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Janine Casella  
*Rowan University*

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**IDENTIFYING SCHOOL-WIDE INEQUITIES: ACTION RESEARCH  
CONDUCTED USING AN EQUITY AUDIT TO INFORM ANNUAL SCHOOL  
PLANNING FOR A PRE-K-8 SCHOOL**

by

Janine Casella

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Leadership, Administration and Research  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
At  
Rowan University  
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Administration and Research

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## **Dedications**

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to the students and families I serve as a leader.

My hope is that one day we will provide an equitable education to all students.

## **Acknowledgments**

I want to express my heartfelt appreciation, first and foremost, to my family for their unwavering support throughout this journey. A special thank you to my wife, who ensured I had the time and energy to focus on writing. I am grateful to my daughter for understanding and sacrificing our time together in favor of writing sessions. Finally, to my sons: you have always been my inspiration, exemplifying the true meaning of possibility.

I also extend my gratitude to my school leadership team. The work was not always easy, and their steadfast commitment to equity was truly inspirational. My team not only completed the work but also demonstrated passion for our plan. They protected my time and energy, and they were my biggest cheerleaders. Thank you to my accountability partners for reminding me that it's just that, a moment.

Lastly, I acknowledge my dissertation committee, Dr. Farrow, and Dr. Coaxum, led by Dr. Manning. My committee played a crucial role in providing feedback and ensuring that my work evolved into the study I envisioned. As my chair, Dr. Manning understood my dual roles as a school leader and a mother, supporting me through the various cycles of life as we navigated this process together. I deeply appreciate the support and understanding, especially during moments when I shared my unedited, stream-of-consciousness Google Docs. Dr. Manning was exactly the mentor I needed to reach the finish line, and I am forever grateful.

## **Abstract**

Janine Casella

IDENTIFYING SCHOOL-WIDE INEQUITIES: ACTION RESEARCH CONDUCTED  
USING AN EQUITY AUDIT TO INFORM ANNUAL SCHOOL PLANNING FOR A  
PRE-K–8 SCHOOL  
2023-2024

JoAnn Manning, Ed.D

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

This action research study aims to identify and address equity gaps within a PK-8 New Jersey school by leading a professional learning community (PLC). The study will use action research methods to conduct an educational equity audit, which will inform the annual school plan and create a leadership action plan to stimulate organizational change. Traditionally, teachers at the research site have used Data-Driven Decision Making (DDDM) cycles, but this study will integrate Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) cycles, including an equity audit analyzed in PLCs. The audit will identify patterns of inequity and identify strategies to address them.

The study aims to drive organizational change by using equity audit data to address inequities, integrating CDDDM in annual planning to tackle inequities exacerbated by COVID-19, while analyzing participant feedback and leader reflection. The equity audit revealed key themes: clarity and comprehension, disparities in supervision, the need for a culturally responsive environment, and adult ownership and action. Integrating these themes into school planning can foster inclusive environments and promote equitable outcomes. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the proactive role of school leaders and staff in creating equitable educational environments, addressing post-pandemic challenges, and aligning with the goals of the New Jersey Department of Education.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

School districts nationwide are contending with the exacerbated educational and socioemotional consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis has significantly impacted students' emotional and social well-being, exacerbating existing challenges and introducing new sources of trauma. Prolonged periods of isolation, disrupted routines, loss of face-to-face interactions, and concerns about health and safety have led to increased stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness among students (Loades et al., 2020). Moreover, school closures and remote learning have limited access to vital support systems, such as teachers, counselors, and peers, further intensifying feelings of detachment and isolation (Racine et al., 2021). Particularly vulnerable communities, including low-income families and communities of color, have borne the brunt of these challenges, amplifying preexisting social inequities and widening disparities in resource access and support services (Patrick et al., 2020). Addressing students' social and emotional needs is crucial for fostering overall well-being and academic success in the face of these unprecedented challenges (APA, 2020).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing equity gaps, presenting educators and school leaders with new hurdles. Equity gaps refer to disparities or inequalities in opportunities, resources, or outcomes among various groups, particularly concerning race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, or other social identities. This crisis has created equity gaps, notably in education, healthcare, and economic realms. School closures and the transition to remote learning have disproportionately affected students from low-income backgrounds, marginalized

communities, and those lacking access to technology and reliable internet connections (Mukherjee et al., 2021). Disparities in learning loss have disproportionately impacted students of color, underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the pandemic's long-term educational ramifications and its repercussions on student well-being (Curriculum Associates, 2022; JerseyCAN, 2021).

Several factors caused students from historically marginalized communities to be disproportionately affected by isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Socioeconomic challenges, including limited access to resources such as stable internet connections and technology devices necessary for remote learning, posed significant barriers for these families (McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2020). Additionally, students from historically marginalized communities were more likely to live in crowded households or multigenerational homes, making it difficult to find a quiet space for studying and concentrating (Park et al., 2021). Furthermore, they often rely on schools for essential services such as meals, healthcare, and mental health support, which were disrupted during school closures (Patrick et al., 2020). The lack of in-person interactions with teachers and peers also deprived them of crucial social and emotional support networks, exacerbating feelings of isolation and loneliness (Mukherjee et al., 2021).

Focusing solely on the recent impact of COVID-19 on students' social and emotional well-being overlooks the systemic and historical factors contributing to unequal resource access and opportunity gaps within the education system. Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational inequities have long plagued the nation's educational landscape, particularly affecting students from historically marginalized communities who have endured fundamentally unequal school experiences

(Carter et al., 2016). Ladson-Billings (2006) highlights the systematic denial of access to an equitable education, particularly for students of color, within educational systems that often fail to culturally affirm their diverse backgrounds. Despite these longstanding disparities, schools frequently overlook such factors when formulating annual plans, neglecting to address them effectively. Jones et al. (2021) argue that the impact of COVID-19 extends beyond mere disruption, disproportionately affecting populations already experiencing preexisting hardships prior to the pandemic's onset. It is incumbent upon school leaders to address the lingering needs of the students most impacted by the pandemic by working collaboratively with educators and policymakers to develop and implement comprehensive plans that prioritize equity and support student well-being. For schools already needing improvement in New Jersey, this planning for continual needs coincides with the mandated annual school plan. In New Jersey, schools identified for support and improvement must develop and implement annual school plans as part of the ESSA.

ESSA, enacted in 2015 to replace the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, aims to ensure all students have equitable access to high-quality educational resources and to close educational achievement gaps. The consolidated State ESSA Implementation Plan serves as New Jersey's state plan under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as amended by ESSA. This plan supports the goal of having all students graduate from high school ready for college and careers.

The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) aids schools identified as needing support and improvement under ESSA. These schools are required to develop and implement annual school improvement plans, which include evidence-based

practices tailored to the specific needs of students and educators. These plans were developed based on a comprehensive school needs assessment informed by data. Following a data-driven decision-making (DDDM) cycle is a common way to make school improvement plans that are required by ESSA. Data analysis is an important part of these plans. (Earl & Katz, 2006; Marsh et al., 2006).

Incorporating ESSA into the annual school planning process ensures that schools focus on continuous improvement and accountability. ESSA mandates that schools not only create these plans but also evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions. Schools can make data-driven decisions to close educational outcome gaps, a practice historically emphasized by educators to improve student achievement (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012). While this data-driven approach has become standard practice for school leaders in annual planning and education reform efforts, it also harbors a subtle bias towards minoritized and marginalized students, perpetuating deficit thinking (Diamond & Cooper, 2007). As a result, aligning the annual school plan with ESSA requirements ensures that New Jersey schools have a structured approach to addressing educational disparities and promoting student success in a post-pandemic context.

Furthermore, the prolonged impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a reassessment of how school leaders address social and emotional gaps among students, highlighting the need for increased collaboration and equity-focused initiatives (Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007; Bingham & O'Neal, 2020; Menzel & Kleiner, 2020). Conventional DDDM practices often perpetuate negative stereotypes about students, particularly those from marginalized communities, perpetuating a deficit model of their social and emotional capacities (Park, 2018). This bias impedes efforts to support the well-being of



the most vulnerable students, underscoring the necessity for a data-driven approach that prioritizes equity (Marsh & Farrell, 2014).

In response to this deficit view, Datnow and Park (2018) propose the critical data-driven decision-making framework (CDDDM), which focuses on identifying systemic inequities and promoting school equity. To move from DDDM to CDDDM, education equity audits and organized ways to find and fix unfair situations across schools and close equity gaps must be carried out. (Skrla et al., 2009). Educators can increase their awareness of inequities by incorporating equity audits into professional learning communities and empowering themselves to address them effectively (Dodman, 2021).

Building upon this framework, this dissertation employs an action research approach to address school-wide inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through principal leadership and the facilitation of professional learning communities, the researcher aims to integrate ESEA planning and education equity audits as components of practitioner action research, contributing to a more equitable educational landscape post-pandemic (Herr & Anderson, 2005). This chapter overviews the traditional DDDM cycle, its role in school planning, and the imperative shift towards CDDDM to address the inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Shifting from Deficit Thinking to Equity: Background on Data-Driven Decision Making in Education**

It is common practice for educators to analyze student data and use that data to drive decision-making around instructional practices, policies, and school culture (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012). This typical use of DDDM highlights assessment data and, unfortunately, perpetuates a deficit view of students (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012).

The use of DDDM cycles emphasizes achievement gaps as opposed to opportunity gaps, does not reveal the opportunity gaps that are present in the school experiences of students in underserved communities, and fails to impart equitable practices that challenge systemic inequities (Valencia, 2010). This use is due to the long history of deficit thinking in education toward marginalized communities (Valencia, 2010). The quantifiable data associated with DDDM cycles force teachers to identify "struggling" students and implement interventions to address the gap (Garner et al., 2017). Data directs educators toward acceptable actions without encouraging schools to confront systemic inequities contributing to achievement disparities (Garner et al., 2017).

Moving away from problematic traditional models of using data towards an equity-minded model involves expanding the data-driven decision-making (DDDM) cycle to a critical data-driven decision-making (CDDDM) model (Dodman, 2021). This shift moves beyond the achievement gap and reveals opportunity gaps in students' school experiences, complex structures, and practices. Current state accountability systems, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, have been in existence since 2001 but have failed to eliminate the gap between white, upper-class students and their Black and brown middle- and lower-income students (Rorrer & Skrla, 2005). School leaders do not clearly understand the role of inequity in their schools (Pollock, 2001). School leaders also typically give external reasons when faced with data demonstrating achievement gaps (Haycock, 2001). Literature related to this study topic emphasizes the DDDM cycle's problems and the need to shift to a CDDDM cycle to address equity (Dodman, 2021; Garner et al., 2017; Fowler & Brown, 2018). By placing equity at the forefront of data-

driven decision-making, the CDDDM framework assists educators in identifying systemic inequity within their schools.

Dodman (2021) calls for more research concerning the use of educational equity audits, and an examination of CDDDM in a preparatory context is needed. This dissertation seeks to respond to that call. In schools, educators have used educational equity audits to document patterns of inequities and implement strategies to address them (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011). This vital tool has assisted school leaders in focusing on equity and social justice (Brown, 2010). Emerging research has examined how equity audits assist pre-service teachers in developing a social justice stand (Groenke, 2010) and provide a framework for teachers to use (McKensie & Skrla, 2011). Dodman (2021) found that teachers who completed an equity audit had difficulty enacting change through collaboration with colleagues. There is guidance about preparing people for critical reflection (Brookfield, 2017) and how to prepare teachers for data use (Hoogland et al., 2016), but the research needs to integrate the two fields when engaging in CDDDM. Although Dodman et al. (2019) focus on examining the impact in terms of teachers, students, and school outcomes, there is a lack of research on how school leaders guide teachers to engage critically with data for equity, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Building upon the research, conducting an education equity audit with a team of teachers through action research contributes a window of understanding into how to respond to systemic equity issues at the school-building level. One way to conduct an education equity audit at the school level is to form a professional learning community (PLC). PLCs present an opportunity to improve instruction and conduct the work of an

equity audit. PLCs are a forum in which members learn individually and collectively to continuously improve their practice with the expectation of transformative change (Martin-Kniep, 2008). A PLC conducting an equity audit systematically uses the CDDDM framework to leverage accountability toward a more equitable, high-achieving school for all students (Dodman, 2021).

### **Research Problem Statement**

Learning loss persists nationwide, and schools continue to grapple with their response. COVID-19 continues to have substantial impacts on all facets of life, including education. Existing inequity has limited the numerous challenges associated with COVID-19, exacerbating their effects on minoritized communities (Sullivan, 2022). As we move beyond the pandemic, the effects on individuals, families, communities, and systems are long-lasting. These effects may become multigenerational detriments for those most marginalized if unaddressed (UNICEF, 2020). These effects demand a critical inquiry and reimagining of educational policies and practices through contextually relevant decision-making, particularly where students present with challenges in the aftermath of disruption related to COVID-19 (Sullivan et al., 2022).

Even before the pandemic, school systems struggled to determine how best to serve marginalized students across different levels of diversity, including students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and students from specific communities (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2014). The pandemic has exacerbated already-existent inequities, and school leaders play a significant role in responding to them. DDDM is commonly used to address achievement gaps.

Major studies on the use of DDDM focus on enhancing educators' engagement in the process through increased 'buy-in' and understanding. In a 2019 study by Dunn, Skutnik, Patti, and Sohn (2019), the implementation of a persuasive instructional unit aimed to address teachers' difficulties and negative biases toward data. Researchers developed this targeted unit to improve teachers' understanding of data and their ability to enhance instructional decisions and student learning. While the study revealed that teachers showed increased engagement in conceptual changes regarding data and its utilization, it emphasized the perception of data solely as an objective tool. Data was not contextualized based on its subjective origins, placement in context, or interpretation influenced by beliefs (Coburn & Turner, 2011).

Although the studies above show that teachers' use of data can change, without simultaneous attention to the critical reflective factors that teachers ought to consider, the implementation of interventions will do little to affect cultural or structural change within schooling. There is a gap in research around shifting to CDDDM to address learning loss, mainly using a tool such as an equity audit. Historically, equity audits have documented inequities and enforced compliance with civil rights statutes (Dodman, 2016). Putting equity at the forefront of school leadership requires data and planning practices that reduce persistent and systemic inequities (Dodman, 2016). Addressing the increase in already existing inequities caused by COVID-19 requires a shift in the use of CDDDM within the equity audit process.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This action research study aims to identify and address equity gaps within a PK-8 New Jersey school by leading a professional learning committee, effectively using the

data and findings to inform the annual school plan and creating a leadership action plan that stimulates organizational change.

Using action research methods, this dissertation will conduct an educational equity audit that will inform the annual planning of a PK–8 school. In the past, teachers at the research site have used DDDM cycles to inform the creation and progress within the annual school plan. In annual school planning, the CDDDM cycle will include data derived from an equity audit and analyzed in PLCs to inform school-wide goals, revise action steps, and monitor progress. Equity audits are a systematic way for school leaders to assess the degree of equity or inequity in three critical areas of their schools or districts: programs, teacher quality, and achievement (Skrla et al., 2009). Equity audits, as a tool of CDDDM, enact a process that identifies patterns of inequity, surmises potential causes, and implements strategies to address the findings (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011). The collection and analysis of data from an equity audit will expose equity challenges, uncover students' strengths instead of deficits, and provide a window of understanding into how schools are responding to increased equity gaps due to the pandemic.

Studying the use of the equity audit seeks to bring organizational change in three areas. The first organizational change is to use the equity audit to collect data to address inequities and equity gaps. This study will lead to the second organizational change, which involves incorporating CDDDM into annual school planning to tackle the inequities exacerbated by COVID-19. Lastly, organizational change will result from participant feedback and leader reflection. The study will not only analyze the effects of an equity audit on school planning. However, it will also identify a plan of action for

school leaders to use as a guide in identifying and reacting to the inequities at the school level in response to the pandemic.

### **Research Questions**

The questions that guide this study include:

1. How can a New Jersey school use CDDDM to identify school-wide inequities that affect student outcomes in their annual school planning?
2. What types of actions and interventions can be facilitated at the school level to identify and address equity gaps?
3. What can be learned about the implementation of an equity audit to inform and improve the school planning process?
4. How does principal leadership influence responding to equity gaps at the school building level?

### **Conceptual Framework**

This action research utilizes the critical data-driven decision-making framework (Datnow & Park, 2018). The framework specifies how data can reflect how schools' practices and policies reproduce injustice, and identifying and altering those practices increases equity and justice for students (Dodman, 2021). The CDDDM framework derives from data-driven decision-making (DDDM). DDDM typically refers to teachers, principals, and administrators collecting and analyzing data to guide decisions and improve the success of students and schools (Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007). The goal of data-driven decision-making is to assist educators in using instructional strategies based on collected and analyzed student data. The intention is that this process leads to revised teaching choices that facilitate better student learning and improve student outcomes. The

typical data-driven decision-making cycle often neglects the relationship between data and schooling conditions, primarily due to systemic inequity.

Although some studies suggest that DDDM can positively impact student achievement (Garner, 2017), literature has also demonstrated that the DDDM cycle cultivates a deficit lens for students. Researchers have found that making decisions based on data can keep unfair things going (Roegman et al., 2018). This happens mostly when teachers use data in color-neutral ways that support what they already think about students or their families (Datnow & Park, 2018; Marsh & Kennedy, 2020), do not consider students' cultural identities (Garner, Thorne, et al.), or keep harmful tracking practices going (Park & Datnow, 2017). Advancing substantive, sustainable, transformational change goals is hindered when the tools educators use to enact changes in policy and practice continue to miss or misdiagnose the root causes of disparities (Boykin & Nogurea, 2011).

Mandinach et al. (2008) assert that many data-driven decision-making systems for annual school planning do not prioritize assessing equity. These data-driven decision-making cycles do not consider how various economic and social factors, such as racism and classism, can and do influence the identified problems (Datnow & Park, 2018). This inability to assess equity is a problem for school leaders, who are required to implement DDDM as part of the annual school plan. There is a lack of DDDM training and implementation when using data that identifies issues of equity (Dodman, 2021). The absence of training and guidance to address inequities is detrimental to school teams as they confront the equity challenges arising in the aftermath of COVID-19. Moreover, the



lack of training for both school leaders and teams is problematic for best practices that evolve beyond assessment data.

The Critical Data-Driven Decision Making Framework (CDDDM) contributes to the DDDM process by adding a cycle of reflection beyond assessment data to uncover educational inequities in practice and policy. The CDDDM framework is critical to the study as a method to identify inequities brought forth by COVID-19. As opposed to a typical DDDM cycle, an expansion of DDDM to CDDDM is needed to determine the immediate instructional needs of students, including the systemic influences on students' learning inequities. This immediate response is critical. The successful use of CDDDM within the annual school planning process through professional learning communities helps foster a transformational change in teaching practices and school policy aimed at equity (Boykin & Nogurea, 2011). The use of CDDDM in annual school planning will directly affect how resources are identified and used in response to the pandemic. One method of engaging in (CDDDM) is a school-wide education equity audit (Dodman, 2016).

Education equity audits, as posited by Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009), inform this conceptual framework for research. Schools need to seek ways of ensuring systemic equity within and across schools (Skrla et al., 2009). Closing school achievement gaps with equity audits provides a systematic way for school leaders to assess the degree of equity or inequity present in their schools (Skrla et al., 2009). Education equity audits require teams to disaggregate and analyze data based on social class, race, ability, language, and gender (Theoharris & Scanlan, 2019). Collecting and analyzing this data with a lens on equity makes the education equity audit a tool for this

work. The data retrieved from the audit will correlate directly with the annual school plan, as previously mentioned. This correlation results in planning and resources dedicated to equity and a focus on improving students' social and emotional well-being, which was negatively affected by COVID-19. Moreover, this conceptual framework complements action research methods, given that the equity audit process engages in cycles of action research by gathering data, forming action plans, and measuring results (Skrla et al., 2009; Stringer, 2014).

Effective school leaders create socially just schools where all students have educational opportunities. Capper et al. (2006) measure social justice school leadership through four outcomes: raising student achievement, improving student structures, recentering staff capacity, and strengthening school culture and community. To address equity and opportunity gaps, socially just school leaders must be courageously reflective. To be an effective, socially just school leader, practices aligned to decreasing opportunity gaps are necessary, and the equity positioning of the equity audit as a primary equity practice requires preparation and reflection (Capper et al., 2021). Leadership preparation for an equity audit and its contributions to school leaders' planning necessitates a strong relationship between learning experiences and practices. Research indicates that educational leaders are best prepared through experiences that are well-defined, purposeful, coherent, and provide an opportunity to reflect (Darling, Hammond et al., 2007; Young et al., 2009). The use of the equity audit in this case study will provide a framework for conducting an audit to address students' social and emotional well-being that was affected by COVID-19 and reflect on their role as a leader in the audit and planning process.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study offers insights into how schools may use equity audits as part of their school planning when responding to the devastation of the pandemic on students, particularly students social and emotional health. School closures and virtual learning contributed to already existing inequities (Coaxum et al., 2022). For the youngest students, 21 million children in the U.S. began staying home from daycares and preschools in March 2020. Many of those children were enrolled in programs such as Head Start, which aims to support the healthy welfare and development of children from lower-income families (Alexander et al., 2016). In places where school closures have been longest, COVID-19 resulted in the highest achievement gap for children from low-resourced compared to high-resourced families, with an average projected gap growth of 15–20% (Oberg et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the emotional well-being of children and adolescents. Loades et al. (2020) conducted a rapid systematic review highlighting the detrimental effects of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of young individuals during the pandemic. Golberstein, Wen, and Miller (2020) emphasized the importance of considering the mental health implications of COVID-19 for children and adolescents. The pandemic has further worsened established opportunity gaps, placing economically disadvantaged students at a disadvantage compared to their more affluent counterparts. Opportunity gaps denote disparities in accessing the necessary conditions and resources vital for learning and growth, encompassing access to food, housing, healthcare, health insurance, and financial assistance programs (Gee, Asmundson, & Vang, 2023). The opportunity gap and equity

gap in education both highlight disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and outcomes among student populations, but they emphasize different aspects of inequity. The opportunity gap addresses disparities in access to high-quality educational opportunities and resources, while the equity gap focuses on unequal outcomes or achievements among different student groups. Despite their differences, both concepts underscore the need to address systemic inequities in education to ensure all students have equitable access to resources and support for success (Lindsey, Thousand, Jew, & Piowski, 2017).

Post-pandemic, school leaders are now seeking to respond to the systemic inequities that their students are experiencing at an even greater rate. Incorporating education equity audits into professional learning communities helps schools uncover and address equity issues. Equity audits are a systematic way to ensure high-achieving schools for all students (Capper et al., 2014). Based on post-pandemic data, providing high-achieving schools includes closing equity gaps that were present before COVID-19. Addressing equity and opportunity gaps should be a priority for schools that want successful schools (Capper et al., 2014). The equity gap can significantly impact student social-emotional well-being by perpetuating feelings of marginalization, stress, and disconnection among disadvantaged student populations. When students experience disparities in resources, opportunities, and support services based on factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or gender, they may feel undervalued or overlooked within the educational system. This experience can lead to feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and a lack of belonging, which in turn can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Lindsey, Thousand, Jew, & Piowski, 2017)

This study aims to detail a particular action research approach that may inform other practitioners about confronting equity issues and improving their annual planning processes. Annual school planning processes neglect equity issues and could benefit from incorporating a CDDDM cycle, especially an education equity audit. Current DDDM cycles fail to address the inequities that are present and cause disparate educational and social-emotional outcomes, specifically for marginalized students (Dodman, 2016). This inability demonstrates the need to move to a CDDDM cycle to address inequities exacerbated by COVID-19 through educational equity audits.

This study seeks to contribute to the research community. Even though there is much research about the transition to CDDDM to avoid the deficit ways of thinking that are intrinsic to DDDM (Bowles & Gentis, 2011), there has not been detailed action research about the transition during the aftermath of COVID-19. In response to the deficit lens of DDDM, researchers such as Datnow and Park (2018) call for placing equity at the forefront of data-driven decision-making. Datnow and Park (2018) also state that there is a need for equity to be the goal in data use practices, which includes more research on data use with an equity lens. Dodman (2016) also calls for a shift to the CDDDM framework to build upon what studies have found in relation to facilitating and hindering data use conditions. This research aims to be useful in this regard.

This study will also contribute to leadership practice and prepare socially just leaders. By examining and reflecting on leading an equity audit, this study will provide a framework for the socially just leadership practice of using equity audits with leadership teams to inform school planning and ultimately match resources to foster a sense of belonging and community in schools, help mitigate the negative impact of the equity gap

on student social-emotional well-being and promote positive outcomes for all learners. Through this action research, a plan will be developed that creates a roadmap for future leaders to address the inequities of COVID-19 and instigate organizational change within their school building.

### **Nature of the Study**

This dissertation aims to identify equity gaps within a New Jersey school and incorporate findings into annual school plan using action research methods. This dissertation will utilize three cycles of action research, starting with an education equity audit in cycle one, followed by an annual school planning process mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in cycle two, and culminating in a focus on principal leadership during cycle three. I will conduct an equity audit that will inform the annual planning, engaging in critical data-driven decision-making (CDDDM) cycles. I will form a Professional Learning Committee (PLC) and facilitate a school-collaborative approach for the first two cycles of research. The collection and analysis of data from an equity audit will expose equity challenges, uncover students' strengths as opposed to deficits, and provide a window of understanding into how schools are responding to increased equity gaps due to the pandemic. Finally, I will reflect on my leadership through the process and develop an action plan to inform and improve the use of equity audits within the school planning process and provide valuable insight for improving principal leadership.

### **Assumptions**

For the study, the established school leadership team, acting as a PLC, will conduct an equity audit. Given their previous work around equity, I assume the team will

swiftly transition into the audit process without requiring intensive pre-service work. This assumption is based on the leadership's established equity work prior to the audit. Participants' initial responses will verify this assumption during the first two audit sessions, which focus on the purpose of the equity audit and uncovering biases. The second assumption expects the team to offer the school leader honest and reflective feedback, regardless of their positionality. This assumption stems from the leader's past practice of actively seeking continual feedback on their practices. As the leader, I will continually communicate the need for honest reflection and model providing objective feedback.

### **Limitations**

Possible limitations to this study include the use of the existing school leadership team and the school leader's current role. First, as stated in the assumptions, the school leadership team has completed professional development around the topic of equity. The team's prior experience in equity may enable the school leader to swiftly advance towards the audit's objectives, compared to a school leader with a team that has not had the chance to enhance their capacity for equity work. To replicate the audit, a school leader would need to gauge their team's equity stance. The study may not identify best practices for leaders who have not completed prerequisite equity work. Second, the current leadership role may limit the study of building a team that will lead the audit. As the current leader with an established team, there will be limited data on previous work that contributed to the team's current functionality.

## **Summary**

COVID-19 has devastated students and widened equity gaps across the nation (Curriculum Associates, 2022; JerseyCAN, 2021). The current protocol of annual school planning required by ESEA does not uncover or address inequities caused by the pandemic that impact student social-emotional well-being by perpetuating feelings of marginalization, stress, and disconnection among disadvantaged student populations and is limited to attendance and suspension data when analyzing climate and culture (NJ Department of Education). Data-driven decision-making (DDDM) is the typical practice for educators in identifying gaps and using data to drive practices to decrease those gaps (Hooglabd et al., 2016). However, research has questioned the model as promoting deficit thinking that perpetuates inequities in schools (Dodman et al., 2019). In responding to the equity gaps that have been exacerbated by COVID-19, specifically for students of color, schools stand to benefit from education equity audits as a form of CDDDM when engaging in their annual school planning. This dissertation will incorporate school planning into a more comprehensive action research study in the aftermath of the pandemic, which may benefit other schools responding to inequity gaps. Further, this research details one New Jersey PK-8 school's use of an equity audit as an action research method to identify school-wide inequities and, in doing so, respond to the devastation of COVID-19.

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

**ESEA-** The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to ensure that all students have equitable access to high-quality educational resources and opportunities, that all schools are improving overall student performance, and that persistent



achievement gaps are closed. ESSA replaces No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 (NJ.gov).

**Annual School Plan-** The New Jersey Annual School Planning Process is a framework for school-wide strategic planning, leading to the implementation of evidence-based practices with fidelity and improved student performance on accountability indicators (NJ.gov).

**Data-Driven Decision Making (DDDM)-** The collection, examination, analysis, interpretation, and application of data to inform instruction, administrative policy, and other decisions and practices (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012, p22).

**Educational equity-** Access to a world-class education that helps to ensure all children with dreams and determination can reach their potential and succeed (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

**Critical Data Driven Decision Making (CDDDM)-** Informed by Duncan-Andrade and Morell's (2008) Cycle of Critical Praxis and based on an adaptation of Ikemoto and Marsh's (2007) data-driven decision-making framework.

**Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)-** are an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour et al.,2006)

**Equity Audits-** Equity audits are tools used to collect data that details the process of removing programmatic barriers that impede complete participation, access, and opportunity for all students to receive an equitable and excellent education. With this tool, leaders or teams can assess the extent to which equity is present in areas such as

teacher quality, the overall instructional setting, and student achievement and attainment (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011).

**Cultural Responsiveness-** Cultural responsiveness refers to the ability of individuals, organizations, and systems to recognize, understand, and respect the cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of diverse groups, particularly those historically marginalized or underrepresented. It entails actively incorporating cultural knowledge, skills, and practices into interactions, policies, and practices to effectively engage and support individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Nieto & Bode, 2012; van der Scheer, Glas, & Visscher, 2017; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

**Equity-** Equity in education is defined by "Ensuring that every student receives what they need to succeed" (Blankstein et al., 2017, p. 5). It involves "providing each student with the necessary resources, supports, and opportunities to address their unique needs and circumstances" (Sullivan et al., 2022, p. 3). Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes that equity in education goes beyond mere equality and requires addressing systemic injustices and disparities.

**Equity Gaps-** The equity gap delves into the unequal outcomes or achievements observed among various student groups, often delineated along lines of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, or other identity factors. This concept highlights the systemic inequities and injustices embedded in the distribution of resources and opportunities, which ultimately result in divergent educational outcomes. Examples of equity gaps encompass disparities in academic achievement, graduation rates,

disciplinary outcomes, access to specialized programs, and overall educational attainment levels (Lindsey, Thousand, Jew, & Piowski, 2017).

**Opportunity Gap-** The opportunity gap refers to the circumstances in which people are born, including their opportunities in life, according to Milner (2012). opportunity gap also relates to the obstacles and conditions students face as they navigate through an inequitable system (Milner, 2012)

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders face the challenge of navigating a transformed educational landscape while prioritizing equity and inclusion (Sullivan et al., 2022). Best practices for school leaders post-pandemic encompass a range of strategies aimed at fostering resilient and inclusive learning environments. Central to these practices is the prioritization of equity and inclusion, ensuring that all decisions and initiatives are guided by a commitment to addressing the diverse needs of students, staff, and families (Sullivan et al., 2022). By embracing these best practices, school leaders can navigate the challenges of the post-COVID-19 educational landscape while fostering inclusive, equitable, and supportive learning environments for all students. Navigating the challenges requires a shift to an equity lens when analyzing data to respond to school-wide inequities from COVID-19, although equity has been a focus before COVID-19.

Education professionals strive to provide equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students (Datnow & Park, 2018). While educational reforms have routinely used data to uncover areas in which differences in achievement are evident, they have largely failed in their aspirations to close equity gaps (Datnow & Park, 2018). The lack of proper attention given to equity efforts beckons further research focused on identifying problems and creating solution-orientated action plans that promote a collaborative culture of inquiry committed to equity (Christman, 2009). While large-scale accountability practices acknowledge inequities, they overly focus on student achievement gaps while neglecting the mitigating effects of unequal conditions and processes (Dodman, 2016).

Reform efforts have focused on closing achievement gaps, which, according to Ladson-Billings (2006), is a term that unfairly frames low-income and minoritized students as having a deficit. Focusing on achievement gaps reinforces negative ideas about disadvantaged groups and keeps doing the same things that do not work to promote equity. The usual practice of using data to show a decrease in achievement gaps between white and minoritized students lacks the further efforts that the current equity crisis requires (Dodman, 2016). The absence of data analysis around equity in schools can have significant implications for students' sense of well-being. Often, the use of data in schools to identify areas for improvement does not include data analysis around equity and how equity contributes to student outcomes. (Datnow & Park, 2018). While researchers often prioritize equity as a crucial goal of school reform, schools in need of improvement, which necessitate annual school plans, typically do not focus on reducing opportunity gaps or identifying inequities (Datnow & Park, 2018). Moreover, current data-driven decision-making practices foster deficit thinking about students and fail to offer teachers and leaders an opportunity to consider how economic and social forces of classism and racism can influence the data collection process, data analysis, and the identification of circumstances based on the data (Dodman, 2021). Data can also undergo further analysis to inform action plans for instructional improvement, guide teachers in utilizing classroom data effectively, and offer a deeper understanding of equity and its influence on student learning and an overall sense of belonging (Dodman, 2016).

The term “opportunity gap” refers to the circumstances in which people are born, including their opportunities in life, according to Milner (2012). The opportunity gap also relates to the obstacles and conditions students face as they navigate through an

inequitable system (Milner, 2012). These opportunity gaps that students experience require a response to foster a positive school environment, build effective teachers, and support student learning equity (Capper et al., 2006). To address opportunity gaps at the school level a school-wide education equity audits can be conducted. These audits are systematic procedures used to collect data that detail the process of removing programmatic barriers that impede complete participation, access, and opportunity for all students to receive an equitable and excellent education (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011).

This review of the literature provides insights into existing bodies of research about this dissertation. The review addresses (a) the need for addressing equity within school planning; (b) educational policy and mandates requiring data; (c) data-driven decision-making; (d) neoliberalism influences of data-driven practices; (e) the expansion of data-driven decision-making towards critical data-driven decision-making; (f) education equity audits as a tool for education professional learning communities,(g) culturally responsive school-wide practices; and (f) the transformative leader reflective process.

### **Approaches to Equity in Education: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives**

The field of education approaches the concept of equity in a variety of ways. According to Stone (2012), it is difficult to define what constitutes equity, including how to achieve equity. Adams (1963) coined the term "equity theory" to describe social relations in the workplace in terms of justice and fairness. Applying equity theory to education, Fowler and Brown (2018) describe education equity as the “outcome of the student’s ability to achieve equity restoration as a result of the perceived injustice of inputs and outcomes” (p. 1). Similarly, social equity theory (Kelly, 1987) expands on

equity theory by outlining how social processes contribute to racial-ethnic achievement gaps. Research has described social processes as creating and maintaining racial-ethnic achievement gaps (Kelly, 1987; McKown, 2013; Spencer, 1999; Weinstein, 2002). The research identifies resources distributed differently to people from different racial-ethnic backgrounds by people from different racial-ethnic backgrounds as negatively impacting education achievement gaps. Likewise, Westhuizen (2012) expanded the concept of educational equity to include what equitable learning could include. He concluded that addressing inequities involves paying attention to factors such as what constitutes equality, accessibility for all, fairness of learning activities, learning situations, and the tools students use to make sense of their learning. Furthermore, educational equity also involves systematically dismantling oppressive forces and ensuring all students are valued as equals (Paris & Alman, 2017).

Historically, public education in the United States has perpetuated an inequitable system (Lee, 2010). Educational inequities create unequal learning opportunities and perpetuate beliefs surrounding academic ability for minoritized and marginalized students (Paris, 2012). The creation of unequal learning opportunities and beliefs around ability lead to students' disadvantages that include inequitable access to academic enrichments, lower quality school environments, less qualified educators, and lack of access to quality school materials/resources (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Picower, 2009; Yosso et al., 2005).

