they fit these criteria, completed a voluntary consent form, and agreed to schedule an interview. Districts were excluded from the research if the superintendent and equity director both did not participate. At the time of the study, I had no prior relationship with the participants.

Participant Recruitment

Eligible school districts were identified through an internet search for school districts with equity directors. The superintendent and equity director in each school district both needed to agree to participate. I recruited participants in three ways. First, participants were contacted

via school district email with a letter outlining the study (Appendix B). I shared the same recruitment letter on my LinkedIn and X (formerly Twitter) accounts.

I used purposeful sampling to select participants. Purposeful sampling is a technique qualitative researchers use to recruit participants to obtain detailed information being investigated. This process identified and selected participants who were knowledgeable or had experience with the researched phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. To assist in recruitment, I utilized snowball sampling by sharing the study with professional networks, colleagues, and social media. Snowball sampling entails getting recommendations from others who fit the criteria and may be willing to participate in the study (Parker et al., 2019). Further, snowball sampling is flexible and is often coupled with purposeful sampling (Parker et al., 2019).

Participants who volunteered for the study emailed me to indicate that they were interested in the study. Next, I sent the informed consent form (Appendix D) to the participant's school district email address, which was to be read, printed, signed, and returned to me. Once the form was received, I signed, scanned, and returned it to the participant. Lastly, participants shared their availability to schedule a Zoom interview.

Data Collection

One-to-one semistructured interviews were the primary means of data collection. The interviews were conducted through Zoom, and individual interviews lasted between 20 and 35 minutes. Each participant was asked predetermined questions (Appendix A). The flexibility of semistructured interviews assisted in the study by providing additional information. The interview questions were used to understand the research questions in depth and allowed

participants to respond in an open-ended way. During the interview, participants were asked follow-up questions so they could provide additional details on their experiences.

The participants in the study were from school districts in New Jersey. Districts were described based on demographic information and region of the state. Additionally, participants were given pseudonyms for confidentiality. All study data were stored on my William Paterson University password-protected OneDrive.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of this multiparticipant case study, I used thematic analysis to identify themes within the data collected from the interviews. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method that outlines the step-by-step procedures to analyze qualitative data from various sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2008). Using thematic analysis for a case study allowed me different options to navigate the different data sets collected.

I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step system for thematic analysis. This method assisted in working through and understanding the thematic analysis. The first step was to familiarize myself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I read and reread the data to gain an in-depth understanding, and took notes about the thoughts generated correlated to the data. Next, I listened to the interviews and used Zoom to transcribe them. While listening to the interviews and reading the transcripts, I corrected transcription errors in the data set and also took notes. Familiarization notes for the data set captured my observations from the data that would be used for coding.

The second step in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was coding the data. During this phase, initial codes were generated from the data. I reviewed the data set, giving equal attention to the items. To get an "intimate understanding of the data" (Braun & Clarke,

2006, p. 61), I read each data set three times to identify potential themes. The codes were created manually, and I took notes on the data I was analyzing.

The third phase was searching for themes. The codes were handwritten with a brief description and placed into theme piles (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Any codes that did not fit the theme criteria were placed in a pile categorized as "other." The fourth phase of reviewing the themes called for two levels of review. The data were read to decide if the themes generated a pattern, and a thematic map was generated from the codes created. Phase five was defining and naming the themes; each theme identified had a detailed written analysis attached. Finally, phase six was producing the report.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study explored superintendents and equity directors in PK-12 school districts. Semistructured interviews provided data to answer the study's research questions. The main research question was "What are equity directors' job responsibilities and roles within PK-12 school districts?" The following three questions also guided the study.

1. What were the superintendent's expectations and intended goals when establishing the position of equity director?
2. How has the equity director position evolved within the district since its origination?
3. How do internal and external school contexts impact the equity director?

The interview data contributed to the limited existing literature on PK-12 equity directors.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This study examined New Jersey school district equity directors, their roles and responsibilities, the evolution of their positions, and the internal and external contexts that impacted their work. It also examined the participating district superintendents' expectations for the position. The study used a qualitative design, and I interviewed equity directors and superintendents who worked together in the same districts. I analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis.

This study's findings provide school districts with information on district-level equity work. I hoped that by conducting this study, I could help school districts with equity directors to improve and sustain their work. Additionally, to assist districts uncertain about navigating equity work, this research outlines steps other districts have implemented throughout their evolution.

The main research question for this study was "What are equity directors' job responsibilities and roles within PK-12 school districts?" The following three questions helped guide the research.

1. What were the superintendent's expectations and intended goals when establishing the position of equity director?
2. How has the equity director position evolved within the district since its origination?
3. How do internal and external school contexts impact the equity director?

The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the individual participants and a summary of each school district. Themes were identified through a thorough analysis of the collected data. The second section presents the interview results, focusing on addressing the research questions; this section is organized by theme. The school district served as this

dissertation's unit of study, so the findings from equity directors and superintendents are grouped to examine each district comprehensively.

Participant Experiences and Background

A total of 11 participants were interviewed for the study via Zoom. The participants included five equity directors, five superintendents, and one participant who was both the district superintendent and equity director. All interviews were recorded and transcribed through Zoom. Equity directors shared the educational and professional experiences that led them to become district equity directors. All participants discussed the roles, responsibilities, evolution, and internal and external contexts that impacted their equity work. Superintendent participants shared their expectations and goals for their equity directors when they created the position. Together, these data answered each of the research questions.

Evergreen School District

The Evergreen School District is located in New Jersey and has less than 5,000 students. More than 40% of the student population is economically disadvantaged. The school district started working with a consultant in the 2020-2021 school year, and the work revolved around DEI. The consultant led town hall meetings, completed surveys, and trained staff in implicit bias for 2 years.

Evergreen School District's equity director began their career with a passion for history and literature. With a background as a literature major, they explored types of reading and writing that engaged students meaningfully. In 2010, while teaching in New Jersey, they introduced literature outside the standard curriculum, which resonated positively with students. This experience inspired them to develop and teach a course centered on race and gender, examining these themes within the literature. When they moved to a new district, this course was

adopted, drawing significant student interest and highlighting the need for a more inclusive curriculum. These experiences highlighted the importance of aligning educational content with students' diverse backgrounds and needs. Ultimately, this path led them to become a district content area supervisor, where they also took on the role of equity director.

Lakeside School District

Lakeside School District is in New Jersey and has a student population of more than 10,000. More than 40% of students are economically disadvantaged. The equity director spent over 10 years as a math teacher, coach, and supervisor. Once they became a math supervisor in this district, the equity coordinator role was added to their responsibilities, eventually leading to their position as equity director. They hold a master's degree in teaching science and math as well as supervisor and principal certifications in New Jersey. They are also a doctoral student with a passion for mathematics and problem-solving. Viewing math as a tool to promote equity, they used data analysis to uncover disparities and address inequitable educational practices.

Riverstone School District

Riverstone School District has less than 5,000 students and is located in New Jersey. Less than 40% of its student population is economically disadvantaged. The equity director began their career teaching first grade, working with diverse student groups. Later, they assumed responsibility for the district's gifted and talented programming. During this time, they sought ways to create inclusive programs, expanding the gifted and talented program to include a new initiative that provided access and opportunities for all students to level the playing field. This expansion allowed the identification of gifted students who might not have traditionally met the criteria in grades K-3 alongside the regular gifted and talented students. Next, they earned their New Jersey principal certification. They became principal of the school with the district's highest

poverty level, highest English language learner population, and lowest number of identified gifted students. In their 5 years as principal, student achievement improved significantly. They were also actively involved in the district's equity committees. When the district restructured the equity director position, they transitioned into this role.

