2023

Elementary Principals' Perceptions Regarding Implementing a District-Mandated Educational Equity Policy

Glen Patrick Messier
Walden University

Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Glen P. Messier

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee
Dr. David Weintraub, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty
Dr. Kathleen Kingston, Committee Member, Education Faculty
Dr. David Moffett, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2023

Abstract

Elementary Principals' Perceptions Regarding Implementing a District-Mandated

Educational Equity Policy

by

Glen P. Messier

MEd, Towson University, 2007

BS, Towson University, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2023

Abstract

The problem in the current basic qualitative study was that elementary principals were challenged to implement a district-mandated educational equity policy. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary principals' experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. The conceptual framework for this study was transformational leadership theory. This leadership theory was often used by leaders who focused on a collective purpose and held themselves accountable for initiating and sustaining positive social change. Three research questions addressed principals' experiences and perceptions in their attempt to implement a district-mandated educational equity policy, as well as principals' suggestions for continuous improvement with policy implementation. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with nine elementary principals. Analysis of the data consisted of in vivo and pattern coding to identify themes from the study. Themes were (a) principals had a lack of preparation, (b) principals cannot implement what they do not understand, (c) principals' lack of accountability translates into complacency, (d) professional development is necessary and important, (e) principals need to prioritize leadership to achieve educational equity, (f) principals aspire for greater inclusion and diversity in the classroom, and (g) principals become visionary leaders. Recommendations included targeted professional development and implementing equity coursework within the principal pipeline. Positive social change may be achieved through the successful execution of the educational equity policy, resulting in all students accessing high-quality educational experiences and feeling like contributing members of their school community.

Elementary Principals' Perceptions Regarding Implementing a District-Mandated

Educational Equity Policy

by

Glen P. Messier

MEd, Towson University, 2007

BS, Towson University, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2023

Dedication

Educators are often viewed as lifelong learners. For many years, I would always include messaging on my vision boards to indicate my desire to earn a doctorate in education. Throughout this journey, there were many days when I did not believe I would ever reach the end and earn my degree. Imposter syndrome was very much real and alive! However, throughout this experience, many people served as cheerleaders and supportive listeners and provided the necessary encouragement to continue forging ahead. From friends to colleagues to professors, I am incredibly thankful for your encouragement.

My biggest cheerleader, accountability coach, and therapist when I frequently doubted my skills, knowledge, and ability to achieve this ultimate goal was my beautiful wife, Kate. I signed up and began this doctoral journey during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the challenging times, Kate knew earning my doctorate had always been my dream, and she supported me from start to finish. Kate, I cannot thank you enough for your unconditional love and support along this crazy journey.

To our four children, Colin, Brennan, Reagan, and Maggie, I sincerely hope watching me persevere through the many obstacles associated with this long-term project instills a passion for learning in each of you. Always follow your dreams, never give up, and keep working hard! I will forever be proud of you!

To my family, especially my parents, thank you all for your continued encouragement and support to achieve this goal.

Acknowledgments

Dr. Weintraub and Dr. Kingston, please accept my heartfelt thanks for your constant feedback, coaching, support, and guidance in helping me earn my doctoral degree. Your positive feedback and praise helped me to push through and to never give up. I will be forever grateful for your mentorship. Dr. Moffett, thank you for providing feedback and holding me accountable to produce a final dissertation of the highest quality possible.

To all my friends and colleagues who have checked in along this journey, participated in the final study, or simply provided encouragement, thank you! To those who are doing the important work daily in schools, I give my sincere appreciation for never giving up—our students are so fortunate to have your leadership and love.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In 2019, modifications to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders established and prioritized equity and cultural responsiveness as one of the many core elements of effective school leadership (Farley et al., 2019). Despite this declaration, many schools faced staggering disparities when comparing student achievement and students' race and socioeconomic status (Poekert et al., 2020).

Through the very nature of their position, principals served as the primary decision-makers regarding how an established educational equity policy was implemented to address inequities and uphold social justice measures (Molla & Gale, 2019). Despite this charge, research studies (Bonner et al., 2018; Farley et al., 2019; Mayger & Provinzano, 2020; Molla & Galle, 2019; Samuels, 2018) have concluded that many educational leaders assumed the position underprepared and lacked the necessary training and skills to support the implementation of established educational policies with fidelity. Mayger and Provinzano (2020) found that new educational leaders are riddled with challenges in implementing educational policies effectively due to a lack of consistent training and ongoing support.

Once principals assume their roles as educational leaders, limited professional development and targeted support affect the fidelity of implementing new policies and regulations. Studies have found that courses focused on equity and culturally responsive practices at the collegiate level are extremely limited (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Özüdoğru, 2018; Samuels, 2018). The lack of courses focused on equity in education has resulted in many educators entering the workforce with a limited understanding of how to effectively

and practically educate students of different races (Bonner et al., 2018; Bukko & Liu, 2021; Özüdoğru, 2018). Principals and teachers must strive to reduce educational disparities by honing their skills and deepening their understanding of the effective implementation of educational equity policies (Poekert et al., 2020). This study was conducted to explore why principals felt challenged to implement a district-mandated educational equity policy and to identify targeted suggestions on how to improve policy implementation. This study gathered detailed information regarding principals' experiences in implementing the district-mandated policy to strengthen current educational equity practices in all schools across the district. Successful implementation of the district's educational equity policy has the potential to help principals develop the necessary leadership skills to ensure that all students feel welcomed, valued, respected, and safe within their school community. Students who feel welcomed and valued by school staff are more likely to demonstrate success in their academic journey (Amiot et al., 2020; Nadelson et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2020).

This chapter provides information on the background of the study, the problem statement, and the purpose of the study. Also included within this chapter are the study's research questions, the conceptual framework, the nature of the study, and definitions of terminology utilized within the study. Assumptions associated with this study, scope and delimitations, the significance of the study, and a summary conclude this chapter.

Background

In 2018, the National School Boards Association launched an advocacy campaign to highlight the critical importance of engaging in conversations around educational

equity and the urgency to develop educational equity policies at the state and local school system levels. In addition to the call to action established by the National School Boards Association (2018), the Maryland Association of Boards of Education (2019) established a core value that revolved around educational equity. This declaration of equity as a core value helped launch the statewide campaign on moving from conversations around equity to reviewing and revising policies at the state level, which helped drive policy development and revisions at the local school system level. As established in the Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) 13A.01.06 Educational Equity (2019), each local school system must develop an educational equity policy to ensure that all students have equitable access to a rigorous school curriculum and support for social-emotional success.

During a May 8, 2019 local board of education meeting, the school system's equity and inclusion officer and chief of academics, equity, and accountability outlined the proposed educational equity policy. The equity and inclusion officer shared with the board of education members that the school system's educational equity policy was developed by a committee that included students, employees, parents, lawmakers, and community activists. The local school district developed an educational equity policy to recognize and remove institutional barriers and ensure that social identifiers are not obstacles to accessing educational opportunities and supports that benefit each student in all school buildings. The educational equity policy was written to provide all students with equitable educational opportunities, ensure that student achievement is not predictable by race, recruit and retain school employees of color, and critically evaluate

all policies, procedures, and practices through an equity lens. The proposed educational equity policy was approved unanimously. Despite the unanimous approval of the school system's educational equity policy, elementary principals have not received direct professional learning support to implement this new policy within their schools.

During the May 2021 board of education meeting, the student representative to the board shared that many students had expressed concerns regarding racial incidents they were witnessing or experiencing within schools. During this board meeting, the student representative to the board disclosed that fellow students had reported hearing racial slurs, the mocking of cultures and accents, and racial jokes throughout their school days. The school system's superintendent stated that all students must be afforded a safe and inclusive learning environment. The superintendent further shared that he would discuss the next steps toward an overall action plan during the June 2021 board of education meeting. Following the discussions of racism and discrimination during the board of education meeting, the local school system's chief of schools informed principals of an investigation following reports of a racial incident during an athletic event. As a result of the preliminary investigation, the chief of schools stated that many other students were coming forward and expressing concerns regarding race and ethnicity. As a result of this information, all schools were required to engage in a county-wide professional development session to engage in conversations around educational equity and explore school personnel's understanding of the district's educational equity policy. During a meeting with equity liaisons, the local school district's equity and inclusion officer directed each school's equity liaisons to develop an equity action plan to

be shared at the upcoming meeting scheduled in September 2021. The equity action plan was designed to ensure that elementary principals and their equity liaisons engage in regular conversations around educational equity and support students of color.

During a board of education work session, a discussion was held between the superintendent, board members, and local system leaders about ensuring a safe learning environment for all students, staff, and families. During this work session, a perceptual survey was decided to be administered to students and staff to ensure progress towards sustaining a safe environment for all stakeholders. In addition to the climate survey, the student representative to the board encouraged the board of education and school staff to consider revising the school system's educational equity policy to include steps for addressing implicit bias and microaggressions.

Despite national and state advocacy campaigns and the school district writing an educational equity policy, a gap in practice remains. Principals face a variety of challenges in implementing the mandated policy successfully. This study was necessary to explore how to help principals overcome current challenges and to identify strategies to ensure improved successful implementation of the district-mandated policy.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed by this qualitative case study was that elementary principals are challenged to implement a district-mandated educational equity policy. A gap in practice existed because principals were not demonstrating success with implementing the mandated educational equity policy. Poekert et al. (2020) found that principals were challenged to implement educational equity policies due to a lack of

targeted professional development that focuses on helping principals become equity leaders. The school district wrote the educational equity policy to recognize and remove institutional barriers and ensure that social identifiers are not obstacles to accessing educational opportunities and supports that benefit each student in all school buildings. The educational equity policy was written to provide all students with equitable educational opportunities, ensure that student achievement is not predictable by race, recruit and retain school employees of color, and critically evaluate all policies, procedures, and practices through an equity lens. School district leaders need to know how principals are implementing the educational equity policy within their schools to develop interventions, such as professional development for teachers and principals, to better implement the educational equity policy across all schools within the school district.

Since 2017, the district's equity and inclusion officer has worked with school administrators to develop their understanding of educational equity and how to best address equity concerns within their respective school buildings. Despite this ongoing training and support, the district's equity and inclusion officer reported ongoing consultation with school administrators on how to best approach equity concerns and incidents of racism occurring within schools across the district. The school district's equity and inclusion officer shared that the incidences of racism occurring in schools and during athletic events highlighted clear challenges between policy development and policy implementation. As a result of these challenges, the school system's equity and inclusion officer began working closely with a targeted group of educators, known as

equity liaisons, to develop a required county-wide professional development session. In October 2021, all schools within the district engaged in the mandated county-wide professional development session that focused on educational equity and exploring the district's educational equity policy. This professional development session was the first time many district employees, including elementary principals, were provided with a focused opportunity to explore the educational equity policy.

Despite the intent and purpose of the established educational equity policy, principals continued to face challenges within their school buildings. A major component of the educational equity policy addressed the successful recruitment and retention of employees of color. During the November 2021 board of education meeting, the director of human resources reported that the local school system hired 199 new teachers during the 2020–2021 school year. It was further reported that 20 of the 199 newly hired teachers self-identified as employees of color. The local school system's director of human resources shared that overall, the state education agency had reported challenges in recruiting employees of color as a shortage of educators was impacting the entire state Current employee data highlight that of the 1,486 elementary educators, only 63 or 4.2% of elementary teachers are employees of color. Despite increased efforts to successfully recruit and retain employees of color, the local school system's employee data did not align with current student demographics. Of the 8,806 elementary school students, 1,718, or 19.5% of students, are students of color (Maryland State Department of Education, 2021). All students deserve to feel welcomed, valued, respected, and safe within their

learning communities. This learning environment may be established when students learn from educators who align with students' racial profiles.

The school district's equity and inclusion officer reported that despite ongoing reflective discussions during monthly principal meetings, opportunities for continued professional development, and the implementation of system-wide Culture Expos, a 1-day event focused solely on expanding participants' understanding of educational equity, principals continued to express concern. Principals across the school district continued to seek guidance and support when addressing incidents of racism and addressing racial inequities within academic programs.

While there was significant research on the benefits of implementing equity policies, using culturally responsive practices within classrooms, and the need for continued professional development for educators in the domain of educational equity (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Connolly et al., 2020; Galloway et al., 2019; Nadelson et al., 2020; Poekert et al., 2020), this study filled a gap in the research focusing on how to strengthen policy implementation practices. The data collected from this study helped district leaders identify strategies to overcome policy implementation challenges and identify targeted professional development practices to strengthen principals' understanding of educational equity.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary principals' experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. A constructivist paradigm framed this study. Interview protocol questions examined elementary

principals' suggestions to improve the implementation process. For this study, I conducted interviews with nine elementary school principals from a rural school district in northeastern Maryland to understand the principals' perceptions regarding the challenges they faced as they attempted to implement a district-mandated educational equity policy. Interview protocol questions targeted the specific difficulties principals experienced, principals' perceptions regarding how to overcome the particular challenges, and a focus on identifying principals' suggestions on improving the process for implementing the district-mandated policy with fidelity.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

RQ1: What are the elementary principals' experiences in attempting to fulfill the mandates associated with the district's educational equity policy?

RQ2: What are the elementary principals' perceptions about how the process of implementing the district's educational equity policy can be improved?

RQ3: What leadership practices do elementary principals believe are needed to successfully implement the district's educational equity policy?

Conceptual Framework

The concept that supported this study was Burns's (1978) theory on transformational leadership. Burns (1978) described transformational leaders as leaders who sought to engage their followers in doing something critically important. For this study, the successful implementation of the educational equity policy may help ensure equitable access to educational experiences, may reduce the predictability of

achievement, and may support the successful recruitment and retention of employees of color (Chu, 2019; Molla & Gale, 2019; Poekert et al., 2020). Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as a continuous process in which leaders seek ongoing opportunities to advance communication, influence, and motivation levels.