Nationally, schools with ninety percent or more students of color spend \$733 less per student per year than schools with ninety percent or more white students (OCR, 2014). Schools with students of color often employ less qualified teachers, teachers with

lower salaries, and teachers with less classroom experience (OCR, 2014). Systemic barriers interfere with classroom learning for students of color, who often experience exclusionary practices that interfere with their education (Cherng, 2017). Bilingual students, students with disabilities, and students who have economic disadvantages struggle through inequitable learning environments that lack resources and cultural competency training and often subject students to harsh disciplinary practices (Paris & Alim, 2017). Moreover, research has identified a lack of access for marginalized students to obtain academic enrichment, resources, and school support (Milner, 2012). Although students take high-risk tests to qualify for academic advancement opportunities such as advanced work courses and enrollment in the best-performing district schools, disparities exist in access to and availability of academic enrichments, resources, and school supports, creating an opportunity barrier.

The opportunity barrier highlights the role of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language proficiency, or other factors in perpetuating inequities as opposed to an achievement gap (Milner, 2012). The opportunity gap narrative shifts deficit views of students' "academic failures" to examining the system that perpetuates inequitable access to resources and opportunities that promote student success (Welner & Carter, 2013). Access to enrichment classes, college readiness courses, and honor placements is less likely among Black students (OCR, 2014). Additionally, Black and Latinx students attend schools that offer fewer enrichment opportunities (OCR, 2014), and even when these resources are available, Black and Latinx students are less likely to be placed in honors or advanced placement courses. Ability grouping frequently places emergent bilinguals, students with disabilities, and Black students into lower-ability courses (OCR, 2014).



Factors that contribute to ability grouping include low teacher expectations due to students' racial/ethnic background and a lack of educator cultural responsiveness (OCR, 2014).

Lack of cultural responsiveness and education professionals of color are factors that perpetuate the inequitable learning environments in the nation (Cherng, 2017). There is a need for the implementation of culturally responsive practices that generate cultural knowledge about students, initiate collaborative conversations with families, and call out systemic racist practices (Cherng, 2017). Nationally, the teaching force is predominantly white, while students of color have made up a majority of students since 2014 (NCES, 2017). According to Lewis et al. (2018), the lack of cultural understanding by white teachers, coupled with the lack of diversity among instructional staff, adds to a structural inequity that calls for a response. This lack of diversity and overrepresentation of white educators who lack cultural competency leads to a lack of home/school collaboration, therefore causing a significant achievement barrier for marginalized students (Paris & Ali, 2017).

Disciplinary practices also lead to educational inequity (Kirkland et al., 2019). According to Morris and Perry (2016), students of color and students with disabilities are especially at risk of being punished severely by school discipline policies. Kirkland et al. (2019) find that minoritized students grapple with school discipline policies based on the belief that consequences must be severe to correct student behavior. Even with constant rates of misbehavior and poverty, Black students are over three times more likely to face suspension or expulsion than their white peers (Skiba et al., 2014). Students who are Black were over two times more likely to get an office referral from a teacher than their

white peers (Skiba et al., 2011). Bryan et al. (2012) found that student race predicted English teachers' referrals to school counselors for disruptive behavior. The expulsion rate for Black students is three times higher than that of white students. The average suspension rate for white students is 4.6%, while it is 16.4% for Black students. Civil Rights Data Collection data (2014) determined that Black students have higher suspension rates than any of their peers, and twenty percent of Black males and more than twelve percent of Black females receive an out-of-school suspension (OCR, 2014). Black females are suspended at higher rates than girls of any other race or ethnicity (OCR, 2014). Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than students without disabilities (OCR, 2014). Black males with disabilities are two times more likely than white males with disabilities to receive out-of-school suspension, and Black females with disabilities are three times more likely to receive out-of-school suspension than white females with disabilities (OCR, 2014). When schools suspend students of color at disproportionate rates, they deprive them of quality instruction time, thereby exacerbating the opportunity gap (Morris & Perry, 2016). Moreover, loss of instructional time also contributes to a lack of educational opportunities, which in turn leads to an increase in the minority achievement gap.

Fullan (2016) uses the phrase “wrong drivers” to paint a picture of schools pulling levers on a system that has little chance of achieving the desired result when aiming to make reforms like educational equity. One reform, such as teacher accountability, has proven to have disappointing results. The increase in accountability measures through NCLB, which promised to have all students reach proficiency by 2014, fell short, and the achievement gap remains a national crisis (Skrla, 2004). The current reform policies

narrow efforts to high-stakes testing. This reductionist approach has failed to close achievement gaps and counter systemic inequity (Skrla, 2004). Educational reform policies were developed with the goal of closing achievement gaps, but historically, they have not taken equity into account. By reducing schools to assessments, reforms only target a symptom of the problem without addressing the cause, according to Skrla (2004). Reform policies often address data, but this alone does not automatically improve schools or decrease achievement gaps (Skrla, 2019). Without a focus on equity, reform efforts have been and will continue to be widely ineffective in providing equal educational experiences for marginalized groups. The failure to include equity in data analysis in schools can undermine students' sense of well-being by perpetuating systemic inequities, fostering feelings of exclusion and injustice, and undermining trust in the educational system. Recognizing and addressing these issues through equitable data practices is essential for promoting a positive school climate, fostering student success, and ensuring that all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. Further analysis of reform efforts, particularly No Child Left Behind, reveals that several manipulations occurred (Skrla, 2019), showing how past reforms ignored issues of equity and, ultimately, disproportionately harmed the education of minoritized and marginalized groups.

### **Historical Educational Reforms and Policy Impact**

This section reviews historical educational reform aimed at closing the achievement gap and creating pathways of equity for all students. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, federal policy has mandated the use of student test data for accountability. Annual high-stakes standardized assessments in

mathematics and English language arts were implemented, followed by additional policies such as the Race to the Top initiative of 2009 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. These policies currently hold schools and districts accountable for students' performance. Students' scores are disaggregated yearly by subpopulations (including categories for race, ethnicity, poverty, language, and special education status) to allow policymakers, educators, and the public to identify and monitor the performance of subpopulations. These differences are typically noted as achievement gaps. Schools in the United States are required to track students' learning outcomes and analyze data to drive instructional decisions, and this practice has become common in school reform. The NCLB Act of 2001 was followed by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which generally led schools to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) to calculate student success and close achievement gaps (Mandinach et al., 2006).

A plethora of criticism has targeted NCLB for focusing attention on students who were close to basic proficiency (Booher-Jennings, 2005). As a result, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed in December 2015 to help respond to the shortcomings of NCLB. It replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 and reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. This law attempts to ensure that all students have equitable access to high-quality educational resources and opportunities, and in doing so, it ultimately hopes to close educational achievement gaps. The ESSA brings several changes. First, it grants states the flexibility to choose how heavily they use accountability factors. This flexibility helps states consider outcomes for all students instead of paying excessive attention to those who are close to the margins of proficiency to improve numbers. This change responds to empirical evidence of the

largely adverse effects of NCLB on educational attainment outcomes, especially for the lowest-scoring students (Deming et al., 2016). Another change away from NCLB brought about by ESSA empowers states to continue assessing students annually with a broader latitude to use alternative assessments rather than the annual end-of-year standardized tests (McGuinn, 2019). This ability to assess annually allows states to develop and implement a support and improvement plan without federal government mandates outlining exactly how states should intervene to turn around their lowest-performing schools (ESSA, 2015).

New Jersey's Consolidated State ESSA Implementation Plan under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was created to ensure all students can graduate high school ready for college and a career. This plan requires all state agencies, school districts, and schools to identify gaps where traditionally disadvantaged students are not making progress. ESSA encourages districts to aim at all students graduating high school ready for college and careers by providing the incentive of ESSA funds for the explicit purpose of closing the identified gaps. Funding from ESSA supports programs, services, and activities that supplement the work states are already doing on behalf of students (NJ.gov).

In accordance with ESSA, the New Jersey Annual School Planning Process consolidates multiple needs assessment processes and systems into one coherent system. The purpose of the New Jersey Annual School Planning Process is to create one aligned system for developing a school-level plan (NJ.gov). ESSA requires a minimum of four indicators for elementary and middle schools in the planning process. The first three indicators are academic and include proficiency on the state test, English-language

proficiency, and one other chosen indicator (such as student growth). The fourth indicator is a school-quality indicator, where the education community may choose from a variety of indicators such as student attendance, chronic absenteeism, dropout rates, school climate, arts, or staff retention. Data is still used as an accountability measure throughout ESSA (McGuinn, 2019). The transition from NCLB to ESSA empowered individual states to adjust, providing them with the ability to use data beyond assessments to inform school plans while maintaining accountability around spending. Although there have been shifts in the planning process, each school is still required to use student outcomes and data as part of their annual school planning. This emphasis on student outcomes and assessments requires data-driven decision-making and requires schools to collect, analyze, and use data purposefully to improve student outcomes (Datnow & Hubbard, 2015).

### **Critique of Data-Driven Decision-Making (DDDM) in Educational Contexts**

Data-driven decision-making (DDDM) focuses on determining a problem, seeking and implementing a solution using data, examining the outcomes of the decision, and identifying the following steps (Mandinach & Jackson, 2012). On a larger scale, DDDM has been used in the creation of achievement goals for varied groups of students and informed accountability policies that seek to accomplish continuous and substantial academic improvement for all students (NCLB, 2005). Moreover, DDDM is also included in current policy, such as the State ESSA Implementation Plan. In school settings, teachers use quantifiable data (such as test scores) to identify students who are struggling (Sun et al., 2016), determine the next steps (i.e., intervention) for said students,

and monitor the results to adapt practices until the student is successful (Van der Scheer et al., 2017).

DDDM is a critical piece of the educational process and has received a large amount of attention (Mandinach, 2012; Young & Kim, 2010). DDDM was included within the four pillars of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Race to the Top program (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). This inclusion of DDDM underscored the importance of using data to inform practice and policy to accelerate and improve learning outcomes that close achievement gaps (Mandinach, 2012; Young & Kim, 2010). DDDM has no single application, even though it has been used and applied in a myriad of ways and continues to evolve in response to critique. DDDM has also taken on various identifiers, such as data-informed decision-making (Jimerson, 2016) or evidence-based instructional practice (Horn et al., 2015). It is also included within the frameworks of data literacy (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016) and assessment literacy (Xu & Brown, 2016). DDDM has been used as a reform initiative both nationwide and internationally and is a crucial component of the learning process (Mandinach, 2012; Mandinach & Gummer, 2013).

Unfortunately, policies like the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and current data-driven decision-making practices seek to improve educational outcomes for minoritized and marginalized students without considering other factors, such as systemic oppression. Historic social inequities are not considered when data is used to drive decisions. According to Gillborn (2015), performance on assessments often monopolizes the time of school reform efforts. Therefore, students' academic paths are

reduced to a series of test scores. This limited focus creates a deficit lens as marginalized students are measured against the white, middle-class norm (Gillborn, 2015).

Along with a deficit lens, DDDM has been questioned as to its effectiveness in positively impacting student outcomes (Carlson et al., 2011), and some research argues that it increases inequities (Lee & Prfied, 2006). The ESEA remains problematic because it falls short in its goal to call attention to equity and close achievement gaps, and it pushes teachers to have a limited vision of data and their students (Braaten et al., 2017). Looking at only academic data can undermine students' sense of belonging by excluding non-academic factors, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy, failing to recognize diverse experiences, and promoting a school culture that prioritizes academic achievement over holistic well-being (Lindsey, Thousand, Jew, & Piowski, 2017).

### **The Intersection of Neoliberalism and Data-Driven Decision-Making in Education**

The practice of using data to make decisions and monitor schools is not new. According to Kliebard (2004), the principles of scientific management that promote efficiency, order, and productivity have been primarily embedded in the organization of U.S. schools since the beginning of the 20th century. Scientific management refers to management techniques aimed at maximizing productivity in the manufacturing industry (Nelson, 1980). Scientific management influenced the introduction of schooling achievements and standardized tests in the 1930s and continues to be a part of standard educational practices (Kim, 2018). Scientific management was influenced by the movement of neoliberalism in the early 1980s. Neoliberalism supports free markets, reduction of public expenditures for social services, deregulation, privatization, and replacement of value for the “common good” with the notion of “individual



responsibility” (Gibson & Ross, 2007). In the context of education, neoliberalism highlights systems of auditing and accountability, applies market principles to schooling, and emphasizes creating equity-oriented goals (Hursh & Martina, 2003; Kitchener, 2016). The practice of creating equity-oriented goals involves evaluating schools, teachers, and students to uphold neoliberalism's principles of accountability, choice, and efficiency (Hursh, 2007). Neoliberal policy assumes that all students have equal access to a high-quality education, attributing poor student outcomes to individual decisions while ignoring racial or socioeconomic inequalities (Brathwaite, 2016).

There is a link between current legislation, such as ESSA, and neoliberalism. Presidents George H.W. Bush and Clinton led the standards-based reform movement during the late 1980s and early 1990s, initiating reform efforts based on neoliberalism. These presidents sought to implement statewide learning standards and expand choice, resulting in little success (Lubienski, 2005). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 under President George W. Bush, was the first federally implemented neoliberal-influenced policy. NCLB increased testing, choice, and accountability for schools with the intention of reducing racial and socioeconomic gaps in achievement (Brathwaite, 2017). The passing of ESSA transferred control of education back from the federal to the state. Individual states were given the ability and flexibility to create programs, direct funds, and develop interventions that address the needs of their local populations without having to pass on federal funds (Egalite et al., 2017). ESSA prohibits the federal government from requiring states to adopt a specific accountability model, a uniform curriculum, or a specific set of teaching methods. However, ESSA does require states to implement their accountability systems using standardized tests and report results by specific subgroups

(e.g., language proficiency, disability, race, and economic disadvantage) (McGuinn, 2016). These accountability systems generate data that guides school planning, necessitating data-driven decision-making.

Although current policy places reform in the hands of state control, current educational systems use DDDM to capitalize on neoliberal trends by emphasizing agents and results in reductionist contexts, according to Nasir et al. (2018). Also, Hursh (2007) says that this way of thinking about educational reform in a neoliberal way takes advantage of people's blind faith in data without revealing the truth of systemic and structural oppression.

This results in constant attention on “achievement gaps” that define the functioning of the schools (e.g., standardized assessments, the formal curriculum) as apolitical or objective (Apple et al., 2009). To promote equity and uncover systemic issues in response to achievement gaps, including a critical dimension to data-driven decision-making is necessary. To address achievement gaps and promote equity, it is essential to include a critical dimension to data driven decision making. While academic data offers insights into performance, it often neglects students' broader experiences and identities. Integrating critical measures to gauge student data, such as their sense of belonging, provides educators with a deeper understanding of factors influencing student success, such as school climate and relationships. This critical approach reveals disparities contributing to achievement gaps and cultivates a culture where all students feel valued and empowered to succeed.

## **Critiquing Current DDDM Practices Through a Critical Lens**

Employing current DDDM practices without considering the broader sociopolitical context perpetuates the notion that disparities in achievement, enrollment, or participation stem from individual student and teacher actions alone. Moreover, these practices often overlook significant data discrepancies, failing to correlate low student outcomes with systemic issues such as oppressive education practices or inequitable resource distribution (Datnow & Park, 2016). Such approaches can be counterproductive to school-wide planning, particularly for students who are already marginalized or underserved (Dodman, 2016). It's imperative to prioritize students' social and emotional well-being within data-driven decision-making frameworks to address these systemic issues effectively.

The relationship between achievement and students' social and emotional well-being, as well as their sense of belonging, is complex and multifaceted (Huguet et al., 2014; Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007; McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2010). While some studies indicate a positive impact of DDDM on student achievement, particularly in schools with a strong collaborative culture and responsive Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (Huguet et al., 2014; Ikemoto & Marsh, 2007; McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2010), others suggest challenges in effectively utilizing DDDM in educational settings (Garner, Thorne, & Horn, 2017). Teachers, often constrained by time limitations, may focus on initial findings rather than broader patterns and may have limited meaningful conversations about data (Garner, Thorne, & Horn, 2017). However, for data-driven decision-making to truly benefit students, it must inform discussions around equitable

outcomes (Fowler & Brown, 2018). This necessitates data that captures students' relationships with their teachers, the educational system, and their learning processes.

Only recently have there been efforts to correlate data analysis in PK–12 schools with an equity-based inquiry view (Allen & Penuel, 2015). There is a movement to consider equity when school communities make sense of data and negotiate meaning from a variety of conflicting messages they encounter in their local environment (Allen & Penuel, 2015). Allen and Penuel (2015) say that DDDM is based on the idea that all students should be able to succeed, and that the way to make big changes is to move toward critical data-driven decision-making (CDDDM) with a focus on fair systems instead of student outcomes.

Using data for equity requires teachers and leaders to take an inquiry-based stance and assume the role of change agents. The shift from the typical DDDM model towards a “critical data-driven decision-making” (CDDDM) framework transfers the emphasis from a “results-based focus” towards data sets that promote the practice of reflection, assessment, and critique of society/culture to challenge power structures. This CDDDM approach to data analysis includes two theoretical foundations. These foundations are the teacher’s inquiry stance and becoming a change agent using CDDDM. Inquiry, as a stance, is the self-positioning of the education professional as a reflective practitioner. This stance encompasses critique and transformation, as well as a commitment to high standards for all students' learning. This stance requires not only applying social change by analyzing data but also striving toward professional growth (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001).

CDDDM recognizes categories like race and gender as both powerful and problematic social structures and centers on school practices, policies, and initiatives as potential drivers of inequity while examining deficit assumptions related to educational reforms (Swalwell et al., 2016). Moreover, CDDDM operates under the assumption that school performance factors exist and function fully, regardless of their intentionality (Swalwell et al., 2016).

According to Datnow and Park (2018), CDDDM purposefully uses data to uncover inequities, which substantially differs from the typical use of data. The main difference between a typical DDDM cycle and CDDDM is that CDDDM requires a critical consciousness throughout the data collection. Critical consciousness was developed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Friere's pedagogy's goal is to liberate the masses from systemic inequity maintained and perpetuated by processes, practices, and outcomes of interdependent systems and institutions (Friere, 1970). This type of data analysis leads to the uncovering of more profound challenges and increased educational inequities. When school professionals focus solely on student achievement data to enhance test scores, they fail to recognize the underlying structural factors contributing to achievement disparities.

Consequently, the root causes of achievement gaps and systemic inequities persist without being addressed for school improvement. Relying exclusively on conventional data-driven decision-making methods puts schools at risk of disregarding crucial elements impacting student social-emotional well-being and sense of belonging. To bridge this gap, there is a need for educators to embrace a broader, more inclusive approach to data collection, analysis, and decision-making that integrates both

quantitative and qualitative data sources, prioritizing the holistic development and well-being of every student.

The shift from data-driven decision-making (DDDM) to critical data-driven decision-making (CDDDM) creates an opportunity for school leaders to identify inequities and build systems that represent transformative leadership. Transformative leadership explicitly addresses the need to change mindsets that perpetuate inequality and reconstruct them in more equitable ways (Shields, 2019). The concept of transformative leadership, as identified by Burns (1978), is leadership at the highest level and is associated with values such as liberty, justice, and equality (Seligman, 1980). According to Shields (2011), critiquing inequitable practices through transformative leadership promotes exceptional individual achievement and a better life lived in common with others. Transformative leadership also builds on other critical leadership concepts and theories, including leadership for social justice. Likewise, Brooks (2017) suggests that school leaders can develop a heightened and critical awareness of oppression, exclusion, and marginalization to promote and enact social justice. While the practice of DDDM attempts to identify the gaps in education decisions that impact student outcomes, transformative change is not possible if educators continually miss or misdiagnose the root causes of inequity. The use of DDDM historically did not push schools to use data to address deeper issues of equity. Garner (2017) suggests that when educators are not urged to address equity, biased systems are reinforced and place students from marginalized backgrounds at an educational disadvantage.

Despite the practices that analyze current education policies and school systems, teachers often do not clearly understand the degree of inequity in their schools (Fowler &

Brown, 2018). In pursuit of equity, Fowler and Brown (2018) propose that school leaders and teachers embark on a journey to uncover what the data fails to reveal about their students, including aspects related to their social and emotional well-being and sense of belonging. By delving beyond surface-level academic metrics, educators can identify the underlying issues that impact student achievement. This analysis entails recognizing the multifaceted nature of student experiences and understanding the nuanced factors that contribute to their success. This practice seems to be even more critical for schools that serve high populations of underserved students who continue to represent a large portion of the achievement gap (Fowler & Brown, 2018). This practice requires a shift in data analysis and a shift to the CDDDM model because the framework addresses equity by expanding the question “What will close achievement gaps?” to include “What will increase and deepen the equity within our school?” This shift encourages the collection of data that uncovers what is producing and maintaining inequities (Fowler & Brown, 2018).

Expanding the use of data is nothing new. Portman and Schildekamp (2016) conducted a study that examined schools that utilized information beyond assessment data. In the study, they found that five of the nine educator teams used data successfully to solve school-wide problems while focusing on identifying and manipulating structural conditions. This study also made connections to the history of neoliberalism, highlighting the role data has played in that ongoing phenomenon. Data monitors and judges schools, teachers, and students in the neoliberal system, prioritizing the hallmark market principles of accountability, choice, and efficiency (Hursh, 2007). Neoliberal policy creates the illusion of a society in which people are chosen and moved to power

positions based on ability and merit. Students are falsely assumed to have equal access to a high-quality education (Hursh, 2007). Individual decision-making, not systematic factors or existing racial or socioeconomic inequity, is the cause of poor outcomes. Positive outcomes are attributed to individual merit and hard work (Brathwaite, 2016). These neoliberal framework presuppositions can quickly go unquestioned in standard DDDM models, perpetuating the status quo. However, according to Gannon-Slater et al. (2017), research indicates that accessing data and having data conversations are insufficient for promoting equitable conditions in schools. CDDDM can respond to these insufficiencies and flaws of DDDM with its clear orientation towards justice and equity as end goals while rejecting debunked neoliberal logic regarding data and data analysis (Gannon-Slater et al., 2017).

Without CDDDM informing the school improvement plan, equity is completely overlooked and not included in the root causes needed for improvement. This study uses an education equity audit (Skrla et al., 2009) as a specific way to make important data-driven decisions (CDDDM) to make sure that fairness is at the center of plans to improve schools. In a study conducted by Dodman (2016) analyzing the use of education equity audits as a method of CDDDM, findings showed that a focus on DDDM can expand toward a more critical approach to understanding educational settings. A wider set of data that is analyzed increased teachers' concerns about equity of educational opportunity for all students as opposed to closing the "achievement gap. The study also concluded that a wider set of data can drive pedagogical and institutional decision-making that directly addresses the root causes of inequities. Lastly, the study also suggested that teachers need full access to and support for interpreting a wide range of data in a supportive, equity-



centered collaborative space. Using an equity audit in conjunction with leader support in professional learning communities, teachers increased their confidence, appreciation, and skill relative to data, increased their awareness of school inequities, and felt empowered as they redefined their responsibilities to include attention to school-based inequities (Dodman, 2016).

### **Implementing Equity Audits for Comprehensive Equity Evaluation**

Equity audits are an effective means of engaging in the CDDDM process (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011). Equity audits have been used to document inequitable social, political, and economic opportunities and outcomes in a variety of domains (Bensimon, 2004) and enforce compliance with civil rights statutes (Skrla et al., 2009). Equity audits have historically been focused on civil rights enforcement, curriculum auditing of math and science, and state accountability, and are also commonly used in business and healthcare settings (Skrla et al., 2009). In the past, equity audits produced large amounts of data that were difficult to examine (Skrla et al., 2009). This data was useful in documenting violations of civil rights laws but not practical for day-to-day leadership use (Skrla et al., 2009). The education equity audit developed by Skrla et al. (2009) is more focused than previous broad audits. This focus provides data that is clearly and understandably organized to reveal levels of equity and inequity in key areas for school teams. These education equity audits are usable for planning and monitoring and provide a tool for schools to reduce the complexity of the data without stripping it of its utility for increasing equity (Skrla et al., 2009).

An education equity audit allows schools to collect data related to the many possible inequities within a school and classroom in terms of race, class, gender,

(dis)ability, sexual identity, and language (Skrla et al., 2009). Data sources typically include achievement data (e.g., test scores, dropout rates), discipline data (e.g., expulsions, office referrals), tracking data (e.g., identified participants for gifted and special education programs), extracurricular data (e.g., participation rates in athletics and the arts), and staffing data (e.g., staff diversity and retention). Instead of the narrow focus on standardized test scores required by NCLB and ESSA (Ravitch, 2010), the conductor of an equity audit examines disaggregated data across several areas (Skrla et al., 2009). Once the data has been collected, the PLC members can begin to make sense of it using a specific protocol. Having this structured conversation about the data will surface the implications and recommendations for leadership practice. The process of analyzing the data begins to tell the school's story because it will underscore the impact on children being served, including the children who are disproportionately affected by the school's current practices (Skrla et al., 2009).

After determining whether a pattern of inequity is occurring and analyzing the potential causes, the team collaboratively works to devise a solution, implements the solution, and monitors the results (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). However, to achieve systemic equity, leaders must target their actions toward practices that disproportionately hinder the progress of specific groups (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). As the leadership team works to confront equity issues, they must clarify the level at which they should focus on the issue (Javius, 2017). This focus should uncover whether systemic issues must be addressed at the leadership level or be resolved by a change in individual teacher mindset and practice (Javius, 2017).

To ensure that an equity audit does not marginalize students, it must be a proportional representation of inclusive practices for all students (McKenzie & Skrla, 2016). The audit must also consider the equity traps that school staff may not be aware of. Equity traps are patterns of thinking and behavior that trap the possibilities for creating equitable schools for minoritized and marginalized children (McKenzie & Skrla, 2016). These traps stop or hinder one's ability to move forward in educational equity. Both individuals and the collective can reinforce equity traps. For example, a collective group of education professionals can reinforce an equity trap when staff continue to communicate to each other their belief that minoritized students struggle academically due to the negative attitudes and "dysfunction" of their families (McKenzie, 2001). This reinforcement of equity traps perpetuates deficit thinking, which maintains systemic inequities that exacerbate achievement gaps. The existence and examination of equity traps is a critical move before engaging in an equity audit (McKenzie, 2001). The method by which leaders address these traps and prepare staff for a successful audit is addressed in the next section around professional learning communities and equity audits (McKenzie, 2001).

Teachers and administrators can sometimes fall into equity traps or assumptions that prevent educators from believing that all students can be successful learners (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). For data to be used effectively, teachers need to be supported. Coburn and Turner (2011) investigated data use in schools and districts. They found that assessments, student tests, and other forms of data are only as beneficial as how they are used. They also found a broad range of dimensions that matter for how data use occurs (Coburn & Turner, 2011). These dimensions range from individual

factors such as beliefs and knowledge to organizational and even political ones (Coburn & Turner, 2011).

An education equity audit can confirm equity concerns and uncover previously overlooked issues. To create systemic equity, there must be an environment that embraces a set of underlying assumptions about the right of every learner to receive the best possible public education (Scott, 2001). Equity audits provide schools and districts with clear indicators for measuring how successful they are in meeting the needs of their students and identifying problematic areas (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011). When leaders are attentive to systemic equity, they focus not only on student academic achievement but also on the quality of their teachers and instructional programs (Skrla et al., 2009). School leaders ensure skilled faculty and staff are in each classroom to serve every student. Further, equity-conscious school leaders are also cautious not to make assumptions that equitable practices are occurring in their schools but rather to gather evidence to ensure every member of the school community assists all students to achieve their highest potential (McKenzie & Skrla, 2016).

While most education equity audits are typically conducted at the district level, Skrla et al. (2009) advocate for school-level leaders to take proactive steps to address equity issues within their schools. Conducting a school-based equity audit is a valuable strategy for leaders to examine how systemic equity issues manifest within their school community (Brown, 2010). Especially in the context of the pandemic, the importance of equity audits in addressing students' social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma experiences becomes more apparent. The disruptions caused by the pandemic have exacerbated existing disparities and trauma among student populations, underscoring the

need for targeted interventions and support. Equity audits offer a tool to not only assess academic factors but also to gauge the impact of the pandemic on students' social-emotional well-being, access to resources, and experiences of trauma. By conducting an equity audit that considers the unique circumstances brought about by the pandemic, schools can develop tailored action plans to support students' social and emotional well-being. Ultimately, equity audits serve as invaluable tools for guiding schools in their efforts to mitigate the long-term effects of the pandemic on students' social-emotional well-being and ensure that all students have equitable access to the support they need to thrive. Equity-conscious leaders gather evidence to ensure that every member of the school community is involved in helping all students achieve their highest potential and to ensure equitable practices are occurring in their schools (McKenzie & Skrla, 2016). This dissertation uses a professional learning community to conduct a school-level education equity audit.

### **Enhancing Equity through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**

Professional learning communities (PLCs) offer an opportunity to improve instruction and conduct an equity audit. PLCs are a forum in which members, individually and collectively, engage in the learning process to improve their practice with the expectation of transformative change (Martin-Kniep, 2008; Overstreet, 2017; Servage, 2007). PLCs picked up momentum at the start of the millennium when No Child Left Behind prompted many districts across the nation to return professional development to the authority of the teachers in individual schools (Vescio et al., 2008). Westheimer (2008) described six main goals of professional learning communities: 1. Improving teacher practice to improve student learning; 2. creating a culture of

intellectual inquiry and being open to difficult conversations; 3. increasing teacher capacity to lead through collaborative leadership; 4. mentoring novice teachers; 5. Reducing alienation; and 6. They are pursuing social justice, democracy, and a communal way of life. Similarly, Stoll et al. (2006) identify five key characteristics that PLCs theoretically share: (a) shared values and vision that serve as a framework for decision-making; (b) collective responsibility for student learning; (c) reflective professional inquiry, which involves frequent critical dialogue examining teacher practice and contextual dilemmas; (d) collaboration and interdependence among colleagues; and (e) promoting group and individual learning.

PLCs provide a platform for educators to gather, discuss, and collaborate within their belief in equality. The PLC platform also promotes teacher learning and positive student outcomes. PLCs appear to offer the solution to many educational woes but often fall short (Servage, 2008; Sims & Penny, 2015). PLCs have fallen short in fulfilling the promise of equity, especially for students who continue to face opportunity gaps and those who have historically been marginalized (Fisher et al., 2019). Schools that seek ways of ensuring systemic equity within and across schools are committed to closing the gaps in achievement, school dropout rates, and teacher quality (Skrla et al., 2004).

The use of collaborative teacher teams, such as PLCs, is beneficial in supporting teachers' use of data, according to Michaud (2016). Changing teachers' pedagogy through the collaborative team experience, achieved by creating teams of teachers, has the most significant potential to impact change, particularly the educational experience of students (Michaud, 2016). Achievement results improve when school leaders and their teams address the range of opportunity gaps that systemically and structurally affect

student learning in and outside of school (Irvine, 2010; Milner, 2012; Welner & Carter, 2013). Schildkamp et al. (2016) found that the use of PLCs to study data in secondary education was a positive experience for members who learned to solve a problem and developed data skills with positive attitudes. The positive experience in PLC teams indicates that school leaders should nurture a culture for data use, for example, by providing resources and communicating expectations for data use more clearly, which is a necessary step in creating equity, according to Gerzon (2015). Overall, PLC teams increase education professionals' efficacy in uncovering inequitable teaching and learning conditions that empower schools to enact change that responds to systemic inequity.

### **Fostering Cultural Responsiveness in Educational Institutions**

Cultural responsiveness refers to the ability of educational institutions to recognize, respect, and incorporate students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives into all aspects of teaching and learning (Gay, 2018). It involves creating an inclusive environment where students from diverse cultural backgrounds feel valued, understood, and empowered to succeed academically (Lind et al., 2014). Cultural responsiveness is essential in identifying equity at the school level because it helps ensure that all students have equal access to high-quality education and opportunities for academic success (Lind et al., 2014). By acknowledging and addressing the cultural factors that may influence students' learning experiences, schools can work to eliminate disparities in achievement and promote positive outcomes for all students, regardless of their background (Gay, 2018).

Furthermore, research has shown that culturally responsive teaching practices can enhance student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement, particularly among

students from historically marginalized groups (Gay, 2018). By incorporating culturally relevant materials, instructional strategies, and assessments, schools can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that meets the diverse needs of all students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Cultural responsiveness is essential for promoting equity at the school level because it ensures that schools recognize and respond to the unique cultural identities and experiences of their students, thereby fostering an environment where all students can thrive academically and socially (Lind et al., 2014; Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

An equity audit addresses cultural responsiveness by systematically examining various aspects of the school environment to identify and respond to inequities related to race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and other cultural factors (Skrla et al., 2009). Through the audit process, data is collected and analyzed to assess the extent to which school policies, practices, and procedures are inclusive and responsive to the diverse cultural backgrounds and needs of students (Lind et al., 2014). This process includes examining curriculum materials for cultural relevance, evaluating discipline policies for fairness and equity, assessing staff diversity and cultural competency, and soliciting feedback from students and families about their experiences with the school's culture and climate (Lind et al., 2014). By identifying areas of strength and areas in need of improvement, an equity audit helps schools develop targeted strategies and action plans to promote cultural responsiveness and create a more equitable learning environment for all students (Skrla et al., 2009).

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers are facing unprecedented challenges in fostering cultural responsiveness in their classrooms. One of the primary



obstacles is the limited access to professional development opportunities tailored to address cultural responsiveness in the post-pandemic era (Lewis et al., 2021). Disruptions caused by the pandemic have strained resources and shifted priorities, leaving teachers with fewer opportunities to engage in training focused on meeting the diverse needs of their students. Additionally, the transition to online or hybrid learning models during the pandemic has increased teachers' workload and stress levels, making it difficult for them to allocate time and energy to enhance their knowledge of cultural responsiveness (Nasir & Hand, 2021).

Increasing teachers' knowledge of cultural responsiveness is crucial for creating inclusive and equitable learning environments where all students feel valued and supported, which in turn can positively impact students' social and emotional well-being (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Cultural responsiveness, defined as educators' ability to recognize and respect the cultural backgrounds, identities, and experiences of their students, plays a significant role in promoting students' sense of belonging and emotional well-being (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014). By integrating cultural awareness into their teaching practices, educators can address disparities in educational outcomes and better meet the diverse needs of their student populations.

Addressing disparities exacerbated by the pandemic requires a focus on equity and inclusion. Smith et al. (2021) advocate for culturally responsive teaching and inclusive curriculum design to narrow achievement gaps. The pandemic has magnified existing equity gaps in education, necessitating teachers to grapple with these disparities while integrating culturally responsive practices into their instructional approaches (Milner, 2020). The transition to remote learning underscored disparities in access to

technology and resources among students from diverse cultural backgrounds, highlighting the critical role of culturally responsive pedagogy in advancing equity in education. However, many educators may lack sufficient training in cultural competence and responsiveness, impeding their capacity to effectively support diverse student populations (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Equity audits reveal instances of racial disparities and the need for targeted interventions to effectively address racism (Smith, 2021). Prioritizing professional development in equity and race-related areas is essential for tackling equity issues (Garcia & Montoya, 2018). Moreover, understanding participants' perceptions and comfort levels around race before the audit provides valuable insights into addressing inequities (Brown & Rodriguez, 2017). Additionally, action steps in a school-wide plan developed post-audit that address teachers' understanding of cultural responsiveness, such as integrating culturally relevant materials to foster student engagement and academic achievement are critically in addressing equity gaps (Skrla et al., 2009; Howard, 2017).

To identify teachers' lack of knowledge around cultural responsiveness, an equity audit can be a valuable tool. Equity audits examine various aspects of the school environment, including curriculum, instruction, discipline practices, and staff diversity, to identify disparities and inequities (Skrla et al., 2009). By analyzing data related to teacher practices and attitudes, such as classroom observations, surveys, and professional development records, an equity audit can reveal areas where teachers may need additional support or training in cultural responsiveness (Datnow & Park, 2018).

Once areas of need have been identified, schools can implement strategies to increase teachers' knowledge of cultural responsiveness. Providing culturally relevant

professional development, offering workshops and training sessions that focus on topics such as cultural competency, implicit bias, and culturally responsive teaching strategies is essential (Howard, 2017). Embedding cultural responsiveness into pre-service teacher education programs is also crucial, ensuring that future educators are prepared to work effectively with diverse student populations (Banks, 2019).