Mapleton School District

Mapleton School District is in New Jersey and has a population of more than 10,000 students. Less than 40% of the student population is economically disadvantaged. The Mapleton equity director has worked in the district for over 20 years; they began their career as a teacher in the district, then spent 10 years as an elementary and middle school principal before stepping into their current role as the district's equity director in the 2024-2025 school year.

Cedar Valley School District

Cedar Valley School District is located in New Jersey and has between 5,000 and 10,000 students. Less than 40% of its student population is considered economically disadvantaged. The current superintendent has been in the role for more than 10 years. The equity director has dedicated over 30 years to Cedar Valley School District, serving in various roles that have deepened their commitment to educational equity. They began as a teacher and then became an interventionist to support struggling students. Their experience broadened when they became curriculum and instruction supervisor for a decade, with a focus on new teacher induction. Through this work, they recognized systemic gaps in access and success for all students, which inspired their commitment to equity. Before stepping into their current role, they held a central office position. The 2024-2025 school year marked their first year in the reconfigured position of equity director, where they oversee the district's equity coordinator. Four years prior, they served as an equity co-chair, helping to guide the district's equity goals.

Pine Hollow School District

Pine Hollow is a K-8 district located in New Jersey with less than 5,000 students. More than 40% of the student population is economically disadvantaged. One person serves as both superintendent and equity director in Pine Hollow School District; their title is chief school administrator. With 4 years as a principal and an additional 4 years as chief administrator, they bring a wealth of experience to district leadership. Their background includes 9 years as a high school teacher and 5 years as an assistant principal, which provided them with a solid foundation in instructional and administrative responsibilities. When the board of education expressed interest in establishing the equity director role, they took on this responsibility in addition to their superintendent duties. They worked to advance the district's equity objectives.

Themes

From the analysis of the interview data and transcripts from the 11 participants, five themes emerged: intentional work, professional development, policy and mandates, community engagement, and district data analysis. These themes highlight the important work equity directors engaged in throughout the six districts.

Themes were categorized in order based on the frequency of responses from participants. For example, intentional work emerged as a theme because all six districts discussed how the positions evolved. Professional development and policy and mandates were identified based on data from five of the six participating districts. Community engagement and district data analysis were included as themes because they were mentioned by four of the six districts.

Intentional Work

The theme of intentional work appeared in responses from all the participants. The evolution of equity director positions began with districts determining how to configure the role

within their systems. Many positions were entering their third year with further development, and this progression reflected what I defined as the theme of intentional work.

Most of the equity director positions were created in reaction to racial injustices that were at the forefront of American society after the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests nationally during the summer of 2020. Districts and equity directors initially had to navigate the new position. Over multiple school years, the districts kept the equity positions. As these positions evolved, districts developed frameworks and identified ways to expand their equity work, adding layers of support to drive change to benefit students. All the districts in this study saw their equity director positions evolve after year one.

In three districts, the equity director interviewed for this study was the second individual to hold the position of equity director. One district started with a diversity coordinator position in 2017, which evolved to the current equity director being restructured to a cabinet-level position for the 2023 school year. The Cedar Valley superintendent shared that the equity director position

> is about ensuring that the vision and the values that we hold around what we believe is equitable practices for kids, staff, and culture shows itself through our system, through everything, from our curriculum to our faculty meetings, and to how we talk.

The Cedar Valley equity director was primarily responsible for strategic planning, ensuring that equity was a stated goal and integrated into all district initiatives. They also worked collaboratively with the equity coordinator, whom they oversaw to ensure equity throughout all initiatives. They shared, “I can have my finger in everything.” The district also acknowledged that overall, their school staff did not align with the community demographics, so an intentional effort was made to diversify the staff. The Cedar Valley superintendent understood the challenge

of hiring a specific demographic group to reflect the student body, but said, “We definitely work hard to hire a diverse staff, and it’s something that we talk about publicly.”

Lakeside School District’s equity director position evolved over 5 school years. At first, the position started as a stipend-based coordinator, and the equity director was a district content supervisor. In 2021, the new district superintendent created a full-time equity director position. The early stages were uncertain and uncomfortable, as the role itself was undefined. Initially, this role focused on establishing a foundational understanding of DEI needs, which was marked by hands-on involvement in faculty meetings and building a baseline for future work. The Lakeside superintendent shared the evolution of the position:

> He went from rolling out ideas and talking about why the work had to happen to them doing the work right now. We’re not teaching them anymore. Now they’re doing it now. They are teaching their students, and they’re working with their students. So, I believe he’s really transitioned to more of a support model right now; he oversees it. Before, he was really in front of everybody, and he really had to push it and be on the ground floor. Now, I do think some of those frameworks are in place. Those structures are going now. He supervises it.

Another district mentioned initial challenges such as the work being messy, lacking coordination, and feeling like it was a one-man show. Over time, the role expanded to involve school-based planning teams and community engagement initiatives, establishing a transparent, strategic vision for DEI work across the district. Each school in their district had a school-based planning team, and they held community meetings to keep everyone involved. Within this intentional work, the district’s strategic plan for the 2024-2025 school year aimed to foster a

culture of diversity and inclusion. They shared that this goal had been in the strategic plan for multiple years, and each year, they increased the action sets to meet the goals and objectives.

Similarly, another district described the evolution of their equity director position from the first year in 2020-2021 to its reconfiguration in the 2024-2025 school year. As the work evolved, the district added layers, such as culturally responsive practices and restorative practices, that worked along with the district's established cultural competency framework. The reconfiguration of the position and the new equity director taking the role further supported the sustained implementation of the district initiatives.

Another district reconfigured its equity director position as well. This district emphasized student achievement as the primary lens of equity. The reconfiguration of the position was intentional and shifted the district's vision for equity work. For example, the equity director felt that in the 2021-2022 school year, "it was almost standing on the outside, making sure that we were doing some book studies, leading some community conversations, but it seemed like the position rested on the outside of the actual classroom." Further, they reported, they did a lot of talking and reading at first, but "eventually you get where it needs to become action-oriented."

One district took a different approach to equity work, examining discipline data to identify disparities in disciplinary actions across student groups. The equity director shared that the COVID-19 pandemic broadened the district's perspective on equity and there was now more of an emphasis on learning loss, enhancing students' social and emotional support, and ensuring that students have access to essential needs such as meals and medication.

The intentional work theme showed the deliberate and strategic evolution of the equity director position. These positions turned into well-integrated leadership roles that drove district systemic change. As districts refined their approach, equity directors intentionally became major

drivers of sustained equity efforts, ensuring that the work extended beyond statements and into action. The ongoing development of these roles highlighted a shift from isolated efforts to district-wide initiatives focused on student achievement. This work strengthened districts' commitment to equity and creating inclusive environments that reflected the diverse needs of their students and communities.