Principals within the local research site engaged in monthly discussions focused on transformational leadership. During each monthly meeting, the director of elementary schools engaged elementary principals on strategies to implement to help move current leadership practices towards the goals of a transformational leader. Furthermore, the school district's equity and inclusion officer informed principals that all school system equity liaisons were charged with developing a school-wide equity plan. The equity and inclusion officer stated that each school's equity plan, developed by the school's principal and equity liaisons, would focus on identifying academic and school climate challenges. As a result of the school's equity plan, school leaders were charged with identifying deliberate steps or actions to address the targeted goals within the school's equity plan. During a county-wide principals' meeting, the chief of schools and the director of elementary schools stated that school improvement plans must incorporate three measurable goals, focused on the areas of reading and writing, mathematics, and equity. To measure each principal's success in developing and implementing transformational leadership practices, the director of elementary schools engaged every principal in site visits during the fall and spring semesters. During these visits, principals reflected on their practices to positively influence their learning communities while highlighting specific transformational leadership strategies utilized to achieve their goals.

The experiences of principals implementing the school district's educational equity policy required transformational leadership practices to provide continued influence and support for those who have faced challenges. Transformational leadership theory was an appropriate framework for this study, in which I explored elementary principals' experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. My efforts to answer the research questions, focusing on principals' individual experiences with policy implementation and suggestions for continued improvement, were grounded by transformational leadership theory to understand the necessary leadership skills to successfully implement the district-mandated policy. Finally, I relied upon the transformational leadership theory to develop the interview protocol, and I relied on this framework to analyze collected data and discuss findings gathered from this study.

Nature of the Study

For this qualitative study, I collected data through semistructured interviews with nine elementary school principals from a rural school district in northeastern Maryland. I conducted a basic qualitative study. The basic qualitative study design allows a researcher to deeply investigate how participants make meaning of a shared experience (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). For this study, I chose to explore and further understand the shared experiences of principals charged with implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. The basic qualitative study research method allowed me to analyze the challenges elementary principals experienced when implementing the policy and identify suggestions for improved implementation of the district's educational equity policy. Data collected from semistructured interviews supported by the constructivism

theory of transformational leadership. This study provided necessary information on improving principals' current practices, resulting in increased success with implementing the district-mandated educational equity policy.

Definitions

The following terms are defined to support the reader with an understanding of how these words are utilized throughout this study:

Educational equity: Ensuring that all students have complete and open access to high-quality teaching and learning experiences facilitated by highly qualified educators (Chu, 2019).

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs): A comprehensive set of guidelines outlining expectations for principals and assistant principals to facilitate meaningful change for all students within their school communities (Farley et al., 2019).

Assumptions

A leading assumption in this study was that all participants answered the interview questions honestly and thoroughly. I assumed that participants freely participated and recognized that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, I assumed that the data collected throughout this study helped formulate meaningful suggestions to share with school system leaders to positively influence the district's educational equity policy implementation.

Scope and Delimitations

This study's scope and delimitations reflected principals' perceptions at the local research site when they were implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy.

The intended participants within this qualitative study were current elementary school principals employed in a rural northeastern school district. The participants who elected to take part in this study shared their personal beliefs and perceptions about their experiences implementing the educational equity policy. Their views and perceptions may not reflect all the principals employed by the school district or other principals from within the state who were also required to implement an educational equity policy within their school district. This study was conducted in one rural northeastern school district in Maryland, so the findings may not be transferrable to all populations.

Limitations

Because I conducted this study in the school district where I am employed, a possible limitation may have occurred when recruiting interview participants. Another limitation was the possibility of personal bias, as I am an elementary principal and had a professional relationship with the interview participants. To ameliorate this potential bias, I focused recruitment efforts on principals with whom I did not have the strongest professional relationship.

The nature of this study provided limitations that I was required to address as the researcher. During the semistructured interview portion of this study, principals volunteered to participate, therefore limiting the study. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview or study at any time. All participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcript for review before their data were included in the results of this study. To participate in this study, principals needed to have at least 1 year of experience and have experience implementing the district-mandated

educational equity policy. The participation criteria and the fact that this study was focused on principals working in one rural northeastern Maryland school district limit the study results from being transferable to other school districts.

Significance

This study is significant in that it addresses a targeted gap in practice and provides the district with knowledge about the challenges that principals experienced when implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. Additionally, this study may promote positive social change by helping school district personnel understand what educational equity looks like when implemented within the elementary school setting. The school district has charged school leaders with recognizing and removing institutional barriers that may impact students' access to high-quality education. Additionally, school leaders are charged with ensuring that academic achievement is not predictable based on students' race, ethnicity, gender, learning style, or socioeconomic status. Positive social change was achieved at the local school level and beyond through the successful and complete execution of the district-mandated educational equity policy, resulting in all students accessing high-quality educational experiences and feeling like contributing members of their school community.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I described the local problem of elementary principals facing challenges with implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary principals' experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. In Chapter 2, I review and synthesize

current research literature to further support the established problem within this study. A thorough review and synthesis of current research literature related to educational equity and effective policy implementation provides detailed insight into ensuring that all students receive high-quality educational experiences.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this qualitative study was that elementary principals were challenged to implement a district-mandated educational equity policy. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary principals' experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. With recent changes to the PSELs, educational leaders must measure and evaluate their success in leading for equity (Farley et al., 2019). Leading for equity has been particularly challenging for educational leaders due to a lack of ongoing professional development and a failure to adequately address disparities between student achievement and student race and socioeconomic status (Bonner et al., 2018; Özüdoğru, 2018; Poekert et al., 2020).

In Chapter 2, I describe my literature search strategy, highlighting the databases and keywords utilized to locate relevant and timely literature. Next, I provide an overview of the conceptual framework that underlies this study. Finally, I extensively review the literature related to the key variables and concepts. The literature review encompasses an inclusive examination of research, journals, and literature on topics including (a) the foundation of leading for educational equity, (b) developing an educational equity mindset, and (c) policy adoption and implementation.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched multiple databases to obtain current literature on the topics included in the literature review. The databases included EBSCOHost, Education Source, ERIC, Google Scholar, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, Taylor and Francis Online, Thoreau Multi-Database Search, and the Walden University Library. The reviews were directly linked to

educational equity, educational administration, and implementation of equity within

classrooms and schools. Inclusion criteria ensured that all articles were peer reviewed,

limited to publication dates within the last 5 years, and available with full text. The

following keywords were utilized to ensure that articles were related to the support-

finding literature associated with this search: *best practices*, *diversity*, *educational equity*,

educational equalization, *elementary*, *implement*, *K–5 childhood education*, *leadership*,

perceptions, *policies*, and *principals*. The literature search generated 56 journal articles

published since 2018, and I selected 41 articles for use in this literature review that met

the established criteria.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Burns's (1978) theory of

transformational leadership. Burns believed that effective leadership resulted in leaders

remaining focused on a collective purpose and holding themselves accountable for

initiating and sustaining social change. While Burns delineated leadership into two

categories, transactional and transformational, the transformational leadership traits are

required if there is a hope to evoke positive change in principals' perceptions when they

are faced with challenges in implementing the district-mandated educational equity

policy. Burns defined a transformational leader as someone actively seeking others to

become followers in charge of evoking change.

Burns (1978) described the delicate relationship between leader and follower as a

relationship grounded in open communication, trust, and motivation. As a result of this

carefully established relationship, the leader and the follower strengthen their

commitment to the over encompassing charge and their ability to evoke positive change. Within this study, the problem has been established that principals are experiencing and facing various challenges as they attempt to implement a district-mandated educational equity policy. Transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978) provided the necessary structure and guidance to help educational leaders develop relationships with faculty, staff, students, and school community members. The relationships formed between leaders and their stakeholders, coupled with open communication, integrity, trust, and motivation, may be a missing component influencing the current challenges being faced.

In a more recent study, Burns (2003) enhanced his definition of transformational leadership by stating that leaders must avoid a top-down leadership style and start by connecting with their constituents or stakeholders. By connecting with stakeholders and profoundly understanding their concerns, wishes, and desires, leaders can begin to carefully craft their strategies to motivate and influence positive social change. Despite educational leaders being ultimately responsible for the effective implementation of district-mandated educational policies, it is also the role of educational leaders to ensure that all policies are implemented in all areas of the school building. Following Burns's (2003) guidance on connecting with constituents and stakeholders, there is power and positive motivation to engage students, teachers, and parents in positively determining the most effective ways to implement district-mandated educational policies.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

Foundation for Leading for Equity

In 1896, the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson* instituted a separate-but-equal mindset in education (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020). This unfortunate mentality remained in effect for almost 60 years until it was rejected by the 1954 Supreme Court decision following the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020). In the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that separate schooling for students of color is unconstitutional (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020). Ashford-Hanserd et al. (2020) found that despite the significant shift in educational segregation, the implementation of educational equity practices continues to be minimal in many schools. Ashford-Hanserd et al. identified educational equity as access, participation, and outcomes. Within their findings, Ashford-Hanserd et al. reported that many schools continue to operate as though they are separated and provide limited opportunities to ensure that all students have equal access to a high-quality education. Ashford-Hanserd et al. were concerned that there would be minimal progress in advancing educational equity practices without extreme shifts and an increase in profound mindsets.

In 1996, the first iteration of professional standards for practicing school and district leaders was developed and released (Farley et al., 2019). These initial standards were identified as the Interstate School Leaders License Consortium (ISLLC) Standards. The ISLLC standards were developed to provide outlined expectations for school leadership and best practices (Farley et al., 2019). While the ISLLC standards provided

educational leaders with a framework for strengthening practice and increasing

accountability around student achievement, educational equity was not addressed (Farley

et al., 2019). In 2015, a new set of educational standards were released, the PSELs.

Farley et al. (2019) stated that the PSEL standards provided a clearer vision of the daily

responsibilities of educational leaders, focused on the success of every student, and

outlined supports necessary to ensure that every student experienced success. In addition,

for the first time, the PSEL standards directly addressed the educational equity lens that

all school leaders must possess if they genuinely believe in ensuring that every student

experiences success within their school building (Farley et al., 2019).

Following the development and release of the PSEL standards, national, state, and

local educational leaders had to begin the critical work of modifying current leadership

evaluation practices and engaging in a deep look at their current leadership practices

(Farley et al., 2019). In 2018, the National School Boards Association launched a

campaign focusing on the critical importance of engaging in conversations around equity

and the necessary development of educational policies to ensure educational equity for all

students. In 2019, the Maryland State Department of Education and the state

superintendent of schools, Dr. Karen Salmon, expressed their desire for all students

within the state of Maryland to be allowed to realize the promise of public education (K.

B. Salmon, personal communication, August 27, 2019). Following this declaration, Dr.

Salmon charged all 24 jurisdictions within the state of Maryland to begin the necessary

measures to develop an educational equity policy. As written in COMAR 13A.01.06

Educational Equity (2019), every state was legally required to develop a policy that

ensures that all students have equitable access to a rigorous curriculum and access to necessary support for social-emotional success. Coupled with the state superintendent's declaration for developing educational equity policies, the Maryland Association of Boards of Education (2019) established a core value that focused on the educational equity of all students and employees. Mavrogordato and White (2019) and Kimura et al. (2022) found that influential leaders have the capacity to visualize and imagine ways to lead their staff forward by implementing new strategies to address historical barriers and biases that currently negatively influence student learning.

Ashford-Hanserd et al. (2020), Farley et al. (2019), and Mavrogordato and White (2019) concluded that developing a foundation of leading for equity is critically important; however, without intentional and deliberate guidance and direction, principals and school leaders cannot be expected to eradicate years of segregation and racism that have resulted in racial biases and achievement gaps in many schools today. However, even the slightest step in the right direction can influence the overall movement in the transformative changes needed to improve educational experiences for all (Ashford et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2019; Kimura et al., 2022). In addition to implementing policy as written, school leaders are responsible for identifying, addressing, and resolving blind spots that may directly impact forward progress (Mavrogordato & White, 2019). Farley et al. (2019) concluded that transformative school leadership is necessary to implement the PSEL standards as written. Kimura et al. (2022) further argued for the importance of transformational leadership by stating that influential leaders always look forward and envision the next steps to overcome obstacles. Additionally, Kimura et al.'s declaration

supported the necessity for future research studies focused on gaining insight into the

challenges that principals are currently facing in implementing the state-mandated equity

policy and possible solutions for increasing fidelity of implementation.

Farley et al. (2019) and Poekert et al. (2020) both argued that future research

needs indicate a gap in the literature surrounding how school-based leaders engage in

ongoing professional development to expand their understanding of how to lead for

equity and inspire school leaders to be the transformational leaders needed to evoke

positive social change within their school buildings and districts. Furthermore, Farley et

al. recommended that further research be focused on exploring principals' perceptions

and understanding of the PSEL standards as written. Acquiring insight into how

principals perceive their roles as leaders for equity and ensuring that all students have

equal access to a high-quality education may provide more precise direction for

professional development experiences.

Developing an Educational Equity Mindset

School-based leaders who believe that all students should be given equal

opportunities to achieve at high levels have an educational equity mindset, as defined by

Nadelson et al. (2020). The mindset of an educational leader is defined as a combination

of a leader's beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that ultimately shape and explain the

leader's actions and choices (Nadelson et al., 2020). Approaching educational equity

through the lens of being a transformational leader may allow for educational leaders to

shift conversations from being focused on what students cannot do to focusing the

discussion on what educators need to do to meet their students and ensure their continued

success (Galloway et al., 2019; Nadelson et al., 2020). Nadelson et al. found that while principals self-identify as having an educational equity mindset, there is a disconnect between the self-identified attributes and the actions displayed in the daily work of school leaders. Nadelson et al. highlighted that the principals within their research study spoke about being fierce advocates for their students and ensuring that all students were making steady academic progress; however, Nadelson et al. concluded that over half of the principals within their study spent an inordinate amount of time engaged in the disciplinary process and other administrative tasks. Further research is warranted to explore the alignment between principals' perceived educational equity mindsets and the reality of how they spend their time daily (Nadelson et al., 2020).