Ongoing coaching and support are essential for helping teachers implement culturally responsive practices in their classrooms. Schools can offer mentoring, peer observation, and feedback to support teachers in incorporating culturally relevant content, pedagogy, and assessment practices (Hammond, 2015). Promoting collaboration and peer learning fosters a culture of continuous improvement where teachers can share resources and best practices for creating inclusive learning environments (Nieto & Bode, 2012).

Encouraging self-reflection and awareness is another critical strategy for increasing teachers' knowledge of cultural responsiveness. Providing opportunities for educators to examine their own cultural beliefs, biases, and practices can help them develop a deeper understanding of their students' needs and experiences (Milner, 2015). By promoting an equity-oriented mindset and fostering a culture of social justice, schools can empower teachers to advocate for the needs of marginalized students and work towards creating more equitable educational opportunities for all (Datnow & Park, 2018). Transitioning from the critical strategy of encouraging self-reflection and awareness among educators to the broader context of cultural responsiveness and sense of belonging, it is evident that fostering an equity-oriented mindset and promoting a culture of social justice within schools is essential. By empowering teachers to advocate for the needs of marginalized students and striving towards equitable educational opportunities

for all, schools can enhance student sense of belonging and create inclusive and supportive learning environments (Datnow & Park, 2018).

### ***Cultural Responsiveness and Sense of Belonging***

Student sense of belonging and cultural responsiveness are intricately linked within educational settings, playing pivotal roles in cultivating inclusive and supportive learning environments. Cultural responsiveness, as elucidated by Ladson-Billings (1994), entails recognizing and valuing the diverse cultural backgrounds, identities, and experiences of students. By embracing cultural responsiveness, educators create spaces where students feel seen, heard, and respected for who they are. This acknowledgment of students' cultural identities contributes to a sense of belonging, as students perceive that their backgrounds and perspectives are valued and affirmed within the school community (Goodenow, 1993). Furthermore, building trust and connection between students and educators is facilitated by cultural responsiveness, as it acknowledges and affirms students' cultural identities and experiences (Howard, 2001). When students witness their cultural identities reflected in the curriculum, instructional materials, and classroom practices, they develop a stronger sense of connection to their school and educators, fostering a deeper sense of belonging (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). This connection creates an environment in which students feel valued as members of the learning community, understood, and supported by their teachers.

Cultural responsiveness is inherently linked to promoting equity and inclusion within educational institutions. As Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts, cultural responsiveness involves recognizing and addressing the cultural biases and systemic barriers that can marginalize certain student groups. By dismantling these barriers,

educators create opportunities for all students to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. When students feel that their cultural backgrounds are respected and affirmed, they are more inclined to engage in learning and contribute positively to the school community (Paris & Alim, 2017). Thus, embracing cultural responsiveness is pivotal for fostering an equitable and inclusive learning environment where every student could succeed (Gay, 2002).

Student sense of belonging and cultural responsiveness are closely intertwined concepts that are crucial for creating inclusive and supportive educational environments. By prioritizing cultural responsiveness and embracing students' diverse identities, educators can foster a sense of belonging among all students, promoting equity and inclusion. This approach allows educators to establish spaces where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. Through examining student feedback on race and equity, schools can gain valuable insights into their culture, identifying areas for improvement in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### **Student Feedback on Race and Equity**

Student data from an equity audit can provide valuable insights into overall school enrollment and equity issues. Understanding student perspectives on race and equity is crucial for assessing and improving the culture of a school. These perspectives provide valuable insights into how students experience and perceive issues related to race, racism, and equity within their educational environment. By examining student feedback, educators and administrators can gain a deeper understanding of the inclusivity, fairness, and cultural responsiveness of their school's culture (Gay, 2010). Positive student feedback regarding feelings of belongingness, acceptance, and cultural affirmation can

indicate a school culture that prioritizes diversity and fosters an inclusive environment where students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds feel respected and valued. Conversely, student perceptions of unequal treatment, discrimination, or marginalization based on race may highlight areas where the school needs to address systemic barriers to equity (Carter, 2008).

Student perspectives on race and equity can provide insights into the cultural responsiveness of a school's curriculum, instructional practices, and disciplinary policies. Feedback indicating a culturally affirming curriculum, inclusive teaching methods, and restorative disciplinary approaches suggests a school culture that recognizes and respects students' diverse cultural backgrounds and lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). On the other hand, instances of racial microaggressions, stereotyping, or racialized conflicts reported by students may indicate areas where the school needs to foster dialogue, understanding, and conflict resolution strategies to improve the racial climate and promote a more inclusive environment for all students (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013).

Student perspectives on race and equity can reflect the degree of student empowerment within the school community. Positive feedback regarding student-led initiatives, activism, and opportunities for student voice and agency suggests a school culture that values student empowerment and encourages students to advocate for change and challenge inequities (Lee, 2007). By listening to and valuing student voices on issues of race and equity, schools can gain valuable insights into the strengths and areas for improvement within their school culture, ultimately working towards creating a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students.

Understanding student perspectives on race and equity through data from an equity audit is crucial for assessing and improving school culture. Positive feedback on feelings of belongingness, acceptance, and cultural affirmation indicates a school that prioritizes diversity and fosters inclusivity, benefiting students' social and emotional well-being and sense of belonging (Gay, 2010). Conversely, feedback indicating unequal treatment or discrimination based on race highlights areas needing systemic equity improvements (Carter, 2008). Additionally, student feedback informs the cultural responsiveness of curriculum, teaching methods, and disciplinary policies, promoting an inclusive environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Student empowerment is reflected in opportunities for activism and voice, contributing to a school culture that values advocacy and challenges inequities (Lee, 2007). By listening to and valuing student perspectives, schools can identify strengths and areas for improvement, fostering a more equitable and inclusive learning environment.

### **The Reflective Practice of Transformative Leadership**

A transformative school leader demonstrates a commitment to social justice, equity, and inclusion and actively works to challenge and transform inequitable systems and practices within the school community (Shields, 2009). This type of leader goes beyond traditional administrative roles and seeks to dismantle systemic barriers to equity, advocate for marginalized students, and promote educational opportunities that empower all learners (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Transformative school leaders prioritize equity and social justice in their decision-making processes, policies, and practices, aiming to create a school culture that embraces diversity, fosters inclusivity, and addresses systemic inequities (Shields, 2009). They recognize the intersectionality of identities and

experiences within the school community and strive to create learning environments where all students feel valued, respected, and supported (Brown, 2012). Furthermore, transformative school leaders engage in critical reflection and self-awareness, continually examining their own biases, privileges, and assumptions to better understand and address the needs of diverse student populations (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). They collaborate with stakeholders, including students, families, educators, and community members, to co-create policies and practices that promote equity and social justice (Shields, 2009).

Transformative school leaders advocate for systemic change both within the school and in the broader educational landscape, challenging policies and practices that perpetuate inequities and advocating for policies that promote equitable access to resources and opportunities for all students (Brown, 2012). They serve as agents of change, inspiring others to join them in the pursuit of educational equity and social justice (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Transformative school leaders are visionary, courageous, and committed individuals who work tirelessly to dismantle inequitable systems and create inclusive learning environments where all students can thrive (Shields, 2009). Through their leadership, they inspire positive change, challenge the status quo, and advocate for a more just and equitable educational system for all (Brown, 2012).

Reflection is crucial for transformative school leaders because it fosters self-awareness, continuous learning, and growth, enabling leaders to critically examine their beliefs, values, and practices concerning equity and social justice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). According to Osterman and Kottkamp (1993), reflective practice allows leaders to "consciously reflect on the multiple dimensions of their work" (p. 4),



including their interactions with students, staff, and stakeholders and the impact of their decisions and policies on equity and inclusion.

Furthermore, reflection helps transformative school leaders identify and challenge their own biases, assumptions, and blind spots, which may inadvertently perpetuate inequities within the school community (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). By engaging in critical self-reflection, leaders can recognize areas for improvement, refine their leadership practices, and develop more culturally responsive approaches to addressing inequities (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993).

Additionally, reflective practice encourages transformative school leaders to listen to diverse perspectives, seek feedback from stakeholders, and engage in dialogue about issues of equity and social justice (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Through reflection, leaders can cultivate empathy, build trust, and foster authentic relationships with students, families, and community members, which are essential for creating inclusive school environments (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). Reflection empowers transformative school leaders to challenge the status quo, question inequitable policies and practices, and advocate for systemic change (Brown, 2012). By critically analyzing their leadership practices and their impact on equity and inclusion, leaders can identify opportunities to dismantle barriers, promote access and opportunity for all students, and create more equitable learning environments (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

Reflection is essential for transformative school leaders because it enables them to deepen their understanding of equity and social justice, confront their biases, and continuously strive for improvement in their leadership practices (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). By engaging in reflective practice, leaders can lead more effectively, inspire

positive change, and create schools that are truly equitable and inclusive for all students (Brown, 2012). The process of reflection outlined in transformative leadership practices aligns closely with the objectives of conducting an equity audit in schools. Through reflection, school leaders engage in critical self-examination of their beliefs, values, and practices about equity and social justice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). This introspection allows leaders to identify their own biases, assumptions, and blind spots that may contribute to inequities within the school community (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

As leaders reflect on their interactions with students, staff, and stakeholders, they gain insights into the impact of their decisions and policies on equity and inclusion within the school environment (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). This process helps leaders recognize areas for improvement in their leadership practices and develop more culturally responsive approaches to addressing inequities identified through the equity audit. Furthermore, reflective practice encourages leaders to listen to diverse perspectives and engage in dialogue about equity issues with stakeholders (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). By actively seeking feedback and engaging in discussions about equity and social justice, leaders can cultivate empathy, build trust, and foster authentic relationships with students, families, and community members, which are essential for creating inclusive school environments (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993).

Through reflection, transformative school leaders also gain the confidence to challenge the status quo, question inequitable policies and practices, and advocate for systemic change (Brown, 2012). By critically analyzing their leadership practices and their impact on equity and inclusion, leaders can identify opportunities to dismantle

barriers, promote access and opportunity for all students, and create more equitable learning environments (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). The process of reflection empowers transformative school leaders to deepen their understanding of equity and social justice issues identified through an equity audit. By confronting their biases, seeking diverse perspectives, and advocating for systemic change, leaders can lead more effectively and create schools that are truly equitable and inclusive for all students.

### **Summary**

Based on the literature review, it is evident that traditional data-driven decision-making (DDDM) processes in education, shaped by neoliberal ideals of meritocracy, often fail to address systemic inequities effectively. This limitation underscores the need for a shift towards critical data-driven decision-making (CDDDM) methods that can more adequately recognize and respond to disparities. Education equity audits look like a useful tool in CDDDM frameworks because they make it easier to find and fix problems in a planned way. Additionally, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are highlighted for their role in fostering critical data analysis and informed decision-making among educators. Crucially, transformative leadership is identified as pivotal in promoting culturally responsive practices and fostering dialogue on race and equity, thereby enhancing overall student outcomes through more equitable educational practices.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

Long before the pandemic, students from historically marginalized communities faced systemic inequities and fundamentally unequal school experiences (Carter et al., 2016). Ladson-Billings (2006) emphasizes the systematic denial of equitable education for students of color, with schools often failing to culturally affirm diverse backgrounds. Jones et al. (2021) further argue that COVID-19 has exacerbated preexisting hardships for already vulnerable populations. Therefore, school leaders must address these lingering inequities by collaborating with educators and policymakers to create comprehensive, equity-focused plans. In New Jersey, schools identified for support and improvement must develop annual school plans, as mandated by ESSA. The purpose of this action research study is to identify equity gaps within a PK–8 New Jersey school, incorporate findings into the annual school plan, and use the data to create a leadership action plan for organizational change. Over the last several years, school districts throughout the United States have experienced disparate educational and social-emotional outcomes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. School leaders are now faced with addressing the immediate needs of the students most impacted by the pandemic. At the end of each academic year, schools are required to implement data-driven plans to address losses. For schools already in need of improvement in New Jersey, this coincides with the mandated annual school plan. Annual school plan creation follows a typical data-driven decision-making cycle. Data-driven decision-making (DDDM) implies that educators identify gaps but often fall short in identifying the factors that inequity plays in student outcomes, and many of these factors are overlooked in the creation of an annual school plan and are not

considered in the comprehensive needs assessment. The overlooking of factors calls for the collection of data that moves away from closing gaps and shifts to increasing and deepening equity within schools (Marsh & Farrell, 2014). Critical data-driven decision-making (CDDDM) facilitates this type of data collection. This dissertation uses the CDDDM framework as its conceptual framework for research, which provides a better way for educators to identify systemic inequities by shifting the use of data from what will close gaps to what will deepen equity (Datnow & Park, 2018).

This dissertation aims to identify equity gaps within a New Jersey school and incorporate findings into annual school plan using action research methods. A PLC conducted an equity audit that informed the annual planning, engaging in critical data-driven decision-making (CDDDM) cycles. In the past, teachers at the research site have used data-driven decision-making (DDDM) cycles to inform the creation of and progress within the annual school plan. However, in response to deficit views perpetuated by the traditional DDDM approach, this dissertation's CDDDM approach includes data derived from an equity audit and analyzed in PLCs to inform school-wide goals, revise action steps, and monitor progress. Equity audits are a systematic way for school leaders to assess the degree of equity or inequity present in three critical areas of their schools or districts: programs, teacher quality, and achievement (Skrla et al., 2009). Using equity audits as a tool for CDDDM enacts a process that identifies patterns of inequity, surmises potential causes, and implements strategies to address the findings (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011). The collection and analysis of data from an equity audit exposes equity challenges, uncovers students' strengths as opposed to deficits, and provides a window of

understanding into how schools are responding to increased equity gaps due to the pandemic.

This chapter describes the research methodology. Firstly, we provide the purpose statement, research questions, as well as the rationale and assumptions of action research. Then, the research design, research setting, participants, and researcher positionality are presented. Following that, data collection and analysis procedures are detailed. This chapter closes by presenting its standards of rigor and commitment to ethical procedures.

### **Research Questions**

1. How can a New Jersey school use CDDDM to identify school-wide inequities that affect student outcomes in their annual school planning?
2. What types of actions and interventions can be facilitated at the school level to identify and address equity gaps?
3. What can be learned about the implementation of an equity audit to inform and improve the school planning process?
4. How does principal leadership influence respond to equity gaps at the school building level?

### **Action Research Rationale**

The term ‘action research’ was coined by Kurt Lewin in his 1946 paper “Action Research and Minority Problems”. Kurt Lewin (1946) is considered the originator of action research. Lewin characterized action research as “comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action, using a process of a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action” (O’Brien, 1998, p. 8)

Action research is a designed approach to constructing a close relationship between actions and solving problems. This outlook involves researchers and participants in a research situation working within a collaborative space in a cooperative and participatory way (Stringer, 2014). Researchers and participants identify a problem, conduct data analyses, plan actions, implement actions, and present an assessment to address a problem (Collatto et al., 2017). Action research, a reflective process, focuses on a cycle of actions that organizational or community members have taken, are taking, or hope to take in response to a specific problematic situation (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Action research is either participatory, where the person conducting the study is involved in collaboration with those inside the organization, or action research may be done by an outsider to an organization. For this action research study, I will act as an active member within the organization, more specifically, a principal leader of a PK–8 school building.

The overarching goal of action research is to improve practice through the development of plans that are implemented and reflected upon (Herr & Anderson, 2010). Action research increases the effectiveness of the work people in schools, business and community organizations, teachers, and health and human services conduct (Stringer, 2007). Action research employs a cycle of inquiry that involves planning, acting, observing, and reflecting to achieve desired outcomes (Herr & Anderson, 2005). This cycle allows the action researcher to study complex social processes and observe the effects of change (Baskerville, 1999). Action research has not gone without scrutiny. Baskerville (1999) stated, “The lack of generally agreed criteria for evaluating action research further complicates the publication review process. These constraints make the approach a difficult choice for academics tied tightly into the journal system of scholarly

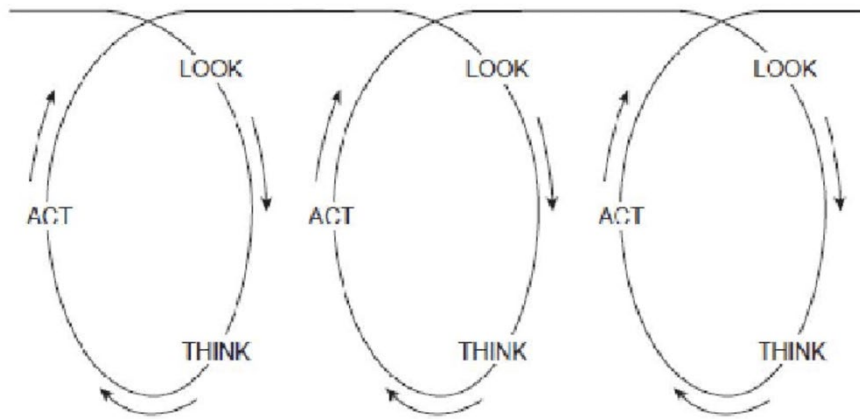
communication” (Grogan et al. 2007, p. 25). Grogan, Donaldson, and Simmons (2007) further discuss the complexities of action research: “This description acknowledges the inherent understanding that true critical reflections involve aligning reflections to theory, forming critical inquiries about policy and practice, and taking informed action” (p. 2). They further add, “Embedded beneath the contexts of biographical, historical and cultural experiences are the justifications for what we know, think, believe, and feel, and our methods of making meaning of and about the environment surrounding us” (p. 2). As a result, action research is a critically reflective process that provides new learning about the organizational environment that may result in change. The goal that one acquires from action research is that it informs practice, garners insight, and can be shifted to the larger organization, which builds organizational learning (Grogan et al., 2007).

Cycles that include decision-making about exploration, data analysis, practice changes, and data collection form the foundation of action research. In action research, the invitation and orientation stages of the cycles may continue right into the data collection process of having group meetings and opportunities to share, reflect, and record experiences (Stringer, 2007). The action research cycle framework of observation, reflection, and action begins with looking, gathering information, building, and framing a picture of work (Stringer, 2007). The next step is to think, explore, and analyze the experience. After looking and thinking, the action is to implement the plan. The action research cycle is as shown. (See Figure 1)



**Figure 1**

*Action Research Cycle*



Action research in educational settings is a type of applied research with the sole purpose of improving the quality of an education professional's practice (Gall et al., 2007). The goal of action research is to produce knowledge that can be generalized in other settings, unlike formal research. Formal research is structured, whereas action research embraces the need for constant modifications, adjustments, and changes in direction when the analysis of data calls for them (Zeni, 2001). Lastly, action research is often at least partially qualitative, focusing on raw data and the practical significance of those raw data (Gall et al., 2007).

Action research, a systematic approach to inquiry, engages stakeholders in investigating effective solutions to challenges within various contexts, including educational settings (Stringer, 2007). This method involves a cyclical process of identifying problems, collecting and analyzing data, implementing interventions, and reflecting on outcomes to inform future actions (Stringer, 2014). Particularly in

education, action research delves into understanding how schools operate, exploring the instructional practices of teachers and the learning experiences of students (Mills, 2011). It serves as a tool for resourceful practitioners, such as school leaders, to move beyond conventional planning processes and toward contextually relevant strategies, especially concerning equity issues (Stringer, 2007).

Equity audits provide a structured framework for assessing policies, practices, and outcomes through an equity lens (Ferguson & Donlon, 2019). These audits involve gathering both quantitative and qualitative data to understand disparities in access, opportunity, and outcomes among different groups within the organization (Kena et al., 2016). Through this process, leaders can uncover systemic barriers and inequities that may exist, such as variations in academic achievement, disciplinary practices, or access to resources and opportunities.

By utilizing action research and equity audits together, leaders take a proactive approach to addressing equity issues by examining root causes and implementing targeted interventions based on evidence (Bustamante et al., 2020). This collaborative and evidence-based approach fosters a culture of continuous improvement within the organization (Sandoval-Hernandez & Guerrero, 2018). It also allows leaders to engage stakeholders, build buy-in, and promote accountability for equity initiatives. Moreover, the iterative nature of action research enables leaders to adapt strategies based on ongoing reflection and feedback, ensuring that interventions remain responsive to the evolving needs of the organization (Bradbury et al., 2015).

In summary, action research and equity audits offer reflective leaders a systematic, collaborative, and evidence-based approach to understanding and addressing

issues of equity within their organizations (Brydon-Miller et al., 2011). By engaging stakeholders, identifying root causes, and implementing targeted interventions, leaders can promote a more inclusive and equitable environment for all members of the organization. I chose action research as my study method because of these characteristics.

### **Setting for Research**

The research setting is a PK-8 school that is located within an urban city in New Jersey and receives support as a Title I school. The Title I program provides technical assistance, resources, and guidance to ensure poor children receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education by helping to close academic achievement gaps (Title I, ND). The use of data for funding is a practice that is associated with schools that receive Title I dollars, and in the state of New Jersey, the school must complete an annual school plan as part of the consolidated State ESSA Implementation Plan. The yearly school plan outlines goals and links funds to them. Schools identified as in need must develop an annual school improvement plan, implement evidence-based practices linked to student and educator needs, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. We develop the school plan through data analysis and goal-setting. The data analysis is a two-step process that includes a comprehensive needs assessment and root cause analysis, which currently does not include a CDDDM cycle or data collection tied to equity.

The research setting is a particular school building, H. Park School, that is part of a larger school district that serves an urban setting in New Jersey with close to seventy-eight thousand residents. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the community's demographics include an average annual income of about twenty-seven thousand dollars, with more than 52% of the residents living in poverty. In addition, the school district in

which H. Park School resides has over 50% Latinx residents and over 32% Black residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Within the larger district, there are close to six thousand three hundred students in grades preschool to twelfth grade, with a majority of the enrollment found in the preschool to eighth-grade levels with close to four thousand nine hundred students. Since 2013, the enrollment in the larger district has decreased due to the influx of students from neighboring charter and Renaissance schools. The research site serves four hundred students in grades pre-kindergarten through eighth. The school shares similar demographics as the school district, serving 52% Latinx and 34% Black. Furthermore, special education students make up 34% of the student body.

### **Population and Sample**

There are eighty-four staff members, and seven of these staff were selected by the school leader as members of the school leadership team. Before a PLC was formed to collaboratively conduct an education equity audit, I disclosed my research goals and the need for the team to engage in equity audits within PLCs to inform the annual school plan. Purposeful sampling is a technique that involves identifying and choosing individuals or groups of people who are highly knowledgeable about or experienced with a situation of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979) noted the importance of accessibility and willingness to participate, as well as the ability to convey experiences and opinions in a clear, meaningful, and reflective manner. In contrast, random sampling was used to guarantee generalization of findings by decreasing the potential for bias in selection (Rapley, 2014). Members of the PLC were recruited based on purposeful sampling criteria. Using these criteria ensured the representation of teachers and support staff from

all grade levels, including an assistant principal and a school counselor. The selected members had also completed prior professional development around the topic of equity, which made them knowledgeable and experienced with topics necessary to conduct an equity audit.

### **Researcher Positionality**

I took on the role of an inside action researcher within my organization to address equity gaps within the specific school building where I serve as principal. In my role as school principal, I am tasked with continually understanding how adults engage with and interpret their work. This understanding supports my efforts to guide and support my staff as we collaboratively identify the necessary steps to enhance our school's performance, including ensuring equity within programming and practices. Anderson and Jones' (2000) research on dissertations in educational leadership suggests the importance of working towards a collective vision and the endurance required to serve our students effectively. In our annual school planning, both the school leadership team and I have traditionally been practitioners motivated by the convenience of studying our site, where we possess a deep level of tacit knowledge.

Moreover, practitioners have expressed a desire for their work within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to contribute meaningfully to their students and the overall workplace environment. I have supported the staff in empowering themselves, both professionally and personally, as we work towards organizational change that addresses equity gaps. My overarching goal as a school leader is to drive organizational change around the school planning process in PLCs using an equity audit.

I am a white female school principal leading a low-income community that serves predominantly children of color. My educational career has consisted of thirty years in the same school district as both a teacher and a leader. Throughout the past thirty years, I have evolved as an educator in response to the community I serve and the inequities that exist. This evolution consists of educating myself about the community I serve, including first recognizing and then working to combat the disadvantages brought by historically oppressive structures. This work is ongoing and incorporates continuous feedback from minoritized staff members, families, and students, as well as self-reflection as an anti-racist, socially just leader. My role as a leader is to engage in practices that create a socially just school. These practices include consistently working toward ambitious educational expectations for all students and creating an environment that is welcoming for students and families.

### **Overview of Action Research Study**

This dissertation used three cycles of action research: an education equity audit in the first cycle, an annual school planning process required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in the second cycle, and a focus on principal leadership in the third cycle. A Professional Learning Committee (PLC) was formed from the existing school leadership team, which facilitated a school collaborative approach for the first two cycles of research.

PLCs consist of a group of people working together to solve a problem or achieve a common goal and are based on the knowledge that learning takes place through authentic tasks embedded in real life (Lave, 1988; Webster-Wright, 2009). Not only does the learning take place through practical experiences, but the reflections and mediated

discussions that are including the PLC perspective in action research gives participants a constant chance to learn and develop solutions to problems that arise in the discussions and reflections. This is especially true for this study, which aims to address equity gaps by having participants take part in an education equity audit.

The collection of data, setting of goals, and implementation of the plan will follow action research's collaborative approach to inquiry and investigation, which leads to action by the audit team, also known as look, think, act, based on the original statement of the problem identified by an equity survey. In my capacity as a school leader and researcher, I will develop protocols and facilitate the PLC activities and discussion groups that will inform this dissertation research.

An education equity audit particularly aligns with this study's action research design. The CDDDM conceptual framework complements action research methods, given that the education equity audit process engages in cycles of action research where the research gathers data, forms action plans, and measures results. The education equity audit positions itself in this work through the action research process and seeks out practice solutions for problems facing communities. Informed by Stringer (2007), this dissertation engaged in three separate cycles of the three-phase action research model: look, think, and act.

### ***Cycle One: The Panorama Survey***

In Cycle One, the process began with administering the Panorama Equity and Inclusion survey to students in grades 3 through 8. This initial survey aimed to gather data on equity-related issues within the school community. During the look phase, the

focus was on analyzing the data collected from this survey to identify any emerging equity-related issues and understand the overall context.

Transitioning to the think phase, attention shifted to examining the survey questions themselves. This phase involved dissecting the questions to uncover any ambiguities or difficulties students experienced in understanding them. The analysis revealed that students struggled with the wording and underlying concepts of some questions, necessitating revisions.

We used the insights from the think phase to develop a revised survey in the act phase. New questions were crafted to address the comprehension challenges identified earlier. The updated survey, designed to be clearer and more accessible, was then distributed to students to gather more accurate data for the ongoing equity audit process.

### ***Cycle Two: Annual School Planning***

Cycle two of the equity audit process focused on refining annual school planning and implementation based on insights from cycle one. During the Look phase, the PLC reviewed data from a second survey distributed to students with the goal of clarifying issues identified in the first survey. This review helped assess the effectiveness of cycle one and pinpoint any additional data needs.

In the Think phase, participants used the Five Whys Protocol to transform established goals into issue statements and identify the root causes of equity problems. This analysis was crucial for developing actionable steps to be incorporated into the annual school plan.

In the Act phase, the next steps were identified based on the findings from the protocol analysis. According to ESSA guidelines, schools that needed support and



improvement developed and implemented comprehensive improvement plans. These plans involved analyzing student achievement data, evaluating existing strategies, setting new goals, and creating detailed action plans with specific steps. The educational equity audit data from cycle one played a critical role in informing the annual school plan for cycle two, which targeted efforts to address equity gaps at the individual school level.

### ***Cycle Three: Leadership Reflection***

In cycle three of the research, the focus shifted to evaluating the leadership exhibited during the previous cycles and identifying areas for improvement. In the Look phase, data collected from the first two cycles, including researcher journals and anonymous questionnaires from all PLC participants, were analyzed to gain insight into supporting the annual school planning process. In the Think phase, reflections from the researcher and participant questionnaires informed improvements in the use of equity audits and provided valuable insights for enhancing principal leadership. We initiated an action plan in the Act phase to facilitate Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), specifically focusing on leveraging equity audits and school planning processes. In this plan, a detailed outline was made to help leaders complete equity audits and help with planning for the next school year, using what leaders had learned from thinking about the plan and hearing from participants.

### **Data Collection**

Action research is a responsive process that gathers data and creates a pathway to use research to solve problems. We collected data from student and teacher data collection, leader reflection journals, and an end-of-study anonymous qualitative short

answer questionnaire to gain a comprehensive understanding of the processes and perceptions of team members during the completion of an equity audit within PLCs.

**Table 1**

*Data Collection by Cycle*

<b>Cycle</b>	<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Protocols/Actions</b>
Cycle One: Identifying the Equity Issue	Student Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey  Participant Reflection  Leader Reflections	Equity Stance Activity  Creation of Second Student Equity and Inclusion Survey
Cycle Two: Critical Analysis of Data; Second Survey, Student Roundtables, Staff Surveys	Second Student Equity and Inclusion Survey  Student Roundtables Staff Surveys  Participant Reflection  Leader Reflections	Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol. (Appendix E)  Five Whys Protocol. (Appendix F).
Cycle Three: Analysis of Reflections to Create an Equity Audit Plan Outline	PLC Participant  Questionnaires After the Audit  Leadership Reflections	The Formation of an Equity Audit Approach

***Student and Teacher Data Collection***

In cycle one, the educational equity audit required the collection of pertinent school data. Data was collected from sources accessible to the school leader and PLC participants, including Panorama equity and inclusion student survey data. First, student

survey responses to the Panorama Equity and Inclusion survey were analyzed to identify what additional data needed to be addressed. A Panorama Equity and Inclusion survey consisted of a series of scales, or groups of survey questions, that worked together to measure students' experiences of equity and inclusion in school. The survey also provided schools and districts with a clear picture of how students, teachers, and staff were thinking and feeling about diversity, equity, and inclusion in school. The survey tracked the progress of equity initiatives through the lenses of students and staff, identified areas for celebration and improvement, informed professional development, and signaled the importance of equity and inclusion to the community. The survey was created as part of the Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools (RIDES) project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) to increase the number and quality of intentionally diverse schools through the development of diagnostic surveys, action-oriented resources, and equity improvement cycle tools. The RIDES project offered insight to school leaders pursuing transformative change in their organizations (McCoy & Bocala, 2022). As a school leader, all the data was easily accessible and provided insight into the educational equity audit.

We collected additional data after the initial Panorama survey. First, a second student equity and inclusion survey was created to address clarity issues identified in cycle one's analysis of the initial Panorama equity and inclusion survey. The second survey was administered to students, and the results were analyzed in cycle two. After the second student survey analysis, several additional data collections occurred. Following the second survey, a student roundtable was conducted, drilling down into student responses from the second survey, followed by a staff survey. The staff survey sought

staff's reflections on the recordings of the student roundtable and their understanding of equity. In the second cycle, all subsequent data collected following the initial Panorama survey was analyzed.

Additionally, we simultaneously collected PLC participant reflection data during the equity audit and after each cycle. Participants wrote a reflection after each PLC meeting. (Appendix A) After the equity audit, participants completed an anonymous qualitative short-answer questionnaire. This data allowed me to gauge the effectiveness of the PLC model and find areas of strength and weakness in the overall research process. (Appendix B) I reviewed the reflection data on a weekly basis, responded to the information provided, and used continuous feedback to guide the PLC planning. The end-of-audit questionnaires allowed for a more detailed picture of the teachers' perceptions of engaging in the PLCs and the use of the equity audits. I collected data to help identify areas of strength and weakness that could be improved to guide principal leaders in facilitating equity audits and annual school planning processes.

### ***Reflection Journal***

Journals written by researchers in practical settings constitute a source of narrative research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These models were used to reframe a problem or issue; then, interventions were carried out, which led to outcomes that were further analyzed. Learning from participant experiences can be difficult. The big problem in learning from experience was that experiences needed to be examined and analyzed to reflect (Schulman, 2002). To remediate that problem and ensure that there was an accurate reflection, Schön (1983) suggested that practitioners reflect after the action was taken. To tackle the challenges that Schön and Shulman identified, I used a reflective

journal after each PLC session to record my experiences (Appendix C). Reflections after each PLC were used as a means of capturing and recording my perspective after each PLC experience. I used my journal to reflect on my role as a researcher and my perspective as a leadership practitioner. These reflections were done throughout the PLC cycles and included what I observed from participants. My journal served as a reflection of leading individuals through each cycle of action research, or PLC cycle. I documented my experiences and actions as a practitioner, drawing on the review of participant reflection journals for guidance. The reflection journal also provided insight into my effort and ability to create organizational change, as well as my ability to lead change. The goal of the reflections was to contribute to informing other practitioners about confronting equity issues and improving their annual planning processes. Reflections also provided insight into the practices identified to decrease opportunity gaps and the position of the equity audit as a primary equity practice.

### **Data Analysis**

Action research is a flexible, responsive process that entails a variety of data analysis procedures (Stringer, 2007). However, this dissertation analyzed qualitative data through a systematic procedure set forth by Miles et al. (2020). Qualitative data was coded and analyzed from short questionnaires and written reflections using a qualitative codebook that linked to the research questions. I needed to determine the first-cycle method of coding before placing any qualitative data in the codebook. Since the qualitative data consisted of short questions, field notes, and written reflections, the first cycle method was a combination of descriptive coding and deductive or a priori coding (Miles et al., 2020). Descriptive coding emphasized the topic and used words or short

phrases that were often nouns (Miles et al., 2020). The other method for the first cycle of coding was deductive or a priori coding. I listed "start codes" which stemmed from the data collected (Miles et al., 2020). I then broke the qualitative data into small samples. The codes were applied to the samples after they were individually read. Where codes did not fit, new codes were created during the rereading process until all data was coded. A narrative was used to discuss the analysis's findings, which were then presented.

### **Trustworthiness**

Strategies to promote trustworthiness included triangulation of data sources, member checking, clarifying bias, and peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009). Data triangulation required ensuring that all themes were prevalent in a variety of data sources used. Member checking was conducted by presenting overall themes to participants for additional feedback on findings. Self-reflection clarified any biases I had, and a peer was solicited to provide a debriefing of themes and findings. The credibility of research processes was critical to action research and supported participant trust through prolonged engagement in the process and persistent observation (Stringer, 2014). Through active participation in each PLC, I had multiple opportunities to take field notes and discuss observations with participants in a collaborative space. Short-answer questionnaires collected from participants also provided additional content, and member-checking raw data verified that the research represented their perspectives.

I led the PLC and worked with participants throughout the process, engaging in insider research. My central bias was the school leader's involvement in the process. As a leader, advocate, and researcher, I created the guidelines for the PLCs, but I acted as an equal participant explicitly with my study participants. Complete objectivity was elusive;

however, researcher self-reflection and journaling, member checks, and triangulation of data limited bias and strengthened validity (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). As a participant-observer, I was aware of my biases and assumptions and logged self-reflections after meetings. Adopting the position of an insider researcher allowed the group to avoid the natural tendency to put on “company behavior” in the presence of an outsider because I was included in the process (Creswell, 2007). As the school leader, I was aware that my position could play a factor in how participants answered questions. To support honesty, all short-answer questionnaires were anonymous. To combat interpreting data in a way that supported my own biases, I identified and recorded biases in my field journal and considered them during the analysis process.

### **Ethical Assurances**

Specific steps were taken to ensure that qualitative research was conducted ethically. Participants' informed consent was obtained prior to any data collection, emphasizing the voluntary nature of their participation in the study (Creswell, 2013). The Institutional Review Board application at Rowan University was completed, and informed consent was acquired from all participants afterward.