Professional Development

Another theme that emerged through the data analysis was the equity director's role in professional development. Five of the six equity directors mentioned professional development as an important part of their jobs, which ranged from them designing and leading programs to bringing in outside professional development for their staff. For example, the Cedar Valley equity director shared:

> I am responsible for the district-wide professional development around our strategic goals and specifically around those goals, creating equitable access for all of our students, for creating spaces where all of our kids belong, for creating spaces where our families are invited into the work.

Five equity directors led equity-focused professional development for teachers and staff. They expressed the importance of providing equity-oriented training for new staff orientation and "making sure that the equity lens is used throughout all the sessions that we are providing to new staff." In Evergreen, the superintendent expected the equity director to oversee the district's equity professional development. To take professional development a step further, this district was committed to growing its teachers' and administrators' capacity, and the administrative team attended various workshops that partnered with external organizations. The Evergreen equity director said, "The entire purpose is to make sure that we are checking ourselves, that we are

self-aware, that we are engaging in restorative practices, and we are seeing every student through an asset-based lens." Additionally, they organized a voluntary equity-based book club that engaged staff and community stakeholders.

A different equity director was responsible for organizing external professional development sessions, leading restorative practices training, and working closely with the evaluation team to integrate culturally responsive practices into the teacher evaluation system. This equity director collaborated with an outside consultant who trained the building equity teams. The district provided culturally responsive training to teaching staff, and the evaluation team collaborated with the teacher evaluation framework to create a culturally responsive domain.

One equity director described their role in oversight of the staff mentoring and induction program, which adopted a DEI-centered approach:

> There's a series of professional development sessions that I facilitate directly for the different stakeholder groups that are part of their mentoring and induction program. So, for our first-year provisional teachers, they attend 10 new teacher workshops, I oversee and facilitate all 10. They cover a myriad of topics ranging from classroom management to our student information system, assessment, parent outreach, etc. special services. I also coordinate with the office of special services and the office of curriculum and instruction, to bring in folks from those departments to meet with and lead workshops and breakout sessions with the teachers. Then we also have an asynchronous professional development platform that all of our teachers have access to. But that's used for our second-year folks. So, once they go through the first-year program, they attend all 10

classes, in the second year they select three classes from this asynchronous platform, covering a myriad of topics, and they must complete those three courses.

The responses regarding professional development showed equity directors' vital role in creating equity-oriented learning experiences for staff. Across districts, equity directors were responsible for designing and leading professional development, and some districts brought in external experts to lead staff. The equity directors' efforts extended beyond one-time sessions and included strategic partnerships to build capacity among staff. They ensured that professional development aligned with district equity goals and worked to create a sustained culture of equity-focused growth throughout their districts.

Policy and Mandates

Policy and mandates emerged as another theme through the analysis of equity directors' roles. Five of the six school districts reported equity director roles that aligned with the policy and mandates theme, such as leading school-level equity teams or curriculum oversight.

Multiple districts reported that their equity directors were responsible for leading school-based equity teams. One district reported the school-based teams as beneficial: "There are more hands in the pie. I think that is a huge shift and a huge help." Similarly, another district hosted monthly meetings with their building equity teams and administrators where an outside consultant provided training sessions on cultural proficiency. Another district reported overseeing school-based equity teams and collaborating with curriculum supervisors and the central office to align DEI efforts with budget planning and district priorities. Their oversight shifted from leading daily DEI activities to supervising and assessing established systems. The Lakeside superintendent shared, "I think they really went from a leader in terms of equipping them with the tools to now that they have the tools." As these positions evolved, districts

established frameworks and implemented additional layers of equity work to create change to support their students.

Cedar Valley's equity director coordinated the district's equity team and directly oversaw the district's equity coordinator. Cedar Valley was the only school district with a two-tiered equity leadership system that included an equity director and coordinator. The Cedar Valley equity director described their role as "almost like a solution architect."

In one district, the equity director's oversight configuration was different. Rather than school-based teams, they were responsible for coordinating equity coaches within each school. The equity director shared, "We have equity coaches in each building, and they've been underutilized." Moreover, they were responsible for reviewing district policies and curriculum to ensure they were representative and accessible to all students.

Evergreen's first step was conducting a curriculum audit with an outside consultant. The equity director reported overseeing the district's curriculum and shared, "I make sure that our curriculum is up to date and reflects our students." The Evergreen superintendent said, "The spirit of it was we wanted to make sure that our curriculum, our programming, our practices, our policies were relevant to today's day and age, from diversity, equity, and inclusion." Describing the district's equity work through the curricular lens, they said, "We want to make sure that not only are our students seeing mirrors and images of themselves, but they are also getting a glimpse into the world." Similarly, the Mapleton equity director shared,

> Zaretta Hammond's work *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain* has worked internally with those teams. We've worked with our curriculum and instruction offices to try and find ways for neurodivergent students to be within the least restrictive environment and to be able to have greater access and opportunities to flourish, not just

> intervention but enrichment opportunities for neurodivergent students within the curriculum.

To summarize this theme, responses within the policy and mandates theme highlighted the structural and systemic responsibilities of the equity director. The equity directors had an important role in the oversight of school-based equity teams, guiding curriculum development, and compliance with policies. This work evolved from being the point person of implementation to a supervisory role that shaped district-wide initiatives. The integration of equity efforts into policy decisions, budget planning, and teacher instruction reflected a shift for equity work within districts. Equity directors ensured representation and accessibility in the curriculum and supported diverse students.

Community Engagement

Involvement in community engagement emerged as a theme and another important role of the equity director. Four participating districts highlighted the equity director's role in community engagement. Each district organized and approached this equity work in the way that worked best for their district. In Cedar Valley, the equity director led the programs committee, which prioritized community engagement and family engagement. In this district, the equity director worked with an equity coordinator, who acted as a liaison between families and the district. They also partnered with the local faith communities to build connections and better understand the different cultures and religions. The Cedar Valley superintendent shared a cultural example to put in perspective the importance of understanding the district's community:

> I did not know what a kirpan was, but having to have conversations with parents that want their child to carry a religious ceremonial knife is not something that I was trained

in. So now I've had to cross these conversations and think of it, not just from a safety perspective, but from a cultural perspective and a religious perspective.

Other districts' equity directors were responsible for organizing district events for community engagement. District-approved celebrations such as Hispanic Heritage Month, Women's History Month, and Black History Month honored the school community's cultural diversity. Another engagement event was a DEI showcase where each school equity team created a school-wide project. Similarly, another district organized large-scale community celebrations, which included a community festival. Evergreen School District's approach to engaging the community was the organization of a district-wide equity-based book club that invited community members to engage in equity work alongside district leaders. They also published a monthly DEI newsletter to recognize diversity groups and equity efforts, such as Black History Month. Additionally, they invited their board of education to undergo implicit bias training, which was the same training some staff were involved in, to build cohesiveness between the board of education and the district.

Mapleton School District took a different approach by collaborating with community civic associations and families through a cultural proficiency committee that reviewed student performance and discipline data. The Mapleton superintendent shared that the goal of the committee members was to "have a diverse representation of various stakeholders from across the district, and the committee itself reviews data, looks at student performance, discipline and assignment of discipline and things along those lines." The committee created cultural proficiency goals and filtered them down to the schools. Further, another district distributed surveys to families to incorporate a wide range of diverse viewpoints. This approach was similar

to the approach of partnering with civic associations to get feedback and working with the stakeholders to create a plan to improve the district.