While the intent behind developing an educational equity policy is to modify and improve current practices that ensure that all students receive high-quality educational experiences not inhibited by institutional barriers or social identifiers, educators and school-based leaders need to engage in further opportunities to deepen their understanding and application of culturally responsive pedagogical practices (Galloway et al., 2019; Poekert et al., 2020). Most educational equity policies aim to address systematic racism, power dynamics, and oppression (Galloway et al., 2019). Principals and other educational leaders must continuously engage in critical and courageous conversations around race and equity to develop the required equity mindset to create and produce racially conscious leaders (Galloway et al., 2019; Rasmussen & Raskin, 2021). Unfortunately, the level of professional development that supports principals along their journey to becoming the equity-focused leaders needed in today's schools is seriously

lacking (Mayger & Provinzano, 2020). Furthermore, Mayger and Provinzano (2020)

argued that current research literature is sparse to effectively support principal

preparation to lead for equity. Studies have demonstrated that the landscape surrounding

principal preparation programs and the development of equity leaders has notably

changed since the early 2000s (Mayger & Provinzano, 2020). While engaging principals

in semistructured interviews, Mayger and Provinzano reported that principals cited a lack

of formal preparation and the need for ongoing professional development to develop or

strengthen their equity lens. Poekert et al. (2020) found a significant need and

opportunity to enhance and deepen leaders' knowledge on effectively leading for equity.

Rasmussen and Raskin (2021) argued that principal preparation programs could shift and

align their focus on transforming leadership by engaging leaders in conversations around

race and equity.

Strengthening educational leadership preparation programs to focus on racial

equity has the potential to shift how principals implement policies; recruit and retain

employees; allocate available federal, state, and local funding; and provide professional

development opportunities to the staff within schools (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Clayton &

LaBatt, 2019; Mayger & Provinzano, 2020; Poekert et al., 2020; Rasmussen & Raskin,

2021). Ultimately, whether principals engage in critical conversations around equity and

race as part of their leadership preparation programs or participate in ongoing job-

embedded professional development opportunities, students need educational leaders

willing to put theory into practice. Furthermore, principals must ensure that they are the

type of leader who is ready to confront and address all instances of bias, prejudice, or

racism that are inhibiting all students from reaching their highest academic and social-emotional potential (Clayton & LaBatt, 2019; Kimura et al., 2022; Samuels et al., 2019). Samuels et al. (2019) questioned whether educators are regularly engaged and consciously aware of the daily implicit bias that floods school buildings and classrooms. Are educators and principals addressing every microaggression or simply remaining complicit and allowing inequity, prejudice, and racism to influence students' experiences (Samuels et al., 2019)? The history of *Plessy v. Ferguson* will only continue if educators do not directly address implicit bias and inequity every day (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020; Samuels et al., 2019). Without targeted professional development and ongoing support, school leaders may believe that they are effectively leading for equity and not even recognize the depth of work that must be done to ensure educational equity and excellence in schools and classrooms (Amiot et al., 2020; Nadelson et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2020).

The current research literature surrounding leadership preparation programs and ongoing job-embedded professional development further supports the potential significance of this research study. This study addressed a targeted gap in practice and provided the district with knowledge about the challenges that principals experience when implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. Lakhwani (2019) argued that educational leaders need ongoing and prioritized professional development, specifically around culturally responsive instruction, to enhance student learning and minimize inequities in schools and classrooms. Further research is warranted to gather

firsthand feedback from current principals on their experiences with leading for equity

and to determine the necessary next steps to improve current practices.

Policy Adoption and Implementation

Far too often, educational policymakers focus on implementing prepackaged

interventions coupled with professional development to solve new challenges educators

and school leaders face daily (Connolly et al., 2020; Welborn, 2019). Connolly et al.

(2020) argued, "A racial equity policy is one that cannot just be posted and shared" (p. 3).

Faced with the challenge of implementing a new policy focused on addressing structural

inequity concerns, Connolly et al. stated to effectively implement policies and address

problems within the field of education, school districts must be ready to provide the

organizational structure to support the work coupled with skilled leaders to facilitate the

necessary work (Connolly et al., 2020; Mavrogordato & White, 2019; Welborn, 2019).

Additionally, Connolly et al. argued that educational leaders must be held accountable for

effort or lack thereof, making necessary strides to resolve inequities within their school

buildings. The development of an organizational tool to evaluate readiness levels and the

implementation of an educational policy can provide clear insight into how an

educational leader communicates, sets expectations, and models expected behaviors

(Connolly et al., 2020). The data collected within this tool could provide direction into

necessary professional development opportunities (Connolly et al., 2020). Failure to

provide targeted professional development based on the data collected regarding policy

implementation may result in the policy not being implemented with fidelity and in

alignment with the intended purpose of the policy (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Connolly et al., 2020; Welborn, 2019).

As school systems navigated the arduous process of developing a new policy and gathering stakeholder feedback, many necessary steps were taken to ensure a quality policy was submitted for official review and approval. Through their work in studying the development of an educational equity policy, Connolly et al. (2020) reported that the initial policy document was drafted through a group of individuals representing many roles within the local jurisdiction and the school system. By recruiting a wide-ranging group of participants, the policy was written with the views and perspectives of a cross-section of the larger community (Connolly et al., 2020). Once a draft policy is developed, there is a window of time for the policy to undergo review and for public comments to be collected. Farley et al. (2021) found that during the public comment period, many policies focused on educational equity undergo attempts of political distraction. Rising above attempts of political distraction can be challenging; however, it is ultimately necessary to ensure that the initial focus of the written policy is not lost in the distraction (Connolly et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2021). Once an approach is adopted, the important work begins as educational leaders are required to implement the written policy within their school buildings.

To successfully implement change in school buildings, educational leaders must first understand the intent of the educational equity policy and be willing to engage in ongoing practices, such as effectively utilizing data to prompt change, developing the capacity of faculty and staff, and directly confronting biases and prejudicial or racial

actions (Amiot et al., 2020). As educational leaders strengthen their practices by eliminating barriers and leveraging policy implementation to positively influence student achievement and accountability, principals may make strides in developing more inclusive school environments (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Kozleski et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2018). Education stakeholders hold power through the policy adoption and implementation process to broaden and deepen the understanding of educational equity and how educational equity practices are best implemented within school buildings (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Welborn, 2019).

Research studies consistently argue that building the capacity of educational leaders is critical. Authors argued that developing an educational equity mindset (Amiot et al., 2020; Nadelson et al., 2020) and, secondly, understanding and implementing educational policies as written effectively (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Clayton & LaBatt, 2019; Connolly et al., 2020) remain the top two critical focus areas to ensure our students receive high-quality teaching and learning practices in all schools. However, Farley et al., 2019 and Gordon and Espinoza (2020) argued that further research is necessary to harness the voice of principals currently serving in leadership roles. Due to a lack of leadership preparation programs with a focus on educational equity (Farley et al., 2019), principals are faced with the daily challenge of balancing their responsibilities as instructional leaders, disciplinarians, change agents, and serving as the lead public relations coordinator within their respective buildings (Farley et al., 2019). Given the many roles and responsibilities principals face in their daily work, it remains unclear how to help principals overcome the challenges they currently face with remaining equity-

focused (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Connolly et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2021; Gordon & Espinoza, 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

As educational leaders within their school buildings, principals are obligated to follow all educational policies as written and ensure that all students achieve at high levels (Farley et al., 2019). Researchers have shown how education has evolved over time from a separate but equal mentality to striving to foster educational equity practices so that all students have equal opportunities to achieve at high levels (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020; Poekert et al., 2020). As classrooms across the world become increasingly more diverse, all educators and leaders must develop and utilize an educational equity mindset to enhance achievement, intentionally remove institutional barriers, and ensure that social factors do not negatively impact or influence student learning and growth (Galloway et al., 2019; Gordon & Espinoza, 2020; Nadelson et al., 2020). Unfortunately, as noted in some of the current literature, principals are entering the leadership role with minimal understanding of how to lead for equity, resulting in principals' practices and beliefs remaining neutral (Farley et al., 2019; Nadelson et al., 2020; Poekert et al., 2020). As a result of this neutrality, educational equity is not achieved at the level the written policy intends (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Connolly et al., 2020; Galloway et al., 2019).

Despite strong direction within current literature focusing on principals actively engaging in professional development and ongoing leadership training (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2019; Molla & Gale, 2019), current research literature remains unclear and inconsistent on how to best support current building leaders in finding a

healthy balance between their daily duties and ensuring that all students receive a high-quality, equitable education (Connolly et al., 2020; Lakhwani, 2019; Samuels et al., 2019). This qualitative study aimed to examine the perceptions of principals implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. Through semistructured interview questions, I explored principals' suggestions for improving the implementation of the mandated policy.

In Chapter 3, I outlined the research method and methodological approach I utilized to support my study. In addition, I outlined how I recruited participants to learn about their perceptions regarding implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary principals'

experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. Chapter 3

includes an overview and rationale of the basic qualitative study research design and

outlines the roles of the researcher. A detailed description of the methodology, including

criteria for selecting participants, the recruitment process for participants, and

instrumentation, is outlined. In this chapter, I discuss the data collection process, which

was done through semistructured, one-on-one interviews with nine elementary principals.

This is followed by the description of my analysis of coding. A comprehensive coding

analysis was conducted to evaluate the interview data collected. An overview of

trustworthiness, focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability,

is discussed. Finally, I conclude this chapter by detailing how I maintained ethical

procedures throughout the study.

Research Design and Rationale

Three research questions guided this study.

RQ1:   What are the elementary principals' experiences in attempting to fulfill the

mandates associated with the district's educational equity policy?

RQ2:   What are the elementary principals' perceptions about how the process of

implementing the district's educational equity policy can be improved?

RQ3:   What leadership practices do elementary principals believe are needed to

successfully implement the district's educational equity policy?

The focus of this study was that elementary principals were challenged to implement a district-mandated educational equity policy. The framework that guided this study was transformational leadership theory, as explained by Burns (1978). Transformational leadership theory encourages leaders to engage their followers in leading change, which is critically important. The concept behind transformational leadership is that transformational leaders are big-picture thinkers who can experiment with new opportunities to overcome established challenges (Burns, 1978).

In qualitative methodology, six research designs warranted consideration. The six qualitative research designs were (a) basic qualitative study, (b) case study, (c) ethnography, (d) grounded theory, (e) narrative, and (f) phenomenology (Burkholder et al., 2020; Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

I utilized a basic qualitative study methodological approach to study the phenomenon and to answer the research questions. The basic qualitative study design allows a researcher to deeply investigate how participants make meaning of a shared experience (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Merriam and Grenier (2019) described the basic qualitative study as a research design that allows a researcher to explore and understand experiences shared by participants. For this study, I chose to explore and further understand the shared experiences of principals charged with implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. The basic qualitative study research method allowed me to analyze the challenges elementary principals experienced when implementing the policy and identify suggestions for improved implementation of the district's educational

equity policy. Data collected and analyzed within this basic qualitative study included semistructured interview questions from nine principals.

Case study research allows a researcher to deeply investigate and analyze a case within a real-world context (Burkholder et al., 2020; Ravitch and Carl, 2021). Burkholder et al. (2020) described case study as a qualitative design that allows a researcher to outline and portray findings from a bounded unit around a particular phenomenon. Merriam and Grenier (2019) further stated that case study research involves an intensive analysis of a phenomenon. I rejected this methodology, given that my research study was isolated to only conducting semistructured interviews of nine principals, therefore not providing an in-depth analysis of the bounded unit.

Researchers conducting ethnography engage in a long-term immersion within a cultural group to collect data (Burkholder et al., 2020). Burkholder et al. (2020) stated that those conducting ethnographic research intend to interpret how a cultural group functions with an identified phenomenon. Because my study was not rooted in anthropology or sociology (Burkholder et al., 2020), I rejected this methodology.

Grounded theory research focuses on theory development. Given that my research study was guided by Burns's (1978) theory of transformational leadership and my research study findings did not contribute to building new theories, this methodology was rejected.

Narrative researchers tell stories based on an individual's connection to the phenomenon studied (Burkholder et al., 2020). The narrative methodology was rejected

because my study was not limited to telling only one person's story (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Phenomenological studies explore shared experiences from a set of individuals from multiple locations (Burkholder et al., 2020). Burkholder et al. (2020) further stated that phenomenological studies limit researchers to only analyzing and examining participants' experiences related to the study's phenomenon. The phenomenological methodology was not selected because my study was not limited to examining study participants' knowledge and experiences implementing a district-mandated policy. In this study, I examined principals' experiences implementing the district-mandated policy, sought principals' perceptions on how to overcome the challenges, and focused on identifying principals' suggestions on improving the process for implementing the district-mandated policy with fidelity. Burkholder et al. argued that a research study aimed at collecting data focused on the usefulness of a phenomenon detracts from the main purpose of a phenomenological study.

Role of the Researcher

Burkholder et al. (2020) stated that a qualitative researcher "serve[s] as the primary data collection instrument" (p. 94). For my qualitative research study, I assumed the role of participant-observer. As a principal in the same northeastern school district where this study took place, I was also responsible for implementing the district-mandated educational equity policy. Within the participant-observer role, I understood the study's phenomenon and had a pre-established relationship with the intended study participants. While my relationship with the intended study participants may be viewed

as a possible challenge, I ameliorated this potential bias by focusing recruitment efforts

on principals with whom I rarely worked during the school year. This allowed me to

work with participants with whom I did not hold a supervisory or power-influenced

position.