When considering the potential for harm (Creswell, 2013), the purpose of the study was communicated through the consent form to avoid deception and prevent participants from experiencing maltreatment. Participants were permitted to leave the study at any time. When gathering data from human subjects, whether qualitative or quantitative, it was essential to keep the data private and confidential (Creswell, 2013). Participants were assured that contributing to the study would not put them in an objectionable position, and their names were changed in the findings report.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this dissertation utilized practitioner action research for professional or organizational development/learning and addressed the need for equity to be the goal in data use practices, along with building-level leader implementation reflection. Using the systematic approach of action research in an educational setting, I moved past the typical school planning process and shifted toward planning that was contextually relevant to equity (Stringer, 2007). I led this planning process as the school principal and conducted it in one school that served marginalized students. Members of the school leadership team were recruited to represent teachers and support staff, including an assistant principal and a guidance counselor. My position as an inside action researcher was to respond to equity gaps within my school building, where I served as principal. The qualitative data consisted of short-answer questionnaires and written reflections collected throughout all three cycles.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

This action research aimed to analyze how Professional Learning Community (PLC) participants utilized critical data-driven decision-making (CDDDM) during an equity audit to identify school-wide inequities and develop an action plan for reducing equity gaps in a PK-8 New Jersey school. The primary focus was on identifying systemic equity issues at the school level, especially in the post-Covid scenario. Through a detailed analysis of participants' experiences and feedback, the study highlighted the importance of prioritizing equity in school planning. The research provided valuable insights into identifying inequities and fostered an environment that encouraged critical engagement with data. Additionally, the study analyzed reflections and feedback from both the leader and PLC participants to develop an action plan conducive to organizational change. The primary objective was to examine participants' experiences and develop a replicable action plan for other school leaders seeking substantial change related to equity.

The research questions guiding this work are:

1. How can a New Jersey school use CDDDM to identify school-wide inequities that affect student outcomes in their annual school planning?
2. What types of actions and interventions can be facilitated at the school level to identify and address equity gaps?
3. What can be learned about the implementation of an equity audit to inform and improve the school planning process?
4. How does principal leadership influence responding to equity gaps at the school building level?

Chapter four outlines the equity audit process conducted by the Professional Learning Community (PLC). This chapter showcases data consistently gathered by PLC participants, illustrating the PLC's operation within the Critical Data-Driven Decision-Making (CDDDM) framework. The equity audit is presented cycle by cycle, beginning with the initial professional development session.

The chapter starts by presenting findings from the equity audit, along with the actions and reflections of PLC participants. These findings form the basis of the data used in the "look, think, and act" phases, including responses from PLC participants. By detailing the sessions and including both the data collected and analyzed by PLC participants, as well as feedback used for action research, readers can see how data influenced each equity audit cycle. The findings include reflections from both PLC participants and the leader.

This structure effectively showcases the use of CDDDM in the equity audit and outlines the steps taken by the leader after each cycle based on feedback from the previous one. The combination of data, overall PLC participant reflections, and leader feedback provides crucial insights into the equity audit process. This chapter lays the foundation for chapter five for the creation of an action plan designed to serve as a model for school leaders aspiring to implement similar approaches.

### **Participant Sample and Setting**

The school leader selected seven staff members from a total of eighty-four to form the school leadership team, which served as the Professional Learning Community (PLC). PLC members were recruited through purposeful sampling, ensuring representation from all grade levels, including an assistant principal and a school

counselor. The selected members had previously completed professional development on equity, making them knowledgeable and experienced in conducting an equity audit.

There were no external or unexpected factors that influenced deviations from the planned interactions.

***Participants***

Seven participants were included in the Professional Learning Community (PLC) that conducted the equity audit and annual school planning. Each participant responded to facilitator-generated reflection questions after each cycle. In addition to cycle-specific feedback, all seven participants provided feedback via a final anonymous questionnaire after the entire audit process. The data portion of Chapter 4 will present detailed feedback.

**Table 2**

*Equality Audit and Annual School Planning by PLC*

Participant	Age	Years in Education	Race	Gender	Job Title
D.W	54	29	White	Female	Pre-K Teacher
F.G.	54	29	Black	Female	2nd-grade teacher
C.C.	54	24	Black	Male	4th Grade Teacher
C.W.	54	24	Black	Female	School Counselor
H.P.	44	20	White	Female	Math Teacher
A.M.	50	20	White	Female	Reading Interventionist
W.P.	58	25	Black	Female	Vice Principal

F.G. is a second-grade teacher and member of the school leadership team. Previously, she held a leadership role in the district before returning to the classroom. F.G. will retire in 2024. C.W., also on the school leadership team, joined the staff two years ago and serves as the school counselor, with 25 years in the district. W.P. is the vice principal, having spent two years at the school and 20 years in the district. C.C. is a fourth-grade teacher who has taught at the same location for 29 years. A.M. is the reading interventionist, with six years at the school and ten in the district. H.P. is a middle school math teacher with six years of experience at the school and 16 years in the district. All PLC participants have been part of the school leadership team for at least two years and have collaboratively developed the annual school plan for the past two years. They have all received varying degrees of professional development on equity and inclusion during their tenure on the leadership team.

The most recent professional development for the Professional Learning Community (PLC) was a book study conducted during the previous school year. The book, "Street Data" by Safir and Dugan (Safir & Dugan, 2022) offered an approach to school improvement centered on comprehensive data analysis. The authors categorize data into three types, providing a framework for districts to assess equity using real-time, ground-level data. The first category, satellite data, provides a broad perspective but may lack specificity, offering a vital yet incomplete narrative of equity. It includes trend data such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, teacher attrition, and parental participation, which reveal patterns in student achievement and associated contextual factors. The second category, map data, delivers a more detailed, mid-level perspective, focusing on specific data like student or teacher skill gaps. It delves into socio-emotional,

cultural, and learning trends within a school community, but like Satellite Data, it might lack the granularity needed for concrete steps to address the highlighted inequities. The final category, street data, focuses on qualitative and experiential information about students, families, and staff, emphasizing their assets. It identifies the underlying causes of inequities found in satellite or map data by highlighting effective practices for students and communities while identifying obstacles. Street Data provides systematic information about student learning, including performance relative to developmental expectations, feelings about the learning environment, impediments to thriving, and suggested instructional or leadership actions. It exposes the roots of inequity while spotlighting areas of opportunity, knowledge, and cultural wealth through artifacts, narratives, stories, and observations from communities and individuals at the margins.

The book study and discussions about the different types of data were aligned with the critical data-driven decision-making model outlined in chapters one and two of this action research study. It also provided PLC participants with a starting point for conducting a deep dive into an equity audit.

### ***Setting***

The research setting is a particular school building that is part of a larger school district that serves an urban setting in New Jersey with close to seventy-eight thousand residents. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the community's demographics include an average annual income of about twenty-seven thousand dollars, with more than 52% of the residents living in poverty. In addition, the school district in which H. Park School resides has over 50% Latinx residents and over 32% Black residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The research site serves four hundred students in grades prekindergarten

through eight. The school shares similar demographics as the school district, serving 52% Latinx and 34% Black. Furthermore, special education students make up 34% of the student body.

### **Data Collection**

Action research is a responsive process that gathers data and creates a pathway to use research to solve problems. Within this action research, there were two distinct sets of data collected simultaneously: student and staff data alongside PLC participant and leader reflection data.

**Table 3**

*Data Collection by Cycle*

<b>Cycle</b>	<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Protocols/Actions</b>
Cycle One: Identifying the Equity Issue	Student Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey Participant Reflection Leader Reflections	Equity Stance Activity Creation of Second Student Equity and Inclusion Survey
Cycle Two: Critical Analysis of Data; Second Survey, Student Roundtables, Staff Surveys	Second Student Equity and Inclusion Survey Student Roundtables Staff Surveys Participant Reflection Leader Reflections	Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol. (Appendix E) Five Whys Protocol. (Appendix F).
Cycle Three: Analysis of Reflections to Create an Equity Audit Plan Outline	PLC Participant Questionnaires After the Audit Leadership Reflections	The Formation of an Equity Audit Approach

The first type of data, student and staff data, is represented in each cycle as PLC participants collected and analyzed within the context of the equity audit. The collection of pertinent school data that was analyzed in each cycle was determined by PLC participants and collected from school sources accessible to the PLC participants. The PLC participants' analysis of the data, as mentioned earlier, is presented in each cycle to demonstrate the responsive practice in which participants are engaging. The qualitative data that is presented within each cycle that is analyzed for this research was obtained from PLC participant questionnaires created by the researcher within each cycle, written reflections from the researcher at the end of each cycle, and an anonymous participant questionnaire at the end of the audit.

### ***PLC Participant Data***

PLC participants responded to reflection questions developed by the leader after each cycle. The researcher initiated the process with six questions designed to assess the participants' self-reflection and their evaluation of personal and group dynamics within the context of equity, biases, and collaboration. These questions aimed to prompt participants to reflect on their experiences, identify critical insights, recognize potential biases, assess communication and collaboration within the team, and evaluate their impact on the day's progress, particularly concerning equity-related issues. The responses to these questions informed the development of new questions for subsequent cycles to further gauge the participants' experiences in the audit process.

After each cycle, the participants' responses were reviewed and coded using deductive coding. The researcher used this feedback to continually guide the planning for the next session. After the equity audit was completed, PLC participants anonymously

completed a final questionnaire. The questions in the final questionnaire focused on reflecting upon and exploring personal experiences and perspectives related to engagement in the equity audit (Appendix B). These questions delved into various aspects, including collaboration, individual sentiments about equity, shifts in perceptions over time, the impact of the work on addressing or perpetuating inequities, and recommendations for enhancing the collaborative process in the context of equity-minded school change. The overall aim was to uncover self-awareness, evaluation, and potential areas for improvement among PLC participants in their equity audit experience.

The data provided insights into the efficacy of the PLC model in fostering equity at the school level and utilizing an equity audit as a tool for critical data-driven decision-making. The anonymous questionnaire offered a detailed perspective on PLC participants' involvement in equity audits, helping to identify both strengths and areas for growth. This information serves as guidance for developing a replicable action plan for leaders conducting equity audits using CDDDM within their schools for annual planning purposes.

### ***Leader Data***

In my role as the leader, I consistently maintained a journal where I reflected on my leadership after each cycle. This journal also served as a platform for reflecting on PLC participant feedback. At the end of each cycle, I coded these reflections, finding them essential in capturing my dual perspective as both a researcher and a practitioner-leader. Following a thorough review of my reflections and those of PLC participants, adjustments to the PLC process were made to ensure success in data analysis and action. Throughout the cycles, my journal not only chronicled the journey of leading PLC



participants through action research and the PLC process but also integrated insights from PLC participant reflection questions, shaping my experiences and actions as a practitioner. My reflections are shared after participant reflections throughout the cycles.

### **Data Analysis**

Data is presented for each cycle, including the first professional development session and introduction to the equity audit. All cycles include a summary of the short reflection questions developed by the leader, which the PLC participants completed at the end of each cycle. PLC participant answers and researcher reflections were coded and analyzed using a qualitative codebook that was linked to the research questions. The first-cycle method of coding was determined before placing any qualitative data in the codebook. Since the qualitative data was short, the first cycle method was a combination of descriptive coding and deductive or a priori coding. The initial or "start codes" codes used were school-wide inequity, use of data, implementation of equity audit, and principal leadership. These "start codes" which stemmed from research questions were broken down into smaller samples within each action research cycle. These samples were read individually to create codes. The codes were used to develop themes for the overall audit. The data collection includes feedback from PLC participants, and relevant themes are described based on each cycle's coding.

### **Results**

This dissertation's goal was to explain how a professional learning community (PLC) used critical data-driven decision-making (CDDDM) to find and fix problems that affected the whole school, as well as make a plan of action through an equity audit. The equity audit's primary goal was to improve equity within the school, especially in the

aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The audit's goal was to employ iterative cycles of reflection to uncover the root causes of educational inequities and develop an equity issue statement. This statement would subsequently inform the creation of action steps for the annual school plan to address the identified root causes.

An educational equity audit typically collects data on various inequities within a school or classroom, covering aspects such as race, class, gender, disability, sexual identity, and language. It examines information related to achievement, discipline, tracking, extracurricular participation, and staffing. To transition towards Critical Data-Driven Decision-Making (CDDDM), our equity audit utilized the Panorama equity and inclusion survey, along with additional data sources like a second student equity and inclusion survey, student roundtables, and a staff survey. This action research adopted a CDDDM framework, starting the process with a student survey, which differed from traditional equity audit protocols. The systematically documented results outline each phase of the equity audit, presenting data collected by PLC participants and providing detailed explanations of the protocols used. Additionally, the experiences of the PLC participants and the reflective insights of the leader are presented for each phase of the audit.

### **Cycle One: Identifying the Equity Issue**

In cycle one, the primary objective was to identify equity issues at the school level using the Panorama Equity and Inclusion survey. Initially, the Professional Learning Community (PLC) engaged in a professional development session to review equity concepts and the purpose of the equity audit. Afterward, they moved to the "look" phase, analyzing the survey data from students in grades 5 through 8. This data was

intended to assist the PLC in identifying the equity issue to address during the audit. However, during the "think" phase, a critical examination of the survey data revealed that it was not sufficient to identify equity issues. Recognizing these limitations, the PLC participants decided to create an additional survey in the final "act" phase.

Cycle One describes the steps leading to Cycle 2, which involves a thorough examination of additional data points after the initial survey. The process underscores the importance of careful data analysis and continuous improvement, as emphasized by CDDDM. The PLC's decision to supplement the initial survey demonstrates its commitment to deeper data-driven insights and ongoing reflection and adjustment.

***Look Phase: Professional Development and Initial Survey Analysis***

The "look" phase encompassed the initial professional development and the examination of primary survey data. Traditionally, educators have used data-driven decision-making to analyze student data, including academic and behavioral information, to make decisions about instructional practices and school culture. To move PLC members away from this common way of looking at data and toward a fair CDDDM method, we had to investigate the data in more depth than just using standard metrics. To make sure this important change went smoothly, everyone involved had to do professional development about what equity audits are for and how to find equity stances. First, the professional development is detailed, followed by the presentation of the initial data analysis session, which includes participant and leader responses to the collected data and the identification of the need for further analysis.

**Professional Development Session.** To create systemic equity, there must be an environment that embraces a set of underlying assumptions about the right of every learner to receive the best possible public education (Scott, 2001). During a single meeting, an initial professional development session was completed. The initial professional development session aimed to achieve several objectives: understanding the purpose of an equity audit, establishing team norms, enhancing comprehension of equity in student learning, and exploring potential inconsistencies among beliefs, language, and actions related to equity and student learning. Initiating an equity audit with a discussion about equity aligned the team's perspectives, established a supportive environment, and ensured that the audit was purposeful and focused on creating equitable outcomes for all students.

After discussing team norms and reviewing objectives for the professional development session, PLC participants were asked to read an article titled "Using Equity Audits to Assess and Address Opportunity Gaps Across Education" (Johnson, 2020), which delved into the purpose, measures, and outcomes of equity audits. The article also provided examples of how audit information can aid schools and districts in addressing inequities. This article was selected to initiate a conversation around each member's definition of equity and the overarching purpose of the equity audit.

Understanding participants' definitions of equity before initiating an equity audit holds significant importance for several reasons. Firstly, participants bring diverse backgrounds and experiences that shape their perspectives on equity. Ensuring a clear understanding of each participant's definition facilitates alignment in their views and objectives. Secondly, the establishment of a common framework is crucial due to the

multifaceted nature of equity, allowing the team to prioritize and guide their efforts consistently. Third, clarifying definitions at the outset reduced the risk of miscommunication and conflict arising from different assumptions.

In addition, being open to different points of view among the participants and considering things like race and socioeconomic status also helps make the audit process more inclusive. Knowledge of individual definitions also aids in tailoring strategies to accommodate varied perspectives, influencing how participants approach the audit and implement interventions. Finally, fostering reflective discussions on personal definitions encourages participants' growth and commitment to the equity audit's overarching goals. In summary, this preliminary understanding of participants' equity definitions established a foundation for a cohesive, collaborative, and inclusive equity audit, fostering effective communication and nuanced exploration within the audit (Irvine & York, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

After reading the article, each PLC participant was encouraged to share their definition of equity. PLC participants had diverse perspectives on equity, each with unique challenges. A.M. stated, "There are many different stances of equity, each with its drawbacks. Trying to create an equitable educational experience for students is challenging." PLC participants also recognized the complexity of achieving equitable outcomes in education and the various challenges, including teachers, curriculum, pacing guides, and expectations, that make it difficult to ensure equity, as shared by H.P., "That there are far more forms of inequity in schools and education than I once realized." C.C. also noted challenges around equity, stating, "It is very challenging to assure equity in education due to the many factors (teachers, curriculum, pacing guides, expectations,

etc.) that we are faced with every day.” Participants in the PLC shared diverse perspectives on equity, recognizing the complexity and challenges involved in achieving equitable outcomes in education, including various forms of inequity within schools and education systems.

**Equity Stance Activity.** Following the article discussion, the PLC participants transitioned into the Equity Stance Activity. (Appendix D) The Equity Stance Activity examines complex questions that arise when educators act to address equity in student learning. This tool supports educators in identifying and articulating an equity stance. The activity asked PLC participants to deepen their understanding of the word equity and examine inconsistencies between their beliefs and actions as they relate to equity in student learning. The Equity Stance Activity was a critical piece of pre-work, as the existence and examination of equity traps are critical moves before engaging in an equity audit (McKenzie & Skrla, 2016). Completing the Equity Stance Activity (Appendix D) before embarking on an equity audit helped to build a cohesive and informed team. It ensured that participants were on the same page regarding their beliefs about equity, fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment throughout the audit process.

The protocol instructed participants to engage in activities that invited them to examine potential inconsistencies between and among their beliefs, language, and actions regarding equity in student learning. Participants were asked to read the five equity stances independently and decide which stance most closely matched their own. The five stances included Stance A: Equity as an Initial Equal Opportunity. Schools should guarantee that each student will receive the same initial educational opportunity and that each student’s response to this initial opportunity will be used to determine the kind of

academic program they receive going forward. Stance B: Equity as an Ongoing Equal Opportunity. Schools should guarantee that each student will have easy access to all academic programs every year, regardless of past performance levels or other factors. Stance C: Equity as Personalized Opportunity Schools should guarantee each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to meet the student's unique needs. Stance D: Equity as Equalization of Opportunity. Schools should guarantee that each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to enable them to demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level within a reasonable length of time. Stance E: Equity as Equal Results. Schools should guarantee that each student will demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level.

The purpose of this equity stance activity was to provide a quick overview of each stance, with the expectation that participants would delve deeper later. The stances were displayed via overhead, including only the stance descriptions, excluding the examples or tough questions. The examples in practice were distributed to the group, along with the tough questions. Participants were given time to individually, without discussion, read and write their initial reactions and questions. The leader then led a text-based discussion beginning with the prompt, "What do you believe schools should do regarding equity in student learning? Participants showcased diverse perspectives through their selected stances. When asked to identify a specific stance that aligned with the work of the PLC, certain stances, such as "Equity as Equalization of opportunity - Schools should guarantee that each student will receive an academic program that is well-designed to enable them to demonstrate performance that meets or exceeds a common high level within a reasonable length of time," were shared. Reflections from C.C. include, "This

can create an attitude of dependency without proper framing of delivery of support and equitable distribution. Students should be provided with what they need to compete and demonstrate adequate growth. Some may need a program longer than others and should receive it until goals are met or other programs are introduced to facilitate the growth”, demonstrating thoughts around the equity stance selected.

Additional insights about equity included F.G.’s observations, “Due to all of the expectations for teachers regarding curriculum, agendas, pacing guides, etc., it is more difficult to stick to or concentrate on equity for all (as I would love to do) when there is almost a race to the finish line that teachers need to get to daily.” F.G. illuminated the real-world constraints faced by educators in adhering to equity goals and the pressures of daily responsibilities, curriculum expectations, and pacing guides. Also, A.M.’s realization that questions surrounding power dynamics and alternative ways to meet students' unique needs require ongoing, thoughtful discussions emphasized the depth of exploration needed for effective equity considerations, “How can we change the amount of power given to those who are more privileged? What are some alternative ways that can ensure the unique needs of the students are met? Those involved may not always agree on the specific needs of the student. Those involved can meet to discuss the students' needs as well as potential programs that would be the best fit. A final decision can be made by all involved.” This recognition highlighted the nuanced nature of equity discussions, suggesting that continuous dialogue is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the issues.

The equity status activity served as a valuable preparatory tool for engaging the participants in the equity audit, as indicated by their responses. It offered participants



insights into the multifaceted nature of equity considerations within educational settings by showcasing diverse perspectives through their selected stances. As participants identified stances aligned with the work of the PLC, such as "Equity as Equalization of opportunity," the activity highlighted the significance of tailoring educational approaches to students' individual needs. The activity also provided insight into each participant's perspectives on equity and how these perspectives might manifest during the equity audit process.

In summary, the Equity Stance Activity facilitated a deeper understanding of equity by exposing participants to diverse perspectives, prompting critical reflections on challenges and practical considerations. The key takeaways emphasized the necessity for ongoing discussions and individualized approaches to addressing educational inequities. These insights are anticipated to inform the participants' work as an equity team, fostering a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to their equity audit.

**Review of the Initial Panorama Survey.** This session started with PLC participants analyzing Panorama student surveys. The Panorama Equity and Inclusion survey was given to students before the study began and was part of a yearly school data collection process. The school administered this survey to students in the fall and spring as part of its overall Panorama platform. The platform is a tool used for the school's multi-tiered support system (MTSS) programming. The survey was given to students in grades 5-8 during March within the social studies instructional block and is administered by the homeroom teacher in special education self-contained classrooms and grade 5. The social studies teacher administered the survey for grades 6-8.

Based on a suggestion from the school leadership team's Street Data Book study, the leader chose the Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey as the initial step for the equity audit. The study highlighted the author's recommendation to use this survey to gather essential street-level data, focusing on patterns of inclusion/exclusion and equity/inequity. After reviewing the survey, the leader concluded it would be an appropriate starting point for the equity audit.

The Panorama Equity and Inclusion survey consists of scales, or groups of questions, designed to measure students' experiences of equity and inclusion in school. It provides schools and districts with a clear understanding of how students, teachers, and staff perceive diversity, equity, and inclusion. The survey tracks the progress of equity initiatives, identifies areas for celebration and improvement, informs professional development, and signals the importance of equity and inclusion to the community.

Developed through the Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools (RIDES) project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), the survey aims to increase the number and quality of intentionally diverse schools by offering diagnostic surveys, action-oriented resources, and equity improvement cycle tools. The RIDES project provides insights to school leaders seeking transformative change (McCoy & Bocala, 2022). The survey served as the starting point for collecting multiple data points from the PLC participants for analysis within the equity audit.

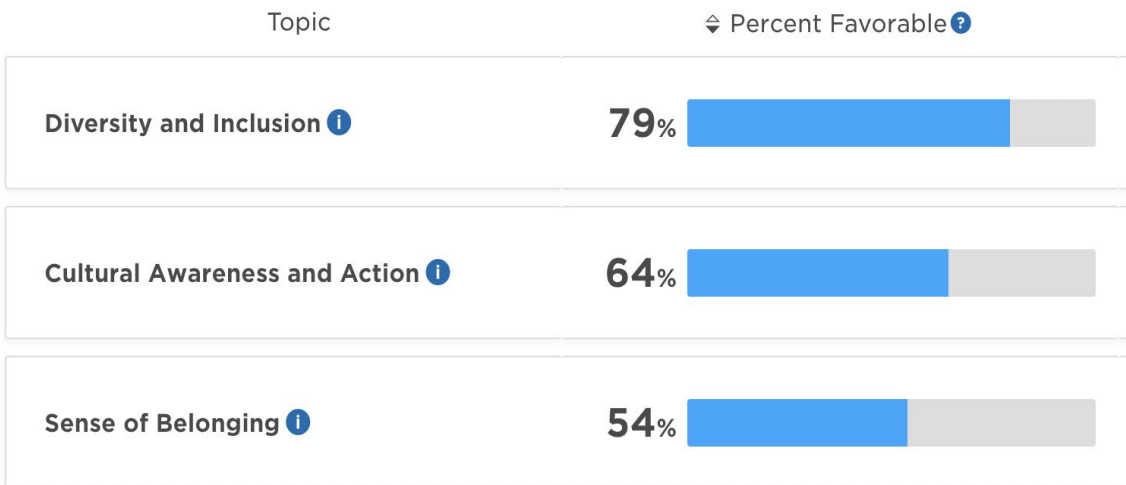
In a typical data-driven decision-making process, the participants began by focusing on student responses using a protocol developed by the facilitator. The first step involved reflecting on the survey process, including when it was administered and to whom. The discussion revealed that the survey was given to students in grades 5-8 during

their usual social studies instructional block. Several considerations about the survey's administration emerged during this conversation. W.P. questioned, "Did teachers introduce the purpose of the survey consistently?" A.M. added, "When students took the survey, did they understand why they were taking it?" These questions were noted as important considerations as the group moved forward to analyze the students' responses.

In the second portion of the protocol, the group was focused on the overall survey responses. The survey consisted of three areas: diversity and inclusion, cultural awareness and actions, and sense of belonging. The figure below shows the percentage favorable for each of the three areas. (see Figure 2)

**Figure 2**

*Favorable Percentage for Diversity and Inclusion, Cultural Awareness and Actions, and Sense of Belonging*

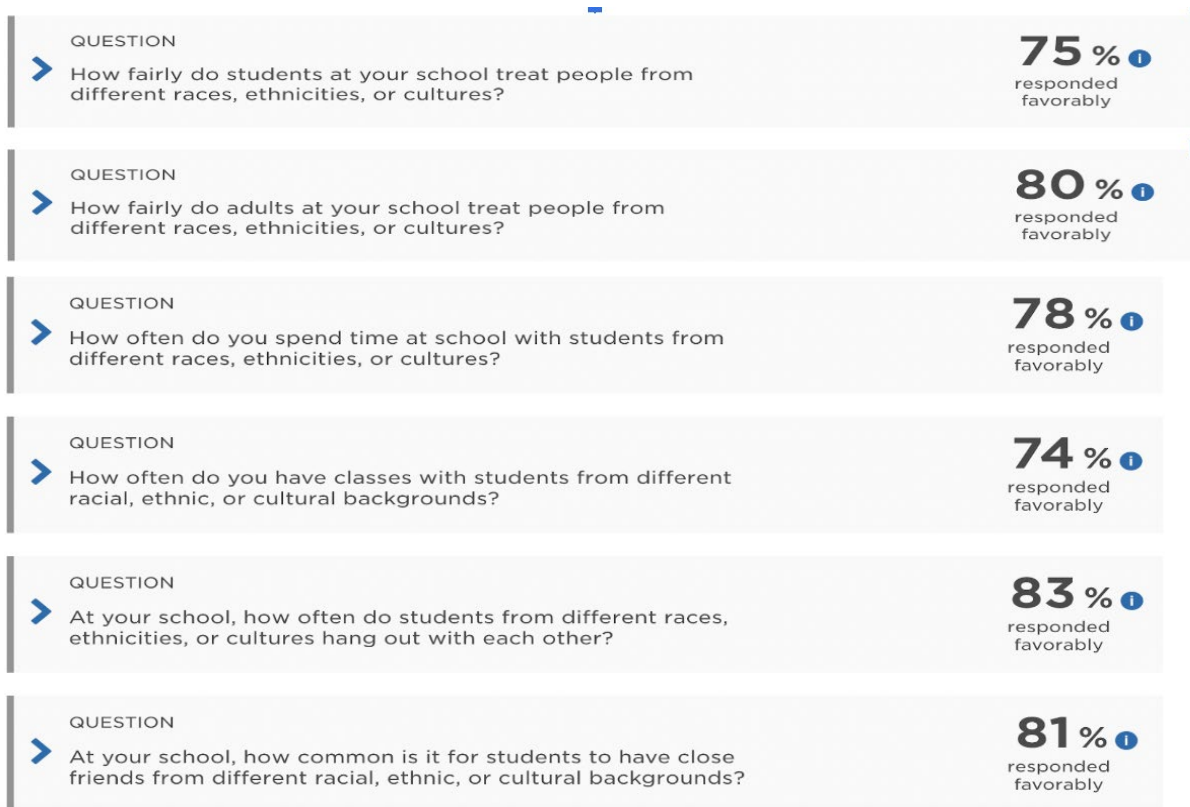


Participants were asked to identify which of the three areas from the survey best aligned with our previous professional development discussion on equity. After independently

reviewing the sections, we chose to discuss "Cultural Awareness and Action" first. This section's questions directly pertain to cultural awareness and action. Figure 3 shows the questions from the "Cultural Awareness and Action" section and the percentage of students who responded favorably. This information provided the group with valuable insights and helped determine whether this area needed critical analysis.

**Figure 3**

*Favorability Percentage for Cultural Awareness and Actions Section*

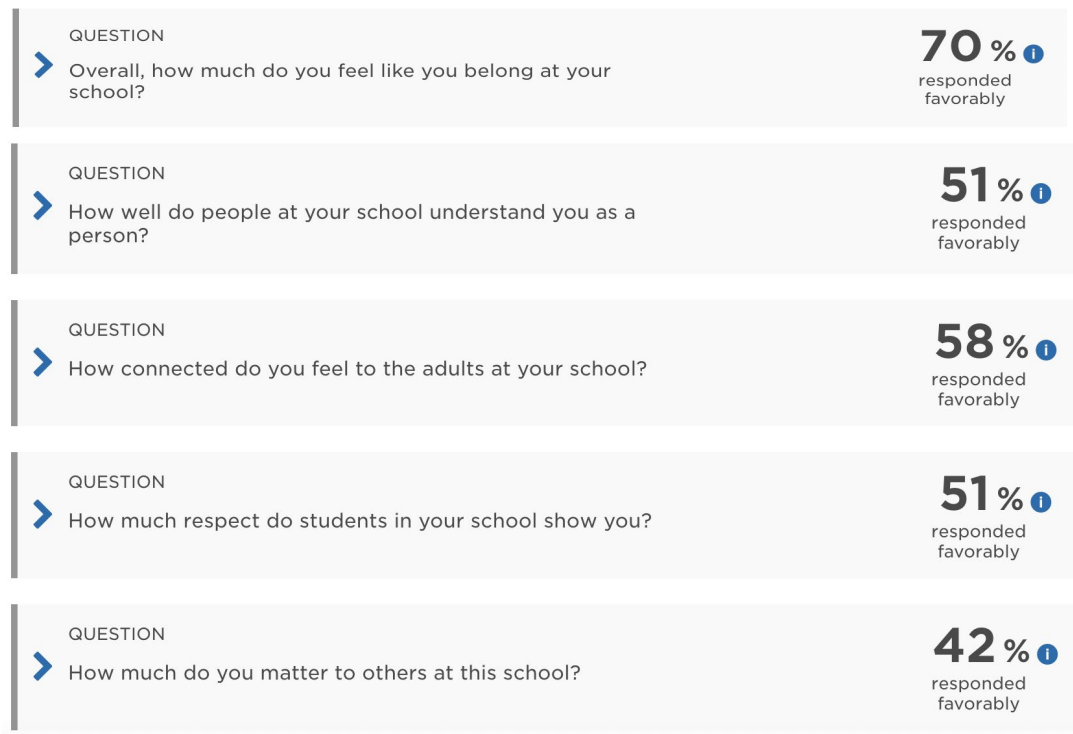


Next, to move into a more critical data-driven lens, I asked the group to reflect and independently identify what they thought this data revealed about the experiences of students. As we shared, C.C. stated that the percentages for this section seemed

somewhat favorable and that maybe we should move to another section of the survey. The participants agreed with C.C., and in response, H.P. suggested that we shift to the category with the lowest percentages overall, Sense of Belonging. Questions in that category focus on student belonging. In the figure below, questions are listed, and percentages are shown for each question (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Independent Favorability Percentage for Cultural Awareness and Actions*



Again, participants were asked individually to critically look at the overall responses in this category. After working individually, we grouped to discuss. A.M. stated that she felt that the questions did not align with our initial discussion about equity.

Two other participants stated their agreement with A.M. Again, collectively, in the discussion, it was determined that the information provided was not enough to identify specific equity issues and that the data was too broad. It was at this time, as the leader, that I felt that based on the group's responses to the initial data dive into this survey, the group's concern was to analyze the survey itself for clarity and its ability to identify a school-wide equity issue. With these concerns in mind, we transitioned to the "think phase," where we aimed to delve deeper into the analysis of the survey data to better understand its limitations and identify potential areas for improvement.

### ***Think Phase- A Deeper Dive into Panorama Survey Questions***

Based on the discussion highlighting the questions and their inability to identify students' experiences with equity, participants were asked to delve back into the overall survey to identify any areas they felt would provide insight into school-wide inequities we could address. We tasked participants, with this new focus, to work individually, reflect on our previous professional development session, and identify which survey questions would best aid us in collaboratively identifying the equity issue. When we reconvened as a group, H.P. suggested that looking at the open-ended response questions might provide more information.

In unanimous agreement, PLC participants initiated the individual review of open-ended responses. Upon reconvening as a group, F.G. asserted that a prevalent pattern in students' responses was the frequent use of the phrase "I don't know." W.P. contributed by noting a distinct observation, "Students expressed uncertainty about why every question pertained to race," signaling a noteworthy concern. C.W. identified a common theme, pointing out that students appeared to lack a clear understanding of the

survey questions' intent. Drawing implications from these student responses, the group agreed that the data derived from this survey was insufficient for identifying a specific equity issue. This realization highlighted the necessity for further examination and refinement of survey instruments to ensure a more nuanced and accurate identification of the equity issue.

Overall, the discussion of the initial survey yielded a common theme of clarity in the survey questions when assessing students' perspectives on race and equity. In reflection, both D.W. and A.M. recognized the importance of ensuring that questions posed to students are clear, understandable, and relatable. D.W. realized the importance of understanding students' feelings about race and equity. "We agreed that some students might not understand the questions, or the words used in the questions, as well as how some may not finish reading the questions completely." A.M. also stated "My most important takeaway from this session was the importance of being clear in what I am asking. The importance of clarity was apparent in our review of the survey when we asked if the students understood or didn't understand the question. If the question wasn't clear or in terms they understood, then the data could be skewed".

By the culmination of the look phase, participants demonstrated an acute awareness of the pivotal role of question clarity within the survey framework, particularly in the evaluation of students' perspectives concerning race and equity. Participants were prompted to reevaluate the comprehensive survey, pinpointing areas that could offer insights into systemic inequities across the school. Individual contemplation, catalyzed by the earlier professional development session, was directed toward discerning which survey queries were best for the collaborative identification of equity-related issues.

Within the ensuing group discussion, H.P. proposed the examination of open-ended response questions to gain supplementary insights. The ensuing collective scrutiny brought to light a prevalent tendency among students to respond with "I don't know," indicative of apprehensions regarding the comprehension of queries about race.

The participants' goal in this phase was to identify why the initial questions were unclear. Participants, including D.W. and A.M., duly recognized the importance of formulating precise and comprehensible questions to prevent potential misinterpretations and data skewing. As the leader, I guided participants to recognize the limitations of the initial survey and emphasized the importance of taking a more detailed and clear approach to identifying specific equity issues in the school community. This shared recognition of the significance of clear survey questions prompted the decision to enter the act phase of cycle one, aiming to enhance students' comprehension and ensure the survey effectively captures their views on race and equity.

***Act Phase: Creating a Second Equity and Inclusion Student Survey***

Recognizing the critical importance of straightforward survey questions, a unanimous decision emerged to initiate the development of new survey questions. The objective was to increase students' understanding, guaranteeing that the survey adequately reflects their perspectives on race and equity, ultimately uncovering a school-wide equity issue. So, this sets the stage for the next phase, which is action. During this phase, the focus will be on getting more accurate and useful information by making a new student survey to find out what specific equity problems exist in the school community.