Two districts in the study built partnerships with local New Jersey universities. One district partnered with a university to offer students of color interested in education careers a way to connect with university students to learn about their experiences. Another district hosted job fairs, inviting community stakeholders to discuss their careers as a way to promote community engagement. Each district tailored their community engagement and approach to what they felt worked best for their district.

The community engagement theme highlighted equity directors' role in connecting schools with their communities. Districts implemented different strategies, including faith-based partnerships, cultural events, data-driven committees, and university collaborations, to build partnerships with their communities. These initiatives strengthened relationships and encouraged stakeholder involvement with a shared commitment to equity. Districts tailored the equity work to their communities and focused on collaboration with stakeholders to create more equitable educational experiences for all.

District Data Analysis

Another top role and responsibility that emerged as a theme was district data analysis. Equity directors reviewed multiple data points to identify trends or areas where their district could seek improvement. Furthermore, student data were analyzed to identify trends, such as the performance of specific student groups and patterns in disciplinary referrals. Their analyses often showed disparities between student groups regarding academic performance or discipline, or disparities in the racial and ethnic backgrounds of teachers and students.

Riverstone School District's approach to equity was focused on student achievement. When establishing the position, the Riverstone superintendent expected the equity director to make a direct impact on student outcomes and focus on student achievement as a primary objective of their daily work. The Riverstone superintendent said, "Our idea in redesigning that position was so that it could be understood that student achievement is always going to be the initial lens in which all things equity are seen through." With their focus on student achievement, the equity director managed the district's tiered instructional supports and led Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, English language learner programs, and gifted education programs. This approach, through data analysis, allowed the equity director to address disparities in student achievement. The Riverstone superintendent shared that their equity director was "the troubleshooter on exactly where the district should be moving and growing and focusing on as far as where the achievement gaps lie."

Cedar Valley used data to drive equity work by implementing strategic goals. The strategic goals were designed with equity integrated into each one. At the start of their equity work, the leadership team analyzed district data. The equity director collaborated with district directors, the assistant superintendent, and the superintendent to disaggregate data and identify areas for improvement while developing goals. By using data and "working their plan," the Cedar Valley superintendent shared, "we have been able to drop our areas of representation and disproportionality by giving explicit focus and looking at our students and systems."

Other districts also increased their focus on data analysis to drive DEI initiatives. One equity director described partnering with district leaders to collect, interpret, and assess data throughout their school. All student data were collected, interpreted, and assessed, such as student outcome data, student achievement, and disaggregated behavioral data. The equity

director of Lakeside said about data analysis, “I’d say, kind of in year two, that really became an emphasis. We are definitely a data-rich district, but one thing that we want to avoid is being data-rich and solution-poor.” Working with the equity team assisted in the data analysis. With the increased emphasis on making data actionable, the equity director’s role shifted from establishing a baseline understanding of DEI needs in the first year to strategically using data for continuous improvement. Lastly, another district took a similar approach where data were examined to track trends in academic achievement, identify student groups that were underperforming, and create a plan to make improvements.

Responses within the district data analysis theme showed that this was a foundational step for equity directors to identify disparities and drive equity initiatives. Reviewing student achievement, discipline trends, and demographic data, equity directors worked closely with district leaders to develop interventions and goals. Some districts prioritized student achievement as a lens for equity work and embedded data analysis into tiered instructional supports. Others emphasized disaggregating data to guide decision making and measure progress. The evolution of data-driven equity work reflected a shift from identifying disparities to creating actionable solutions.

The five themes identified in this study made it clear that equity director positions across these six school districts were multifaceted and evolving. While the positions were initially created in response to the national racial justice movements that occurred during the summer of 2020, they developed into more strategic leadership positions. The intentional work theme showed that districts refined and reconfigured their equity positions over time, based on their needs, and responded with action steps and initiatives. The professional development theme demonstrated the key role of the equity director in leading and facilitating training intended to

strengthen staff capacity, provide DEI knowledge to staff, and ensure DEI was integrated into district-wide initiatives. The policies and mandates theme underscored the importance of integrating equity work through curriculum oversight, school-based teams, and compliance with state policies. This theme highlighted how districts sustained the work beyond the equity directors themselves. The community engagement theme showed the importance of creating and supporting meaningful relationships with families, civic associations, and local universities to support the districts' DEI work. Lastly, the district data analysis theme indicated that a key part of equity directors' work was using data to drive decision-making, track disparities, and develop interventions to improve student achievement. Collectively, these themes showed what districts were doing to create more equitable educational experiences for all of their students.

Research Questions

In response to the study's main question, "What are equity directors' job responsibilities and roles within PK-12 school districts?" I found the equity directors' roles and responsibilities to be multifaceted, with little consensus among participants. Each equity director position had evolved since its origination. All equity directors' primary responsibility was to oversee the district's equity work, but each position branched to multiple areas of responsibility based on how their position was configured. For example, one equity director was responsible for oversight of student achievement and the tiered systems within the district. A different equity director was responsible for staff mentoring and induction. These examples highlight the varying responsibilities of the position. In addition, participants reported that considerable navigation was required to understand the position at first. Once districts laid a framework within their schools, such as the coordination of building-level equity teams, they could add layers of equity work through different forms of professional development and learning. The evolution of the

position in three districts meant that multiple people had filled these equity director positions since their origination. For example, one district reconfigured the position and title and hired a new equity director. Another district had a director in the district take over the position and responsibilities. A third district restructured the superintendent's cabinet, and the equity director role was elevated; this person was also the second sitting person in the equity director position. As the positions evolved, so did their roles and responsibilities. Some equity directors oversaw content areas, managed district assessments, or supervised mentorship and induction programs.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 for this study was "What were the superintendent's expectations and intended goals when establishing the position of equity director?"

Superintendents expected their equity directors to integrate equity into all aspects of the district. This sometimes meant aligning equity throughout the curriculum, faculty meetings, and professional development. The role involved supporting students, staff, and families through resources and community cultural celebrations. Intended goals varied in each district, but some included collaborating on curriculum audits, organizing events, and publishing the school newsletter. Addressing instructional gaps through tiered support and interventions was a main goal at a different district. Overall, superintendents envisioned the position as a strategic role that drove equity initiatives through the use of policy, programs, and stakeholder engagement.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was "How has the equity director position evolved within the district since its origination?"

At first, there was a lot of navigation of the position, as reported by participants. Once districts laid frameworks within their schools, such as the coordination of building-based equity

teams, equity directors could add layers of equity work through different forms of professional development and learning. In three districts, the evolution of the position meant that the equity director interviewed was not the first one hired. As the positions evolved, so did the roles and responsibilities; some equity directors oversaw content areas, were responsible for district assessment, or oversaw mentorship and induction. Overall, the position evolved and was adjusted to meet the needs of the districts.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was "How do internal and external school contexts impact the equity director?"

Multiple external and internal school contexts influenced the equity directors' work. My analysis identified six as having the most influence. Four of these were external contexts (the community, the board of education, sociopolitical factors, and the New Jersey Department of Education) and two were internal (staff and students). Specifically, the participating districts shared that their boards of education supported equity work as beneficial to their overall equity progress. Some districts reported having support from the community, while others shared that community resistance or misunderstanding impacted the equity work. Further, equity work had become deeply political, and districts mentioned sociopolitical factors that influenced the space in which equity work operated.