As a principal within the research setting, I recognized the potential for my

personal bias to influence the research. To ensure that my personal biases did not affect

the study, I engaged in reflexivity throughout the data collection process. During data

collection, reflexivity can include researcher memos and journals (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

I actively engaged in journaling through the research study and data collection processes

to record my thoughts following participant interviews and my opinions and expectations

to support the data analysis portion of this study.

In addition, during the data collection process, I followed the semistructured

interview process strictly. All participants received clear directions as to the intended

purpose of the study and reassurance that their identity and responses to the interview

questions would remain confidential. Finally, the ultimate intention was to preserve and

accurately reflect the depth and breadth of the studied phenomenon.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Participant selection for this study came from 22 elementary principals employed

in a rural school district in northeastern Maryland. Principals within this school district

had a wide range of experience and service within this leadership role. The prospective

participants' years of service ranged from less than 1 year to 20 years of experience

serving as an elementary principal. For this research study, I interviewed nine participants

with varying experience levels. Ravitch and Carl (2021) stated that while there is no

formal guidance related to sample size, the researcher must engage with enough

participants to effectively and rigorously answer the study's research questions to ensure

that the findings are valid and transferrable.

I used a purposeful sampling strategy to select nine participants for this research

study. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), purposeful sampling is utilized to

purposefully recruit participants who may have had specific experiences, knowledge

about the study's phenomenon, or other distinctive characteristics that support answering

the study's research questions. To qualify as a participant in this research study,

participants met the following criteria: (a) served as an elementary principal, at the time

of the study, within the rural northeastern Maryland school district; (b) had completed at

least 1 year as an elementary principal; (c) had participated in professional development

related to the district's educational equity policy; and (d) were available to participate in

face-to-face video conferencing through an online platform regarding their personal

experiences and challenges as related to implementing the district-mandated educational

equity policy.

The following steps took place to contact and recruit participants for this study:

1. I gained access to participants after securing permission from the district's

    assistant superintendent to conduct this study. To obtain permission to

    conduct the study, I described the purpose of the study, the population of the

study, the methodology, and any possible benefits and risks for both participants and the school district at large.

2. Following district approval, I collected email addresses for all principals. Email addresses were available to the public from individual school websites. The initial email was a personal invitation to participate in this study. The invitation detailed the purpose of the study and the qualification criteria to participate. Finally, I included the informed consent document for each participant to review.

3. After 7 days, when I had not reached my participation target, I sent all remaining invited participants a follow-up email to confirm their interest in being considered as a participant in this research study.

4. Once the nine research study participants had been identified, I sent a follow-up email thanking all principals for their consideration in participating in this research study.

5. I sent an email to the nine study participants with a letter of informed consent, including interview procedures (see Appendix A). I outlined the voluntary nature of this study and the risks and benefits of their participation. I also shared measures taken to ensure confidentiality and privacy.

6. After receiving signed consent forms, I followed up with each participant to schedule a date and time for their semistructured interview. Each participant chose to participate virtually, utilizing an online video conferencing platform.

Finally, all participants were reminded that their interviews would be audio-recorded.

Instrumentation

Because this research study was a qualitative study, semistructured interview questions were used as this study's primary data collection source (see Appendix B). Following the researcher-developed interview protocol, I created eight questions to explore elementary principals' experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. Developing an interview protocol provided consistency among individuals being interviewed (Burkholder et al., 2020). The interview questions were written to collect pertinent information and data relevant to the study's research questions. The semistructured interview protocol questions were written to investigate elementary principals' perceptions of their experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. Interview protocol questions focused on principals' previous experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy, barriers principals faced while attempting to implement the mandated policy, and the leadership practices necessary to implement the mandated policy effectively. All interview protocol questions were written to be open-ended, allowing me to ask essential follow-up questions as appropriate. To establish content validity, I asked two members of senior leadership within the school district who had earned their doctoral degrees to review the interview protocol questions and provide feedback. The senior leaders provided feedback that resulted in revising the wording of the interview protocol questions.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB approval number 12-06-22-1044512), I solicited participants using multiple communication methods. I contacted all participants using my Walden University email account. Email addresses for participants were collected from district-managed school websites. All 22 elementary principals were contacted initially via email to ask for their participation in this study. Within the initial recruitment communication, I included the established participation criteria to ensure that willing participants were eligible to participate. The following criteria determined participation eligibility: (a) served as an elementary principal, at the time of the study, within the rural northeastern Maryland school district; (b) had completed at least 1 year as an elementary principal; (c) had participated in professional development related to the district's educational equity policy; and (d) was available to participate in face-to-face video conferencing through an online platform. Following a 7-day waiting period, all participants contacted initially via email received a follow-up email to confirm their interest in being considered as a participant in this research study.

All recruited participants were asked to confirm their current position to determine if they met the eligibility criteria to participate in this study. Following this confirmation, I provided all participants with a copy of the informed consent form, which outlined the purpose and nature of this study, detailed information on how the research data would be collected and stored, and addressed their rights as participants and assurance of confidentiality. Finally, interviews were scheduled via an online video

conferencing platform. Interviews were planned to be conducted outside of the

participants' work hours. Each semistructured interview lasted between 30 and 45

minutes. In addition to audio-recording the interview questions and responses, I

maintained a notebook of field notes. Following each semistructured interview,

participants were asked and encouraged to add any additional questions or comments

related to the study.

On the day of the scheduled interview, all participants were reminded of their

informed consent, and I reviewed the purpose and nature of the research study. I

reminded each participant that their privacy was guaranteed and that they had the right

not to answer any of the interview questions or to end the interview at any time without

penalty.

After each interview, I asked the participant if they had any additional comments

to share or any questions related to the study, and I encouraged each participant to contact

me directly with any follow-up questions or comments following the interview. A thank

you note was sent to each participant acknowledging their time supporting this research

study. Following the interview process, all participants received a transcribed copy of

their interview responses to review and provide clarification or further details, as

appropriate. After the participants had an opportunity to review their interview transcript

and offer edits, if necessary, the data were coded and analyzed.

Data Analysis Plan

Ravitch and Carl (2021) defined qualitative data analysis as "the intentional,

systematic scrutiny of data at various stages and moments throughout the research

process" (p. 234). After completing the semistructured interviews and reviewing the transcribed interview data, I began the data analysis process. After completing the semistructured interviews and downloading the interview transcriptions, I engaged in multiple reads of the interview data to deepen my understanding of the data. Following a comprehensive review of codes collected from the semistructured interview data, I began using the available codes to construct themes (Burkholder et al., 2020). Themes that were generated from the collected data that were not relevant to the research study were considered, analyzed, and interpreted in relation to the study's research questions. Themes generated from the data that supported the study's research questions were further supported with direct quotes from the semistructured interviews.

Data Organization and Management

Following each semistructured interview, I created individual files in Microsoft Word for each interview transcription. Audio-transcriptions were transcribed verbatim. All transcriptions were uploaded into Microsoft Word within 5 days of the interview. After all transcripts were uploaded, I engaged in precoding. Ravitch and Carl (2021) described precoding as an integrative process of thoroughly reading, questioning, and reflecting on the information presented. During this precoding stage, engaging in multiple reads to increase familiarity of the data is encouraged (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Throughout this precoding stage, I wrote analytic memos to capture what I had learned from the data, documented questions that arose, and to ensure my biases did not influence the analysis of the available data. After engaging in multiple immersive readings of the semistructured interview transcripts, I began the first-cycle inductive and deductive

coding process and engaged with the semistructured interview transcript data. Ravitch and Carl described inductive readings as analyzing data sets for themes and patterns and deductive readings as analyzing data to determine how the data support concepts and topics described in prior research studies. Following the first-cycle coding of interview transcripts, all initial codes were uploaded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, with each code receiving its own worksheet. Direct quotes from interview participants that supported specific codes were added to each worksheet, thus allowing for more simplistic data organization and management. Microsoft Excel worksheets were created to further organize codes and direct quotes from semistructured interview transcripts to support each of the proposed study's three research questions:

RQ1: What are the elementary principals' experiences in attempting to fulfill the mandates associated with the district's educational equity policy?

RQ2: What are the elementary principals' perceptions about how the process of implementing the district's educational equity policy can be improved?

RQ3: What leadership practices do elementary principals believe are needed to successfully implement the district's educational equity policy?

First-Cycle Coding

Following multiple reads of all transcripts, I began the initial process described by Saldaña (2016) as first-cycle coding. Ravitch and Carl (2021) defined first cycle coding as a recursive process that results in the refinement of initial codes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Saldaña defined a code as a reference to a word or short phrase that resonates with the researcher as a descriptive attribute to a piece of language or visual data source. As a researcher reviews preliminary codes within the transcript data, the researcher may reorganize the many codes into smaller categories that best describe the codes (Saldaña, 2016). Ravitch and Carl found that as a researcher begins transitioning from categories to themes, the researcher, who serves as the primary research instrument, organizes, and constructs themes based on the collected data.

Second-Cycle Coding

Following the initial process of first-cycle coding, Saldaña (2016) recommended that researchers engage in second-cycle coding as an advanced method of reorganizing and reanalyzing data. I utilized a holistic approach and applied a lumper style while coding and attempting to identify themes within the collected data. Saldaña described the lumper style of analysis as when a researcher focuses on more significant portions of text versus splitting sentences with various codes. While engaged in second-round coding, I organized initial coding into categorical themes representing all participants' responses.

Thematic Analysis

Ravitch and Carl (2021) described thematic analysis as a process for developing themes to answer a study's research questions and determining "…relationships, similarities, and differences in the data" (p. 239). For this study, I carefully reviewed all coded data collected from the transcripts from the semistructured interviews. Following the initial coding, in vivo, pattern, and versus coding were utilized to identify themes representing all participants' responses and to answer the study's research questions.

Codes generated from the semistructured interview transcripts were compared to determine overlaps, disconnections or outliers, or available patterns. The themes generated through this stage of analysis were documented into analytic memos to capture my thoughts around what the themes meant and the codes that supported each theme. Additionally, I used the study's research questions to support the connection between the codes and identified themes. Once initial themes were identified, I re-visited and re-immersed myself within the data available from the transcripts from the semistructured interviews. This re-immersion allowed me to determine any missing information and to generate subthemes, as appropriate. Finally, I continuously engaged in self-reflection to continuously check my own interpretations of the data to avoid possible misinterpretation or possible alternative explanations. Data saturation was achieved when I could answer the study's research questions.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness, in qualitative research studies, is best defined as a researcher's ability to ensure the study's results are an accurate and complete reflection of the participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Although positivists commonly challenge trustworthiness in qualitative research studies, qualitative researchers have worked hard to advocate for the fidelity of qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To establish validity within qualitative research studies, researchers must address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981). Throughout this study, I remained cognizant of my own experiences, biases, and relationship with the

participants to ensure that the findings within this study remained believable, reliable, and transferable.

Credibility

Credibility in a research study is achieved when the data collected aligns with the study's research questions (Burkholder et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To establish trustworthiness within my research study, I utilized the strategy of member checking following the semistructured interviews. Member checks, or participation validation strategies (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), are one strategy researchers can implement to establish credibility within the study. Following each semistructured interview, I provided the interview participant with the transcript and allowed the participant to make any necessary revisions. Following my work with coding the interview transcript, I will again follow up with the participant to verify that the codes are aligned with the participant's thinking around experiences with implementing the district-mandated educational equity policy. While this process may be laborious, validating the participants' thinking proved invaluable. The member-checking process also ensured that I remained bias-free throughout my analysis.

Transferability

In a qualitative research study, transferability is achieved when evidence demonstrates that a study's findings apply to other situations (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To further support the transferability of this study's conclusions, I provided detailed descriptions of the research study's setting, research participants, and comprehensive

analysis of the data collected for readers to apply the findings of this study to future research.

Dependability

Establishing transparency throughout this research study was critical to ensuring dependability and consistency within data collection, analysis, and the reporting of findings after the study (Burkholder et al., 2020). To further support the dependability of this research study, I conducted audit trails and maintained detailed notes of how the research was conducted and how the data collected was analyzed (Burkholder et al., 2020). Rich, thick descriptions outlining specific details on how the study was conducted and how the data were analyzed allowed future researchers to conduct this study and achieve the same results. Throughout the study, detailed field notes were maintained to capture how participants were recruited, how, where, and when the semistructured interviews were conducted, and a thorough review of how the research data were analyzed to answer the study's research questions.

Confirmability

Within qualitative research studies, confirmability requires researchers to acknowledge, explore, and challenge how biases may have influenced the study results (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Within this qualitative research study, I served as the primary instrument; therefore, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity throughout the entire research process. To ensure my biases did not impact the results of this study, I used the member checking strategy to ensure I did not inaccurately interpret participants' responses to the interview questions. Additionally, I actively engaged in journaling through the research

study and data collection processes to record my thoughts following participant interviews and my opinions and expectations to support the data analysis portion of this study. Ongoing journaling to practice reflexivity throughout all stages of this research study confirmed my study's results.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical concerns were possible with this study, as this study was conducted in the same district where I currently serve as an elementary principal, and I am a colleague of the study's participants. Although I worked alongside the research participants, I did not supervise any participant that was recruited to participate in this study. Conducting this research study within my own work environment required me to take a relational approach to the research study and to critically examine each facet of the research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Maintaining a relational approach to the research study allowed me to demonstrate vulnerability if I not know the answer to a question posed by a study participant, admit bias, and to engage in dialogue with others involved within this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Power relationships were not used within this study; therefore, participants were encouraged to participate in this study to help promote positive social change and provide necessary guidance towards helping elementary principals with overcoming challenges around the implementation of the district's mandated educational equity policy. While my relationship with the intended study participants may have been viewed as a possible challenge, I ameliorated this potential bias by focusing recruitment efforts on principals with whom I rarely worked during the school year. This allowed me

to work with participants with whom I do not hold supervisory or power-influenced positions.