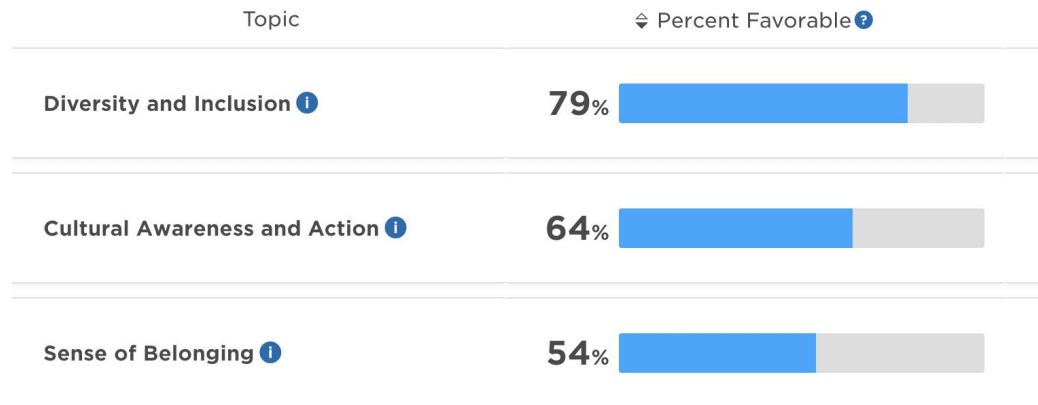


While the initial goal of the cycle was to formulate an equity issue statement to begin the work of addressing an uncovered equity issue, PLC participants realized the need for additional information from students. They questioned whether the students comprehended the questions asked. The PLC participants collaborated to identify a second set of questions for the student survey, aiming to enhance the understanding of students' perspectives. Concerns were raised about the survey's use of terms that students might not comprehend, potentially skewing the data. W.P. articulated the collective sentiment, stating, "We all discussed what we felt we saw in the data as well as what we could do to better understand why the students answered the way that they did. Collectively, we agreed that some students might not understand the questions, or the words used in the questions, as well as that some may not finish reading the questions completely. We brainstormed to create a new survey to gather more information from the students that will show us better their level of understanding."

To start the process of identifying new questions, I asked participants to go back to the open-ended questions to identify what they felt students did not understand and why. I asked that participants view the data with a lens of what information we need to identify an equity issue and how we can use what we have from the initial survey to create additional questions that will provide a more accurate picture of the equity issue. We first reviewed responses to the overall survey questions. Again, we looked at overall percentages. The overall percentages are listed below from the survey (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

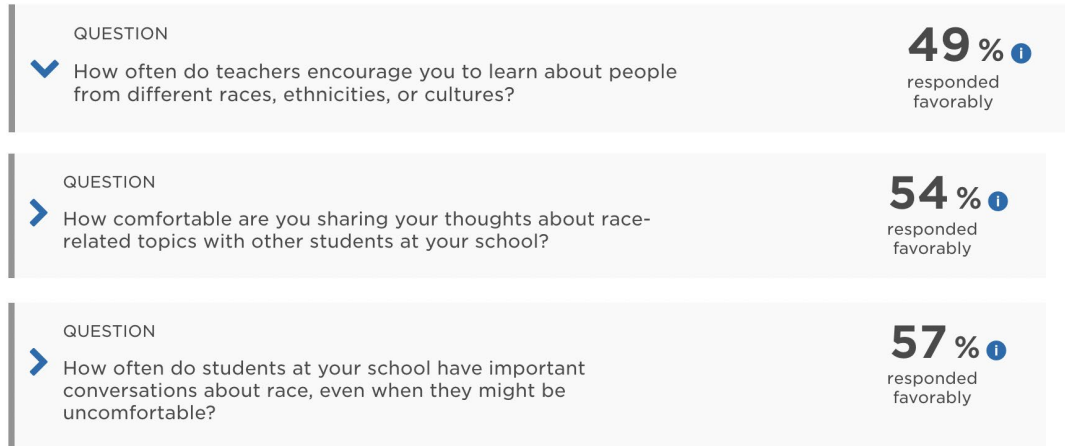
*Open-Ended Questionnaire to Explore Favorability Percentage*



Once again, we determined that even though the sense of belonging category had the lowest score, we needed to thoroughly examine the individual questions within the cultural awareness and action category to accurately identify the equity question. In our review, we noted three questions with the lowest percentage rate. The questions with the lowest percentage of favorable responses are listed below. We collectively agreed that some students might not fully understand the questions, or the vocabulary used, and some may not have read the questions thoroughly. (see Figure 6).

## Figure 6

### *Favorability Percentage in Individual Questions in the Category of Cultural Awareness and Action*



We decided collectively that these areas needed further clarification to uncover the equity issues. We divided the three questions among groups of PLC participants. Each team examined the questions and student responses, identified what students might not understand, and determined the additional information needed to identify the equity issues. Each participant shared their insights. W.P. suggested that some students with IEPs might struggle with vocabulary. C.C. noted that some fifth graders might not understand the term "ethnicity." D.W. added that if the survey wasn't framed properly by the administrator, students might not grasp what was being asked. A.M. proposed rewording the questions to be more direct and creating a specific script for teachers to use before administering the revised survey.

To ensure a clear understanding and gather more data, PLC participants created new questions for a second student survey. In response to D.W.'s concern about inadequate survey framing, we formulated a script to guide teachers in introducing and administering the survey. The script was as follows: Before administering the survey on

race and equity to students in grades 5-8, it is crucial to provide some context. Please explain the purpose of the survey and emphasize its importance in understanding students' experiences and viewpoints to improve the overall school environment. To ensure students understand the questions, review the survey beforehand and clarify key terms related to race and equity. For students with special needs, consider using visual aids and teaching key concepts before the survey to ensure they are familiar with the language used. The survey and script were emailed to teachers, and a reminder for completion was included in the weekly staff email.

### ***Summary of Cycle One***

Cycle one shows a shift from conventional data-driven decision-making to a more critical approach through the Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) framework. PLC participants reviewed survey data focused on equity and inclusion and recognized the limitations in understanding students' perspectives on race and ethnicity. PLC participants noted the possible lack of clarity in survey questions and acknowledged the need for deeper insights beyond surface-level analysis. PLC participants collaboratively developed new survey questions to better comprehend student perspectives, aligning with the CDDDM's emphasis on addressing systemic inequities.

Reflecting on being the leader of our school community, I have always believed in the power of collaboration and shared understanding. When I realized there was a noticeable discrepancy in how equity was perceived among our team members, it gave me pause. Despite my deep involvement in promoting equity in education, I assumed we had a cohesive perspective. However, the recent discussion revealed a range of views,

from acknowledging the challenges posed by external power structures to recognizing the intersection between daily curriculum challenges and the pursuit of equity.

This diversity in viewpoints prompted a period of introspection, making me reevaluate my assumptions. I realized our past experiences had not fully prepared us for the complexities of equity discussions. Each team member brought a unique background, cultural perspective, and set of privileges, influencing their understanding of equity. This realization led me to focus on creating an environment where every voice could be heard and respected. Without a foundation of trust and inclusivity, discomfort and discord could arise from differing viewpoints.

As the school leader, my reflections shed light on important lessons learned during our discussions about the equity audit. Firstly, I recognized how engaged and passionate participants were, prompting me to contemplate how their personal experiences and identities shape their views. For example, when we talked about F.G.'s thoughts on the curriculum, it made me consider whether her perspective came from struggling with the system, a strong belief in equity, or a mix of both. It became clear that everyone's life experiences influence their stance on equity issues. Secondly, I noticed the variety of equity perspectives based on people's different life experiences. Structured activities helped us understand where each person was coming from, and I realized the importance of emotional check-ins to make sure everyone felt comfortable sharing.

When it came to planning the equity audit, I had to acknowledge some unexpected feedback about the validity of our data. It showed me that the group was serious about digging deeper into real equity issues, not just skimming the surface. We

decided to look more closely at student data and make sure our survey questions were clear and comprehensive.

Clarity was a big theme throughout our discussions, especially when it came to making sure students and staff understood the purpose of our equity audit. I realized it is my job to address any confusion and make sure everyone knows what we are trying to achieve. I also see the importance of clear definitions and strategies to tackle inequities across the whole school. It is up to me to guide these efforts and create a more equitable educational environment for everyone involved.

Leadership reflections acknowledged the need for deeper data dives and inclusivity in perspectives, highlighting the use of CDDDM in understanding systemic issues and diverse voices to effectively address equity concerns in education. Overall, the cycle demonstrated a move toward critical data-driven decision-making, aiming to uncover and address systemic inequities.

### **Cycle Two- Critical Analysis of Data; Second Survey, Student Roundtables, Staff Surveys**

In the second cycle of the equity audit, we undertook an examination of data and analysis to contribute to the formulation of the annual school plan. Cycle one marked a departure from conventional data-driven decision-making towards a more critical approach, employing the Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) framework. Participants in the Professional Learning Community (PLC) critically reviewed survey data focused on equity and inclusion, acknowledging limitations in understanding students' perspectives on race and ethnicity.

The first phase's data necessitated further data collection. The outcomes of cycle one revealed that participants recognized the original Panorama survey lacked validity in uncovering equity issues, prompting the need for additional information. During the analysis of the Panorama survey data, participants scrutinized the students' understanding of the questions. This examination disclosed that students might have encountered difficulties in comprehending the survey's questions, highlighting the need for clearer and more comprehensive survey instruments.

Consequently, participants developed and distributed a second survey. The data obtained from this second survey, in addition to subsequent data collections, including student roundtables and staff surveys, is elucidated in the second cycle. Within the "think" phase, the analysis of root causes to inform an equity issue statement is delineated. The cycle culminates with the "act" phase, during which participants engage in the development of action steps for the annual school plan.

### ***Look Phase- Analyzing Student Surveys, Student Roundtables, and Staff Surveys***

As previously mentioned, a second survey was distributed to students after it was discovered that students originally had difficulty comprehending the questions from the first Panorama survey. This phase began with PLC participants analyzing the new student survey, which was developed based on initial student responses. To guide this critical analysis, we used the Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol, chosen for its effectiveness in identifying the overarching equity issue affecting the entire school.

This protocol, available on the School Reform Initiative (SRI) website, was selected for its comprehensive approach to data analysis. SRI, an independent non-profit organization committed to promoting educational equity and excellence, provides

valuable resources and tools to support educators and students both nationally and internationally (Appendix E). The Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol is designed to cultivate awareness and understanding of PLC participants' perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions about data without making immediate judgments (School Reform Initiative, n.d.). It operates in three distinct phases that facilitate collective data. This approach helps replace intuitions and emotions with factual data, analyze patterns and trends, and spark discussions that delve into underlying causes, moving from identifying symptoms to exploring potential roots.

Participants individually answered prompts before and after the data was presented, ensuring a thorough and reflective analysis. This structured approach allowed us to connect the initial findings with deeper insights, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the equity issues at hand. The data was examined, focusing on recognizing patterns, trends, and surprises. Following this, the group shared their observations in a round-robin format, ensuring everyone had the opportunity to contribute.

Next, PLC participants expressed their interpretations of what the data suggested and proposed potential actions or solutions. The leader synthesized these ideas for use in the subsequent phase of the cycle. This detailed analysis by PLC participants, as outlined in the following sections, was an integral part of the equity audit and illustrates their approach within this phase of the cycle.

### ***Participant Initial Inferences and Trends from the Student Survey Data***

The first prompt asked participants to individually name what they felt and wondered about the data before reviewing it. Regarding this, A.M. stated, “I feel like this



data is slightly different now that the questions asked have been clarified. Students may have revised their responses based on the clarification or explained further what they meant”. C.C. added, “I wonder if they now have a better understanding of race and the meaning behind a racist comment.” D.W. added patterns and trends. “Some patterns and trends I observed were that students who are in the same grade and may be in the same class have very different views about the rate at which discussions about race occur. Most of the students surveyed are comfortable discussing race with both teachers and their peers, yet it appears that teachers are not keeping up with their willingness to discuss it. The data is showing me that the students are making racist comments to each other, which is very concerning.” H.P. added, “I am surprised that students are comfortable discussing race, but they do not address their friends when their friends make racist comments or name-calling.” The theme of the participants' reflections before data review includes considerations of potential shifts in student responses, curiosity about students' grasp of race and racism, observations on discrepancies between student and teacher comfort levels discussing race, and concerns regarding students' comfort discussing race contrasted with their response to peer racism.

As part of the Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol (Appendix E) for the equity audit, the data was then presented visually on large sheets of paper. In pairs, PLC participants marked up the data and highlighted trends in different colors. Collectively, PLC participants discussed the patterns and trends within the survey data after working with partners. Trends that arose from the discussion included identifying that racial slurs were prevalent among students and occurred more frequently during unsupervised free time. Moreover, older students tended to dismiss racist slurs as jokes, while younger students

found them uncomfortable, suggesting an age-related difference in responses. PLC participants noted that most students believed that individuals using racist slurs should face the consequences, such as suspension or education on the history and negativity of these words. Some PLC participant surprises emerged from the data, including the number of students who felt uncomfortable at school and the unexpected revelation that some younger students had heard racist comments from staff. Furthermore, PLC participants shared that in their data analysis, students appeared comfortable discussing race but tended not to address their friends when they made racist comments, indicating a potential gap in addressing such behavior within peer groups.

Several equity gaps were identified from the student survey data analysis. It was observed that racial slurs were prevalent among students, particularly during unsupervised free time, highlighting a need for increased supervision during these periods. Older students tended to dismiss racist slurs as jokes, while younger students found them uncomfortable, indicating an age-related difference in responses. Despite students' comfort in discussing race, there was a reluctance to address racist comments made by peers, suggesting a potential gap in addressing such behavior within peer groups. Additionally, the data revealed surprises, including the number of students feeling uncomfortable at school and the unexpected revelation that some younger students had heard racist comments from staff. Overall, these observations underscore the importance of addressing racial issues proactively and fostering a more inclusive school environment where all students feel safe and respected.

Reflecting on my capacity as the school leader, the stark contrast in responses between the current survey and the first evoked a strong emotional response, particularly

concerning the revelation of students' experiences with racist language. I felt anger and sadness as I engaged with the responses and observed the reactions of the participants. As someone entrusted with the well-being of the school community, I had previously assumed a thorough understanding of the student body's experiences. However, this encounter served as a profound wake-up call, prompting a reassessment of my perceptions and emotional preparedness for handling such sensitive data. Recognizing the importance of fostering an authentic and supportive environment, I contemplated the need to be adequately equipped to navigate participants' emotional responses during data analysis sessions. Considering these realizations, I feel I should be proactive in reviewing data sets before engaging with participants, ensuring that I am adequately prepared to provide the necessary support amidst potentially triggering content. Additionally, I am inclined to consider strategies that facilitate genuine collaboration and empathetic engagement during data interpretation sessions, fostering an environment conducive to open dialogue and emotional expression. Before diving into the data, I think gauging where participants are in a check-in will help me gauge possible participant reactions.

Furthermore, the personal impact of students' disclosures weighed heavily on me as a leader, evoking feelings of distress and a deep sense of responsibility. The stark realization that such incidents were occurring within the school community under my supervision prompted a profound reevaluation of the school's cultural landscape. This introspective examination underscored the imperative of addressing systemic issues and fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment through the work we are doing.

However, amidst the somber reflection, there also exists a sense of optimism and resolve. The collective commitment of the participants to undertake this critical work

serves as a beacon of hope for meaningful change. The potential impact of our collective efforts, if executed with fidelity, holds the promise of transformative progress toward a more equitable and inclusive school environment as we move on to annual school planning. This recent session emphasizes the need for the audit and subsequent planning, with a new emphasis, for me as the leader, on ensuring the plan is carried out with fidelity once created.

### ***Identifying Actions and Solutions from Second Student Survey Data***

After patterns and trends were discussed, the leader charted out responses and posed the question, what new thoughts are you having about the data now? What are your next steps? According to PLC participants, there is a need for intensive education regarding racial slurs and interventions targeting students who persistently use such language. PLC participants noted that there is also a need for encouraging race dialogue and supporting teachers in effectively guiding these discussions. D.W. shared, “I believe that data suggests students need more education and background on racial slurs and that options need to be in place for those children that continually use such words. Students need to understand that using such words is not funny or to be a joke and how it bothers students more than they know”.

Additionally, PLC participants noted that some students made racist remarks without grasping the gravity of their words, highlighting the need for education on racism and its historical context. Suggestions included in the discussion included introducing peer mentoring initiatives to foster a more inclusive and informed educational environment, as shared by C.W. “We need to address this issue quickly and throughout the school year. We need to focus on the hot spots of the day and monitor them closely.

Since most teachers feel comfortable talking about race to the students and each other, let us allow them to do it". The theme derived from the discussion revolved around the necessity for intensive education on racial slurs, interventions targeting persistent use of such language, encouragement of dialogue about race, and support for teachers in guiding these discussions, with a focus on fostering inclusivity and addressing racial issues promptly and throughout the school year.

As I examined the initial responses from the participants, I noticed a strong emphasis on students' actions and motivations, spanning from discussing the historical context of slang to proposing consequences for its use. This examination prompted me to contemplate the broader implications of why students engage in such behavior and why it often goes unaddressed when observed. I found myself considering the concept of a culturally responsive school and how our current practices may fall short of this ideal. My hope was for our team to collectively shift our focus towards actions that adults can take to foster a more culturally responsive environment, rather than solely concentrating on student behavior. This broader perspective felt crucial to me as a school leader.

Following group discussions and building on the question "What are the next steps?" Several key steps were charted visually and identified for integration into the annual school plan process. The first suggested step involved focusing on unstructured times of the day and implementing close monitoring during these periods as an effective intervention. Next, PLC participants acknowledged the comfort levels of most teachers when discussing race and stated that an important part of the plan should include opportunities for conversations about race. The PLC participants also stressed the importance of clarifying the school's understanding of equity to ensure a unified approach

among teachers, thus preventing potential division within the school community.

Solutions and action steps were proposed. Some of these steps were putting in place social-emotional learning (SEL) programs to help students become more racially aware and empathetic, helping teachers lead well-planned discussions about race, starting peer mentoring programs to help students deal with racial issues, and creating thorough lessons about race that include important historical contexts, the origins of derogatory terms, and promoting cultural understanding.

In conclusion, the initial prompt of the protocol asked participants to reflect on their feelings and curiosities about the data before reviewing it, revealing themes such as shifts in student responses, understanding of race and racism, discrepancies in comfort levels between students and teachers discussing race, and concerns about student responses to peer racism. After sharing individual reflections and conducting a detailed group analysis of the survey data using the Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol, it became evident that several equity gaps needed to be addressed. These findings guided the PLC participants in identifying the next steps necessary to address the issues uncovered in the second survey data.

### ***Identifying Next Steps from Second Survey Data***

In the conversation about the next steps, participants focused on identifying specific areas and times when racial issues were most prevalent, particularly during recess. C.C. discussed the playground: “I wonder where this happens the most outside; that may help us with monitoring.” W.P. added, “We could ask the students where, or we could observe.” The discussion continued about how to pinpoint where it was happening outside during recess. A.M. suggested, “Why don't we have a student roundtable to ask

students? Then we can clarify some other items from the survey.” In agreement, participants planned a student roundtable for students in grades 4-5 by selecting five students from each grade band to clarify the survey responses. The use of student voices again signifies a shift to the CDDDM by expanding the analysis from "What will close achievement gaps?" to "What will increase and deepen equity within our school?" The planned data collection is a critical step in the CDDDM process. With the decision to gather more detailed insights directly from students, the next step involved organizing student roundtables to further explore and clarify the survey responses.

### ***Facilitating Student Round Tables***

In response to the data obtained in student and staff surveys, participants carried out and documented student roundtables for use in the ongoing cycle. Roundtables were completed with two sets of students from grades fourth to fifth. To ensure a random sampling of students, the first five students on the roster in each grade level were selected. As leader, I facilitated the round table with two PLC participants. Before initiating the round table, students were asked to confirm that they had taken the previous student survey. Next, students were informed that the purpose of the round table was to expand on the answers that their peers provided. Students were then given the option to not participate if they were uncomfortable. All the selected students participated. Participants then led the roundtables and used the following prompts: Have you heard racial comments directed towards others during special area classes and recess? Do your peers inform staff members when racial terms are used, and what are your solutions to these occurrences? Student responses were collected and were shared at the next audit meeting for analysis.

### ***Preliminary Thoughts and Patterns about Student Round Table Data***

The Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol was again used to guide PLC participants through the student round table data. (Appendix E) This dialogue tool aided in substituting intuitions and emotions with factual data, analyzing patterns and trends, and sparking discussions that delve into the underlying causes, transitioning from identifying symptoms to exploring potential roots. The dialogue's first prompt asks participants to infer thoughts about the data before listening to the roundtables.

Preliminary thoughts about the data included an anticipation that it would be eye-opening and insightful, particularly because some student responses might indicate discomfort or feelings of unsafety. PLC participants believed the clarified questions were designed to be easily understood by students, potentially resulting in more genuine responses compared to previous data. They observed that the clarification of the questions might lead to a slight change in the data. C.C. remarked, "Students may have revised their responses based on the clarification or explained further what they meant." Additionally, PLC participants observed that with the clarified questions, students now had a better understanding of the concept of race and the meaning behind racist comments. However, there was still curiosity about their full comprehension, as expressed by H.P., "I wonder if most students truly understand what race is and how it can be used to negatively impact someone."

In the second portion of the meeting, participants listened to the data and observed patterns using the Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol. This protocol fosters awareness and understanding of PLC participants' perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions about data without making immediate judgments. It operates in three distinct phases, facilitating a



collective interpretation of data. We asked participants to present only the facts about the data, without inferring anything.

Overall, PLC participants' reflections noted that the student recordings highlighted the importance of addressing racist language and behavior in the school environment. Reflections were displayed visually on large sheets of paper, and PLC participants, working in pairs, marked up the reflections and highlighted trends in different colors. Following that, participants collectively discussed the patterns and trends within the roundtable data. Common themes that emerged from listening to student voices included student awareness, clarity around questions and race, consequences for engaging in racial remarks, and peer mindset. PLC participants identified that students were generally aware that their peers use racist terms. However, there was a distinction in how students perceived the intent behind these terms. Some felt they were meant to hurt, while others viewed them as jokes.

Additionally, participants noted that racist slurs were most heard during free time, particularly at lunch and recess. W.P. stated, "The students were quite aware that their peers do use racist terms with each other; however, some feel that they do it to hurt while others feel they do it to be funny or as a joke." This observation highlighted the students' general awareness of their peers using racist terms but also the differing perceptions of the intent behind these terms. Some students perceived them as harmful, while others saw them as jokes.

The PLC participants anticipated that the round table questions would provide more genuine responses, revealing insights into students' understanding of race and their feelings of safety. The analysis highlighted that while students were generally aware of

their peers using racist terms, perceptions varied, with some viewing them as jokes and others as hurtful, particularly during unsupervised times like lunch and recess. With these insights in mind, the next step was to analyze the data for specific grade-level trends, which would further inform our understanding of how racial issues manifested differently across various age groups.

### ***Grade-Level Trends in Data from Student Roundtable***

The PLC participants' use of the data-driven protocol also highlighted trends in grade-level differences in responses to racist name-calling. The discussion following the paired markup of trends revealed that fourth-grade students tend to display less comfort with such language, while fifth graders seem to take it less seriously and are comparatively less affected. Also noted were that students across both groups unanimously agree that their teachers do not use racist remarks. Additionally, when students hear such remarks, they act by addressing them, either privately or immediately on the spot. Regarding the frequency and context of racist slurs, it was observed that these terms are most heard during free time, particularly during lunch and recess. Participants in the PLC identified specific periods of the school day during which racist slurs occurred, emphasizing the need for more intervention during these unstructured times. Participant F.G. noted patterns, "Some students, mostly 4th graders, are not comfortable with the racist name calling while the 5th brushed it off and said they were fine with it". Both grade levels concurred that their teachers never make racist remarks, and when they do, they address them either privately or immediately. Both grades answered yes to having been the victim of such racist slurs and agreed that this happens

mostly during free time (lunch and recess). The most heard words are N-word, taco eater, and monkey.

Fourth graders felt uncomfortable at school due to bullying by older students. All students expressed their belief that the school should suspend or provide additional education on the origins of these words and their negative connotations. Overall, PLC participants observed that certain students exhibited a lack of clarity regarding the subject, suggesting a potential necessity for further education and discourse. Additionally, some students seemed at ease discussing racial terms as jokes, indicating a potential lack of awareness about the detrimental impact and harm caused by such language. PLC participants expressed the following observations about race conversations: D.W. observed, “Students needed more information to answer about race conversations,” and C.W. noted, “Some students view the use of racist terms as a form of humor or a joke.” Lastly, there were reflections about students expressing skepticism about the consequences of using racist language and the effectiveness of lessons in changing their peer's behavior, including W.P. 's reflection, “They believe that even with lessons students may continue to engage in racist behavior.” Overall, Fourth graders reported feeling uncomfortable at school due to bullying by older students, with all students across grades suggesting suspensions, in-house placements, or increased education on the history and negative impact of racial slurs, prompting PLC participants to observe a lack of clarity among certain students and a potential need for further education and dialogue, while also noting that some students viewed racial terms as jokes, indicating a lack of awareness of the harm caused by such language; reflections

also included students expressing skepticism about the effectiveness of lessons in changing their peers' behavior regarding racist language.

The fourth and fifth graders thought this conversation was funny at first, and how they wanted to see the students “face consequences.” All participants noted that there is a concern that consequences for racist behavior may not be effective and that students may simply become more discreet in their actions without genuine change. C.C. stated, “Some feel it's a joke,” while H.P. added, “Consequences won't affect behavior; students will just become sneakier.” PLC participants also stated that students seem to believe that it is difficult to change their peers' thinking regarding racist behavior. A.M. noticed that students felt “Nothing will change peer's thinking.” Overall, participants identified that the data revealed several patterns and trends related to students' awareness and experiences with the use of racist terms within the school environment.

The PLC participants' analysis revealed trends in grade-level differences in responses to racist name-calling, with fourth graders feeling less comfortable compared to fifth graders who took it less seriously. Students across all grades agreed that teachers do not use racist remarks and generally address such behavior when they hear it, most commonly during unstructured times like lunch and recess. The discussions highlighted a need for more intervention during these periods, further education on the impact of racial slurs, and a concern about the effectiveness of consequences for racist behavior. Some students viewed racial terms as jokes, indicating a lack of awareness of their harm, while others expressed skepticism about the ability to change peers' behavior through lessons alone. With these insights in mind, the next step involves identifying actionable strategies to address the identified equity gaps and improve the overall school environment.

**Identifying Next Steps from Student Round Table.** As previously stated, PLC participants listened to recordings of students and pinpointed suitable actions in response to the collected data. The Data-Driven Protocol was employed again, with the leader instructing PLC participants to document their inferences. This protocol cultivates awareness and comprehension of PLC participants' perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions regarding data without making immediate judgments. It operates in three distinct phases, facilitating a collective interpretation of data. Based on past sessions, I encouraged participants to discuss issues from the data while we used a separate protocol for the overall planning of the next steps. Then, inferences were charted for visual representation, and PLC participants worked in pairs to identify issues. These pairs shared their identified problems, and the leader recorded the issues agreed upon by the PLC. The PLC's issues revealed significant suggestions and solutions related to cultural understanding within the school environment, student behavior, and safety.

In the area of cultural understanding within the school environment, PLC participants identified the need for conversations about what is culturally appropriate for everyone. C.C. noted, "I believe that data suggests the need for conversations around what is or is not culturally appropriate for everyone." Additionally, the responses included solutions to promote culturally relevant and inclusive practices. D.W. inferred, "I think that students need to be better educated on race and equity, as do staff so that the entire building is operating on the same ideals and beliefs about what equity truly means and how we can achieve it as a whole." The data also suggested that teachers might need professional development around equity and race to better learn how to speak to their

students and peers. H.P. stated, “I think the appropriate actions or solutions for this data include enacting culturally relevant and inclusive practices, creating the conditions for effective dialogue, and incorporating student and staff voices.” PLC participants recognized the need for conversations on cultural appropriateness within the school environment, alongside solutions promoting culturally relevant and inclusive practices and the necessity of professional development around equity and race for teachers.

Safety was the second issue that emerged from the PLC participants' analysis of the roundtable data. PLC participants identified a need for more structured, supervised free time to ensure students feel safe. They inferred that some students do not feel comfortable around their peers, particularly during less supervised times, fearing bullying and name-calling. W.P. noted, “Some students do not feel comfortable around their peers.” This reflection raised the question: Are they uncomfortable being in school or just in spaces during less supervised times? They fear bullying and name-calling occur too frequently. The data suggests that more adults supervising during open times such as gym, lunch, and recess would hinder negative comments. C.C. added, “I believe that data suggests we need to develop a plan for more structured, supervised free time to ensure students feel safe.” The PLC participants identified safety as a significant concern, emphasizing the need for more structured and supervised free time to address students' discomfort around their peers, particularly during less supervised periods, due to fears of bullying and name-calling, leading to a suggestion for increased adult supervision during open times such as gym, lunch, and recess to mitigate negative comments.

Lastly, the issue of student behavior was discussed. A.M. expressed that students identified a need for more education around racial terminology and the consequences of

derogatory remarks: “Many felt there were no consequences for foul language or fighting; therefore, teacher roundtable discussions might be a way where they feel heard, but also hear why admin makes the decisions they make.” D.W. added by noting, “Look at the use of racist comments as ‘not an option.’ Devise a plan for more positive dialogue, understanding, and acceptance.” Solutions suggested by PLC participants included providing more supervision during free time and possibly clubs for arts and crafts, gaming, or organized sports. Other suggestions included continuing discussions to address the perception that there are no consequences for foul language or fighting through teacher roundtable discussions. C.W. suggested, “I believe there need to be consequences for using negative slurs and making others feel unsafe, such as peer sessions and being kept out of downtime to alleviate the opportunity to occur. Students need to be educated on race and what their negative actions do and make others feel.” The PLC participants discussed the theme of student behavior, highlighting the need for more education on racial terminology and consequences for derogatory remarks, proposing solutions such as teacher roundtable discussions, promoting positive dialogue and understanding, providing more supervision during free time, and implementing consequences for negative actions to create a safer and more inclusive environment.

Additional solutions identified included educating students and staff on race and equity to ensure a shared understanding and commitment to equity principles. H.P. suggested creating a plan for more positive dialogue, understanding, and acceptance: “Much of the data suggests that perhaps students should be interviewed one-on-one so as not to be influenced by their peers and that many students didn’t take the discussion seriously.” Data also suggested that teachers might need some professional development

on equity and race to better learn how to speak to their students and peers. C.C. also encouraged more discussions, noting, "Conducting more roundtable discussions is a must. It gives the students a chance to share their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment." The solutions PLC participants provided were aimed at creating a safer, more inclusive, and culturally sensitive school environment where students feel respected, heard, and supported. They also encouraged open dialogue and education about important issues such as race and equity. To further understand the perspectives and needs of the school community, the next step involved creating a teacher survey to gather insights about the roundtable data and the identified issues.

**Creating a Teacher Survey About Roundtable Data.** Towards the end of this session, PLC participants were assigned the task of crafting an equity issue description based on the data presented. The goal of writing an equity issue description was to find a specific equity issue that came up in the data analysis. This was done by describing the problem and either suggesting a solution or pointing out the need for more information. After the leader explained the purpose of an equity issue statement, PLC participants worked in pairs to create their statements. One pair interrupted the work, expressing the need for more data collection. To delve deeper into the problem, H.P. suggested, "I think that we need to go a little deeper and get feedback from staff." C.C. added, "Since staff may be part of the problem and ultimately the solution, we need their thoughts on what the students were saying." Other PLC participants agreed, deciding on the necessity of additional data. They proposed incorporating the perceptions of school staff into the student roundtable before finalizing an issue statement, viewing it as beneficial for defining the issue and determining subsequent action steps. Specifically, they wanted the



teachers to hear what students shared and express their thoughts and feelings about what students stated during the roundtables. During the discussion about the survey, PLC participants identified several areas where they wanted feedback to understand perceptions school-wide about the identified equity issue. C.W. suggested reviewing the previous data protocol used with the participants and replicating some prompts. Participants collectively created questions that covered various aspects of teacher observations and feelings about race discussions. Like what the participants had done, the survey asked teachers to listen to the roundtables, explore any patterns, note surprises, and suggest possible next steps. Finally, the questions addressed comfort levels in discussing race with students and coworkers, as well as understanding the term equity. All PLC participants helped to create the survey questions. Although the survey was created for teachers, all staff were invited to participate. The survey was sent via email to all staff to be completed voluntarily, and it included a brief synopsis of the work done thus far in the audit. To further explore and address the identified equity issues, the next step involved analyzing the staff survey responses to gain additional insights and perspectives from the staff based on the student roundtable data.

**Analyzing Staff Survey About Roundtable Data.** Staff survey data was collected to determine their perceptions of the student roundtable discussion. To commence the analysis of the staff survey data, the leader instructed the use of the three phases of the Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol once more (Appendix E). The protocol included providing preliminary thoughts about the data before viewing it, interpreting the data to draw inferences, and finally identifying possible next steps based on the data.

**Preliminary Thoughts about Staff Data.** As part of the Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol, PLC participants were asked to provide preliminary thoughts on the data before viewing it. (Appendix E) This protocol cultivates awareness and comprehension of PLC participants' perspectives, beliefs, and presumptions regarding data without making immediate judgments. It operates in three distinct phases, facilitating a collective interpretation of data. Participants were asked to describe their initial thoughts and then analyze the staff survey responses to identify patterns and trends. PLC participants were also asked to report any surprises they had regarding responses. As previously completed in the Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol, the first part of the look phase was done independently. Responses from the PLC participants noted a belief that the data will be eye-opening.

Regarding teacher perspectives on student feelings and actions concerning race and equity, W.P. mentioned, "I feel like this data is going to show that some staff members will be a bit surprised by what they heard and read while others (esp. Middle school) will not be surprised at all. I feel like the teachers that talk to their students openly will already know how many students feel and what others are saying racially". Another question from C.C. was whether teachers should independently devise intervention strategies or wait for leadership direction. "I wonder if the teachers will see the need to devise intervention strategies to address this. Will they do this on their own, or will they wait for the leaders to tell them to do it? This will help me ascertain their feelings of the importance of this to the school culture and its members as individuals. Preliminary thoughts lead to surprises in staff responses.

PLC participants pointed out observations about staff's comfort level discussing race, equity, and students not feeling safe during free time. There were concerns about staff reactions to student responses, as well as the expectation that some staff members would be surprised by student reactions. A.M. stated, "I am surprised that the teachers seem to agree that something needed to be done, but many suggestions were off task. Teachers have varied understandings about what equity is and what it looks like. If equity is to be a part of the school culture and the teachers don't share the same understanding, it could lead to confusion about how to address situations. This varied understanding of equity can also cause division within the school". Observations overall identified that there were diverse staff perceptions around equity.

Patterns and trends in the data that PLC participants noted were that staff, for the most part, were not surprised by what students said about each other and that staff feels students need more supervision. H.P. noted, "I am surprised that staff, for the most part, were not surprised about hearing what the students said about other students calling them." F.G. stated, "Teachers felt that students needed to be better supervised and that many didn't feel safe during downtimes. Many teachers were not surprised that students talked to each other this way". It was clear that PLC participants were interested in understanding the dynamics of how students and teachers interact regarding race and equity, as well as their perceptions and responses to these interactions. This realization underscored the necessity for a deeper examination of our practices and prompted us to analyze the staff survey data to gain further insights into the underlying issues.

**Inferences About the Staff Survey Data.** Again, the Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol was used, and PLC participants were asked to infer. (Appendix E) This protocol

cultivates awareness and comprehension of PLC participants' perspectives, beliefs, and presumptions regarding data without making immediate judgments. It operates in three distinct phases, facilitating a collective interpretation of data. Concerns arose from that data regarding student safety during downtime. According to PLC participants, students do not feel safe during these periods. To address this, several PLC participants stated a need for an increase in supervision. A.M. suggested, "I believe that data suggests we need to develop a plan for more structured, supervised free time to ensure students feel safe." The data also shed light on teacher comfort levels when discussing race. It revealed that while many teachers feel at ease talking to students about race-related issues, they exhibit less comfort when discussing these topics with their peers, as stated by D.W., "Data also suggested that teachers may need some PD on equity and race as well, to better learn how to speak to their students as well as their peers". The data also demonstrated the need to address issues related to race and equity promptly and consistently throughout the school year. A.M. suggested, "Many felt there were no consequences for foul language or fighting; therefore, teacher round table discussions might be a way where they feel heard, but also hear why admin makes the decisions they make ". The participant's inferences sparked a discussion about possible next steps.