The internal and external school context findings are critical for districts to understand the contextual factors that influenced equity work. Certain contexts assisted the districts' equity work, while others challenged districts' ability to provide students with a more equitable educational experience. For districts that are interested in the equity director role or already have

the position, understanding these contexts may help in navigating the landscape of equity work moving forward.

External School Contexts

The community context, consisting of families and stakeholders living within the town or area of the school district, influenced district equity work. Some districts reported partnering with the community through school-based celebrations and events. An approach by one district was partnering with the local faith community, as faith was a key component for a large portion of the student population, and this assisted with the relationship between the school and the community. Further, some participants and districts spoke about the community's support for their equity work and district initiatives.

In other instances, the community context influenced the work in ways besides engagement and support. Multiple participants described instances when community members showed resistance to their equity work or misunderstood aspects of it. The Lakeside equity director shared a story of a community member coming up to the microphone at a board of education meeting to say that the district was giving students puberty blockers to help them transition. Another equity director described community members questioning district spending on equity coaches and asking why students were reading certain books. Within the same district, the equity director shared examples of parents emailing about why students were reading a certain book and stating that the content made their child feel like a racist. Another district described community misunderstanding as a challenge to their equity work: the Mapleton superintendent shared some community members' views of DEI work as "anti-American or anti-patriotic" and said that the conflict nationally and locally around DEI had impacted their view and support of the work.

Another external context that influenced district equity work was the board of education. Most participating districts reported that their boards of education supported their equity work. The Cedar Valley superintendent said, “I have a board of education that has no fear of public pushback and has no fear of supporting us. So we’re really blessed with a board that is equity-minded.” In another district, the superintendent shared that the board of education embraced the work and board members attended the same implicit bias training as school staff, which showed a cohesive approach to equity work. Further, one district equity director and superintendent shared the importance of the board of education’s collaboration and support for the work. Within the same district, one of the board members’ professional work was DEI related, and this was instrumental in the district’s equity work. The Lakeside superintendent described their approach to beginning conversations with the board of education as “Hey, this is an opportunity, or you might want to look here. It is never forced, and I don’t think any good work is ever forced. It’s always an open discussion.” They also started to look at things through a different lens to ensure access and equity were present.

Multiple districts mentioned that the sociopolitical context influenced their equity work. One superintendent said that the politics of the world created consternation and challenges. Others mentioned that the political world impacted decisions made by the equity director. Most districts had created the equity director position after the killing of George Floyd, when racial injustices were brought to the forefront in everyday life. An equity director shared their understanding of the pendulum swinging “the other way” and felt some resistance against district initiatives, which caused them to “be a lot more cautious and a lot more thoughtful on messaging so things aren’t misconstrued.” Other districts discussed similar experiences with the

sociopolitical context, saying that international and national conflict had impacted students in their schools and they needed to be responsive and adaptive to those needs.

The fifth influential external context for participating districts was the New Jersey Department of Education, as state standards and directives dictate what districts must do and teach. One superintendent shared that the state funding formula greatly impacted their ability to lead initiatives focused on equity. For example, increased district funding supported the creation of additional positions to address various aspects of equity. Specifically, Tier 3 systems supported the district's approach to equity.

Internal School Contexts

School staff and students were two internal contexts that influenced equity director roles and responsibilities. In most districts, teacher buy-in and investment in equity work and initiatives were mentioned as influential to the work. There were instances of staff failing to recognize inequities among student groups. The Riverstone superintendent described a level of internal resistance to change, or a mindset of "if it's not broke, don't fix it," which impacted the work. This challenge was shared by multiple districts, who reported that it was difficult to shift teachers' mindsets about the work. One equity director shared that teachers felt overwhelmed with responsibilities and were unsure how to incorporate equity work into their existing practices. This showed a misunderstanding in not recognizing that equity work was tied into their everyday work. Another equity director shared,

> We worked with the coalition of the willing for a while, and now we spread it. It's always that balance in this role for all of us: how far can we push without leaving people behind? But how far do we push without leaving other people behind?

These examples highlight how staff resistance and deficit mindsets influenced district equity initiatives.

The student body was another internal context that influenced districts' equity work. In many districts, student demographics dictated the needs of the district. One district mentioned the urgent need to adjust to shifting community demographics. Another shared that decision-making around equity must be student-centered. Student demographic, academic, and behavioral data were used to determine areas where districts needed to focus to provide a more equitable experience for their students. One district shared that students came out and voiced concerns about the national civil unrest. Further, the Lakeside equity director shared, "So it was important that all of our students felt like they had a voice and were heard." These districts were willing to listen to the needs of their student body regarding this critical work.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the roles and responsibilities of K-12 equity directors in New Jersey school districts. All participants in the study were employed in school districts with equity director roles. Five themes emerged from the individual interviews: intentional work, professional development, community engagement, policy and mandates, and data analysis. Participants also discussed the contexts that impacted their equity work. All participants described the evolution of the equity director position, which contributed to the theme of intentional work. Professional development was a main responsibility of the equity directors. Community engagement emerged as a third theme, with participants hosting events and fostering partnerships with community stakeholders to advance equity initiatives. Additionally, district policies and state mandates, particularly the New Jersey Department of Education's DEI guidance, influenced equity work. Within this theme, equity directors played a

role in curriculum oversight and managed school-based equity teams. Equity directors reported utilizing student academic, disciplinary, and demographic data to identify and address district disparities through data analysis. Districts that incorporated data-driven approaches used these insights to inform initiatives and assess the impact of their equity efforts.

The study's findings highlighted the equity work conducted by six New Jersey school districts through the equity director position, a role that had not been previously examined. Additionally, the findings provided insight into the impact of equity directors within these districts. This study pointed out critical factors that shaped equity efforts across the six districts by analyzing internal and external contexts that influenced the equity director role. These insights could inform educational leaders in districts considering establishing an equity director position, offering guidance on its implementation and potential impact.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study explored the roles and responsibilities of equity directors within K-12 school districts in New Jersey, a position that has seen increased prevalence since the 2020-2021 school year. The existing literature on equity directors is scarce, a gap this research aimed to address. Irby et al. (2021) noted that the expectations for equity director roles often did not align with job responsibilities, which supports the need to understand how equity directors navigate their work within varying district contexts.

The killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States brought national attention to the injustices faced by people of color, prompting a period of reflection for many communities. During this time, some school districts began discussing disparities within their schools, which led to the creation of equity director positions. As these roles have now been in place for 2 to 3 school years in many districts, this study examined equity directors' evolving responsibilities and impact after sustained engagement in equity work. Data for this study were collected during the summer and fall of 2024.

This research focused on six school districts in New Jersey. It was a qualitative multiparticipant case study where five superintendents, five equity directors, and one superintendent/equity director participated in semistructured Zoom interviews. A qualitative design was appropriate for this study because little research has explored the equity director position. The main research question for this study was "What are equity directors' job responsibilities and roles within PK-12 school districts?" The following three questions helped guide the research:

1. What were the superintendent's expectations and intended goals when establishing the position of equity director?
2. How has the equity director position evolved within the district since its origination?
3. How do internal and external school contexts impact the equity director?