To ensure this study remained ethical, I submitted the study for review and approval through Walden University's Institutional Review Board before initiating all recruitment measures or data collection. Following the informed consent process, I informed all participants of the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their identity and all responses provided during the interviews, and the necessary measures taken to protect all participants from harm. All participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. Participants signed an informed consent form indicating their willingness to volunteer in this study. No incentives were offered to recruit or to show gratitude toward participants for engaging in this research study.

Sustaining participants' confidentiality remained a top priority throughout this research study. To further protect participants, all responses remained confidential to ensure that all data collected cannot be connected back to the study participants. All data remained on a password-protected computer. When transcribing the interview data, I used pseudonyms to protect participants' identities further. All hard copies of informed consent forms, field notes, archival data documents, and paper-based transcription printouts remained in a locked filing cabinet. Following Walden University's guidelines, all data and documentation associated with this research study will be destroyed after 5 years.

Summary

This chapter outlined the selection criteria for the basic qualitative study design and identified alternative qualitative research designs that were ultimately rejected. The basic qualitative study research design provided an opportunity to explore elementary principals' experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. As the researcher of this study, I outlined how I anticipated recruiting participants for this study. Although I worked alongside the study's participants, I did not directly supervise any of the participants, which assisted in eliminating bias within my data analysis. Data collection occurred through semistructured interviews, which were audio-recorded, and a detailed review of available archival data sources, such as Board of Education meeting minutes and professional development presentations. Detailed field notes served as an audit trail to ensure the research study was implemented as described. As outlined by Walden University's Institutional Review Board, all ethical procedures were implemented to ensure the integrity and protection of all research participants.

Chapter 4 provides readers with a detailed description of the research study's setting and an outline of each phase of the data collection and data analysis processes and concludes with sufficient results to answer each research question. Details on how trustworthiness was achieved are detailed before transitioning to Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary principals' experiences in implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. Three research questions guided this study:

RQ1:   What are the elementary principals' experiences in attempting to fulfill the mandates associated with the district's educational equity policy?

RQ2:   What are the elementary principals' perceptions about how the process of implementing the district's educational equity policy can be improved?

RQ3:   What leadership practices do elementary principals believe are needed to successfully implement the district's educational equity policy?

This chapter includes information on the setting, data collection, and data analysis. Results provide detailed information on the themes that emerged because of the data analysis related to the three research questions. Next, evidence of trustworthiness is discussed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, a preview of Chapter 5 follows a summary of answers to the research questions.

Setting

The setting of this qualitative case study was a rural school district in northeastern Maryland. There are 23 elementary schools within this school district. Based on the established participant selection criteria, 20 principals were eligible to participate within this study. To qualify as a participant in this research study, participants met the following criteria: (a) served as an elementary principal, at the time of the study, within the rural northeastern Maryland school district; (b) had completed at least 1 year as an

elementary principal; (c) had participated in professional development related to the district's educational equity policy; and (d) were available to participate in face-to-face video conferencing through an online platform regarding their personal experiences and challenges as related to implementing the district-mandated educational equity policy. Following the voluntary nature of the study's recruitment process, 10 elementary principals provided initial informed consent to participate. Although recruiting individuals to participate in this study was not overly challenging, the scheduling of the semistructured interviews took longer than anticipated. This challenge was associated with availability of time to commit given the day-to-day responsibilities of building leaders both during and outside of their established duty days. These conditions resulted in one participant withdrawing from the study after initially providing informed consent. In addition, two elementary principals expressed their desire to participate but stated that they could not fit the interview into their overloaded daily schedules. Overall, interviews were conducted over the course of 1 month between December 27, 2022, and January 27, 2023. The nine participants in this basic qualitative study were all elementary principals with varying years of experience. As shown in Table 1, all participants had served as elementary principals for at least 2 years prior to engaging in this research study.

Table 1

Research Participant Information

Participant	Gender	Years as principal
P1	Female	7
P2	Female	18
P3	Female	11
P4	Male	2
P5	Male	7
P6	Female	6
P7	Female	9
P8	Female	9
P9	Female	2

Data Collection

The data collected for this study were from elementary principals participating in semistructured interviews. The semistructured interview protocol questions were written to investigate elementary principals' perceptions of their experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. Interview protocol questions focused on principals' previous experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy, barriers principals faced while attempting to implement the mandated policy, and the leadership practices necessary to implement the mandated policy effectively. All interview protocol questions were written to be open-ended, allowing me to ask essential follow-up questions as appropriate.

All nine semistructured interviews were recorded and transcribed using the online video conferencing platform in a quiet office setting that was free of distractions and interruptions. Each semistructured interview lasted up to 40 minutes. Using an interview protocol provided structure to the conversations and ensured that each participant was asked the same interview questions. I recorded each interview using an online video

conferencing platform. Following each interview, the participants were sent the transcription of their interview. This allowed participants to review the transcript for accuracy and to clarify any possible misconceptions. All interviews were confidential, and interview recordings and transcriptions were stored on a password-protected laptop. No unusual circumstances were encountered during this study's data collection phase.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data sources requires researchers to engage with all data points fully and to begin making sense of the data related to the study's research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this research study, I collected and analyzed data in the form of transcripts from semistructured interviews. Ravitch and Carl (2021) defined qualitative data analysis as "the intentional, systematic scrutiny of data at various stages and moments throughout the research process" (p. 234).

After engaging in multiple readings of the transcripts simply to refamiliarize myself with the data collected, I began the first-cycle coding process. During first-cycle coding, I utilized an open-coding method to analyze the available data. I created worksheets within Microsoft Excel related to the study's research questions. Throughout my analysis of the data sources, I moved inductively from coded data units to larger data representations, including categories and themes related to the study's research questions. Throughout my analysis of the data sources, I sought repetition of words or phrases shared by study participants. Saldaña (2016) recommended that qualitative researchers engage in two rounds of coding, minimally, to ensure accurate interpretation of the study's results.

Ravitch and Carl defined coding as a process in which a researcher assigns labels to words or phrases to help organize data for analysis purposes. I began by reviewing each transcript line by line to first identify codes, categories, and finally themes. My first round of coding consisted of in vivo coding, which allowed me to focus on the participants' voices to generate codes. By focusing on how the participants responded to the semistructured interview questions, I was able to manage my bias through this stage of initial analysis. Using in vivo coding, I read through each transcript line by line and highlighted what I believed to be important words, phrases, and concepts. As I engaged in this initial data analysis process, I maintained a journal of analytic memos to capture my thoughts, reactions, questions, and personal bias. After my initial coding of each interview transcript, I reread each of the nine interview transcripts to identify and document similar thoughts and wording across the transcripts. Commonly identified words and phrases were loaded into the Microsoft Excel worksheets.

For my second round of coding, I utilized pattern coding. Pattern coding required me to look globally at the initial codes generated from the interview transcripts. Saldaña (2016) described pattern coding as combining similar initial codes into broader categories. After reviewing the initial codes listed in the Microsoft Excel worksheets, I began to determine relationships between codes associated with each research question and began grouping similar codes together to generate categories. During the second round of coding and building categories, the themes became more defined and aligned with the study's conceptual framework. Following this second round of coding, a final

list of codes was generated. During second-round coding, I organized codes and categories into themes representing all participants' responses.

The themes generated through this stage of analysis were documented into analytic memos to capture my thoughts around what the themes meant and the codes that supported each theme. Additionally, I used the study's research questions to support the connection between the codes, categories, and identified themes. There were no discrepant cases. After coding all the data sets, identifying categories, and grouping similar topics, the following seven final themes emerged (see Table 2).

Table 2

Codes, Categories, Themes by Research Question

Codes	Categories	Themes
RQ1: What are the elementary principals' experiences in attempting to fulfill the mandates associated with the district's educational equity policy?		
No prior experiences Lack of coursework Site-based professional learning	Professional development On-the-job training Continuing education	Principals had a lack of preparation
Lack of understanding Policy Lack of guidance	Policy development Policy implementation Purpose of policy	Principals cannot implement what they do not understand
Unaware Lack of accountability Lack of leadership	Out of sight, out of mind Pandemic disruption	Principals' lack of accountability translates into complacency
RQ2: What are the elementary principals' perceptions about how the process of implementing the district's educational equity policy can be improved?		
Time Training Exposure	Professional learning	Professional development is necessary and important
Vision Clear expectations Consistent leadership Lack of accountability	Strong leadership Consistent messaging Accountability	Principals need to prioritize leadership to achieve educational equity
RQ3: What leadership practices do elementary principals believe are needed to successfully implement the district's educational equity policy?		
Diversity Recruitment Collaboration	Community partnership Human resources	Principals aspire for greater inclusion and diversity in the classroom
Pushing ahead Collaboration Awareness	Inclusivity Shared focus	Principals become visionary leaders

Note. RQ is the abbreviation for research question.

Results

The results of the semistructured interviews with nine participants are

summarized below. The seven themes that emerged from coding and data analysis were

sufficient to answer the study's three research questions:

RQ1: What are the elementary principals' experiences in attempting to fulfill the

mandates associated with the district's educational equity policy?

RQ2: What are the elementary principals' perceptions about how the process of

implementing the district's educational equity policy can be improved?

RQ3: What leadership practices do elementary principals believe are needed to

successfully implement the district's educational equity policy?

Seven major themes emerged from the thematic data analysis. As shown in Table

2, the major themes were organized by research question. These themes were (a)

principals had a lack of preparation, (b) principals cannot implement what they do not

understand, (c) principals' lack of accountability translates into complacency, (d)

professional development is necessary and important, (e) principals need to prioritize

leadership to achieve educational equity, (f) principals aspire for greater inclusion and

diversity in the classroom, and (g) principals became visionary leaders. Summaries of the

findings, organized by theme, with direct quotes from the semistructured interviews are

included below.

Theme 1: Principals Had a Lack of Preparation

A common theme that resonated throughout the semistructured interview data

from principals was the absolute necessity of ongoing professional development and the

lack of preparation provided by colleges' and universities' educational leadership preparation programs. All nine participants shared that the concept of educational equity was not explicitly taught in their leadership development programs. As participants reflected on their leadership programs, some indicated that their coursework alluded to educational equity, but an explicit focus was lacking. P4 said,

> There's always been a least some kind of understanding that [equity] was an expectation in that we provide equal opportunities for students and for staff. But, I don't know if I got a whole lot of specific training or experience leading [for equity] before becoming an administrator. I don't think there was any specific professional development I attended, and I don't think there was a specific focus on equity during any courses that I took for my master's [degree].

P6 and P7 stated that their leadership development programs did not prepare them to be equity leaders, and prior to becoming school-based administrators, professional development opportunities were limited. P8 said, "I don't feel like we discussed equity in leadership during my admin cohort. We have had some training as leaders in the public school system, but not clear directives on how to approach the same issues with our staff." P9 said,

> As far as leading for equity, I would say that my programming essentially prepared me to know that it's important to ensure that all students are receiving free and appropriate education, and that may look differently for different students, but that it's my role both as a classroom teacher and also as an administrator to ensure that this is in fact happening for students and to tap into

whatever resources are necessary, whether it be people or physical items, to make

sure that the education is equitable.

All participants were clear that ongoing, specific professional development around

effectively leading for equity is necessary and important.

Theme 2: Principals Cannot Implement What They Do Not Understand

When interviewing principals about their experiences implementing the district's

educational equity policy, I found that all participants were clear that a lack of

understanding, as related to the district's educational equity policy, significantly inhibits

their abilities to lead for equity effectively. P1 stated,

One of our challenges is [that] we are a small school, so it's hard to do a lot of the

[equity] activities and really look at the equity in our building. We are also not a

very diverse staff. So, we have a lot of very similar experiences and it's hard to

get a lot of good rich dialogue going.

P2 said, "I think it's all of us and all the people that I encounter, we want to do the right

thing. It's just not knowing what that right thing is and what's best for everybody." P3

stated,

The challenge here is letting people know [the policy] exists and that it's

important. Because like everything else, when you're working in a school, where

pretty much everybody's White and pretty much everybody comes from middle

class socioeconomic means, that it's really easy to ignore.

P4 reported that "not everybody interprets the policy the same way." Both P4 and P5 reflected on previous experiences when attempting to implement the policy resulted in challenges presented by their staff. P5 said,

> When I try to be more inclusive and allow more students into the [Gifted and Talented] program, I did get some pushback from some of staff members and teachers because they thought the student wasn't gifted. I tried to open their eyes to see that it's more about giving kids new experiences.

P7 discussed that she felt she and her staff shared similar experiences in lacking knowledge and understanding of educational equity. "Knowing the lack of experience or education that my staff has had similarly [to] myself and trying to get the importance of it across to many staff members of my predominantly White and not diverse school." P7 continued on to share that "…many people don't think [equity] is an issue or don't think it's necessary. Don't see it as a need." P6 shared similar thoughts when discussing county-wide professional development opportunities that have been made available to principals and local school teams. She continued to say, "…when our equity liaisons are giving a canned [presentation] that they have to do, and school teams are not in the same place across the county, that's a huge problem."

In October 2021, the school district's superintendent and equity and inclusion officer, stated that all schools were required to implement a 60-minute professional development presentation focused on the school district's educational equity policy and what educational equity looks like in the classroom. When reflecting on this growth opportunity, P8 stated, "I think everyone knowing and understanding the policy is first

and foremost, second, respecting the equity policy has been an issue…and I don't think that our equity liaisons are properly trained to deliver information of this magnitude." P6 noted that her staff found the professional development presentation "left a really bad taste in people's mouths just because it seemed to deteriorate into a very judgmental [experience]." She continued by sharing that staff questioned and stated, "why are we doing this? It's not helping my teaching. I don't see the purpose of it."