In the discussion around possible next steps, professional development for teachers in the areas of equity and race was highlighted as a crucial need. The data suggests that teachers may benefit from additional training to improve their communication with both students and peers regarding race-related issues. D.W. felt that there is a clear need to improve students' understanding of word choices, particularly in the context of race and equity, "I think that students need to be better educated on race

and equity as do staff so that the entire building is operating on the same ideals and beliefs as to what equity truly means and how we can achieve it as a whole". The data also indicated the necessity of prioritizing equity as a significant focus at the school. Lastly, the data highlighted the presence of varying cultures within the school and emphasized the importance of understanding how each culture relates to the concept of race. In summary, the data and observations provided valuable insights and recommendations for addressing issues related to race, equity, and student well-being.

Using the Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol, PLC participants inferred that students did not feel safe during downtime and highlighted the need for increased supervision. The data also revealed that while teachers are comfortable discussing race-related issues with students, they are less comfortable discussing these topics with peers, indicating a need for additional professional development in equity and race. The observations underscored the necessity of prioritizing equity throughout the school year and addressing varying cultural understandings related to race. These insights set the stage for creating a concrete goal and identifying the next steps to address the identified equity issues and improve the school environment.

**Creating a Goal and Next Steps.** PLC participants were asked to identify the next steps based on the data and develop a goal for the annual school plan. The data highlighted several crucial recommendations for addressing issues related to race and equity in the school environment. First, there is a call to embrace culturally relevant and inclusive practices. This call to embrace involves restructuring the school environment to ensure equity and inclusion; as suggested by W.P., "I think the appropriate actions or solutions for this data include enacting culturally relevant and inclusive practices;

creating the conditions for effective dialogue and incorporating student voice and all staff.”

It was deemed imperative to incorporate the voices and perspectives of students in decision-making processes, including engaging all staff members in open discussions about race and equity. A.M. shared, “I think the appropriate actions or solutions for this data include additional feedback from staff as well as students involving “what equity is and why it is important?” Also, perhaps additional round-table discussions for staff and students. Maybe the possibility of another adult coming in “from outside of the building” to lead the discussions to see if the conversations are the same or different.”

One of the immediate concerns raised in the data pertained to students' safety during downtime. To address this, a restructured approach to downtime was recommended, including smaller group settings and enhanced supervision to ensure students feel secure. A.M. suggested “Providing more than just extra supervision during free time. Possible clubs for arts & crafts, gaming, or an organized sport”. “I believe there need to be consequences for using negative slurs and making others feel unsafe, such as peer sessions and being kept out of down times to alleviate the opportunity to occur. Students need to be educated on race and what their negative actions do and make others feel”, DW shared, indicating what needed to happen to discourage negative slurs and behaviors that create an unsafe environment.

Focusing on the overall school climate and culture is another vital aspect of the recommendations. Prioritizing a safe and welcoming environment was discussed, and it was noted that teachers need training and support to effectively address issues related to race and equity. The PLC participants' discussion concluded with the development of a

collective goal for the annual school plan. The goal created was “By the end of the school year, equitable and culturally responsive practices will be evident across all learning environments.” This goal was created as a starting point for the annual school planning process and the development of action steps. With the goal established, the PLC moved to the Think Phase, focusing on identifying the root causes around the equity issue statement to address the underlying concerns effectively.

**Look Phase Leader Reflections.** Reflecting on my role as the school leader during the Look Phase, I experienced a strong emotional response to the survey data, particularly concerning students' experiences with racist language. This data challenged my previous assumptions about the school environment, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding and preparedness to handle sensitive information. I realized the importance of fostering an authentic and supportive atmosphere for data analysis and recognized the need to be proactive in reviewing data sets before engaging participants. The personal impact of the students' disclosures prompted a reassessment of the school's cultural landscape, emphasizing the urgency of addressing systemic issues. Despite the distressing revelations, the collective commitment of the participants provided a sense of optimism and resolve for meaningful change. The session underscored the need for adult actions in addressing racist remarks and cultural responsiveness, shifting focus from student behavior to adult accountability. This reflection highlighted the necessity of comprehensive professional development and a deeper engagement with equity issues among staff. As we transitioned to planning the annual school plan, the importance of adult ownership in creating a more inclusive school environment became evident. The goal is to ensure that culturally responsive practices are implemented consistently across

all learning environments, driving transformative progress in our school's approach to equity. These reflections underscore the critical need to delve deeper into the underlying issues, guiding us to the next phase: identifying the root causes around the issue statement using the Five Whys Protocol.

***Think Phase: Identifying the Root Causes around the Issue Statement***

PLC participants were assigned the task of transforming the previously developed goal, “By the end of the school year, equitable and culturally responsive practices will be evident across all learning environments,” into an equity issue statement for analysis using the Five Whys Protocol. (Appendix F). The protocol includes a questioning process aimed at delving into the specifics of a problem to identify symptoms. Originating from Sakichi Toyoda, the protocol suggests that by repeatedly asking "why" five times, the issue statement becomes clearer, uncovering root causes and facilitating the development of potential solutions. The purpose was to identify the root causes of the overarching equity issue, aiming to create action steps for the annual school plan. The leader outlined the components of an issue statement, emphasizing the need to pinpoint root causes to derive actionable steps. Participants were instructed to create individual issue statement slides, which were visually shared and discussed. After deliberation, the collectively agreed-upon issue statement was: The issue is the student's social and emotional well-being is being negatively impacted through racially and culturally inappropriate comments during unstructured time, which occurs mainly outside at recess and during special areas.

The created issue statement enabled root causes to be identified and further steps to be taken toward achieving the goal. Although some root causes had been previously



discussed in earlier sessions, the purpose of the root cause analysis was to pinpoint three reasons and their sub-reasons for the problem and formulate action steps and timelines for the annual school plan (ASP) using the Five Whys Protocol (Appendix F). This refined issue statement laid the groundwork for a thorough root cause analysis, guiding the PLC in identifying the underlying reasons behind the problem.

### **Identifying Root Causes of the Issue Statement using the Five Whys Protocol.**

The Five Whys Protocol (Appendix F) was chosen for root cause analysis because it is a valuable tool for systematically addressing issues in a school setting and fostering collaboration in problem-solving, thereby supporting continuous improvement efforts. The protocol includes a questioning process aimed at delving into the specifics of a problem to identify symptoms. Originating from Sakichi Toyoda, the protocol suggests that by repeatedly asking "why" five times, the issue statement becomes clearer, uncovering root causes and facilitating the development of potential solutions. The central aspect of the process is the "why questioning" phase, where up to five successive "why questions" are posed to reveal deeper layers of the problem. In discussions, PLC participants aided the leader in understanding the underlying causes without resolving the issue at each "why" question. The leader facilitated open dialogue, visually recording responses as participants brainstormed answers. Upon reaching the fifth "why" question, the PLC participants collectively identified the first root cause. The protocol for the root cause analysis can be found on the School Reform Initiative (SRI) website. SRI, an independent non-profit organization dedicated to fostering educational equity and excellence, offers valuable resources and tools to support educators and students across the United States and beyond (School Reform Initiative, n.d.)

***Root Cause One: Lack of Knowledge.*** The first root cause of the problem statement that was identified from the protocol was a student's lack of knowledge regarding the historical context of racial slurs, words, and phrases. The leader then asked PLC participants to define the term in the context of the issue statement and its effect on equity for students, asking each participant to respond independently. PLC participants then shared each response and, through discussion, collectively agreed that the term "ignorance" was defined as staff and students' ignorance regarding the historical context of racial terms, cultural awareness, and lack of social skills such as conflict resolution.

***Root Cause Two: Lack of Supervision.*** As PLC participants discussed the initial root cause, one participant raised a question to the group regarding the timing and occurrence of the identified name-calling and conflicts and whether addressing these issues was necessary. The leader then suggested employing the Five Whys Protocol again to delve into the underlying reasons for the prevalence of name-calling and conflicts, particularly during special area classes and recess. Using the same protocol as for the first identified root cause, PLC participants identified the second root cause collectively. They concurred that the second root cause was "Lack of Supervision.". This identification as a root cause encouraged more discussions to gain clarity and understanding, which was extremely helpful.

Once again, the leader prompted PLC participants to articulate the definition of this root cause. According to PLC participants, the lack of supervision extended to unstructured times; there was a lack of accountability for school leaders regarding staff responsibilities, insufficient coaching for supervising staff, and inconsistent expectations for both staff and students. The leader visually documented this definition.

The protocol provided a structured approach for defining the problem and collecting pertinent data, guiding the group through the "whys" to pinpoint the root cause. W.P. remarked, "The protocol was effective in identifying the root cause from the issue statement. It facilitated open discussions about the various aspects, allowing us to visualize and refine statements as we delved into each reason within the problem statement. Additionally, it encouraged everyone to think creatively and consider perspectives beyond their own, fostering an environment of shared insights and awareness". "The process itself was straightforward, yet delving into the depth of thought on the topics posed some challenges". Overall, the discussion on root causes was smoothly executed but prompted profound reflections, as noted by C.C.

In summary, equity gaps were identified through a root cause analysis session facilitated by the Five Whys Protocol. The first root cause identified was a lack of knowledge among students regarding the historical context of racial slurs and phrases, highlighting a gap in cultural awareness and social skills. The second root cause identified was a lack of supervision during unstructured times, such as recess, leading to racially and culturally inappropriate comments impacting students' social and emotional well-being. The protocol prompted discussions to clarify definitions and understand underlying issues, ultimately guiding the development of action steps for the annual school plan. This process also emphasized the importance of adult ownership in addressing equity concerns within the school community, ensuring alignment between identified issues and actionable steps. With the root causes clearly identified, the next phase involved developing specific steps for the annual school plan to address these equity issues comprehensively.

**Think Phase: Leader Reflections.** The goal created for the annual school plan addressed the overarching theme of cultural responsiveness and school culture. Initially focused on student behaviors, the participants shifted to adult actions, a critical change in addressing our school's equity issue. This shift, spurred by staff survey data, emphasized the importance of adult accountability and professional development. The Five Whys Protocol facilitated in-depth discussions, uncovering root causes and highlighting the need for systematic action steps. This session clarified the scope of work required, moving us from conceptual ideas to actionable plans, with a renewed focus on adult ownership and alignment with equity goals. With the root causes identified and a clearer understanding of the necessary actions, we now transition to the Act Phase, where we will develop specific steps for the annual school plan to address the identified equity issues comprehensively.

***Act: Identifying Steps for the Annual School Plan***

The act portion of this cycle involved identifying the next steps to be incorporated into the annual school plan based on the findings uncovered by the protocol. Participants reviewed the two root causes, and the leader asked them to collaborate on identifying two goals. The participants referred to the issue statement created in a previous session. The issue statement was: "The issue is the student's social and emotional well-being is being negatively impacted through racially and culturally inappropriate comments during unstructured time, which occurs mainly outside at recess and during special areas." Two goals for the annual school plan were identified: increasing cultural responsiveness and increasing supervision during unstructured times.

Participants reviewed the previous year's annual school plan and were asked to share what they noticed about the formatting of action steps. W.P. remarked, "I notice that the action steps have specific owners; this will be helpful." C.W. also expressed, "I don't see timelines; we will definitely need timelines." After sharing reflections about how action steps were formatted, participants were paired to collaborate on creating action steps to be shared with the group around the two goals: increasing cultural responsiveness and increasing supervision during unstructured times.

The leader prompted participants to refer to their notes from previous cycles, and when possible, solutions were presented. The first focus was determining precise action steps that would contribute to a reduction in inappropriate racial and cultural statements. The outcomes of the Five Whys Protocol (Appendix F) were then evaluated by PLC participants, who collaborated to define action steps to be incorporated into the annual school plan on separate slides. As participants brainstormed action steps, they were recorded on a Google Slide shared with the PLC. Each participant edited the slide until we reached a consensus on the steps to include in the annual school plan. The figure below shows the proposed action steps for the first goal: increasing cultural responsiveness (see Figure 7).

## Figure 7

### *Increasing Cultural Awareness Questionnaire*

#### **Increasing Cultural Awareness**

- Professional development to help staff identify and teach what is cultural awareness (the ability to understand different cultural values, beliefs and perceptions) **Who? How? Quarterly? How do we keep it fresh- no learning loss?**
  - Teachers will turnkey professional development learning to their classrooms
- Professional development to guide staff in exploring their own historical roots (see above)
- Learn about different cultures (discussions with others, roundtables) send surveys about family culture , Staff Culture highlight paper meeting, culture corner, grade level and whole staff PD, Culture event,
- Attend/provide links to various cultural awareness workshops and/or diversity focused conferences
- Build relationships with students and teachers (assist other staff building relationships)
- Connect to local cultural organizations
- Reflect on how aspects of your own culture has shaped your beliefs, unconscious biases and behaviors (include in PD, relationships)

This slide of action steps demonstrated a shift in how we, as adults, would tackle the issue we had uncovered, particularly cultural responsiveness. Although the steps still needed additional specific actions, they were a starting point for the annual school plan. As a leader, I envisioned these as initial starting points that other staff beyond the initial PLC participants would own for the following school year. This slide alone demonstrated a significant shift in mindset for the staff overall. I wondered, as a school leader, how that challenged me to change or push various staff mindsets around what this work meant. Overall, this slide demonstrated for me a focus on what needed to be done, and now it was up to me as the school leader to gather feedback on how to lead the work and self-reflect on my understanding of cultural responsiveness. Next, specific actions targeting the reduction of the "lack of supervision" were developed. The leader again provided an example of action steps and referred to the previous year's annual school plan. PLC participants then evaluated the results of the Five Whys Protocol (Appendix F) and

worked together to delineate action steps based on the bullet points. Participants developed the slide below, suggesting action steps to address the second goal: increasing supervision during unstructured times (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8**

*Consistency of Expectations for Recess/Lunch*

Action Step	Owners	Timeline
Identify expectations & consequences for recess/lunch for each lunch period (expectations from arrival to dismissal from lunch)	Admin/SLT	August
Communicate expectations & consequences for lunch/recess to grade level chair/cafe duty staff	Admin/SLT	First teacher PD days before students arrive
Communicate expectations & consequences for lunch/recess to classroom teachers	Grade Level Chairs	First teacher PD days before students arrive
Role play scenarios showing different expectations and conflict resolutions (by lunch period/grade level band) 1st-2nd; 3rd-5th; MS	Admin/SLT Grade Level Chairs	First teacher PD days before students arrive
Classroom teachers model identified school expectations for lunch/recess (from arrival to dismissal from lunch)	Classroom teachers	First student day for first three days; review as needed

With these foundational steps in place, the next phase involved creating a comprehensive annual school plan that incorporates these action steps and further strategies to address our identified equity issues.

**Creating the Annual School Planning.** The annual school plan shows how important it is to use action steps from the equity audit along with active participation in critical data-driven decision making (CDDDM) when setting up the annual school planning process. This collaborative engagement not only enhances the strategic objectives of the plan but also emphasizes the systematic and intentional addressing of equity-related considerations, aligning with the broader goals of the New Jersey Annual School Planning Process mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).


In New Jersey, schools identified for support and improvement under ESSA are obligated to develop improvement plans. Traditionally, this planning process involves the analysis of student achievement data, the assessment of existing improvement strategies, goal identification, and the formulation of a detailed implementation plan with specific action steps. To address equity gaps, the expansion of the Data-Driven Decision Making (DDDM) cycle through the incorporation of a Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) cycle, facilitated by an educational equity audit, informs the subsequent annual school plan. The planning process allows for specific action steps at the school level, relying on audit data rather than historically collected data for the annual school plan.

Participants helped to develop the overarching goal of cultural responsiveness, which was incorporated into the annual school plan with subsequent funding allocated. The figure below shows the platform for the annual school plan, as well as the SMART goal developed based on the equity audit findings. Firstly, we identified the focus area as climate and culture; secondly, we identified the need from the equity audit; and finally, we provide a narrative identifying root causes (see Figure 9).



**Figure 9**


*Root Cause Analysis to Develop SMART Goal*

 STATE OF NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION		
2023-2024		
Area of Focus for SMART Goals	Priority Performance Need	Possible Root Causes (Based upon the CNA and data analysis, what factors are most likely to have contributed to this)
Climate & Culture - Attendance/Behavior	Based on the conducted equity audit it was determined that there is a need for additional culturally responsive teaching.	The equity audit determined that students are not being instructed in culturally relevant practices that will increase their knowledge base for different cultures and foster a positive communication with each other.

The next figure (see Figure 10) displays the interim goals and the evidence that the school leader and PLC will need to gather to assess the plan's implementation.

**Figure 10**

*The Interim Goals and The Evidence to Be Collected by the School Leader*

 STATE OF NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION		
2023-2024		
End of Cycle	Interim Goal	Source(s) of Evidence
Apr 15:	By April 15, 50% of action steps identified from equity audit will be observable in 100 % of teacher and staff practice demonstrating culturally relevant and responsive practices.	Agendas, PLCs, Equity Walkthroughs, Panorama equity surveys
Jul 1	By June 2024, students will score above 85% on the Panorama equity and inclusion survey.	Agendas, PLCs, Equity Walkthroughs, Panorama equity surveys

**Summary of Creating the Annual School Plan in the Act Phase.** During the Act Phase, the PLC participants identified action steps to address equity issues uncovered through the Five Whys Protocol. They reviewed the previous year's plan and established two main goals: increasing cultural responsiveness and improving supervision during unstructured times. Participants collaborated to define precise action steps, ensuring each had specific ownership and timelines. These steps were recorded on shared Google Slides and refined through group consensus. The leader facilitated discussions, helping to align these steps with the broader goals of the annual school plan. The specific action steps derived from the equity audit ensured that equity considerations were systematically integrated into decision-making processes. This approach aligned with the broader objectives of the annual school planning process and fostered a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. The steps also demonstrated a shift from a typical data-driven decision-making process to a critical data-driven decision-making process with a specific lens on equity, ensuring that goals and actions were developed thoughtfully and inclusively. This collaborative effort laid the foundation for a comprehensive plan aimed at fostering a more inclusive and equitable school environment.

### **Conclusion of Second Cycle**

In conclusion, the second cycle of the equity audit played a crucial role in shaping the annual school plan. Building upon the critical approach established in cycle one, participants in the Professional Learning Community (PLC) conducted a thorough examination of survey data focused on equity and inclusion. Recognizing limitations in the initial survey, participants took proactive steps to address the gaps by developing and

distributing a second survey. The insights gleaned from this process, along with subsequent data collection, informed the formulation of the annual school plan. Moving forward, the PLC transitioned into the "think" phase, where root causes were analyzed to shape the problem statement. Finally, the discussion culminated in the "act" cycle, where participants collaboratively developed actionable steps to integrate equity considerations into the annual school plan. This iterative process underscores the commitment to fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational environment through informed decision-making and strategic planning. The transition to the third cycle involves gathering reflections from participants and leaders to provide a structured outline and suggestions for school leaders to conduct equity audits, which schools should implement prior to their annual school planning, with the goal of addressing equity disparities at the school level.

### **Cycle Three: Analysis of Reflections to Create an Equity Audit Plan Outline**

The collective reflections provided by PLC participants offer a comprehensive understanding of the equity audit process, including the identification of equity issues and the PLC's responses to these challenges. This analysis will be investigated during the final cycle's look phase. In my role as leader, I also engaged in reflection on the equity audit process and its outcomes. The thinking phase of this cycle will delve into my observations, particularly emphasizing my role as a transformative leader. Finally, the act phase will synthesize the leader's reflections and conclude with the development of an outline for an equity audit plan tailored for school leaders, with a specific focus on identifying equity issues through the lens of CDDDM.

### ***Look Phase: PLC Participant Questionnaires After the Audit***

Participants were invited to share their reflections in an anonymous questionnaire following the equity audit, addressing specific questions aimed at gathering evidence of their experiences and providing feedback to the leader. These questions covered a variety of aspects of their engagement, including their collaboration with peers in choosing the equity issue, their evolving thoughts and feelings about discussing equity throughout the project, and their perceptions of the impact of their work on addressing or perpetuating inequities. Additionally, participants reflected on areas of unfinished work and suggested ways to enhance the positivity of the process for equity teams in the future, as well as recommendations for the leader's role in facilitating future collaborations for equity-minded school change.

**Question One: Choosing the Equity Issue.** The first question asked participants how they worked with peers to choose the equity issue to address. The process of choosing the equity issue to address involved collaboration among peers, with participants working both individually and in groups to refine and select the most relevant question. One member described the process, stating, "We viewed the original questions that were suggested, then reframed and changed them according to the needs and understanding of the students." Another member shared, "I considered the comments that had been brought up to me by students in the past, the concerns of the teachers, as well as the concerns brought up by my fellow staff members." highlighting the importance of considering various perspectives.

Participants analyzed survey data to identify common trends and areas of concern, ultimately narrowing down their focus to the issue of racially and culturally inappropriate

comments during unstructured time. One member explained, "We reviewed the responses from a survey that identified students' and staff's personal feelings about racism and equity in the building." Another member added, "We learned students were making racist and culturally inappropriate comments during unstructured time." Throughout the process, participants engaged in discussions and reflections to refine their understanding of equity issues and develop actionable steps. One member reflected, "My very first thought in this process was this is a very tough topic to tackle and are we ready, willing and able to address what is needed for a positive outcome." Another member stated, "We were looking for common trends that showed what individuals and groups were thinking," emphasizing the importance of addressing current practices and understanding the root causes of inequities. Overall, the collaborative process allowed participants to identify a specific issue statement related to racially and culturally inappropriate comments during unstructured time, providing a clear focus for their equity work.

**Question Two: Feelings About Equity.** The second question asked was, what did you feel before this project began about discussing equity? During work? Now? Asking participants about their feelings before, during, and after discussions about equity aids in establishing a baseline understanding of their attitudes and emotions towards the topic, facilitating progress assessment, and promoting self-awareness. Additionally, gathering feedback on participants' feelings throughout the audit allows for reflection and provides valuable insights for enhancing the effectiveness of the facilitator to build equity knowledge and capacity among participants. The responses from participants shed light on their diverse perspectives and experiences regarding discussions about equity.

Before the audit began, there was a mix of intrigue and uncertainty regarding discussions about equity. One participant expressed eagerness to hear various perspectives, stating, "I was actually quite intrigued to hear what everyone else had to say about the topic." Another participant acknowledged potential discomfort among participants, stating, "I felt that 'equity discussions' may be uncomfortable to some, especially when it relates to different cultures and groups of people." During the audit, perceptions shifted as participants found a safe space for open dialogue and collaboration. One participant noted the positive atmosphere, stating, "During the work, it was just the opposite. Everyone was able to share and not feel judged." Another participant stated, "Now, this team of educators has worked together to identify areas in which we are able to combat inequities in our school, district and community." highlighting the newfound understanding and readiness for action.

Regarding how others may feel about this work, participants recognized a range of emotions and emphasized the importance of fostering inclusivity and understanding. One participant noted potential discomfort but stressed the need for progress, stating, "Other people may not feel as comfortable doing this work as I do." Another participant stated, "I think anything related to race and culture can be a touchy subject if not approached respectfully." highlighting the importance of respectful discussions. Overall, in the sessions of the audit, there was a shift from uncertainty to empowerment, creating a platform for meaningful dialogue and action towards equity. Participants recognized the necessity of these discussions for personal and communal growth, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and understanding in navigating sensitive topics.

**Question Three: The Effect of the Work on Addressing Inequities.** The third question was how this work has served to eliminate or perpetuate inequities. What work still feels unfinished? This question aimed to identify how the work has impacted equity and what remains unfinished, as well as encourage critical reflection and accountability among participants. Participants agreed that the audit served as a crucial step in identifying and acknowledging the inequities present within our school environment, providing a targeted starting point for action. While the work has not yet eliminated or perpetuated inequities, it signifies the beginning of a transformative mindset shift toward addressing these issues. Moving forward, evaluating the effectiveness of implemented strategies and establishing a common understanding of equity among staff members will be essential for progress.

Through the audit process, participants gained insights into previously unrecognized inequities and developed a plan of action to address them, highlighting the power of targeted interventions. However, many next steps remain unfinished, awaiting implementation in the upcoming school year. The ongoing nature of equity work necessitates continual revisitation and adaptation to ensure meaningful and sustainable change. The audit also provided an opportunity for participants to engage in discussions, listen to diverse perspectives, and reflect on their understanding of equity. While progress has been made, there are still misconceptions and confusion surrounding equity that require further exploration and dialogue. Overall, the reflections identified that the audit marks the beginning of a broader initiative to address inequities within the school community, signaling a commitment to ongoing growth and improvement in this vital area.

The experience of the equity team was overwhelmingly positive, with participants expressing satisfaction with the process and outcomes. One member stated, "I don't think there was anything that could have made it more positive." The school leader's guidance through relevant tasks and effective facilitation was praised, with another member noting, "The audit was conducted in a very effective and efficient manner. I would not change anything." Recommendations for future collaborations included clarity around expectations and language, as well as the need for ongoing dialogue and engagement with various stakeholders.

Some participants emphasized the importance of sensitivity in addressing equity issues and suggested strategies for promoting buy-in and ownership among staff. One member highlighted the need for additional time to collaborate and conduct follow-up surveys, stating, "With time, I believe this effort will prove to be a positive move forward for the school community." Another member suggested including different participants and conducting more surveys with diverse groups to gather input. Participants commended the school leader for their facilitation skills and understanding of the sensitive nature of the topic. They expressed satisfaction with the process and outcomes, noting that they felt comfortable asking questions and contributing to discussions. Looking ahead, participants emphasized the importance of continuous engagement and dialogue to sustain progress toward equity-minded school change.

**Question Four: Improving the Process for Equity-Minded Change.** The last question asked participants how this process could have been more positive for those on the equity team. What should the person leading the process do differently in a future collaboration for equity-minded school change? The experience of the equity team was



described as "very positive" and "overwhelmingly positive." One team member expressed, "I don't think there was anything that could have made it more positive." However, there was a recognition of uncertainty regarding the best course of action after establishing the issue statement. One participant suggested, "Looking at plans that were already in place along with their data may help focus our action steps.", possibly to guide in implementing action steps.

Regarding future collaborations for equity-minded school change, there were suggestions for improvement. One team member highlighted the importance of clarity around expectations, stating, "The only recommendation I would make is clarity around expectations at the beginning of each meeting." Another emphasized the need for clarity around language and common terminology, as not everyone may fully understand the terms being used. They suggested, "Possibly clarity around language." Additionally, there was a call for developing a plan to support equity and adaptability to change within the school community. Diversity of perspectives was deemed essential for effective, equity-minded change. Reflecting on the need for more diverse staff involvement, one participant stated, "Reflecting on ideas from as many different sectors of the school creates an even broader perspective and lens toward change." Another person emphasized the importance of involving different participants to expose more peers to knowledge and provide opportunities for input. A participant suggested, "Teams should meet monthly to review and have discussions about the information from the ASP. This will allow for continuous engagement with various individuals." Identifying continuous engagement and follow-up surveys were highlighted as crucial for sustaining momentum and ensuring ongoing progress.

**Summary.** Participants in the equity audit's collaborative efforts culminated in a positive experience as they navigated discussions on equity issues and identified areas for improvement within the school community. Their reflections underscored the importance of ongoing dialogue and engagement in promoting equity-minded change. Reflections also demonstrated the PLC's identification of existing equity gaps uncovered in the equity audit.

Participant reflections are closely linked to identifying equity gaps at the school level because they provide valuable insights into students and staff's experiences, perceptions, and needs regarding equity issues. For instance, in Question One, participants discussed their collaborative process for selecting an equity issue to address. Their reflections highlighted the importance of considering various perspectives and analyzing survey data to identify common trends and concerns. By examining how participants navigate these discussions and decisions, school leaders can identify patterns of inequity and areas where specific groups of students or staff may be marginalized or underserved.

In Question Two, participants shared their feelings about discussing equity before, during, and after the audit process. These reflections provide insight into the emotional dynamics surrounding equity discussions and how they evolve. Understanding participants' initial apprehensions, shifting perceptions during the audit, and newfound readiness for action can inform strategies for fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for ongoing equity work.

Question Three delved into the impact of the equity audit on addressing inequities within the school community. Participants reflected on the progress made as well as the

unfinished work and challenges that lie ahead. By examining these reflections, school leaders can assess the effectiveness of current equity initiatives, identify areas for improvement, and develop strategies for sustaining momentum toward equity-minded change.

Finally, in Question Four, participants provided feedback on how the equity process could have been more positive and effective. Their reflections offer valuable suggestions for enhancing future collaborations, such as clarifying expectations, promoting diversity of perspectives, and fostering continuous engagement with various stakeholders. By incorporating these insights into future equity initiatives, school leaders can create more inclusive and impactful strategies for addressing equity gaps and promoting social justice within the school community.

Participant reflections, in essence, serve as a critical instrument in pinpointing the equity gaps identified during the equity audit. Transitioning from these participant perspectives to school leader reflections provides insight into the facilitation of such initiatives and the broader impact on school culture and practices.

### ***Think Phase: Leadership Reflections***

During this process, I began by prioritizing reflections provided by participants. Following each PLC meeting, participants were asked to reflect on the leadership dynamics and protocol utilization, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of our meetings. Secondly, the post-audit questionnaire provided significant insights into the collected data and its implications for our school environment. These insights, along with the reflections after meetings, helped guide the development of an outline for leaders to

conduct an equity audit and provided me with a deeper understanding of the broader implications for our school culture and practices.

This reflection process is fundamental to the "Think" phase of action research. It involves critically analyzing and synthesizing the audit data, considering its impact on various aspects such as the school environment, leadership dynamics, and participant responses. By examining participants' reflections and identifying recurring themes, I gained deeper insights that informed the development of our action plan. Lastly, I reflected on several key areas within the audit, and these reflections, along with an analysis of my insights, will be detailed further.

**Reflections on Participant Reflections Throughout Equity Audit.** After each PLC meeting, participants provided reflections on the leadership dynamics and protocol utilization, offering valuable insights into the effectiveness of our meetings. Participants' feedback highlighted several key themes and suggested actionable steps for me as a leader or another leader conducting an audit. To replicate the success of this process, a leader can take several steps. To begin, they should facilitate a collaborative process for choosing the equity issue, ensuring that various perspectives are considered. This process can involve analyzing relevant data, such as survey responses, and engaging participants in discussions to refine their understanding and develop actionable steps. Providing guidance and structure for this process can help focus efforts on addressing specific equity issues, such as racially and culturally inappropriate comments during unstructured time.

Next, the leader should create a safe space for open dialogue and collaboration throughout the audit process. Creating a safe space involves fostering an environment

where participants feel empowered to share their thoughts and ideas, even if they initially feel uncertain or uncomfortable discussing equity. Encouraging active listening and respectful communication can promote inclusivity and understanding among participants, leading to personal and communal growth.

Additionally, the leader should recognize that the audit is just one step in a larger journey toward equity. While it serves as a crucial starting point for identifying and acknowledging inequities, participants also recognized that much work remains unfinished. Moving forward, evaluating implemented strategies, establishing a common understanding of equity among staff members, and continuous engagement with various stakeholders will be essential for progress. Establishing a clear plan for the ongoing evaluation of the annual school plan implementation and fostering a culture of accountability can help ensure that efforts to address inequities are effective and sustainable over time.

### **Reflections on Initial Professional Development of PLC and Equity Stance**

**Activity.** Participants completed the initial professional development session in one meeting. PLC participants were asked to read an article titled "Using Equity Audits to Assess and Address Opportunity Gaps Across Education" (Johnson, 2020), which delved into the purpose, measures, and outcomes of equity audits. Participants in the PLC shared diverse perspectives on equity, recognizing the complexity and challenges involved in achieving equitable outcomes in education, including various forms of inequity within schools and education systems.

Reflecting as the leader of our school community, I've always championed collaboration and shared understanding. However, confronting the noticeable discrepancy

in how equity was perceived among team members gave me pause. As a leadership team, we had been deeply involved in equity initiatives, and I assumed cohesion in our perspectives." I realized that our past experiences, while valuable, had not fully prepared us for the intricacies and complexities that discussions on equity can bring." reflecting on the diversity of opinions challenging my previous assumption.

Each participant brought a unique background, cultural perspective, and set of privileges, influencing their understanding of equity. Recognizing this, I shifted towards creating an environment where every voice could be heard and respected. "Without a solid foundation of trust and inclusivity within our team, there was a risk of discomfort and discord arising from these differing viewpoints. "Navigating these reflections, I came to appreciate the importance of embracing diversity and fostering open dialogue. "This realization serves as a reminder of the ongoing journey towards creating a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for all members of our school community." Only by acknowledging and valuing our differences can we authentically and sensitively address equity complexities.

The Equity Stance Activity (Appendix D) was the next portion of the professional development session. The Equity Stance Activity examines complex questions that arise when educators act to address equity in student learning. This tool supports educators in identifying and articulating an equity stance. The activity asked PLC participants to deepen their understanding of the word equity and examine inconsistencies between their beliefs and actions as they relate to equity in student learning. During our discussion, I observed significant engagement and passion among the participants, prompting reflection on the alignment of their perspectives with personal experiences. "Particularly,

when considering F.G.'s remarks on the curriculum, I pondered whether they were influenced by her current struggles within our educational framework, a genuine dedication to equity, or perhaps a combination of both." I initially anticipated that participants' reflections would draw from their unique life encounters, a presumption that proved accurate upon deeper reflection. The diverse range of responses led me to contemplate how these various perspectives on equity would manifest in our collaborative efforts. "I firmly believe that the structured activity served as a valuable tool in my role as a facilitator, allowing me to better understand each participant's standpoint." This is a valuable reflection as we embark on the audit.

Acknowledging an oversight in not including emotional check-ins at the beginning of our discussions, I recognized the need for a secure space for all participants. "While I had previously assumed that our teamwork had cultivated an environment of openness and trust, I am now more mindful of the need to ensure a secure space for all participants, as not everyone may feel equally comfortable. Recognizing the importance of regularly assessing and ensuring participants' comfort levels reaffirmed my commitment to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment within our school community.

The professional development session for PLC members focused on deepening their understanding of equity, prompting a reevaluation of assumptions about cohesion in perspectives, and emphasizing the importance of creating an inclusive environment. The Equity Stance Activity (Appendix D) allowed participants to examine their beliefs and actions, highlighting the need for emotional check-ins and ensuring a secure space for all. These reflections conclude that participants were ready to work collaboratively based on

their previous work together, mutual respect, and beginning equity work. A different group of PLC participants that had not worked together or did not have similar backgrounds would need a different approach. For a replicable plan, an approach needs to be created based on the dynamics of the team, the leadership, and the overall culture of the school building. A protocol should be used to assess the approach.

**Reflections on the Use of Panorama Student Survey.** The Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey is a series of scales, or groups of survey questions, that work together to measure students' experiences of equity and inclusion in school. I chose this survey as a starting point for the equity audit. The survey also provides schools and districts with a clear picture of how students, teachers, and staff are thinking and feeling about diversity, equity, and inclusion in school. The survey tracks the progress of equity initiatives through the lenses of students and staff, identifies areas for celebration and improvement, informs professional development, and signals the importance of equity and inclusion to the community.