There were four major findings to support and answer the main question and the three research questions. In reference to the main research question, the study identified the equity director position as multifaceted. Although there were similarities between the equity directors' roles and responsibilities, the district configuration of the position and the needs of the district dictated the work. For example, one equity director was responsible for district curriculum review and revision to reflect student demographics. In another district, the equity director oversaw staff induction, managed the mentor program, and integrated the district's equity vision into the programs. A third equity director reviewed student academic data and oversaw the district's tiered instruction as one primary responsibility. These examples highlight the unique needs and configurations of the equity directors' positions.

The second major finding was that superintendents expected equity directors to integrate equity into all aspects of their district. Some districts did this through curriculum, faculty meetings, and professional development.

The third finding of the research was that New Jersey district equity work has evolved from reactionary to intentional work. The positions, at first, faced challenges, including difficulty engaging staff and stakeholders in the work and equity directors feeling isolated in navigating this new position. Over time, the positions evolved, and districts established frameworks for the equity work and continued to add layers. Notably, three of the six school districts' equity directors were the second person to fill their position. In each instance, the equity director role

was reconfigured according to the needs and vision of the district. In two of these cases, the districts recently had new superintendents, and there was administrative reorganization. In all three cases, the new equity directors were current district administrators with tenures over 20 years. As the positions were reconfigured, so were the responsibilities of the equity director. Two of the equity directors held other district-level responsibilities in addition to being the equity director.

The fourth finding was that equity work was influenced by internal and external contextual factors, showing the complexity of DEI initiatives in school districts. The community context, which consisted of families and stakeholders, influenced the districts' equity work. Districts engaged community members through school-based celebrations and events. In other instances, community members resisted the equity work and sometimes misunderstood DEI work. Also, boards of education had an influence on the districts' equity work, but showed support in all participating districts. Further, the sociopolitical context impacted the district work, as the political world outside of schools sometimes impacted equity directors' decisions. Equity directors and superintendents needed to be aware of the political landscape in which they were operating. Districts also reported that the New Jersey Department of Education, as a regulatory body, provided guidance and directives to dictate what districts would teach as it related to DEI. Internally, teacher buy-in was reported as a context that hindered districts' equity work, where some staff did not recognize inequities among students. Lastly, each district's student body dictated the district's needs, and districts centered students in their decision making.

Five themes emerged from the data collected for this study: intentional work, professional development, policy and mandates, community engagement, and data analysis. Themes were categorized in order based on the most frequent responses from participants. Each

of these themes reflected the multifaceted role of the equity director. All participants expressed the intentionality of their districts' equity work, as it was tailored to the specific needs of their students and communities. Five of the six equity directors shared that facilitating equity-oriented professional development was a key responsibility, and they might be the point person or bring in external professional development for staff if needed. Responsibilities around policy and mandates included overseeing curriculum and leading school-level teams: four of the six equity directors led school-based equity teams that shared and implemented district initiatives. Community engagement was a key role in four out of the six districts, where equity directors were responsible for organizing events that included stakeholders and sharing vital information and celebrations with them. Districts also discussed the importance of analyzing data as part of their equity process to reveal disparities between student groups and drive the district's work.

Connections to Literature

The interviews with superintendents in this study provided insight into their collaborative work with their equity directors. The support of the superintendent in district equity work was essential to its success. Marshall and Khalifa (2018) emphasized that the success of equity work depended heavily on the involvement of superintendents; without their active engagement, equity initiatives risked failing to achieve meaningful change. Consistent with this, the superintendents in this study demonstrated a strong commitment to equity and collaborated closely with their equity directors to establish and sustain impactful district-wide initiatives.

Further, Roegman (2017) stated that equity initiatives need to be tailored to the district's specific needs and should not take a one-size-fits-all approach. This was the case for each of the districts that participated in this research. The work in one district started with an equity consultant who led town hall meetings, surveys, and staff training. Another district started equity

work because of changing community demographics and cultural differences. A third district reconfigured its equity director position and focused on equity through the lens of data and instruction. The equity director in one district oversaw all of the district's equity work and was heavily involved in staff mentoring. A different district restructured the equity director position to focus on building partnerships with community groups, noting that local and global conflicts impacted their students. Another district focused on analyzing student data and reporting data to the local board of education and the New Jersey Department of Education. In each of these instances, the equity initiatives were tailored to the specific needs of the district, which supports the findings shared by Roegman (2017).

In five of the six school districts, the position was created after the summer of 2020 and the civil unrest that led to districts taking a critical look at their data and practices and having conversations about race and equity. This finding is consistent with Irby (2022), who wrote, "The position first gained popularity as a knee-jerk response to episodic anti-Black violence rather than bold vision, proactive goodwill, or even acknowledgment of long-standing education inequities" (para. 4). The findings also align with Weiler and Stanley's (2023) work that demonstrated the equity director role was created for several purposes, including addressing racism, promoting a culturally responsive school environment, and amplifying community voices in district decisions. Participants in this study shared that community engagement was a primary responsibility of the equity director. One superintendent from this sample of NJ school districts emphasized that a particular board member was pivotal in supporting equity work. Another superintendent reported that the full backing of their board of education was instrumental in advancing equity initiatives. Initial efforts in one district included town hall meetings that provided a platform for community input on equity initiatives. This district continued to engage

the community through district celebrations and a collaborative book club involving district staff and stakeholders. Another district established a committee of diverse stakeholders to review district data and develop goals based on the findings. Although five out of six districts created the equity director position after the civil unrest of 2020, none explicitly mentioned combating racism as a primary focus. However, analyzing data, evaluating practices, and facilitating difficult conversations about race and equity led to collaborative efforts that addressed racism by establishing equity goals that acknowledged district-wide disparities and outlined a plan to address them.

Participants spoke about laying a framework and navigating a new landscape within the district when the position was first created. Rice-Boothe and Marshall (2022) found that when equity directors' positions were new, much of their time was spent creating a framework for the work in the district, which is supported by the findings in this study. In two districts, the equity directors met with staff, hosted faculty meetings, and began conversations about race and equity with staff and community members. Once the framework was established, the equity directors oversaw equity teams created within schools in their districts. There were instances where the current equity director was the second person to hold the position because the initial equity director resigned or retired from the district. Prior to hiring for these open equity director positions, the districts reconfigured the roles, responsibilities, and titles for these positions. For example, in one district the equity director position was elevated to the superintendent's cabinet. In another district, the equity director's title was changed and the position reconfigured to focus on equity through the lens of data and instruction. The first equity director in this district had participated in conversations and community work, but the work did not directly impact students in the classroom. Another newly appointed equity director had participated in previous work as a

district administrator and continued to build on the established framework. These findings indicated that participating school districts revised their original equity director frameworks to improve alignment with student and community needs. The findings also support the work of Irby et al. (2021), who described the role of equity directors as an evolving process.

My findings highlighted the complexities of the equity director position, as Ishimaru et al. (2022) described. Equity directors' responsibilities ranged widely, including professional development, community and family engagement, strategic planning, and addressing incidents of racism and injustice. Similarly, Weiler and Stanley (2023) identified four key themes associated with equity directors: planning and development, professional learning, data use, and family and community engagement. The themes derived from my data analysis are closely aligned, although I identified five themes: intentional work, professional development, policy and mandates, community engagement, and data analysis.