P7 reflected on challenges she has personally faced while attempting to implement the district's educational equity policy and reported that she "…cannot blame [her staff] for their lack of experience or knowledge, because they haven't been exposed to it either. This is their first time being exposed to any type of equity practices." P8 concluded that educational equity "[is not] a priority in this system." Most participants noted that as of the date of their interview, the school district's educational equity policy had not been reviewed or discussed in any detail. It simply cannot be assumed that principals have reviewed and have a working understanding of established district-wide policies.

Theme 3: Principals' Lack of Accountability Translates Into Complacency

During the May 8, 2019, local Board of Education meeting, the school system's equity and inclusion officer and chief of academics, equity, and accountability outlined the proposed educational equity policy. The proposed educational equity policy was approved unanimously. Despite the unanimous approval of the school system's educational equity policy, elementary principals have not received direct professional learning support to implement this new policy within their schools. When asked to

describe the level of support each principal has sought to overcome obstacles, they have faced with implementing the district's educational equity policy, P1 reflected and said, "Mostly working with our equity liaison at the county level, but that has been hit or miss the last couple of years, so [I] haven't really gotten a lot of support that way." P2 said that she often consults with colleagues and brainstorms different ways to reach a desired outcome. She continued to reflect and shared that felt comfortable also seeking support at the Central Office level. P2 also noted that, "Sometimes it's just knowing what to ask." P3 reported that she really hasn't sought support to help overcome any obstacles. "we haven't had a person in the most important position for what feels like forever."

P3 continued by reflecting on the support provided by the former employee who served as the school district's equity leader. "I will say I felt like [former employee] definitely had a vision that was very clear to administrators, and I am hopeful that our new equity leader will continue that kind of dedication…" She continued, "I think [former employee] was kind of just starting to move into that place where her message and her belief system was transferring from administrators to teachers. And then it goes from teachers to kids." Most other principals interviewed shared similar sentiments around the unexpected change in leadership affecting continued growth.

All principals reflected on the collegiality of the system's elementary principal team and the openness of leaning on one another to overcome unforeseen challenges. P4 stated, "If I feel like I'm having difficulty navigating, I feel like I always want to reach out and make sure I'm getting other perspectives as well." A couple of principals also noted that the Covid-19 pandemic jeopardized forward progress. P8 said, "I would say in

the last two years, we've received zero support or any direction from central office or from our equity leader." P3 summarized the last few years as "survival years" where principals prioritized their focus on helping all faculty, staff, and students overcome the unpredictable and unprecedented challenges associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, traditional monthly principals' meetings were replaced by weekly or bi-weekly county-wide updates on health metrics, shifts in curriculum, and new instructional practices to help support fully virtual or hybrid learning.

Theme 4: Professional Development Is Necessary and Important

Six participants shared that professional development and strengthening the leaders' understanding of educational equity is imperative if principals are expected to not only implement the educational equity policy, but also ensure that all faculty and staff are following the guidance of the policy within every school. P1 said, principals need "a clear understanding of what the equity policy is and there should be a broadening of what we consider under equity." She continued to share that at her school, "our focus is a lot on disability equity, and it seems like that is really missing. The policy seems to be very one sided." P4 shared that he felt as though principals have received "bits and pieces throughout our learning as administrators" but the policy needs to be more visible. He continued, "principals can benefit from some clarity on what we're expected to do within our roles" to strengthen our practices as leaders for equity.

P5, P6, and P7 all noted that the elusive element of time is critical in helping faculty and staff strengthen their understanding of the educational equity policy. P5 said, "just carving out time to talk about equity. When you do something like [equity work]

over and over again, it gives it value and that communicates importance and value." P6

reflected on the importance of finding time to meet, talk, and process through the purpose

and value of the educational equity policy. She commented, "We often make time for

other required professional learning, such as suicide prevention, but we have yet to

prioritize equity." P7 reiterated that "time is so limited" but, "you can't just send out an

email with this type of PD. It really needs to be in person. You need to be engaging with

people."

P9 shared that she believes professional development is necessary because it

allows principals and school staff to

> [talk] about what it actually looks like in schools, hearing from other
>
> administrators of connections they can make to pieces of the policy and maybe
>
> how they handle challenges that they have faced and how that connects back to
>
> the policy. I also think having time to collaborate with different departments when
>
> needed to support students.

P8 believed that having a strong leader in the position of equity supervisor, who

"explains the policy, what their vision is for the policy, and how to go about making

change in our buildings" is the necessary resource to help school leaders implement the

district mandated educational equity policy."

Theme 5: Principals Need to Prioritize Leadership to Achieve Educational Equity

Implementing the educational equity policy with fidelity was mentioned by all

interview participants. While all participants strive to do their best to be equity leaders in

their respective buildings, many shared struggles they continued to face. When focused

on how district-level leadership can best support principals with implementation of the policy, P1 said, "understanding what the actually policy is, how we're implementing and what we're doing differently to help move things forward." P2 and P3 both shared that leading for equity is looking beyond and outside of your classroom and school. P3 said,

> Having guidelines for equity is a great start. But what are we doing outside of our schools in communities to walk the talk? I think about opportunities outside of schools, outside of academics, in the classroom. What are we doing to model the expectations of our policies?

P2 shared that collaborating with other school administrators and engaging in conversations about how equity is prioritized within their buildings helps leaders learn about resources that they might not have known existed.

P4 and P5 echoed the importance of truly understanding what the policy means, because when properly implemented all students benefit. P5 shared that when educational equity is prioritized, "it helps kids with their grades. It helps kids with their mental health. It helps decrease violence. It builds trust for the parents [because] they feel like we're really working at this and supporting their families."

P6 shared her belief that district leaders should be visible for sharing, training, and implementing the educational equity policy. "If our equity supervisor visited schools to see how equity was implemented in different buildings, and trainings were consistently offered, people might then find the value." She continued, "Face time is what people value more than anything in terms of building that authenticity and that relationship. Without that, this work is incredibly hard to do." P7 stated that she would like to see

educational equity to become sustainable and consistent across all buildings in the school district. "I don't think we're quite there yet. I think it's very different or looks very different in different buildings."

P8 shared that as a group of elementary principals, it is important to not only have a clear and complete understanding of the educational equity policy, but to implement and sustain the ongoing practice of reflection. "I would like for us to engage in some discussion regarding what we, as a group, are doing within our buildings and how are we working with our equity liaisons to develop a plan of action to continue the work." P9 also believed the element of reflection is necessary. She said,

> Talk about real examples that we can each connect to within the policy and
> challenges that have come up that are connected to the policy and how [the
> challenges] were handled, and even being reflective of what maybe could have
> been done differently.

Implementation of the educational equity policy should not be done in silos. Ongoing discussions and reflection can help all leaders grow and strengthen their practices. P5 said educational equity "is like giving [students] a voice, because I feel like sometimes, they don't feel like they have a voice."

Theme 6: Principals Aspire for Greater Inclusion and Diversity in the Classroom

Ensuring inclusion and diversity within classrooms and in the school building, emerged from data gathered through the semistructured interviews. The theme of inclusion and diversity being an expectation throughout the professional development presentations that were made available by the school district. A review of the district's

core values on the school district's website indicated that all school staff will display

cultural proficiency and ensure every child succeeds among many other outlined core

values. During each of the professional development presentations that were previously

shared with principals during monthly principal meetings, the theme of inclusivity and

celebrating diversity was apparent. Four principals shared insights into how they

celebrate and recognize diversity and inclusivity within their schools. Two principals

discussed the value and necessity of recruiting more diverse employees, so students can

see themselves in classrooms across the district.

P3 stated that she supports the policy within her belief system and within the

walls of her school, she strives to foster and communicate the importance of diversity and

inclusion. P5 shared that he had previously worked with the district's equity supervisor to

make connections with his minority families to ensure they felt welcomed and supported.

P4 stated that he "…wants to be well-rounded in my understanding of what is equity,

what our students and staff need." He continued, "I'm the principal and I want to make

sure that we're doing things that are equitable and fair to everybody here." P6 stated that

she encourages conversations in order to ensure that equity practices are a regular part of

the daily work of our staff. She continued, "We have language within our [School

Improvement Team] plan that refers to equitable practices and how to create inclusive

learning environments." P8 talked about community events she held to celebrate the

diversity within her school community. She shared,

> We have two equity chairs on our equity team that meets every month, and we try
>
> to look at where we can make improvements in the school building or how we can

best support our changing [student] population and our rapidly expanding ESOL

population. Discussing how to reach those families has been like a top priority.

Last year, we held a multicultural night, where families could come and represent

their country. We had dancing, signing, drum bands, and food. This helped our

community feel connected. We also change our bulletin boards every month. We

use student pictures to celebrate different cultural heritage months and we try to

stock our library with diverse books to help students learn more about and accept

differences and different cultures.

P2 and P3 both discussed the importance of recruiting efforts and the value in

attempting to recruit employees of color, so that our staffing is more aligned with the

school district's student population. P3 said,

We need to kind of go into communities like, go to all black, historically black

colleges and into more urban communities rather than saying, well, come to us and let us

know if you're interested…We may not be doing that, but other neighboring counties are

and with great success.

Theme 7: Principals Become Visionary Leaders

The final theme that resonated throughout all the interviews was that the

principals recognized the importance of educational equity and despite facing a variety of

challenges and roadblocks, they continued to forge ahead. According to the available

archived data, the last time principals engaged in purposeful professional learning

regarding equity and diversity initiatives was in the fall of 2019. In March 2020, all

schools in the state of Maryland were closed, under the direction of the state

superintendent, due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Personal Communication, March 13, 2020). Despite a lack of continued professional development and the challenges associated with the pandemic, elementary principals continue to rise above and prioritize educational equity within their school buildings. Eight principals discussed the critical need to develop a strong vision and to ensure that all educators have a clear understanding of the policy. P1 said, "Again, clear understanding of what [the policy] is and a clear understanding of the outcome. How do we know when we get there?" P2 discussed the importance of having a clear vision that helps support her staff in understanding what equity looks like in their classrooms and to ensure consistency over the years despite any changes in staffing. P3 shared, "I would say a clear plan for professional learning that is rigorous and attainable that is built upon input from all stakeholders." She continued, "It can't just be like the awareness is the beginning. But like, what do we need to do and not just implement more professional learning…What have [schools] done to strengthen community-based relationships with families of diversity in your building?" P4 and P5 discussed the importance of collaboration and holding each other accountable for ensuring the important work continues. P5 said,

> We need to have resources that align with the policy and then we also need to have people [who] are brave enough to enforce it to make sure that we're doing what we're supposed to be doing and holding each other accountable to make sure it's actually happening.

P7, P8, and P9 all echoed similar feelings that despite the challenges all school administrators have faced, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, there remains an

unspoken priority to keep equity in the forefront of principals' daily decision-making. P7 shared,

> I think going back to basics in regards to that whole policy too, because I do feel like it's been swept to the side. It's not in the forefront of people's minds or their radar, so to speak or in their schools. I know things are still happening, but it's kind of like based on what we did a couple years ago or based on where we were a couple years ago. It needs to come back up, be in the forefront, be put on the top of the list and be addressed again.

P8 reflected and shared that while she is continuing to prioritize equity practices within her school building, "we need to make sure that inclusion and diversity is accepted in our county system" to support the strong work being done in our respective buildings. P9 reflected on the importance of collaborating with other principals to share the work she is doing in her building and learning about what other principals are doing in their buildings to ensure the important work continues. Despite the unforeseen challenges principals have faced over the last couple of years, prioritizing educational equity practices sends a very clear message to all students that they are welcomed and valued in classrooms across the district.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness, in qualitative research studies, is best defined as a researcher's ability to ensure the study's results are an accurate and complete reflection of the participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Ravitch and Carl (2021) argued that for

a study to be considered trustworthy the following four criteria must be met: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility of the results were established when the methodologies aligned with the study's research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To gather insights into principals' experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy, I interviewed nine elementary principals. An inductive analysis of the interview data allowed me to generate codes, categories, and themes from the data sources (Saldaña, 2016). Following each semistructured interview, participants were sent their transcripts for review and encouraged to share any edits or additional information they would like included. Following the analysis of their transcripts, I again shared the analyzed transcripts with each participant to verify that the codes associated with their spoken words aligned. This process, known as member checking, allows researchers to check in with participants to capture their thoughts and feelings about how the analysis of their data resonates and aligns with their thinking (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). While I was willing to make any necessary adjustments to my data analysis, I did not receive any requested changes from the interview participants.

Transferability

In qualitative research studies, transferability is established when a researcher sufficiently describes the setting in which the study occurred and outlines the assumptions of the study, so any readers can make informed decisions related to the findings of the study (Burkholder et al., 2020). Transferability of this study was

established by providing rich, detailed descriptions of my data analysis. In addition, the research study participants ranged with years of experience, which added value in gaining a wider perspective on how principals implemented a mandated policy within their respective buildings.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research studies is established when there is evidence of consistency in how research data is collected, analyzed, and reported (Burkholder et al., 2020). I established dependability of my research study by maintaining detailed audit trail notes, outlining the planning process, recruitment of participants, collection, and analysis of the data. When capturing my notes, I utilized rich, thick descriptions to not only detail the steps taken throughout the study, but to also capture my thoughts and to prevent biases from influencing the data analysis.