In preparing for the equity audit, my initial reliance on the Panorama survey data was challenged by the group's concerns about its validity. This challenge prompted me to reconsider my approach, emphasizing the need to ensure the integrity of our data sources. Reflecting on the group's commitment to a thorough examination of equity issues, I realized the importance of moving beyond surface-level analysis and incorporating diverse viewpoints into our decision-making processes. This shift underscored the value of genuine examination and critical data analysis in addressing equity concerns within our school community. I noted, "I encountered an unexpected perspective from the group, who voiced concerns about the validity of the data. Despite initially viewing this



assertion as a challenge, I came to recognize that it underscored the group's dedication to conducting a thorough and genuine examination of equity issues rather than settling for surface-level analysis." Also, "While the discussion around using critical data to inform decision-making had not been explicitly articulated, I had consistently advocated for examining data through an equity-oriented lens." This experience reinforced the importance of remaining flexible in our planning processes and continuously striving to incorporate diverse perspectives into our decision-making frameworks. [OBJ]

In the future, allowing the PLC to select the data type for uncovering equity issues in the school as part of the equity audit process may be more beneficial. Allowing the PLC to select the data ensures that the chosen survey or other data collection method includes a significant percentage of student voices, effectively capturing the necessary data to initiate the process. While it's clear that one survey will not offer all the required data, and it should not, if adopting a CDDDM lens, the team can select the first survey or data piece, which should be integrated into the initial stages.

As the PLC participants reviewed the initial Panorama questions, pondering whether students understood what was being asked, I reflected on the significance of the group's analysis. Once again, I was pleasantly surprised by the comprehensive nature of the participant's analysis. As one member noted, "Participants highlighted concerns regarding students' potential lack of comprehension regarding the purpose of the survey questions." This highlight prompted introspection on my part regarding my failure to adequately elucidate the survey's intent to students. While I had provided such clarification to the teachers, elucidating how the data would inform our equity audit, another member added, "I realized I had not extended the same level of clarity to the

students." It became evident that enhancing communication of the survey's purpose to them beforehand was imperative to mitigate potential confusion. This realization led me to contemplate whether our school staff might harbor similar uncertainties regarding the survey's purpose and the broader equity audit.

Consequently, I discerned the significance, as a leader, of addressing this issue during the finalization of our annual school plan. I aim to ensure a comprehensive understanding among all stakeholders regarding the importance of equity clarity and the necessary steps to rectify any disparities within the school community. In future surveys, it is advisable to provide a script to both staff and students to ensure clarity regarding the survey's purpose and messaging. A replicable plan would include possible scripts to send to staff, students, and families.

Overall, cycle one demonstrated a shift from conventional data-driven decision-making to a more critical approach through the Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) framework. PLC participants reviewed survey data focused on equity and inclusion, recognized the limitations in understanding students' perspectives on race and ethnicity, and created a new student survey. As the school leader, my reflections illuminated crucial insights gleaned from our discussions about the equity audit. Participants were engaged and passionate, prompting contemplation on how personal experiences shape perspectives. For instance, discussion about F.G.'s stance on the curriculum sparked thoughts on the origins of such views, whether from systemic struggles or a genuine belief in equity. This emphasized the influence of life experiences on equity perspectives. Structured activities facilitated understanding, with another participant noting, "Structured activities helped us understand where each person was

coming from." underlining the importance of emotional check-ins for fostering comfort in sharing.

Unexpected feedback about data validity prompted a reassessment of our approach. The group's commitment to thorough examination rather than surface-level analysis was evident, as one participant noted, "It showed me that the group was serious about digging deeper into real equity issues." Consequently, a shift towards examining student data more closely ensued, emphasizing clarity and comprehensiveness in survey questions. Clarity emerged as a recurring theme, particularly regarding ensuring understanding among students and staff about the equity audit's purpose. Recognizing this, I acknowledged my responsibility for addressing confusion and clarifying objectives. Emphasizing clear definitions, clarifying objectives, and developing strategies are themes that should be at the forefront of a replicable plan.

**Reflections on the Second Student Survey.** A second survey was disseminated to students based on the identification of students' difficulty comprehending the questions of the original Panorama survey. This phase started with PLC participants analyzing the second student survey that was developed from the initial student responses. Reflecting on my role as the school leader, the stark contrast in responses between the current survey and the first evoked a strong emotional response, particularly concerning the revelation of students' experiences with racist language. "I felt anger and sadness as I engaged with the responses and observed the reactions of participants." As someone entrusted with the well-being of the school community, I had previously assumed a thorough understanding of the student body's experiences. However, this encounter served as a profound wake-up call, prompting a reassessment of my perceptions and emotional preparedness for

handling such sensitive data. Recognizing the importance of fostering an authentic and supportive environment. "In light of these realizations, I feel I should be proactive in reviewing data sets before engaging with participants, ensuring that I am adequately prepared to provide the necessary support amidst potentially triggering content.", contemplating the need to be adequately equipped to navigate participants' emotional responses during data analysis sessions.

As reflected, "I think gauging where participants are in a check-in before diving into the data will help me gauge possible participant reaction." Furthermore, the personal impact of students' disclosures weighed heavily on me as a leader, evoking feelings of distress and a deep sense of responsibility." The stark realization that such incidents were occurring within the school community under my supervision prompted a profound reevaluation of the school's cultural landscape. Future leaders of the equity audit may want to consider reviewing data ahead of time to ensure that they are ready to receive feedback. A self-check-in to review data you may not expect would assist in working through it with PLC participants. Setting a protocol that allows the leader to delve into the data ahead of the participants will allow the leader to gauge what type of emotional check-ins may be necessary to engage participants so that they remain in a safe and productive space.

However, amidst the somber reflection, there also exists a sense of optimism and resolve. "The collective commitment of the participants to undertake this critical work serves as a beacon of hope for meaningful change." The potential impact of our collective efforts, if executed with fidelity, holds the promise of transformative progress toward a more equitable and inclusive school environment as we move on to annual school

planning. "This recent session stamps the need for the audit and subsequent planning, with a new emphasis, for me as the leader, on ensuring the plan is carried out with fidelity once created." As a leader, I recognized two important areas. First, a leader must be open to hearing what is happening from the student and staff perspective. Student and staff voices are strong, and leaders must be prepared to hear what needs to be changed, even if it is not how they thought it was. Secondly, there is a renewed focus on ensuring that the plan is implemented with fidelity after its creation. This renewed focus also highlights the need to ensure that future planning of action steps has fidelity checkpoints. The fidelity checkpoints will be crucial in communicating with staff overall and building trust that the plan will come to fruition. Alongside fidelity checkpoints, feedback from staff at various points should be included to ensure that staff feel valued and have a voice in a plan that they have been asked to engage in to promote equity school-wide.

**Reflection on the PLC: Identifying Actions from Student Surveys.** During the PLC discussion on the next steps following the analysis of student surveys, a prominent theme emerged, emphasizing the critical need for comprehensive education surrounding racial slurs. Additionally, interventions aimed at addressing the persistent use of such language were highlighted as essential. Furthermore, participants stressed the importance of fostering open dialogue about race and providing support for teachers in facilitating these discussions. Central to these efforts is the objective of promoting inclusivity and promptly addressing racial issues throughout the school year.

As I examined the initial responses from the participants, I noticed a strong emphasis on students' actions and motivations, spanning from discussing the historical context of racial slang to proposing consequences for its use. This examination prompted

me to contemplate the broader implications of why students engage in such behavior and why it often goes unaddressed when observed. "My hope was for our team to collectively shift our focus towards actions that adults can take to foster a more culturally responsive environment, rather than solely concentrating on student behavior." Although the goal was not to discuss potential solutions at this part of the protocol, I cannot ignore the deficit lens placed on students by focusing solely on student behavior rather than the adult behavior that caused the student behavior. Setting a lens at the beginning of the audit to use adult behavior-first language when discussing the root causes of student actions is critical and should be part of a replicable plan.

The participants frequently moved forward to discussing the next steps before we embarked on the root cause analysis. This move to the next steps was due to the data protocol asking for the next steps. I found myself impressed by the wealth of ideas articulated by the participants. "While each proposed action was firmly grounded in the data we had examined, I couldn't help but feel a pressing need for a more structured approach to elucidate the underlying causative factors before formulating strategies." Looking back, I reflected, "This would have prevented prematurely steering participants towards solutions before we had thoroughly understood the root causes of the equity issues at hand." I now recognize the potential benefit of omitting the segment devoted to potential solutions from our data-driven dialogue.

Moving from the next steps in a data-driven dialogue protocol to a process that encouraged a deeper dive into the data with a focus on equity, I reflected. "Aligning our protocol with the principles of CDDDM (Critical Data-Driven Decision Making) would undoubtedly enhance its effectiveness in this context." Despite these reflections, I find

encouragement in the fact that participants, following the discussion on potential solutions, expressed a desire to acquire additional data. "This indicates their commitment to a comprehensive and evidence-based approach, which aligns perfectly with our goal of addressing equity issues in a thorough and impactful manner." Moving forward, I am eager to integrate these insights into our planning process, ensuring that our strategies are not only well-informed but also deeply rooted in understanding the complexities of equity within our school community. Possibly incorporating as part of the Data Driven Dialogue Protocol a question such as, "What additional data do we need to understand this data?" would promote the continual gathering of additional data.

**Reflections on Analyzing Student Round Tables.** In response to the data obtained in student and staff surveys, participants carried out and documented student roundtables for use in the ongoing cycle. Roundtables were completed with two sets of students from grades fourth to fifth. The Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol (Appendix E) was again used to guide PLC participants through the data. This protocol cultivates awareness and comprehension of PLC participants' perspectives, beliefs, and presumptions regarding data without making immediate judgments.

Reflecting on the initial roundtable discussion, I was not surprised by the trends identified by participants from the data. "While I had previously addressed remarks occasionally heard among middle schoolers, I had not been fully aware of similar occurrences involving younger students." This prompted a realization of the broader context and raised questions about how such comments were addressed by staff. "Did they perhaps lack the necessary strategies to respond effectively?" Recognizing the complexity, I understood the importance of collaborative efforts to develop more

effective strategies. Transitioning to the next steps, I pondered whether participants would seek additional data, highlighting the ongoing commitment to critical data-driven decision-making in addressing equity issues within our school community.

Once more, assessing staff to understand their level of cultural responsiveness and equity knowledge before beginning the equity audit offers valuable background insight. With this prior understanding, both the team and I would have been able to assess the staff's ability to address students' use of racial terms. Additionally, understanding staff's perspectives and overall comfort level regarding race and culture would facilitate root cause analysis and help establish a foundation for actionable steps derived from the audit for the annual school plan.

**Reflections on Next Steps from Round Table.** According to the student roundtable data, the PLC participants arrived at several next steps based on the data shared from the student roundtable. The student voices presented many themes in this discussion. The themes that students uncovered that resonated with me were students feeling unsafe and the lack of consequences for behavior. As a school leader, the discussion surrounding the data, particularly regarding students' expressed need for consequences, was unexpected. "Are consequences still necessary for addressing this type of language?" Having transitioned our school culture from one centered around consequences to a more restorative approach, the student's perspective prompted a thorough reflection on the effectiveness of consequences versus restorative actions. "How can we effectively implement restorative or reactive actions to address such behavior?" This led me to ponder crucial questions as we progressed towards the planning stage. "What are students' perceptions of our shift towards restorative practices compared to



traditional consequences?" Is there a space for integrating both approaches? Although the initial intent was to refrain from focusing on solutions during the discussion, I observed a natural inclination toward exploring possible solutions. "Rather than redirecting the conversation, I chose to embrace it and took note of the ideas shared by participants." These notes will serve as valuable insights for our future sessions, where we can thoroughly examine and consider the feasibility of implementing these solutions within our restorative framework. "This approach reflects our commitment to fostering an inclusive and collaborative environment, where all voices are heard and valued in shaping our school's practices and policies." The unexpected discussion on students' expressed need for consequences prompted a thorough reflection on the effectiveness of restorative versus punitive approaches, leading to a commitment to embracing possible solutions within a restorative framework to foster an inclusive and collaborative environment in shaping school policies and practices.

Again, creating a space for the leader to reflect on school-wide practices that arise throughout the process occurs by including a prompt that asks the participants and the leader, "How does this uncovered data contribute to the school-wide culture?" Also, a prompt that asks participants, "How does this data relate to the root causes of the equity issue?" ensures a safe space for participants. In addition, a space on the agenda for discussion around school culture issues that may contribute overall to the equity issue is necessary with the leader prepared to be reflective in those conversations. The PLC and the leader also need to be open to how issues of school culture uncovered in data analysis reflect the overall cultural responsiveness of the school. This reflection should also be noted in sessions and will be an important part of the root cause analysis moving forward.

**Reflections on The Creation and Analysis of Staff Survey.** During the discussion about the next steps to the student round table data, PLC participants proposed incorporating the perceptions of school staff in the student roundtable, viewing it as beneficial for defining the issue and determining subsequent action steps. Specifically, they wanted the staff to hear what students shared and express their thoughts and feelings about what students stated during the roundtables. Reflecting as a school leader, I see the shift towards adult perspectives as a positive step in comprehending the broader dynamics shaping our school's culture. Yet, I am keen to gauge where staff stand in terms of their ownership of the issues we have uncovered, pondering whether they share the same surprise as the team and whether they might propose alternative solutions. "However, I harbor concerns that pinpointing the most prevalent areas of concern, such as recess and special areas classrooms, could inadvertently ostracize those teachers and undermine their confidence among peers." My primary hope is that our staff will recognize the necessity of a shift in our approach to cultural responsiveness. "I believe that this initial staff perceptions data could serve as a valuable starting point for our collective efforts.", viewing this recognition as the crucial first step towards addressing these challenges.

Survey data was collected from staff regarding their perceptions regarding the student roundtable discussion participants pointed out observations about staff's comfort level discussing race, equity, and students not feeling safe during free time. "The fact that staff were not surprised by the students reporting the use of racial slang and the lack of clarity around the definition of equity was disheartening." As a leader, I felt that we had made some shifts in this area as it was part of our vision statement. "Our staff had

professional development on cultural responsiveness, and it was centrally communicated in staff meetings and weekly communications." Again, I noticed that this was a much bigger issue than student racial remarks towards each other and that although, as a staff, we may have touched the surface of cultural responsiveness, we needed to take a deeper look into our knowledge and practices because what we had done in professional development and messaging was not translating into action.

In discussing the next steps regarding staff survey data, PLC participants suggested professional development for teachers in the areas of equity and race, which was highlighted as a critical need. The data suggests that teachers may benefit from additional training to improve their communication with both students and peers regarding race-related issues. I observed, "The identification of professional development was a definitive shift from student ownership to adult ownership.", highlighting the pivotal role of adults in addressing the uncovered issues. They emphasized the importance of establishing a common language around equity among adults as a crucial step toward addressing these challenges. Reflecting on my role as a leader, I asked myself, "How do I lead this?" and "What steps do I need to take to keep a pulse on this?" These reflections underscored my commitment to guiding the PLC in crafting a response and clarifying our role in supporting this process.

Identifying the staff perceptions and comfortability around race before the audit, as previously mentioned, will provide a much clearer picture of student data. Having the data ahead of the equity audit also allows the leader to have an adequate gauge of the work that needs to happen before action steps from the audit are created. Although this session was very informative, a survey before engaging the staff would have allowed us

to know our starting point at the beginning of the audit, providing us a lens for analyzing student data and how their actions may be related to staff's perceptions and comfortability or lack of cultural responsiveness.

The actions of the leader and PLC participants identified equity gaps in the school environment by revealing critical insights into students' experiences and behaviors, as well as staff perceptions and responses to those issues. For instance, the analysis of the second student survey highlighted a concerning trend of racially inappropriate comments, which prompted a reevaluation of the school's cultural landscape and the need for proactive measures to address such behavior. This reflection underscored the importance of reviewing data sets before engaging participants to ensure preparedness and emotional support during discussions.

Similarly, discussions within the PLC revealed a strong emphasis on the need for comprehensive education on racial slurs and interventions to address their use. However, there was a recognition of the importance of shifting the focus from solely student behavior to adult behavior and fostering a culturally responsive environment. This reflection prompted considerations for future protocols to prioritize understanding the root causes of equity issues before formulating strategies.

Furthermore, incorporating staff perceptions into surveys provided valuable insights into their comfort level in discussing race and equity. The data highlighted areas where additional training and professional development were needed, indicating a shift towards adult ownership in addressing equity issues. These reflections emphasized the pivotal role of adults in fostering a more inclusive environment and clarified the leader's role in guiding the PLC's response and supporting the ongoing process.

Overall, these reflections highlighted the interconnectedness between student behaviors, staff perceptions, and school culture, shedding light on equity gaps and paving the way for targeted interventions and systemic changes to promote equity and inclusivity within the school community.

In summary, the perspectives shared through both participant and leader reflections offer critical insights into shaping a thorough audit outline that prioritizes equity and the use of CDDDM. The inclusion of CDDDM within the equity audit outline is critical for guiding leaders in addressing disparities and ensuring equitable opportunities, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic. By centering equity in the audit process, leaders can actively work towards creating a more just and supportive educational environment where all students have equal access to resources and opportunities for success, ultimately increasing student outcomes.

#### ***Act Phase: The Formation of an Equity Audit Approach***

The following equity audit outline offers a structured approach and recommendations for school leaders to conduct an equity audit, with a focus on CDDDM, to identify equity issues contributing to student outcomes. It is divided into specific sections, outlining protocols and necessary data. Given the nature of CDDDM, data collection will be guided by the analysis of initial data. Suggestions for additional data will be provided, but each leader will need to align with the path determined by their PLC participants. These recommendations and next steps stem from the action research conducted and are aimed at facilitating organizational change within each school to promote equity.

**Pre-Audit: Professional Development of PLC participants.** To replicate the process outlined for conducting an equity audit, several steps must be taken, beginning with a comprehensive professional development session. This session should focus on establishing a shared understanding of the purpose and objectives of the equity audit, as well as fostering a supportive and collaborative environment among participants. It is essential to recognize the importance of creating an environment that embraces the underlying assumptions of equity in education, as this sets the tone for the entire audit process, particularly in addressing inequities stemming from COVID-19.

Before delving into the discussions, it may be beneficial to identify participants' pre-existing knowledge and conceptions of the term "equity." Identification can be done through surveys, questionnaires, or informal conversations to gauge their understanding and perspectives on equity in education. Understanding where participants stand on the concept of equity can guide discussions and ensure that their voices are heard and respected throughout the process. During the professional development session, participants should be provided with relevant resources and literature to deepen their understanding of equity audits and their potential impact on addressing disparities in education. This may include articles, research papers, or case studies that explore the concept of equity and its application in educational settings. These resources serve as a foundation for discussions around individual definitions of equity and the overarching goals of the audit. Consider articles or resources that can deepen understanding, such as "Enhancing Equity in Education: A Guide to Conducting Equity Audits" by Johnson (2020). This resource offers insights into the purpose, measures, and outcomes of equity

audits, providing valuable guidance on assessing and addressing opportunity gaps in education.

Engaging participants in reflective discussions about their definitions of equity is a critical step in the process. Identifying definitions enables the recognition and validation of diverse perspectives and experiences within the team, as well as fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges inherent in promoting equity in education. By acknowledging and respecting these differences, participants can work collaboratively towards a common vision of equity that guides their audit efforts. A suggested tool to lead the reflective discussion is the Equity Stance Activity (Appendix D).

To effectively utilize the Equity Stance Activity in preparing for an equity audit, it is essential to understand its purpose and implementation steps. The activity serves as a foundational step to deepen participants' comprehension of equity and align their beliefs and actions regarding equity in student learning. Here's a guide on how to conduct the Equity Stance Activity (Appendix D):

1. Introduction to the Activity: Begin by explaining the purpose of the activity, emphasizing its role in identifying potential inconsistencies between participants' beliefs and actions related to equity. Highlight the significance of this introspection prior to engaging in the equity audit process.
2. Provide Resources: Offer relevant resources, such as articles or case studies, to facilitate participants' understanding of equity concepts and their application in educational settings. These resources will serve as the basis for discussions during the activity.

3. Activity Execution: Present the five different stances on equity to participants: equity as initial equal opportunity, equity as ongoing equal opportunity, equity as personalized opportunity, equity as equalization of opportunity, and equity as equal results. Encourage participants to read and analyze each stance independently.

4. Reflection and Discussion: Facilitate a discussion in which participants share their reflections on each stance and identify which one closely aligns with their own beliefs. Encourage open dialogue and the exploration of differing perspectives to foster a collaborative and inclusive environment.

5. Clarification and Consensus: Encourage participants to clarify any uncertainties or questions they may have about the stances and engage in constructive dialogue to reach a consensus on their positions regarding equity.

6. Integration into the Equity Audit Process: Emphasize the significance of the insights gained from the Equity Stance Activity (Appendix D) in guiding subsequent steps of the equity audit process. Encourage participants to apply their clarified beliefs and perspectives on equity throughout the audit to ensure a cohesive and informed approach.

By following these initial steps, you can effectively utilize the Equity Stance Activity (Appendix D) to prepare participants for an equity audit, fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment conducive to meaningful discussions and actions toward achieving equitable outcomes for all students.

As the leader facilitating the process, it is essential to approach these discussions with humility and openness to learning. Reflecting on personal assumptions and biases, as well as acknowledging the complexities of equity, can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all team members. Embracing diversity and valuing each



member's unique perspective is crucial for fostering trust and collaboration throughout the audit process (Irvine & York, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Finally, in this initial step to identify the background knowledge of equity, it is crucial to assess the equity knowledge of the entire school staff. When progressing through action steps, assessing equity knowledge will be critical. Identifying staff members' equity perspectives and knowledge can aid in the analysis of data and the formation of the action plan. Various tools can be utilized for this assessment. Several tools can be utilized to identify school staff's knowledge of equity. One such tool is the "Equity Literacy Quiz," developed by Gorski and Swalwell (2015), which assesses educators' understanding of equity concepts and principles. Another option is the "Cultural Competence Assessment Tool," created by the National Center for Cultural Competence (2017), which evaluates educators' cultural awareness and sensitivity in addressing equity issues. These tools offer valuable insights into the existing knowledge base of school staff regarding equity, guiding efforts to address disparities and promote inclusivity.

Overall, the adoption of this process requires a commitment to ongoing dialogue, reflection, and collaboration among all stakeholders involved. By prioritizing equity and inclusivity in the audit process, schools can work towards creating a more just and supportive educational environment that ensures equitable opportunities for all students. Additionally, incorporating specific steps such as facilitated discussions, the Equity Stance Activity (Appendix D), emotional check-ins, and protocols for assessing the approach can further enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of the equity audit process.

**Initial Student Data Collection.** To conduct the initial student feedback quest using the Panorama survey, the leader should begin by thoroughly reviewing the survey instrument and its background. It's essential to prioritize clarity, comprehensiveness, and validity in the data collection methods and survey questions. This ensures that the survey accurately captures students' experiences and perceptions regarding equity and inclusion in the school environment (Panorama Education, n.d.). Emphasizing clarity and communication is crucial throughout this process. The leader should reflect on the significance of ensuring that survey questions are clear and understandable to mitigate potential confusion among students and staff.

The decision to use the Panorama survey as the initial step for the equity audit should be informed by research and recommendations, such as those from Street Data. The text "Street Data" discusses the utilization of the Panorama Equity and Inclusion Survey as a tool for gathering crucial street-level data to assess and address equity issues within education (Safir & Dugan, 2020). It suggests leveraging the survey to explore patterns of inclusion/exclusion and equity/inequity within the school environment. Specifically, the book recommends utilizing the Panorama survey to measure students' experiences of equity and inclusion in school (Safir & Dugan, 2020). It emphasizes the importance of asking questions that delve into students' perceptions and feelings about diversity, equity, and inclusion, thereby providing valuable insights into potential areas of concern and opportunities for improvement.

The Panorama Equity and Inclusion survey, developed as part of the RIDES project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, provides an initial starting point for the equity audit process while also assisting in identifying additional data points (Harvard

Graduate School of Education, n.d.). This comprehensive survey, accessible via the Panorama platform for student surveys, is designed to track equity initiatives through the perspectives of students and staff, aiming to improve the quality of diverse schools by offering diagnostic surveys and action-oriented resources (Panorama Education, n.d.).

In addition to serving as an initial step, the survey plays a crucial role in guiding leaders toward identifying further data sources. By prioritizing clarity, communication, and validity in the survey administration, leaders can gather accurate and meaningful data on students' experiences and perceptions of equity within the school community.

Analyzing the survey results enables leaders to pinpoint specific areas where equity and inclusion efforts may require attention or improvement. This information not only forms the foundation for developing targeted interventions and strategies but also helps in identifying additional data sources that can provide deeper insights into equity-related issues.

To ensure the effectiveness of equity-related surveys and initiatives, clear communication about their purpose and significance is essential. School leaders can achieve this by creating scripts or communication materials to inform stakeholders about the survey's objectives and the importance of their participation. This clarity sets expectations and fosters understanding among participants, encouraging thoughtful engagement with the survey process.

Overall, the Panorama survey serves as a critical tool at the outset of the equity audit process, assisting leaders in identifying key areas of focus and guiding them toward further data collection to gain a comprehensive understanding of equity issues within the school community. Through thoughtful analysis and strategic use of survey results,

leaders can drive meaningful change toward a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students.

*Analyzing Student Data.* To initiate the analysis of student survey data effectively, it is crucial to establish a clear protocol and approach. Beginning with the initial data analysis sets the foundation for collecting additional data and identifying equity issues within the school community. Several protocols can be utilized for this purpose, with a focus on uncovering equity issues without prematurely considering the next steps.

The chosen protocols should solely concentrate on identifying equity issues and avoid prematurely jumping to action steps. Therefore, the leader must carefully review the data protocol beforehand to ensure it aligns with this objective. It's essential to assess whether the protocol encourages participants to rush into the next steps before thoroughly conducting the root cause analysis of the identified equity issues.

Additionally, it is essential for the leader to carefully examine any data presented during the analysis process. This step is crucial for gaining a thorough understanding of the data and identifying any patterns or trends that may indicate underlying equity issues. Furthermore, when approaching the analysis of student data, the leader must demonstrate sensitivity, preparedness, and a commitment to fidelity to the process. Before delving into the data, the leader should assess the emotional readiness of participants through a check-in process. Assessing participants' emotional readiness helps to anticipate possible reactions and ensures that participants feel supported and safe throughout the analysis. Lastly, conducting a self-check-in to review the data beforehand is beneficial, particularly considering unexpected or distressing findings. This preparation allows the leader to

navigate the data with sensitivity and effectively guide participants through potentially challenging insights. Overall, this approach enables the leader to evaluate the emotional tone and plan appropriate emotional check-ins to maintain a productive and supportive atmosphere during the analysis process.

***Suggested Protocols for Analyzing Collected Data.*** Once the participants and leader have prepared to embark on data analysis, they can leverage various protocols tailored to their needs. Each protocol is designed to postpone subsequent actions until a thorough root-cause analysis is conducted. The primary aim of using protocols for analysis is to pinpoint the overarching equity issue affecting the entire school. Several protocols are available on the School Reform Initiative's (SRI) website. SRI, an independent non-profit organization dedicated to fostering educational equity and excellence, offers valuable resources and tools to support educators and students across the United States and beyond (School Reform Initiative, n.d.). The following is a suggestion for use in the equity audit.

***Data-Driven Dialogue.*** To utilize this protocol with student surveys, begin by facilitating a Data-Driven Dialogue Protocol session with all participants, including school staff and leadership teams. (Appendix E) The protocol is structured to promote awareness and understanding of participants' perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions regarding the data while also suspending judgments. It ensures that all participants have an equal voice in the discussion. With an equity lens, the leader can facilitate this by reminding participants about the data being measured and the specific data collected by the survey. The protocol consists of three phases designed to guide groups in collectively making sense of the data:

1. Replace Hunches and Feelings with Data-Based Facts: Encourage participants to set aside personal hunches or feelings and focus on the factual data presented in the student surveys. Replacing helps ground the discussion on objective information rather than subjective impressions.

2. Examine Patterns and Trends of Performance Indicators: Guide participants in analyzing the data to identify patterns and trends in student performance indicators. Examining involves looking for consistent trends or disparities across different demographic groups or subject areas.

The last step, if completed, should have participants noting the identified factors to further discuss in a root cause analysis. While you may not want to eliminate this step, it may highlight preliminary issues within the data that require further investigation. The leader must steer the discussion. By looking at the data to find patterns and trends in student performance indicators, participants will make sure they do not jump straight to a root cause analysis before they've even found the equity problem.

3. Generate "Root-Cause" Discussions: Facilitate discussions that move beyond surface-level observations to explore the root causes of student performance. Encourage participants to delve deeper into the underlying factors contributing to any identified patterns or trends.

***Additional Data Collections.*** After analyzing the initial dataset, participants may consider collecting additional data. Considering additional data is essential because it provides a holistic understanding of the equity landscape within the school. By gathering information from additional student surveys, staff feedback, discipline records, attendance data, academic performance metrics, and community input, participants can

identify patterns, trends, and disparities related to equity. This comprehensive approach allows participants to pinpoint specific areas where inequities may exist. These additional data sources, often referred to as "street data," provide real-life insights into the daily experiences of students and staff, helping leaders understand the nuanced challenges they face and make informed decisions to promote equity and inclusion in the school environment (Safir & Dugan, 2017). Safir and Dugan (2017) suggest that this approach involves gathering data from real-life experiences and observations within the school environment to gain insights into equity-related challenges and disparities. This additional data should be determined by the PLC and analyzed using the suggested protocols until a clear equity issue is identified.

**Root Cause Analysis of Equity Issue.** Once an equity issue is identified, a root cause analysis is the next step. The suggested protocol for the root cause analysis can be found on the School Reform Initiative (SRI) website. SRI, an independent non-profit organization dedicated to fostering educational equity and excellence, offers valuable resources and tools to support educators and students across the United States and beyond (School Reform Initiative, n.d.). The Five Whys Protocol (Appendix F) is valuable in identifying root causes during an equity audit because it helps delve beyond surface-level issues to uncover deeper systemic factors contributing to inequities. Equity audits aim to address disparities and promote fairness within educational systems by repeatedly asking why. The Five Whys Protocol allows audit teams to trace the origins of equity issues, revealing underlying structures, policies, or practices that perpetuate inequities.

In the context of an equity audit, the Five Whys Protocol (Appendix F) can be applied to various aspects of the educational system, such as disparities in academic

achievement, disciplinary practices, access to resources, or opportunities for marginalized groups. By systematically probing into the causes of these disparities, audit teams can identify systemic barriers, biases, or inequitable policies that may be contributing to the observed outcomes. The Five Whys Protocol also promotes a holistic understanding of equity issues by considering interconnected factors and their cumulative effects. It helps audit teams move beyond symptom management to address the fundamental drivers of inequity. This method also fosters a culture of continuous improvement, as it encourages organizations to address root causes rather than simply treating the symptoms of inequity.

The steps of the Five Whys Protocol (Appendix F) are as follows:

1. Identify the problem: Start by clearly defining the equity issue you want to address. This issue should be identified through data analysis and be specific and observable.
2. Ask "Why" Once: Begin by asking why the issue occurred. This question should prompt a direct response that identifies one potential cause of the problem.
3. Ask "Why" Again: For each answer provided in the previous step, ask "why" again to delve deeper into the cause. This step helps uncover underlying factors or processes contributing to the issue.
4. Repeat the Process: Continue asking "why" for each response obtained in the previous step. Repeat this process iteratively until you reach a point where further questioning no longer reveals new insights, or until you identify a clear root cause.
5. Identify the Root Cause: After asking "why" multiple times and reaching a point where additional questioning does not yield new information, the root cause is identified. This root cause is the underlying issue or factor that, if addressed, could prevent the problem from occurring again in the future.



By systematically asking "why" and digging deeper into the causes of an issue, the Five Whys Protocol (Appendix F) helps teams uncover hidden factors contributing to problems and develop effective solutions. After a successful root cause analysis, the PLC can move into the annual school plan development.

**Annual School Plan Development.** Once an equity issue is identified and a root cause analysis has been conducted, a goal can be set to be included in the annual school plan. If working within the context of Title I schools, ESSA requires a minimum of four indicators for elementary and middle schools in the planning process. The first three indicators are academic and include proficiency on the state test, English-language proficiency, and one other chosen indicator (such as student growth). The fourth indicator is a school-quality indicator, where the education community may choose from a variety of indicators such as student attendance, chronic absenteeism, dropout rates, school climate, arts, or staff retention. The equity goal can be considered the cultural goal in the annual school plan.

Once the participants agree upon the wording of the goal, action steps need to be developed. To develop action steps, participants must work collaboratively to address the causes identified in the root cause analysis and identify action steps that address the equity issue. These action steps can be developed within the PLC or shared with the school community for more feedback. It is suggested that the school leader provide examples of action steps before releasing the task to the PLC or other stakeholders. Ultimately, the action steps will be included within the annual school plan, and subsequent funding can then be allocated to the action steps. Lastly, indicators to gauge

progress toward the goal must also be included. The indicators should have concrete dates to collect additional data to ensure progress toward the equity goal.

**Implementing Organizational Change by Leading the Plan.** Implementing organizational change and leading as a transformational leader in the context of equity initiatives requires adherence to established principles and strategies. According to Fullan (2014), effective organizational change involves clear communication of vision and goals, capacity building among stakeholders, and fostering a collaborative culture. This approach aligns with the transformational leadership framework proposed by Bass and Riggio (2006), emphasizing inspiring followers, fostering positive relationships, and promoting innovation.

Equity initiatives demand a systematic approach that includes critical data-driven decision-making and ongoing evaluation (Dodman et al., 2021 & Datnow et al., 2013). Leaders must employ evidence-based practices and regularly monitor progress toward equity goals, adjusting as needed to address challenges and capitalize on opportunities for improvement. To operationalize these principles, school leaders can implement the following action steps:

1. Establish a clear vision and goals: Work with stakeholders to develop a clear vision statement around the equity goal. Communicate the vision widely and regularly to ensure alignment and commitment from all stakeholders (Fullan, 2014).

2. Build capacity among stakeholders: Provide professional development opportunities that focus on the action steps identified for the equity goal. Offer workshops, seminars, and ongoing training sessions to enhance understanding and skills related to equity initiatives (Banks et al., 2005).

3. Foster a Culture of Collaboration: Create structures and opportunities for collaborative decision-making and problem-solving. Establish equity teams or committees comprising diverse stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, parents, and community members, to drive equity initiatives forward collaboratively and monitor the progress of the plan (Leithwood et al., 2006).

4. Promote Distributed Leadership: Empower staff members at all levels to take on leadership roles in advancing equity initiatives. Encourage shared decision-making, delegate responsibilities, and recognize and celebrate contributions to equity efforts (Spillane et al., 2004).

5. Utilize Critical Data for Decision-Making: Develop systems for collecting, analyzing, and utilizing “street data” to monitor progress towards equity goals (Safir & Dugan, 2017). Regularly review data to monitor identified action steps and progress toward equity goals. Use data to assess progress toward the indicators developed in the plan (Harrison et al., 2002).

6. Provide Ongoing Support and Feedback: Offer coaching, mentoring, and support to staff members as they engage in equity work and the action steps. Ensure that leaders understand the needs of supporters and provide them with the necessary resources. Provide regular feedback on progress and celebrate successes to maintain momentum and motivation (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

7. Implement evidence-based practices: Adopt evidence-based practices and interventions proven to promote equity and inclusivity in educational settings. Identify staff's background knowledge of the chosen evidence-based practices and interventions. Based on the identified background knowledge, establish support systems and

differentiate them according to the staff's needs. Remain informed about research and best practices in the field of equity and ensure that initiatives are aligned with current evidence (Goddard et al., 2007).