Irby et al. (2021) found that some equity directors influenced multiple areas in the district depending on their role configuration. My findings aligned with this, as five of the six equity directors had responsibilities in addition to DEI. These additional job titles or responsibilities varied depending on the configuration of the position in the district. For example, one equity director also held the director title for another central office position, and some participants had dual roles, such as being the equity director and a district-level supervisor.

My contextual findings aligned with Hallinger's (2018) six contexts. Hallinger outlined how the community context influenced leadership decision making and mentioned different community factors impacting decisions. In this study, I found that the community context was an external context that influenced district equity work. Hallinger also noted that community conflict influenced the behaviors of school principals. In many districts, the equity director

position was established in response to the national attention on racial justice following the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests, which heightened awareness of systemic inequities. Districts engaged their communities through partnerships and hosted cultural celebrations. However, participants reported community conflict in many districts, as some members resisted or misunderstood equity initiatives. Hallinger (2018) emphasized that "educational leadership is value-driven and that leaders achieve results through people" (p. 11).

The sociopolitical context was another external factor that impacted districts' equity work. Hallinger (2018) stated that politics impacted school leaders' decisions, while previously public schools had been viewed as an apolitical public service. This was not the case for equity work in the school districts that participated in this study. Findings showed that the political world created challenges for some districts and equity directors. Outwardly discussing DEI work had its risks, as equity directors were aware of the politicization of the work. One equity director mentioned the pendulum swinging toward resistance to equity initiatives. Similar to the findings of Hallinger, equity directors and superintendents in this research recognized the political forces that influenced their work. One difference between Hallinger's political context and my sociopolitical context was that it considered the external political pressures related to leadership decisions around equity. In other words, school district leaders had to consider outside political factors in the community, state, nation, and even globally as they made decisions around equity in their districts.

District boards of education were a contextual factor affecting participants in this study. The board of education was also a factor in Fancera's (2022) study of a building-level administrator's transition to becoming a district-level leader and how context-responsive leadership practices supported the transition. Fancera noted that the superintendent's decisions

did not always align with the board of education. In contrast, the superintendents and equity directors in this study shared that their boards of education, as an external context, influenced their equity work and supported it. Fancera also shared that most research on context-responsive leadership theory revolved around leadership at the omnibus level in schools (the where, when, and who). This was the case for the contextual factors found in this study. Omnibus contextual factors were introduced by Oc (2018), and Fancera (2022) found that the omnibus contextual factors aligned with Hallinger's (2018) six contexts. They also aligned with this study's four external and two internal contexts: community, board of education, sociopolitical, New Jersey Department of Education, students, and staff.

A critical contextual finding was the time frame of creating the equity director position in districts, which aligned to Oc's (2018) omnibus level of the when. Oc (2018) wrote, "The time at which the research is performed can act as an important proxy for the contextual factors related to time effects" (p. 225). Further, important societal events were identified as time-related contextual factors (Oc, 2018). This was certainly the case for the creation of the equity director positions in this study, as all but one district did not have the equity director position before the summer of 2020 and the national racial events. Districts were influenced by these events that impacted their students and community members and created the positions to react to them.

The contextual findings in this study add to the understanding of district contexts. These findings are new, as there seem to be no previous studies that examined the equity director position through context-responsive leadership theory. Most of the context-responsive leadership theory literature has examined school principals and superintendents. My findings on internal and external contexts identified what influenced superintendents and equity directors' work within their districts.

Implications for Practice

This study's findings demonstrate equity directors' critical role in addressing systemic inequities within school districts. To support this work, targeted professional development should be prioritized, focusing on equipping equity directors and staff with the skills necessary to create equitable learning environments. Professional development on inclusive practices will better prepare administrators and teachers so all students can thrive. This aligns with one part of the multifaceted equity director role: providing staff professional development specific to district needs with respect to DEI. Such training should emphasize strategies for identifying and addressing disparities in access, opportunity, and outcomes across all student groups. Districts can create inclusive and respectful educational settings that benefit all learners by fostering a shared understanding of equity.

Focusing on equity throughout the district's curriculum and instruction can lead to systemic changes. Districts should integrate culturally relevant and responsive instruction to create a learning experience that reflects the diverse student population. For example, within the theme of community engagement, districts in this study had cultural celebrations to acknowledge diverse student groups. Systemically, districts should implement regular equity audits to identify and address disparities. Districts can use data-driven decision-making to monitor their equity initiatives and adapt strategies to meet evolving needs. Building relationships with stakeholders through systems for collecting and integrating feedback ensures that equity work is responsive to the experiences of students, families, and community members. Collectively, these practices will contribute to a more equitable and inclusive education.

The findings from this research describe the work that districts engaged in to create a more equitable experience for their students, ensure their schools celebrated diversity, and create

ways for all stakeholders to feel included. The participating districts shared their intentional, strategic approaches to equity work and discussed the contextual factors that might impact the work. Districts considering creating an equity director role or adding equity to an already existing title should review the findings from this research, which provide a framework and starting point. Further, this research is meaningful not only to school districts, but to all stakeholders. It sheds positive light on the meaningful equity work of districts in New Jersey, as well as multiple ways these districts are committed to creating more diverse and inclusive school spaces for students and families. The participating districts have maintained their commitment to equity and sustained their work through commitment to their students and communities. Schools are reflective of their communities, and the districts in this study have found ways, through a collaborative approach, to improve the educational experience for their marginalized students. While equity work can become highly political, the districts in this study prioritized their students and community needs, ensuring that students had access to programs and resources while feeling included and valued within their schools. As each district and community's needs varied, so did their approach to equity work.

On a national scale, stakeholders can sometimes politicize and misunderstand equity work. National media coverage has highlighted attacks on DEI initiatives (Harper, 2023) and the spread of misinformation, which have created significant obstacles to equity efforts. Equity work must be data-driven, focusing on various data types, including demographic data, qualitative data from surveys, student voice data, and student academic and disciplinary outcome discrepancies. Analyzing and transparently sharing data with stakeholders is essential for advancing district equity initiatives. Additionally, superintendents must understand the contextual factors that influence equity work within their districts.

I recommend the following six-step guide for district equity work:

1. Review all student data. Analyze comprehensive student data, including academic performance, disciplinary actions, extracurricular participation, and demographic trends. Identify discrepancies and inequities that may exist within the district to establish a data-informed foundation for equity work.
2. Conduct stakeholder surveys. Distribute voluntary surveys to gather feedback from students, families, staff, and community members. Use the survey results to understand the perceptions, needs, and concerns of stakeholders, ensuring their voices inform the equity agenda.
3. Present findings to the board of education. Share the analyzed data and survey feedback with your board of education to highlight areas of concern and opportunities for improvement. This step fosters transparency and secures buy-in from district leadership for equity-focused initiatives.
4. Form a diverse equity committee. Collaborate with the board of education to create an equity committee that includes representatives from various community associations, families, and district staff. Ensure the committee reflects the diversity of the community to provide a broad range of perspectives and insights.
5. Develop district goals and an action plan. Work with the equity committee to establish clear, actionable district goals aligned with identified needs. Create a detailed action plan with timelines, responsibilities, and metrics for success to guide the implementation of equity work.
6. Incorporate equity into the district's strategic goals. Embed equity as a core component of the district's strategic goals to demonstrate long-term commitment.