Confirmability

Confirmability is achieved when a research study can be replicated and produce similar results (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To establish confirmability within this research study, I regularly engaged in reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis stages. By journaling my thoughts, feelings, and questions, I was able to ensure that my personal biases did not influence the data collection and analysis stages. To further support that my personal biases did not influence the results of this study, I engaged in member checking to ensure that I did not misinterpret any participant's responses. Engaging in these reflective practices ensured that my research study remained rigorous and valid.

Summary

This qualitative research study explored elementary principals' experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. In summary, seven themes were identified during the analysis of collected data, resulting in answering all three research questions. The identified themes were, (a) principals' lack of preparation, (b) principals cannot implement what they do not understand, (c) principals' lack of accountability translates into complacency, (d) professional development is necessary and important, (e) principals need to prioritize leadership to achieve educational equity, (f) principals aspire for greater inclusion and diversity in the classroom, and (g) principals become visionary leaders.

This chapter included a summary of the data collected from semistructured interviews. An in-depth analysis of the collected data followed which provided detailed descriptions of each theme and examples from participants to support each theme.

In Chapter 5, I will detail the interpretation of the collected data, as well as the implications of the results from this study. In addition, limitations of the study and recommendations for future research studies will be described based on the study's results. Finally, I will provide an overview of positive social change that may occur because of this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore elementary principals' experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. The lack of success that principals faced in implementing the district's mandated educational equity policy served as the key problem for this research study. The qualitative nature of this study featured completing semistructured interviews of nine principals responsible for implementing the district's mandated educational equity policy.

Data analysis of the interview transcripts identified seven themes, which answered the study's three research questions. The seven major themes identified were (a) principals' lack of preparation, (b) principals cannot implement what they do not understand, (c) principals' lack of accountability translates into complacency, (d) professional development is necessary and important, (e) principals need to prioritize leadership to achieve educational equity, (f) principals aspire for greater inclusion and diversity in the classroom, and (g) principals become visionary leaders.

Interpretation of the Findings

Thorough data analysis was achieved through continuous notetaking, becoming deeply immersed in the interview data collected. Following multiple readings of all available data, I engaged in two rounds of coding to generate categories and themes that answered each of the study's three research questions. The final study's themes, resulting from data analysis of the collected data, each aligned with the literature detailed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, I analyzed the collected data using the conceptual framework of Burns's (1978) theory on transformational leadership.

Principals' Lack of Preparation

All nine participants made it evident in their responses that the concept of educational equity was not explicitly taught during their pre-service coursework or when enrolled in educational administration courses. In a study by Mayger and Provinzano (2020), the authors reported that a lack of formal preparation to lead for equity within leadership development courses perpetuates the lack of understanding among school leaders. Significant revisions to the principal pipeline are warranted to address the lack of preparation principals face when challenged to lead for equity in their school communities (Mayger & Provinzano, 2020). Unfortunately, most principals currently leading school communities received formal training under the former ISLLC standards, which did not prioritize practices focused on equity and cultural responsiveness (Mayger & Provinzano, 2020). To overcome the challenges associated with a lack of preparation, there is a distinct need for ongoing systematic professional development, coaching, and mentoring to help principals strengthen their skills (Mayger & Provinzano, 2020; Rasmussen & Raskin, 2021).

In another research study, Rasmussen and Raskin (2021) reported that principal preparation programs must make necessary shifts to align their focus on engaging leaders in conversations around race and equity. Principals must engage in deliberate and purposeful reflective conversations regarding race and racism to ensure that their personal biases do not negatively influence their effectiveness in leading for equity (Rasmussen & Raskin, 2021). While some principals referenced the quarterly professional development exercises that they had participated in at the school-district

level, Rasmussen and Raskin argued that courageous conversations must be coupled with frequent professional development as leading for equity can not only be a steep learning curve, but is often uncomfortable for many.

Nadelson et al. (2020) described the necessity for principals to develop a relationship between transformational leadership and educational equity. In their study, Nadelson et al. found that principals must shift from focusing on the prerequisite skills that students lack to implementing focused strategies to further support student learning. Nadelson et al. described a transformational leader as a principal who promotes equity, recognizes and celebrates individuality, and strives to create learning environments where all students can learn and grow. The principals who participated in this research study were all focused on improving their practices and fostering an inclusive environment.

The literature, coupled with participants' responses from the semistructured interviews, supports the findings from this study that preservice educational leadership programs do not effectively prepare principals to enter the field of education with a strong understanding of how to lead for equity effectively.

Principals Cannot Implement What They Do Not Understand

Educational standards that help guide principals to become highly effective educational leaders have evolved. In 1996, the first iteration of professional standards for educational leaders was released (Farley et al., 2019). This first iteration of standards was known as the ISLLC standards. The ISLLC standards focused primarily on bridging the gap between research and practice regarding how school leaders should effectively manage their school buildings (Farley et al., 2019). Farley et al. (2019) found that the

ISLLC standards helped establish clear boundaries for school-based leaders to focus on daily responsibilities to become strong instructional leaders. As a result, school leaders prioritized student achievement; however, educational equity was never explicitly addressed within the ISLLC standards (Farley et al., 2019). In 2015, the PSEL standards were released. In their study, Farley et al. noted that the rollout of the PSEL standards resulted in principals shifting from a sole focus on accountability for student achievement to a focus on every student and outlining specific supports to ensure that all students succeed. While this shift from data to focusing on individual student needs was critically important, the PSEL standards were the first set of professional standards that specifically addressed educational equity (Farley et al., 2019). With educational equity now explicitly identified in the PSEL standards, many educational leaders were faced with ensuring that all educators had a strong understanding of how to meet the needs of every student and ultimately ensure that every student succeeds at high levels (Farley et al., 2019).

The findings from this research study were congruent with the challenges reported in the supporting literature. P9 reflected on challenges her staff had faced around not being aware of the amount or type of specific resources that may be needed to fully support student success. P6 shared that many county-wide presentations geared towards helping teachers and principals strengthen equity practices within schools are "canned presentations that do not align with all current stages of understanding or implementation with regard to educational equity."

Principals' Lack of Accountability Translates Into Complacency

Farley et al. (2019) wrote that over the past 20 years, policymakers have strived to ensure that principals and educators alike are held to higher standards and ultimately held accountable to ensure that learning environments are transformed to support all students. With national legislation most known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, educational leaders are challenged with embodying equity-oriented leadership in their daily work with teachers and students (Farley et al., 2019). Despite this national focus, a lack of accountability at the state and local school district level has resulted in principals not prioritizing educational equity within their targeted school improvement practices.

As participants reflected on their experiences implementing the district's mandated educational equity policy, many participants reflected that a lack of understanding of the policy had resulted in a lack of accountability in leading for equity. P2 said, "I think all of us want to do the right thing; however, we just do not always know what the right thing is and what is best for everybody." Turning challenges into opportunities for continued improvement is supported by Burns's (1978) theory of transformational leadership. Burns (1978) stated that effective leaders demonstrate an ability to make social change that positively impacts student learning. However, a policy cannot simply be posted or shared once and is therefore expected to be fully implemented (Connolly et al., 2020). Without sufficient accountability measures to support the district-wide policy implementation, historical inequities may continue to influence student achievement (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020).

Professional Development Is Necessary and Important

Mayger and Provinzano (2020) found that professional development opportunities

for principals to strengthen their understanding of educational equity are seriously

lacking. Despite clearly defined professional standards outlining the expectations for

school leaders to lead for equity (Farley et al., 2019), principals are not engaging in

targeted equity work consistently to truly strengthen and hone their craft to be strong

leaders of equity (Mayger & Provinzano, 2020; Poekert et al., 2020). In their study,

Connelly et al. (2020) found that professional development opportunities must be tailored

to the leaders' experience levels and aligned with the expected outcomes of the

educational policy. The authors further stated that professional development should not

be administered in isolation but embedded within the work throughout the school year

(Connelly et al., 2020). According to Burns (1978), transformational leaders are

committed to continued learning and effectively increasing their capacity to lead for a

common purpose.

The literature supports that principals require frequent and ongoing professional

development to develop an equity mindset and align the central focus to ensuring that all

students experience success in school. Without targeted professional development

opportunities, school leaders cannot be expected to erase years of segregation and racism

(Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020).

Principals Need to Prioritize Leadership to Achieve Educational Equity

For far too many years, educators have not prioritized educational equity

(Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020). Racial biases, discrimination, and significant academic

achievement gaps continue to impede the success of minority students in classrooms across the United States today (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020). Kimura et al. (2021) concluded that strong leadership from the principal is crucial in establishing a safe and open space for all students to feel welcome and available for learning. Without this safe and welcoming space, academic achievement levels will be negatively influenced (Kimura et al., 2021). Nadelson et al. (2020) also reported that if principals develop and sustain an educational equity mindset, those principals are more likely to consistently advocate for an engaging and high-quality educational experience for all students. As outlined in the PSEL standards, all school leaders must lead with a targeted focus on educational equity (Farley et al., 2019).

Despite the school district where this study took place developing an educational equity policy in 2019, principals consistently reported that they had never reviewed the policy, lacked understanding of how to lead for equity effectively, and faced challenges in planning for professional development opportunities focused on educational equity adequately. Every participant expressed a strong desire to spend more time unpacking the school district's educational equity policy to ensure that they had a complete understanding so they could strive to implement the policy with fidelity.

The literature supports the findings of this study. Principals must have a strong understanding of the policies and educational standards related to educational equity to effectively lead for equity and strive to create learning environments that are welcoming for all students (Farley et al., 2019; Nadelson et al., 2020; Poekert et al., 2020).

Principals Aspire for Greater Inclusion and Diversity in the Classroom

A critical analysis of the PSEL standard focused on educational equity identifies the school principal as someone who leads, focusing on implementing culturally responsive practices to ensure that all students experience academic success and well-being (Farley et al., 2019). The research literature is consistent with findings from multiple studies indicating that educational leaders remain racially conscious and sustain forward thinking, thus ensuring that all decisions are made with educational equity at the forefront of their minds (Galloway et al., 2019; Nadelson et al., 2020; Poekert et al., 2020; Rasmussen & Raskin, 2021). While the available archival records from the school district highlighted small amounts of district-wide focus on educational equity, the work implemented in schools is worth celebrating.

Although educational leaders are now held accountable for far more than ever before, leaders must prioritize inclusivity and diversity in all areas of the school building (Farley et al., 2019). Ashford-Hanserd (2020) argued that until society values equity, significant change will not occur. On a smaller level, principals can serve as transformative leaders and evoke positive social change by acknowledging, celebrating, and assigning value to inclusion and diversity in the classroom. These small steps may foster the necessary resurgence in the fight for equity (Ashford-Hanserd, 2020).

Principals Become Visionary Leaders

Burns (1978) defined a transformational leader as someone who follows their passion for evoking change and guides followers to reach a desired goal. Faced with significant challenges associated with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the

principals from this study overcame the many adversities and continued to lead with a focus on equity. Despite the need to prioritize educational equity as students faced unprecedented challenges surrounding the pandemic, equity had been pushed to the side. Although direct support had not been prioritized, elementary principals took measures into their own hands. Influential leaders can envision the necessary supports and structures to move forward rather than relying on previously learned skills to resolve new problems (Nadelson et al., 2020). Building collaborative relationships, operating with an equity lens, and using available data sources to evoke positive change are guaranteed strategies to help all students make positive educational strides (Amiot et al., 2020; Mayger & Provinzano, 2020). This idea of collaborative, visionary leadership was best reflected by P2, P3, and P6, who discussed their partnerships with other elementary principals within the school district. Each principal reflected on developing a smaller scaled professional learning community in which they would collaborate to strengthen their leadership practices, resulting in positive learning opportunities for students.

The findings of this study supported and extended literature specific to the conceptual framework of Burns's (1978) theory of transformational leadership. Burns (1978) believed that effective leadership resulted in leaders remaining focused on a collective purpose and holding themselves accountable for initiating and sustaining social change. Nadelson et al. (2020) best described transformational leadership as when principals stop focusing on the existing problems but rather problem-solve and determine the best ways to help students overcome their obstacles. The results of this study support current research literature in that despite the many challenges principals continue to face

in elementary schools within a rural northeastern Maryland school district, the principals from this study continue actively seeking opportunities to overcome challenges, help students achieve at high levels, and support other principals who may need extra guidance and support to lead effectively for equity.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study included a small sample size of participants. Based on the established participant selection criteria, 20 principals were eligible to participate in this study; however, only nine principals elected to participate in the final study. Additionally, because the sample came from one school district in rural northeastern Maryland, the results of this study are not directly transferrable to other school districts in the state of Maryland. Given my proximity to this study and the risk of bias, as I serve as an elementary principal in the same school district where this study was conducted, the instrument design and protocols developed were followed to ameliorate any potential bias.

Recommendations

The results of this study provided the school district with critically important information regarding elementary principals' experiences implementing the district's mandated educational equity policy. The data collected provided an in-depth analysis of the critically important work that elementary principals lead to ensure that all students feel welcomed, valued, and safe within their school buildings. As a result of the findings from this study, I have provided recommendations for practice and future research.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the data collected and analyzed within this study, district leaders should prioritize their focus on educational equity. First and most importantly, district leaders must be purposeful in helping elementary principals expand their understanding of the district's educational equity policy. Based on the data collected, if principals do not fully understand the district's educational equity policy, they cannot implement the policy as written. Secondly, principals clearly expressed a strong desire to receive ongoing professional development opportunities to hone their skills to become leaders for equity. Poekert et al. (2020) reported a significant need for continued professional development focusing on educational equity. Without a targeted focus on improving educational equity practices, students in marginalized groups may continue to underperform as compared to their peers (Poekert et al., 2020). Ashford-Hanserd et al. (2020) argued that if something drastic does not occur in the arena of educational equity, racial biases, and achievement gaps will continue to worsen, thus impeding educational outcomes for students of color. All participants in this research study consistently shared their strong desires to evoke positive social change within their buildings. District leaders must build upon this strong desire and strive to evoke this level of change across the entire school district.