Regularly review and update the goals to reflect progress and adapt to changing needs within the district.

This dissertation adds to the existing limited literature on equity directors and provides insight in some areas that were not previously examined in research. The evolution of equity director positions in the participating New Jersey school districts highlights the work these districts have completed since the creation of the positions. Further, examining the internal and external contexts of equity work was vital in understanding the full scale of the work. School districts must know these contexts and how they can impact their work. While resistance can arise in some contexts, this dissertation shows that participating districts stayed committed to the work even when staff and community members did not fully buy in. The participating districts also showed their deep commitment to the work by integrating equity-oriented goals into their strategic plans and district plans. Over time, the roles and responsibilities of the equity directors did change. In certain instances, the equity director was tasked with additional district responsibilities, but overall, the responsibilities and roles shared by the equity director and superintendent were consistent.

Limitations

I was reflective in considering the limitations of this study. The decision to focus only on equity directors in New Jersey limited my ability to recruit a larger sample of participants. The study sample was determined by analyzing New Jersey school district web pages to identify those with equity director positions. Only districts that had equity directors were eligible to participate in the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should examine how school districts sustain support for diverse student populations amid the growing opposition to DEI initiatives. At the time this dissertation was written, the federal government was engaged in a coordinated effort to end DEI programs. As of January 2025, the U.S. Department of Education deleted and archived many documents, reports, and training materials that referred to DEI on public communication platforms, and employees responsible for overseeing DEI initiatives were placed on paid administrative leave (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). In February 2025, the Trump administration notified American schools to eliminate diversity initiatives within 2 weeks or risk losing federal funding (Schermele, 2025). Further, the Department of Education created a public portal called EndDEI.ed.gov, intended for stakeholders and the community to report school districts with discriminatory practices regarding race or sex (Vilcarino, 2025). These efforts by the federal government created resistance to national DEI work in schools, and the planned cuts to schools that do not eliminate those positions would be detrimental. Despite these plans, school districts still have to find ways to support their students' needs and continue to engage in this work. Examining how districts navigate the challenges while maintaining equitable policies and practices is critical. Future research investigating how districts sustain equity initiatives despite political and societal shifts will provide insight for district leaders committed to supporting inclusive learning environments.

Another area of future research could be the impact of the equity director role. For example, studies could examine the long-term effects of equity directors' roles on student outcomes, staff perceptions, and district culture to determine how the positions are achieving systemic change. Additionally, future research should compare the roles of equity directors in

districts with varying demographics, funding levels, and political climates to understand how context influences equity initiatives.

As the equity directors' roles and responsibilities evolved, there were two districts in this study where the job title changed from director of DEI between the 2023 and 2025 school years. One district hired a new person for the position, and "equity" remained in the new job title, but the title was more focused on students. Another district changed the director of DEI title to a student-focused title with no connection to DEI. Although the job titles were new, districts were still committed to being student-centered and doing what they felt was best for their students. In these two cases, the new titles encompassed the equity directors' multiple roles and responsibilities in addition to overseeing the district's equity work.

Conclusions

The purpose of this dissertation research was to examine the roles and responsibilities of equity directors from PK-12 districts in New Jersey. Analysis of the qualitative data collected via individual interviews indicated that the roles and responsibilities of the equity directors were multifaceted, district equity work evolved from reactionary to intentional work, and both internal and external contextual factors influenced school districts' equity work and initiatives. These findings offer important considerations for school districts seeking to create an equity director position or further support established positions to ensure all students are provided an equitable education.

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APPENDIX A

Questions for superintendents

1. Please describe who was involved in creating the Equity director and the steps taken to establish it.
2. Please describe your and the district's reasoning for creating the Equity director position.
3. How were the Equity director's expectations and goals established for the position?
4. Please describe an overview of the important work Equity directors engage in.
5. Please provide your thoughts on how the Equity director position has evolved since the year if its inception.
6. Please describe the top challenges that the Equity director is faced with.

Questions for Equity director

1. Please describe your educational and professional experience that has led you to become an Equity director.
2. What are your responsibilities throughout the district as an Equity director?
3. Can you explain your roles as an Equity director? Who created them?
4. Please describe an overview of the important work Equity directors engage in.
5. Please describe your and the district's reasoning for creating the Equity director position.
6. How has the Equity director position evolved since its inception?
7. Please describe the top challenges that the Equity director is faced with.

APPENDIX B

Recruitment Letter via email, X, and LinkedIn

Dear New Jersey School Administrator,

You are invited to participate in a study on New Jersey Superintendents and Equity Directors.

My name is Michael C. Riehl, and I am a doctoral candidate at William Paterson University. My dissertation research focuses on PK-12 Superintendents and Equity Directors' perspectives. The purpose of my dissertation is to examine New Jersey school Superintendents' and Equity Directors' roles, expectations, and goals for the Equity Director position.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are either:

1. A New Jersey School Superintendent in a district with a district-level equity leadership position, no matter the title. Some commonly used titles for the position in New Jersey include equity directors, directors of DEI, supervisors of DEI, or chief equity officers
   OR
2. A New Jersey district-level equity leader

<u>The Superintendent and Equity director within the school district both must participate to be eligible for the study.</u>

Your participation in this study is voluntary. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes and be recorded via Zoom.

Data derived from this research will solely be used for this study and any resulting publications. All dialogue will be kept confidential in reports or presentations, with no disclosure of participants' identities, including names and specific identifying details such as school district names or locations.

If you have any questions or would like to participate, please contact me as soon as possible at riehlm1@student.wpunj.edu or my cellphone at 6xx-6xx-1xxx.

Sincerely,

Michael C. Riehl
Doctoral Candidate
Ed.D Doctor of Education in Leadership
William Paterson University College of Education

APPENDIX C

William Paterson University
Project Title: Understanding PK-12 Equity directors
Principal Investigator: Michael C. Riehl
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Samuel Fancera
Contact Phone Number: 6xx-6xx-1xxx
Educational Leadership & Professional Studies
Course Name and Number
Date:

I have been asked to participate in a research study on PK-12 Equity directors. The purpose of this study is to examine the Equity director's responsibilities and roles within the district and investigate the evolution of the position. I understand I will be asked to complete a Qualtrics demographic survey and participate in a 30-minute virtual interview. Potential risks to subjects participating in this research are minimal, meaning that the risks involved as a participant in the interviews are no greater than those encountered in everyday life.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may end it at any time during this research. I understand that my identity will be protected at all times, and my name will not be used. I understand that the study results will protect the participants' identities, and there will not be a way to identify individual participants.

I understand that any data and recordings collected as part of this study will be stored in a safe and secure location and that this data will be destroyed when this research is completed. I understand that I will be audio and video recorded and that these recordings will be destroyed when the research is completed.

I may call the investigator, Michael C. Riehl, or other individuals listed in the heading of this document if I have any questions or concerns about this research and my participation. If I have any questions or concerns about this research, my participation, the conduct of the investigators, or my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 973-720-2852 or by email at IRBAdministrator@wpunj.edu.

By signing this consent form, I am agreeing to participate in this research study.

Name of Subject _____ Signature of Subject_____
Date: _____
Name of Investigator_____ Signature of Investigator_____
Date: _____

VITA

Michael C. Riehl

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2022 MEd, Educational Leadership, William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