Mayger and Provinzano (2020) reported that the principal development pipeline must be revised to prioritize educational equity. As leaders complete their completer programs, educational equity is rarely discussed as a critical component of educational leadership. With the necessary shift to Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) standards to include a clear focus on educational equity, school-based leaders

will need mentoring, coaching, and ongoing professional development opportunities to hone and refine their understanding of how to lead for equity (Farley et al., 2019; Mayger & Provinzano, 2020; Poekert et al., 2020).

Finally, all students' social development and academic achievement must remain a priority. Like principals developing school improvement plans to specifically address practices and initiatives to address areas of academic concerns, principals are encouraged to develop equity plans. A school-wide equity plan would guide principals and school leadership teams to closely evaluate student achievement data by student groups (e.g., racial diversity, socioeconomic status, students with disabilities, English Learners) and develop targeted strategic actions to eliminate all achievement gaps when comparing pre-selected student groups. When educational equity is at the forefront of decision-making and held to the same academic achievement standards, all students will begin to succeed (Nadelson et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study provide guidance and structure for future research around educational equity and policy implementation. The limitations associated with this study encourage future research, specifically, the smaller sample size and given that all participants were from one region of Maryland. Future research studies could focus on the perspectives and experiences of principals from school districts across the state of Maryland. Additionally, this study was limited to elementary principals within the school district. Future research could focus on the experiences of additional participants, including assistant principals, district-level leaders, or teachers. While principals are

ultimately responsible for what occurs within their buildings, the voices and experiences of other staff and leaders may provide deeper insight into daily successes or challenges.

Implications

This study has the potential to influence social change on several levels. First, elementary principals responsible for implementing district-mandated equity policies may recognize some of the challenges and successes other principals have faced. The first-hand experiences of principals who participated in this study highlight the critical work in which principals created learning environments where all students experienced academic success and felt like contributing members within their school communities. Principals who strive to lead with an equity lens may increase opportunities for students thus resulting in increased student achievement.

Secondly, this study could influence social change at the district level. The data collected from this research study may provide district-level leaders with a clear understanding of the many challenges elementary principals face as they strive to create equitable opportunities for all students. Furthermore, the study's results may help district-level leaders recognize the unforeseen negative impact of writing and publishing a policy with no consideration for proper implementation. The school district created the educational equity policy primarily focusing on recognizing and removing institutional barriers that may impact students' access to high-quality education. However, with limited professional development and no clear implementation plan when the policy was rolled out, elementary principals have faced significant challenges implementing the policy within their buildings. Ensuring that all school leaders fully understand the

educational equity policy and implement the policy effectively may result in school leaders ensuring that academic achievement is not predictable based on students' race, ethnicity, gender, learning style, or socioeconomic status.

Conclusion

Nine rural northeastern Maryland school district elementary principals participated in this qualitative case study. Interview data uncovered the challenges principals are facing when implementing the school district's mandated educational equity policy. While the policy was written to ensure that all students experience high academic and social-emotional success levels, many principals faced unclear expectations, limited professional development opportunities, and attempted to become leaders for equity with no prior education or coursework focused on educational equity. Despite the many significant challenges faced by leaders across the school district, many principals honed their transformative leadership skills and strived to create warm, welcoming learning communities where all students felt like contributing members of their respective school communities.

Future research opportunities based on this study's findings may allow for continued positive influences on social change. The results of this study could help school districts eliminate unnecessary challenges following the implementation of a mandated policy. Student achievement may increase when principals receive the necessary professional development to lead for equity effectively. All students deserve to receive the highest levels of academic success, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

References

Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education: Lessons from

    international experiences. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, 6*(1),

    7-16. https://doi.org/10.1080.20020317.2020.1729587

Amiot, M. N., Mayer-Glenn, J., Parker, L. (2020). Applied critical race theory:

    Educational leadership actions for student equity. *Race Ethnicity and Education,*

    23(2), 200-220. https://doi.org/10.1080.13613324.2019/1599342

Ashford-Hanserd, S., Springer, S. B., Hayton, M., & Williams, K. E. (2020). Shadows of

    Plessy v. Ferguson: The dichotomy of progress toward educational equity since

    1954. *The Journal of Negro Education, 89*(4), 410-422.

    https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/shadows-plessy-v-ferguson-

    dichotomy-progress/docview/2655177449/se-2?accountid=14872

Bishop, J. P., & Noguera, P. A. (2019). The ecology of educational equity: Implications

    for policy. *Peabody Journal of Education, 94*(2), 122-141.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1598108

Bonner, P. J., Warren, S. R., & Jiang, Y. H. (2018). Voices from urban classrooms:

    Teachers' perceptions on instructing diverse students and using culturally

    responsive teaching. *Education and Urban Society, 50*(8), 697-726.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124517713820

Bukko, D., & Liu, K. (2021). Developing preservice teachers' equity consciousness and

    equity literacy. *Frontiers in Education, 6*.

    https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.586708

Burkholder, G. J., Cox, K. A., Crawford, L. M., & Hitchcock, J. H. (Eds.) (2020).

    Research design and methods: An applied guide for the scholar-practitioner.

    Sage Publications.

Burns, J. (1978). *Leadership*. Harper & Row.

Burns, J. (2003). *Transforming leadership: A new pursuit of happiness*. Atlantic Monthly

    Press.

Chu, Y. (2019). What are they talking about when they talk about equity? A content

    analysis of equity principles and provisions in state Every Student Succeeds Act

    plans. *Education Policy Analysis Archives 27*(158).

    https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4558

Clayton, J. K., & LaBatt, A. (2019). Balancing the role of the principalship: Creating and

    sustaining equity and excellence. *Education Leadership Review, 20*(1), 69-86.

    https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1234919

Connolly, F., Durant, T. L., & Durham, R. (2020). Indicators to assist in addressing

    equity through policy adoption. *Teachers College Record, 122*(140311), 1-32.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812912201411

DeMatthews, D. E., Serafini, A., & Watson, T. N. (2021). Leading inclusive schools:

    Principal perceptions, practices, and challenges to meaningful change.

    Educational Administration Quarterly, 57(1), 3-48.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0012161X20913897

Farley, A. N., Childs, J., & Johnson, O. A. (2019). Preparing school leaders for

    America's wicked problems? How the revised PSEL and NELP standards address

equity and justice. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 27*(115).

https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4299

Farley, A. N., Leonardi, B., & Donnor, J. K. (2021). Perpetuating inequalities: The role

of political distraction in education policy. *Educational Policy, 35*(2), 163-179.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820987992

Galloway, M. K., Callin, P., James, S., Vimegnon, H., & McCall, L. (2019). Culturally

responsive, antiracist, or anti-oppressive? How language matters for school

change efforts. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 52*(4), 485-501.

https://doi.org/10.1080.10665684.2019.1691959

Gordon, S. P., & Espinoza, S. (2020). Instructional supervision for culturally responsive

teaching. *Educational Considerations, 45*(3), 1-22. https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-

9282.2208

Guba, E. G. (1981). Criteria for assessing trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries.

Educational Resources Information Center Annual Review Paper, 29, 75-91.

Kimura, A. M., Antón-Oldenburg, M., & Pinderhughes, E. E. (2022). Developing and

teaching an anti-bias curriculum in a public elementary school: Leadership, K-1

teachers', and young children's experiences. *Journal of Research in Childhood

Education, 36*(2), 183-202. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2021.1912222

Kozleski, E. B., Stepaniuk, I., & Proffitt, W. (2020). Leading through a critical lens: The

application of DisCrit in framing, implementing, and improving equity drive,

educational systems for all students. *Journal of Educational Administration,

58*(5), 489-505. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-12-2019-0220

Kurth, J. A., Miller, A. L., Toews, S. G., Thompson, J. R., Cortés, M., Dahal, M. H., de

Escallón, I. E., Hunt, P. F., Porter, G., Richler, D., Fonseca, I., Singh, R., Šiška, J.,

Villamero, R. J., & Wangare, F. (2018). Inclusive education: Perspectives on

implementation and practice from international experts. *Intellectual and

Developmental Disabilities, 56*(6), 471-485. https://doi.org/10.1352/1934-9556-

56.6.471

Lakhwani, M. (2019). Insights into new teacher professional development: A focus on

culturally responsive teaching practices. *Journal of Behavioral and Social

Sciences, 6*(2), 101-107.

Maryland Association of Boards of Education. (2019). *MABE's educational equity

continuing resolution*. https://www.mabe.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019-

2020-Continuing-Resolutions-Educational-Equity.pdf

Maryland State Department of Education. (2021). *Transforming the culture of

Maryland's schools for black boys: A resource guide for educators*.

http://marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/2021/0427/MSDETransf

ormCultureforBlackBoy.pdf

Mavrogordato, M., & White, R. S. (2020). Leveraging policy implementation for social

justice: How school leaders shape educational opportunity when implementing

policy for English learners. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 56*(1), 3-45.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18821364

Mayger, L. K., & Provinzano, K. (2020). Community school leadership: Identifying

qualities necessary for developing and supporting equity-centered principals.

Leadership and Policy in Schools. Advance online publication.

https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2020.1759652

Merriam, S. B., & Grenier, R. S. (2019). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Molla, T., & Gale, T. (2019). Positional matters: School leaders engaging with national equity agendas. *Journal of Educational Policy, 34*(6), 858-876.

https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2018.1556811

Nadelson, L. S., Albritton, S., Couture, V. G., Green, C., Loyless, S. D., & Shaw, E. O. (2020). Principals' perceptions of educational equity: A mindset for practice. *Journal of Education and Learning, 9*(1), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v9n1p1

National School Boards Association. (2018). *Equity matters: NSBA's advocacy agenda*.

NSBA_Advocacy_Agenda_2019.pdf

Özüdoğru, F. (2018). The readiness of prospective teachers for culturally responsive teaching. *Acta Didactica Napocensia, 11*(3–4), 1–12.

https://doi.org/10.24193/adn.11.3-4.1

Poekert, P. E., Swaffield, S., Demir, E. K., & Wright, S. A. (2020). Leadership for professional learning towards educational equity: A systemic literature review. *Professional Development in Education, 46*(4), 541-562.

https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1787209

Rasmussen, N., & Raskin, C. (2021). Men's voices: Black and white aspiring principals reflect on their preparation to be racial equity leaders. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 1-25. https://doi.org/10.1177/19427751211069149

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2021). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers.* SAGE Publications.

Samuels, A. J. (2018). Exploring culturally responsive pedagogy: Teachers' perspectives on fostering equitable and inclusive classrooms. *SRATE Journal, 27*(1), 22-30. https://doi.org/files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1166706.pdf

Samuels, A. J., Samuels, G. L., & Self, C. (2019). Champions of equity: Fostering civic education to challenge silence, racial inequality, and injustice. *Multicultural Perspectives, 21*(2), 78-84. https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2019.1605805

Sullivan, T. (2020). Transforming systems of single best practices to educational equity quantum ten: An equity framework. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 4*(1).

Welborn, J. E. (2019). Increasing equity, access, and inclusion through organizational change: A study of implementation and experiences surrounding a school district's journey towards culturally proficient educational practice. *Education Leadership Review, 20*(1), 167-189. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1234931

Appendix A: Letter of Invitation to Participate

You are invited to take part in a leader interview for my doctoral dissertation conducted as part of my EdD in Education Administration and Leadership.

Interview Procedures:
If you agree to be part of this study, you will be invited to take part in audio-recorded interviews about the organization's operations and problem-solving needs. Transcriptions of leader interviews will be analyzed as part of the study, along with any archival data, reports, and documents that the organization's leadership deems fit to share. A copy of your interview recording is available upon request. Opportunities for clarifying your statements will be available through processes of transcript review and member checking. Interviews may take an hour, and each review process may take up to 30 minutes.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
This study is voluntary. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. The researcher seeks approximately 8-10 volunteers for this study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
Being in this study would not pose any risks beyond those of typical daily life. My aim is to provide data and insights that could be valuable to this organization and others like it.

Privacy:
I am required to protect your privacy. Interview recordings and full transcripts will be shared with each interviewee, upon request. Transcripts with identifiers redacted may be shared with my university faculty and my peers in class. Any reports, presentations, or publications related to this study will share general patterns from the data, without sharing the identities of individual participants or their employer(s). The interview transcripts will be kept for at least 5 years, as required by my university.

Contacts and Questions:
I am happy to answer any questions you might have about the study's purpose and steps. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr.-------. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is --------. Walden University's ethics approval number for this study is 12-06-22-1044512.

If you agree to be interviewed as described above, please reply to this email with the words, "I consent."

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Opening script: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview with me today. As previously shared, the purpose of this proposed research study is to explore elementary principals' perceptions regarding their experiences implementing a district-mandated educational equity policy. This interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Following our interview, I will examine your answers for data analysis purposes. It is important to note that at no time will I share your name or identity, nor will anyone be able to identify you based on your responses to the interview questions. You may choose to stop this interview at any time. This interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

1. Please tell me about yourself, including your name, years in education, years as a school leader, and your current position.

2. What prior experience do you have leading for equity? To what extent did your leadership preparation program(s) prepare you to lead for equity?

3. What specific challenges have you experienced while attempting to implement the district's mandated educational equity policy?

4. Describe the level of support you have sought to help overcome obstacles you have faced.

5. What resources are necessary to help school leaders implement the district's educational equity policy effectively?

6. What would you recommend if you could advise the Superintendent on best supporting principals with implementing the educational equity policy?

7. What measures have you taken to ensure a complete understanding of the school district's educational equity policy?

8. Based on your leadership experiences, what do you believe are the necessary next steps to strengthen the implementation of the educational equity policy?