8. Engage with Stakeholders: Foster meaningful partnerships with students, families, and community members to ensure that equity initiatives are responsive to the needs and perspectives of all stakeholders. Begin the year by sharing the purpose of the initiative, the findings, and the proposed next steps. Solicit feedback, listen actively, and give stakeholders updates as indicators are reviewed (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

By operationalizing these action steps, school leaders can effectively lead organizational change and advance equity initiatives within their schools. These steps provide a roadmap for translating the principles of organizational change and transformational leadership into tangible practices that promote equity and inclusivity in educational settings. They should be included in the annual school plan and referenced throughout the year to gauge the plan's success.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

As schools grapple with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus shifts beyond academic loss to the profound impacts on student trauma and social-emotional well-being. Learning disruptions caused by the pandemic have disproportionately affected marginalized communities, exacerbating existing inequities and intensifying challenges faced by minority groups (Sullivan, 2022). Moving forward, the lingering effects of the pandemic on individuals, families, communities, and systems remain significant, potentially perpetuating long-term disadvantages for those already marginalized (UNICEF, 2020). In response, there is a pressing need for a thorough reevaluation of educational policies and practices to address the enduring challenges stemming from COVID-19 disruptions (Sullivan et al., 2022).

Even prior to the pandemic, educational systems faced challenges in adequately supporting marginalized students across various dimensions of diversity, including those living in poverty, students with disabilities, and individuals from specific communities (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2014). The pandemic has exacerbated these pre-existing inequities, highlighting the pivotal role of school leaders in addressing such disparities. Traditionally, efforts to narrow achievement gaps, particularly those exacerbated by the pandemic, have relied on data-driven decision-making (DDDM) approaches. To deal with the unfair situations made worse by the pandemic, this action research shifts its focus to critical data-driven decision making (CDDM) through school-based equity audits.

This study significantly advances educational research by exploring the intersection of Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) principles and equity audits as responses to equity and opportunity gaps, particularly within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing equity and opportunity gaps necessitates the recognition, acknowledgment, and active rectification of disparities in access, resources, and outcomes. By integrating these methodologies, the research introduces a novel approach to tackling systemic inequities within educational settings, thereby bridging a notable gap in existing literature. Through practical insights drawn from documented experiences and strategies, educational leaders and practitioners gain actionable guidance on how to leverage CDDDM within equity audits to foster inclusive learning environments and enhance students' sense of belonging.

This study identifies evidence-informed strategies and interventions derived from equity audits that aim to mitigate equity gaps and support marginalized students. By emphasizing the proactive role of educational leaders, the research empowers them to instigate positive change and address systemic inequities within their school communities. This empowerment is essential in enabling leaders to cultivate a more equitable educational landscape. The study also adds to the field of educational equity research by showing how important it is to combine CDDDM principles with equity audits and by giving information that can help future research projects and policy changes that aim to improve social justice and educational equity. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus on addressing equity and opportunity gaps assumes heightened significance, particularly concerning student trauma and well-being. The pandemic's profound impacts on students have magnified existing inequities and

significantly affected their social-emotional well-being. Many students have endured trauma, loss, and disruptions to their daily lives, which can have enduring effects on their mental health and academic performance. As schools navigate the aftermath of the pandemic, it is crucial to prioritize the holistic needs of students, including their emotional and psychological well-being.

Schools can better support students in their recovery from pandemic trauma by addressing equity and opportunity gaps. Addressing equity and opportunity gaps entails not only identifying and rectifying disparities in access to resources and opportunities but also implementing trauma-informed practices and furnishing adequate support services for students' social-emotional needs. Using Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) principles along with equity audits is a smart way to find and solve these problems because it helps teachers understand each student's unique needs and create specific interventions to improve their health.

By empowering educational leaders to initiate positive change and cultivate a more equitable educational landscape, the research contributes to creating environments where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to thrive. By prioritizing the social-emotional well-being of students in the aftermath of COVID-19, schools can play a pivotal role in promoting resilience and facilitating students' overall recovery from the trauma of the pandemic. So, where equity audits, making important decisions based on data, and student well-being meet is a key area of focus in education after the pandemic. It provides a complete way to deal with the many problems students are facing because of COVID-19.

Chapter five begins with a section that offers a detailed description of the emergent themes identified during the data collection process. These themes were gathered across each cycle and represent the central focus of the participants' experiences throughout the action research. Following this, the research questions are presented, shedding light on how the action research identified and addressed each inquiry. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications for practice, policy, research, and leadership, while also outlining the limitations of the study.

### **Themes**

Using Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) within the equity audit revealed three specific themes aimed at decreasing equity gaps using Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM). This section will provide a rich description of the emergent themes from the data collection process. The themes were gathered through each cycle representing the focal point of the participants' experience during the action research. The three themes that emerged included clarity and comprehension, supervision and a culturally responsive learning environment, and adult ownership and action.

#### ***Clarity and Comprehension***

During Cycle One, discussions about equity initiatives highlighted the importance of clarity and comprehension, with participants emphasizing the need to clearly explain survey questions and equity audit goals to both students and staff. This clarity was deemed essential for obtaining accurate data and effectively addressing equity-related concerns. Additionally, diverse viewpoints among participants underscored the challenge of reconciling different opinions to develop cohesive equity strategies.



During the PLC's reflection on the initial Panorama questions, concerns arose about students' understanding of the survey's purpose, prompting the leader to reflect on the disparity in communication between teachers and students. Recognizing the need for improved communication and clarity, the leader aimed to address this issue during the finalization of the annual school plan. A proposed solution included scripted communication for both staff and students in future surveys to clarify the survey's purpose and messaging.

Leader reflections from Cycle One reiterated the theme of clarity and comprehension throughout equity audit discussions, revealing insights into how participants' personal experiences and identities influenced their perspectives on equity issues. Structured activities facilitated understanding of diverse equity perspectives, with emotional check-ins ensuring comfort in sharing. In the proposed replicable plan, it is suggested that participants' pre-existing knowledge and conceptions of equity should be identified before discussions to inform their direction and ensure their voices are respected. Additionally, providing relevant resources and literature during professional development sessions can deepen participants' understanding of equity audits and their potential impact on addressing education disparities. Engaging participants in reflective discussions about their definitions of equity is crucial for recognizing diverse perspectives and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of promoting equity in education.

### ***Supervision and Culturally Responsive Learning Environment***

Examination of the second survey data by PLC participants indicated shifts in student responses after clarifications from the initial survey, highlighting disparities in

comfort levels between students and teachers regarding race discussions and concerns about peer racism (Jones et al., 2020). Key findings included the prevalence of racial slurs among students, especially during unsupervised periods like recess, and variations in responses based on age groups. Subsequent student roundtable discussions further elucidated these perspectives, emphasizing aspects of students' social and emotional well-being and sense of belonging within the school environment (Brown & Rodriguez, 2017). Additionally, students' perceptions of racial issues within the school setting were articulated through their voices. These actions identified equity gaps by revealing disparities in students' comfort levels when discussing race and concerns about peer racism, particularly during unsupervised times like recess.

During cycle two's root cause analysis session, PLC participants identified the lack of supervision during unstructured times as a primary issue, along with inadequate accountability for school leaders regarding staff responsibilities, insufficient coaching for supervising staff, and inconsistent expectations for both staff and students. Addressing these concerns became central to the development of the annual school plan, with specific action steps aimed at enhancing supervision during identified critical periods.

Again, the focus on student belongingness emerged as a crucial data point, underscoring the significance of fostering an inclusive and supportive school climate. Research indicates that a strong sense of belonging correlates with higher academic achievement, improved mental health outcomes, and reduced dropout rates among students (Goodenow, 1993; Yeager & Walton, 2011). Consequently, action steps were devised to bolster students' sense of belonging through culturally relevant practices and initiatives promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within the school community.

Student voice, conveyed through surveys and roundtable discussions, played a pivotal role in identifying equity issues by offering comprehensive insights into systemic barriers, discrimination, and disparities. These insights empowered the PLC to formulate targeted strategies for advancing equity and inclusion for all students in the annual school plan.

In summary, the equity audit uncovered racial disparities and the imperative for targeted interventions to enhance students' sense of belonging and social-emotional well-being effectively. Prioritizing professional development in equity and race-related areas was crucial in addressing equity issues, alongside understanding participants' perceptions and comfort levels regarding race before the audit. Action steps derived from the plan aimed to enrich teachers' grasp of cultural responsiveness, foster student engagement, and ensure consistent supervision during unstructured student times, ultimately fostering a more equitable and inclusive school environment.

### ***Adult Ownership and Action***

Adult ownership and action was the third theme of the action research conducted as part of the equity audit, serving as the overarching action step in addressing the equity issue within the school environment. Within the equity audit and annual school planning process, there was a definitive shift in focus from a student-centered issue statement to an adult-centered one. This shift highlighted the need for increased ownership and action among school staff regarding culturally responsive practices. This shift suggested a gap in knowledge and understanding among adults within the school community, hindering their ability to effectively address issues of racial and cultural sensitivity. Unlike the conventional approach of annual school planning, which predominantly centers on

assessing student actions to define academic and cultural goals, this study identified the role of adults in rectifying inequities that impact student outcomes. Using the CDDDM framework during the planning process revealed several areas where adult interventions were recognized as the central and first step in confronting equity challenges.

During cycle one, the significance of clarity and comprehension emerged as focal points in discussions revolving around equity initiatives. Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that survey questions and the broader purpose of equity audits are clearly explained to both students and staff. This clarity is deemed indispensable for capturing precise data and efficaciously addressing equity-related concerns. Additionally, the range of viewpoints among participants regarding equity in education was revealed, highlighting the challenge of blending different opinions to create cohesive equity strategies.

Moving into cycle two, there was a noticeable change from looking at what students were doing to examining what staff members were doing or not doing. This change was evident in the thoughts shared by participants, highlighting the importance of adults getting involved compared to students in addressing equity issues. The results emphasized the crucial role of adults stepping in across different areas, including differences in how comfortable students feel, the widespread use of discriminatory language, the need for educational programs, the lack of effective responses to student feedback, the importance of training for teachers, and the concerning lack of surprise among staff when it comes to reports of discriminatory behavior.

Moreover, in the planning phase of cycle two, there was a discernible emphasis on the pivotal role of adults in enhancing supervision and fostering a culturally

responsive learning environment. This departure from the conventional approach to annual school planning, which typically focuses predominantly on student deficiencies, underscores a shift towards recognizing adult contributions. By leveraging the CDDDM framework, participants were able to identify areas where adults were falling short, thereby contributing to issues such as insufficient supervision and cultural responsiveness.

Reflections from participants and leaders in cycle three further underscored the centrality of adult action compared to student involvement. The collective findings highlight the critical imperative for adult engagement in addressing equity concerns within the school climate. These actions entail promoting inclusivity and equity, ensuring adequate supervision, establishing consistent expectations and accountability measures, addressing safety concerns, providing comprehensive teacher training, and bridging the perceptual gap between student experiences and staff perceptions.

The study highlighted the pivotal role of adults in recognizing, addressing, and redressing equity issues within the school community (Fowler & Brown, 2018; Dodman, 2016). Ultimately, it is up to adults to take the initiative to create a safe, welcoming, and supportive learning environment for all students (Fowler & Brown, 2018; Dodman, 2016). Students' actions and experiences can help adults understand these problems. Fowler and Brown advocate for a shift towards critical data-driven decision making (CDDDM) to deepen equity within schools, expanding the focus beyond closing achievement gaps (Fowler & Brown, 2018). Similarly, Dodman's research demonstrates how a wider set of data analyses, such as education equity audits, can directly address the root causes of inequities (Dodman, 2016). This emphasis on critically data-driven

approaches aligns with the findings from the study on adult ownership, highlighting the importance of adult intervention in various equity-related challenges, including creating a culturally responsive learning environment and enhancing supervision. Participants stress the significance of adult involvement, with reflections from both participants and leaders underscoring the centrality of adult action in addressing equity concerns within the school climate.

The theme of adult ownership and action also aligns with the overall identification of equity gaps by shifting the focus from student-centered to adult-centered approaches within the equity audit and annual school planning process. This shift underscored the need for increased ownership and action among school staff regarding culturally responsive practices, revealing a gap in knowledge and understanding hindering their ability to address racial and cultural sensitivity issues effectively. Unlike conventional approaches that mainly assess student actions to define academic and cultural goals, this study highlighted the pivotal role of adults in rectifying inequities affecting student outcomes. We identified several areas where adult interventions were crucial in confronting equity challenges by utilizing the framework of critical data-driven decision making (CDDDM).

In summary, the study emphasizes adult ownership in recognizing, addressing, and redressing equity issues within the school community in the annual school process, as opposed to focusing solely on student actions. While student actions and experiences serve as illuminating indicators of these issues, it is ultimately incumbent upon adults to proactively undertake measures to be culturally responsive. To improve student

outcomes, adults must create and maintain a secure, inclusive, and nurturing learning environment for all students.

### ***Summary Of Themes***

The equity audit, framed within the lens of Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM), yielded insights into key themes pivotal for enhancing student outcomes within the school environment. During Cycle One, discussions underscored the paramount importance of clarity and comprehension in equity initiatives. Participants emphasized the need for clear communication regarding survey questions and equity audit goals to ensure understanding among both students and staff. This clarity was seen as essential for obtaining accurate data and effectively addressing equity-related concerns (Smith et al., 2021). Concerns about student comprehension prompted reflection on communication disparities, leading to recommendations for scripted communication in future surveys to bridge the gap between staff and student understanding (Garcia & Montoya, 2018).

Furthermore, analysis of survey data during Cycle Two underscores the importance of supervision and cultivating a culturally responsive learning environment to address equity issues in schools. First, lack of supervision during unstructured times emerged as a key issue, alongside inadequate accountability for school leaders to address staff's supervising responsibilities. The developed school plan included specific measures needed to ensure consistent supervision during unstructured times. Moving to cultivating a culturally responsive learning environment, findings from surveys and student discussions revealed disparities in comfort levels between students and teachers regarding race-related discussions. These findings led to planning for implementation of culturally

relevant professional development. Additional next steps in annual planning included, implementing culturally relevant curricula and student-led clubs to promote diversity and inclusion. Lastly, action steps were also included to enhance teachers' cultural responsiveness. Overall, the study highlighted the pivotal role of supervision and a culturally responsive environment in promoting educational equity.

The theme of adult ownership and action emerged as a critical aspect of addressing equity challenges within the school community. This shift towards adult-centered issues indicated the necessity of increased ownership and action among school staff regarding culturally responsive practices (Fowler & Brown, 2018; Dodman, 2016). Reflecting on the study's findings, participants and leaders stressed the importance of adult intervention in various equity-related challenges, including creating a culturally responsive learning environment and enhancing supervision. The study underscores the pivotal role of adults in recognizing, addressing, and redressing equity issues within the school community, ultimately aiming to create a secure, inclusive, and nurturing learning environment to improve student outcomes.

In summary, the equity audit, conducted through Critical Data-Driven decision-making, revealed key themes. The analysis identified disparities in clarity and comprehension, lack of adequate supervision, the need for a culturally responsive learning environment, and adult ownership. Integrating these themes into the annual school planning processes seeks to foster an inclusive learning environment and promote equitable outcomes for all students. The transformative potential of CDDDM aligns with research advocating for data-driven decision-making models prioritizing equity and inclusivity. Ultimately, the study underscores the proactive role of adults in creating and



maintaining a nurturing learning environment for all students, aligning with the goals outlined by the New Jersey Department of Education.

### ***Research Questions***

Research Question One: How can a New Jersey school use CDDDM to identify school-wide inequities that affect student outcomes in their annual school planning?

To effectively identify school-wide inequities affecting student outcomes in their annual school planning, New Jersey schools can utilize Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) principles, as demonstrated by the success of an action research study. This study, which departed from typical data-driven decision (DDD) practices, focused on uncovering and addressing systemic inequities rather than solely raising test scores (Smith, 2021). By integrating equity audits into the planning process, the study gained valuable insights into cultural and racial dynamics within the school environment, identifying overarching equity concerns and prioritizing targeted interventions grounded in empirical evidence (Jones et al., 2020).

Moreover, the study emphasized professional development for teachers in equity and cultural responsiveness, empowering educators to create more inclusive learning environments (Garcia & Montoya, 2018). By incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices advocated by scholars like Gay (2018), Ladson-Billings (1995), and Howard (2001), the study enhanced engagement and motivation among students from diverse backgrounds.

The study's commitment to ongoing reflection and feedback from participants and school leaders further contributed to its success (Brown & Rodriguez, 2017). By continuously evaluating and adjusting strategies based on feedback, the study ensured

that interventions remained relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the school community.

In summary, the comprehensive approach of CDDDM principles drives the success of action research in identifying school-wide inequities. By integrating equity audits, prioritizing professional development, and fostering ongoing reflection (Thomas & Johnson, 2019), the study effectively identified inequities within the school, laying the foundation for continued progress toward a more equitable learning environment. This approach fulfills the imperative mandate of addressing inequities in student outcomes, particularly in the aftermath of a pandemic, where vulnerable student populations face exacerbated challenges (Garcia et al., 2022).

Research Question Two: What types of actions and interventions can be facilitated at the school level to identify and address equity gaps?

To identify and address equity gaps at the school level, a multifaceted approach involving various actions and interventions is essential. Firstly, it was imperative to gather student perspectives on cultural and racial dynamics within the school environment, as this serves as the foundational step in identifying overarching equity issues. Through student surveys and roundtable discussions, notable insights were identified regarding students' experiences with racial issues, including their responses to racist behavior and the context in which such incidents occur. These perspectives provided valuable information for devising targeted interventions aimed at fostering a more inclusive and respectful school culture.

Once student perspectives were collected and analyzed, the next step involved implementing culturally responsive practices and interventions as a response to the root

cause analysis. These practices and interventions were included in the annual school plan as a direct response to the uncovered equity issue. This addition of culturally responsive practices as action steps in the annual school plan entails acknowledging and validating students' cultural identities and perspectives in all aspects of teaching and learning. The action steps in the annual school plan included incorporating culturally relevant materials, instructional strategies, and assessments into the curriculum, as advocated by scholars such as Gay (2010) and Howard (2001). By connecting classroom content to students' lived experiences and cultural contexts as part of the annual school plan, the creation of a learning environment that is more meaningful and relevant to diverse student populations will ultimately enhance academic outcomes and foster a sense of belonging among students.

Facilitating cultural responsiveness and interventions in the school plan to reduce equity gaps required several key strategies. Firstly, the application of Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) ensured that data analysis in the equity audit was conducted through a culturally sensitive lens, allowing PLC participants to identify and address disparities affecting students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). By integrating students' cultural identities and perspectives into decision-making processes, PLC participants developed action steps for the annual school plan that are more relevant and meaningful, ultimately improving academic outcomes for all students (Nieto, 2000). Also, PLC members hoped that using culturally responsive teaching practices—that is, using materials, methods of instruction, and tests that are relevant to different cultures—would make students more interested, motivated, and successful in school, especially those from historically underrepresented groups (Gay,

2018). Embracing cultural responsiveness is crucial in creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment where all students feel valued, understood, and empowered to excel academically and was a critical part of the annual school plan based on the work of the PLC (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lind et al., 2014). Also, the use of CDDDM enabled PLC participants to identify the lack of culturally responsive practices and interventions through the analysis of student and staff data (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). To address students' identified lack of belonging, the incorporation of culturally responsive education nurtured a sense of belonging among students by affirming and integrating their cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities into the educational setting. When students encounter their culture reflected and respected in the curriculum, instructional materials, and classroom interactions, they feel valued and embraced. This acknowledgment strengthens their bond with the school community, thereby fostering a deeper sense of belonging (Gay, 2010).

Continuous data analysis enabled PLC participants to identify areas for growth and incorporate instructional approaches into the annual school plan to better meet the needs of culturally diverse students. Ongoing professional development on equity and cultural responsiveness emerged as an essential action step identified through critical analysis of staff data. This ensures that staff are ready to implement and evaluate the interventions outlined in the annual school plan derived from the equity audit.

Additionally, ongoing education and dialogue surrounding racial issues were added to the annual school plan and identified as essential components of addressing equity gaps at the school level. Professional development opportunities for staff members were also added to enhance their understanding of cultural responsiveness and equip staff

with the necessary tools and strategies to promote inclusive practices in the classroom. Furthermore, fostering open and honest discussions about racial issues among students was planned to help raise awareness and cultivate empathy, ultimately contributing to a more respectful and supportive school community.

Overall, the use of CDDDM revealed a need for cultural responsiveness to address the uncovered equity issue, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. Continual data analysis will be crucial when following the action steps outlined in the annual school plan that was created from the equity audit. To evaluate effectiveness, however, the staff implementing the action steps related to cultural responsiveness must have ongoing professional development on equity and cultural responsiveness to successfully implement the action plan.

In summary, decreasing equity gaps at the school level requires a comprehensive approach that involves implementing equity-oriented policies and practices to address systemic barriers and promote equitable access to resources and opportunities for all students. This approach includes adopting inclusive discipline policies, reducing tracking and ability grouping practices, and increasing access to advanced coursework and extracurricular activities for historically marginalized students (Smith et al., 2021). Additionally, it entails gathering student perspectives, implementing culturally responsive practices and interventions, and incorporating them into the annual school plan. By fostering ongoing education and dialogue surrounding racial issues, schools can create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment that promotes positive outcomes for all students.

Research Question Three: What can be learned about the implementation of an equity audit to inform and improve the school planning process?

The implementation of the equity audit offered valuable insights into addressing systemic inequities within the school planning process, as traditional data-driven decision-making often overlooks these issues. By shifting towards a Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) model, PLC participants expanded their focus beyond achievement gaps to deepen their understanding of equity within the school (Fowler & Brown, 2018). This shift required a nuanced approach to data analysis, examining factors influencing student achievement and uncovering previously overlooked inequities, prompting the identification of equity issues (Dodman, 2016). The equity audit, conducted as part of the CDDDM process, provided clear indicators for measuring a school's success in meeting the needs of all students (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011). The audit also uncovered the need for a more culturally responsive school environment, which was detailed in the annual school plan.

Reflecting on the implementation of the equity audit, it became evident that embracing diverse perspectives and fostering inclusivity within the team was crucial for meaningful dialogue on equity (Dodman, 2016). The first professional development session was structured to include work on equity stances and an overall understanding of equity, creating a safe and inclusive space to discuss issues that, at times, were uncomfortable given the diversity of participants. Structured activities facilitated knowledge for participants, but emotional check-ins were necessary to ensure everyone felt comfortable sharing (Datnow & Park, 2018). Feedback about data validity prompted a reconsideration of using the first survey, highlighting the importance of integrity and

inclusivity in decision-making (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011). Subsequent requests for additional data throughout the audit also demonstrated a shift from the typical DDDM model towards a “critical data-driven decision-making” (CDDDM) framework, emphasizing reflection, assessment, and critique of societal norms and power structures (Dodman, 2014).

As discussions progressed during the equity audit, there was a shift towards actions that adults can take to foster a culturally responsive environment, indicating a deeper understanding of systemic issues (Fowler & Brown, 2018). However, the emotional impact of students' disclosures underscored the need for proactive support and empathetic engagement during data analysis sessions (Datnow & Park, 2018). Moving forward, addressing systemic issues and fostering inclusivity will be paramount for creating a more equitable learning environment (Scott, 2001). The root cause analysis devised an action plan that identified the shift to a more culturally responsive practice as the main step in establishing a more equitable learning environment.

Implementing an equity audit provides valuable insights into improving the school planning process by addressing systemic inequities. Embracing diverse perspectives, fostering inclusivity, and adopting a CDDDM model are essential steps toward promoting equity and fostering positive student outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018).

Research Question Four: How does principal leadership influence responding to equity gaps at the school building level?

Principal leadership is pivotal in addressing equity gaps at the school-building level through a multifaceted approach that encompasses specific actions, student

perspectives, cultural responsiveness, and staff professional development (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Shields, 2009; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Brown, 2012).

First, at the start of the audit, the principal initiates professional development sessions on equity issues, ensuring that participants are prepared to undertake the audit with an equity lens. Also, student voices and perspectives are incorporated into decision-making by using the student survey as a starting point (Shields, 2009). By employing tools that allow students to share their experiences and insights in various ways, including surveys and roundtables, the principal demonstrates a commitment to centering student voices in decision-making processes. Surveys, roundtables, and staff surveys provide PLC participants with firsthand accounts of inequities experienced by students, fostering empathy and understanding while creating a plan to address school-wide inequities.

Additionally, the principal prioritizes cultural responsiveness within the annual school plan by incorporating specific action steps to promote diversity and inclusion (Shields, 2009). Through the identification of the equity issue and its root causes, identifying and implementing curriculum enhancements that reflect the cultural backgrounds and experiences of diverse student populations becomes a critical part of the annual school plan. Using CDDDM within the equity audit to uncover the need for cultural responsiveness in teaching practices, the principal ensures that all students see themselves represented in the curriculum, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment and ensuring it happens as part of the annual school plan.

Furthermore, the principal recognizes the importance of staff professional development around cultural responsiveness, as identified in the equity audit through the staff survey. The crucial analysis within the audit of staff surveys led to the inclusion of



targeted action steps in the annual school plan to address this need (Brown, 2012). As a direct response to the staff survey data, the action steps involved providing ongoing training and resources to help staff develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to effectively engage with students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

By incorporating student perspectives, promoting cultural responsiveness, and prioritizing staff professional development around cultural responsiveness in the annual school plan, the principal demonstrates a comprehensive approach to addressing equity gaps at the school-building level (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Through these efforts, the principal fosters a school culture that ensures equity, promotes inclusivity, and empowers all students to succeed academically and socially. This integrated approach addresses immediate equity concerns and lays the foundation for sustained progress towards a more equitable learning environment, ultimately addressing the inequities caused by COVID-19 and improving student outcomes school-wide.

Principal leadership is crucial in addressing equity gaps by promoting reflective practices, fostering inclusivity, and advocating for transformative change within the school community (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Brown, 2012). Through critical analysis of their leadership practices and meaningful engagement with stakeholders, principals can establish inclusive learning environments conducive to the success of all students (Shields, 2009). Continual reflection during the equity audit offers additional opportunities to address previously unidentified areas within the school culture, incorporating insights from staff and student data. The principal's commitment to creating a safer, structured, and culturally responsive learning environment directly

influences the use of Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) to uncover equity issues, identify root causes, establish next steps, develop an action plan, and guide staff and students through its implementation.

In conclusion, school leadership significantly shapes responses to equity issues post-pandemic by formulating school policies, establishing practices, cultivating a culturally responsive environment, and facilitating collaboration and community engagement. A strong commitment to equity from school leaders is essential in fostering an inclusive learning environment where every student can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally (Smith et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2022).

### ***Implications***

This research investigates how critical data-driven decision making (CDDM) could change education, especially when it comes to the yearly planning that is required by laws like the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). By examining how CDDDM intersects with practice, policy, leadership, and research, this research explores how schools can use data-driven insights to advance equity and create inclusive learning environments. Through this analysis, actionable recommendations are provided for policymakers, educational leaders, and researchers to promote equity and drive positive change in education.

**Implications for Practice.** The effects on practice include how adopting critical data-driven decision-making (CDDM) methods could completely change many parts of how schools work. Beyond just annual school planning, schools can use CDDDM practices in additional data analysis strategies to effectively address equity gaps and promote cultural responsiveness. By integrating CDDDM principles into everyday

practices, schools can cultivate an inclusive and supportive learning environment where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered to thrive academically and personally. Using practices that are based on high-quality data, schools can find systemic inequities all year long. This lets them create targeted interventions and start professional development programs that will help staff be better at using practices that are sensitive to different cultures. Additionally, by institutionalizing CDDDM practices throughout the school community, schools can ensure that identified inequities are consistently addressed and that any emerging issues impacting cultural responsiveness and equity are promptly identified and effectively tackled.

Incorporating equity audits into a professional development committee (PLC) process offers a strategic framework for enhancing cultural responsiveness and promoting student belonging within school communities. By collaboratively collecting and analyzing data on equity-related issues, PLC members can identify disparities, systemic barriers, and areas for improvement. Through reflective analysis and dialogue, action plans are developed to address identified challenges and foster inclusivity. Professional development initiatives aimed at building educators' capacity for cultural responsiveness are integrated into the process, ensuring ongoing support and growth. Continuous monitoring and collaboration within the PLC sustain efforts over time, fostering a culture of accountability and prioritizing equity. Ultimately, this approach enables schools to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments where all students feel valued and empowered to succeed.

As schools continue to navigate the complexities of promoting equity and inclusion, embracing CDDDM practices emerges as an important proponent of effective

leadership and decision-making, guiding schools toward meaningful progress in their pursuit of increased student outcomes and social justice.

**Implications for Policy.** Expanding on the implications of the study, it's crucial to recognize the limitations of current educational policies, particularly in their ability to adequately address equity concerns. While the annual school planning process mandated by ESSA provides a structured framework for schools to develop improvement plans, it does not fully capture the complexities of equity issues within school communities. Existing practices prioritize academic metrics and standardized assessments, which do not effectively capture the nuances of equity-related challenges faced by marginalized students (Datnow & Park, 2016). Consequently, there is a risk of overlooking systemic inequities and perpetuating disparities in educational outcomes.

To address these limitations, policymakers and educational leaders should prioritize the integration of CDDDM frameworks into the planning process. Schools can adopt a more holistic approach to data analysis by leveraging CDDDM principles, considering factors such as student demographics, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, as well as adding a cycle of reflection beyond assessment data to uncover educational inequities that contribute to lower student outcomes. This allows for a deeper understanding of the root causes of inequities and informs targeted interventions to address them effectively (Dodman, 2016). Additionally, incorporating equity audits into the planning process can provide valuable insights into the unique challenges faced by marginalized student populations, guiding the development of equity-focused goals and strategies within annual school plans (Skrla et al., 2009).

Furthermore, to ensure the successful implementation of CDDDM practices, policymakers should consider providing incentives and resources to support schools and districts in their efforts. Resources may include funding for professional development initiatives focused on equity awareness and data literacy, as well as technical assistance to help schools build capacity for critical data-driven decision-making (Datnow & Park, 2016). Additionally, establishing mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of equity goals within annual school plans is essential to track progress and make necessary adjustments over time. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement and accountability, schools can work towards creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments for all students, in alignment with the goals of ESSA and the broader aims of educational equity.

**Implications for Research.** In addition to exploring the implementation and effectiveness of Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) frameworks, future research endeavors should also delve into the underlying mechanisms and processes that contribute to their success or limitations in addressing equity gaps and promoting cultural responsiveness within educational settings. This entails conducting qualitative inquiries to capture the lived experiences, perspectives, and challenges encountered by stakeholders involved in CDDDM initiatives, including teachers, school leaders, students, parents, and community members. By engaging in rich, narrative-based research methodologies such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observations, researchers can uncover the intricate dynamics at play and identify key factors that facilitate or hinder the integration of CDDDM into everyday practices.

It is critical to research the use of student voice to identify school-wide inequities. Firstly, students are directly impacted by the policies, practices, and culture within schools, making their perspectives invaluable for understanding the realities of educational inequities. By actively researching the use of student voice, educators and policymakers can gain insights into the effectiveness of incorporating student perspectives in developing targeted and effective interventions, particularly in annual school planning aimed at addressing school-wide inequities. Additionally, research that identifies how centering student voice in research promotes a culture of inclusion, empowerment, and agency reinforces the idea that students are active participants in shaping their educational environments, encouraging school leaders to incorporate student voice into their decision-making processes. Understanding how student voice can inform efforts to address inequities contributes to the development of more equitable and student-centered approaches to annual school planning.

Furthermore, future research should adopt a comparative approach to examine how different contextual factors, such as school demographics, geographical location, socioeconomic status, and institutional structures, shape the implementation and outcomes of CDDDM initiatives. By conducting cross-case analyses across diverse educational contexts, researchers can identify patterns, trends, and best practices that inform effective strategies for leveraging CDDDM to advance equity and inclusion. Moreover, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact and sustainability of CDDDM frameworks over time, tracking changes in student outcomes, school climate, and stakeholder perceptions as CDDDM practices evolve and mature.

Additionally, future research should explore the intersectionality of equity issues and the role of CDDDM in addressing multiple dimensions of diversity, including race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language proficiency, and special needs. By adopting an intersectional lens, researchers can illuminate how CDDDM frameworks can be tailored to address the unique needs and experiences of marginalized student populations and foster more inclusive educational environments. This inclusive approach ensures that equity initiatives are responsive to the complex and intersecting identities of all students, thereby promoting equitable outcomes for all learners. Ultimately, by embracing these multifaceted research approaches, scholars can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of CDDDM and its transformative potential in advancing educational equity and social justice.

**Implications for Leadership.** This study's implications for leadership highlight the critical role that reflective leadership practices play in shaping inclusive learning environments in schools. Reflective leadership requires school leaders to critically evaluate past approaches and engage stakeholders in meaningful dialogue to effectively address equity issues. By embracing reflective practices, school leaders can create spaces for open dialogue and collaboration, fostering an environment where all voices are valued and respected. This approach is particularly important during equity audits, where leaders must engage stakeholders in discussions about equity and cultural responsiveness to ensure that the audit process is comprehensive and inclusive.

Leadership at both the school and district levels plays a pivotal role in fostering a culture of reflective practice and continuous improvement (Dodman, 2016). School leaders should prioritize reflective leadership practices, encouraging ongoing evaluation

of past approaches and strategic planning for future actions to address emerging equity challenges. By leveraging data-driven insights, fostering reflective leadership practices, and promoting collaborative efforts among stakeholders, schools can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments that promote positive outcomes for all students (Dodman, 2016; Sullivan et al., 2022).

Principals, as leaders within the school community, play a pivotal role in setting the tone and direction for equity initiatives. They must prioritize reflective practices to ensure that data-driven insights and cultural sensitivity guide decision-making processes. Integrating Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) principles into these processes is essential, as it enables leaders to analyze data through a culturally sensitive lens and develop strategies to address disparities effectively. Ongoing professional development for staff members is crucial to enhancing their understanding of equity issues and building their capacity to implement culturally responsive practices.

Furthermore, leaders must not only reflect on their staff's knowledge of equity but also their understanding and perceptions. Before implementing CDDDM initiatives or equity-focused strategies, leaders should assess their knowledge and feelings toward equity to ensure clarity and alignment with organizational goals. Creating a safe and inclusive environment where stakeholders feel empowered to share their perspectives is essential for fostering open dialogue and collaboration. Active listening and respectful communication are key components of this process, promoting inclusivity and understanding among team members.

It is also important for leaders to recognize that equity audits represent just one step in a broader journey toward equity. Continuous evaluation of implemented



strategies, the establishment of shared understandings among staff members, and ongoing engagement with stakeholders are essential for sustaining progress over time. By embracing diversity, fostering open dialogue, and prioritizing reflective practices, leaders can authentically address equity complexities within the school community and promote positive student outcomes.

It all begins with the school leader, and future research should also encompass studying how leaders' professional development in equity diminishes deficit approaches and enhances their capacity to effectively address culturally relevant issues, promote inclusion, and foster collaboration. Researching the impact of leaders' professional development in equity is crucial for several reasons. First, it helps to understand how such development initiatives can mitigate deficit-based approaches in education, which often perpetuate inequities. Second, investigating the effectiveness of these programs sheds light on how they can empower leaders to address culturally relevant issues within their schools. Last, by promoting inclusion and collaboration, these initiatives contribute to creating more equitable learning environments. Ultimately, research in this area informs evidence-based practices that support educational equity and improve outcomes for all students.

### ***Limitations***

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study's focus on a single school community may restrict the generalizability of the results to broader educational contexts. Different schools may have unique dynamics and challenges that could influence the applicability of the identified

themes and implications. Therefore, caution should be exercised when extrapolating the findings to diverse educational settings.

Secondly, the qualitative nature of the study introduces the possibility of subjectivity and bias in data collection and interpretation. While qualitative research offers rich insights into participants' experiences and perspectives, it is essential to acknowledge and mitigate the potential influence of researchers' preconceptions or biases. Employing multiple researchers could enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings. Also, using self-reported data and participant perspectives may make it harder to get to the bottom of systemic problems or unconscious biases. Future research could complement qualitative insights with quantitative measures or objective observations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Lastly, while the study identifies key themes and implications for practice, policy, leadership, and research, it does not comprehensively explore the intersectionality of equity issues. Future research could delve deeper into how factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and other aspects of diversity intersect with CDDDM practices and influence educational outcomes. Even with these flaws, the study adds to our understanding of how equity audits can be used as a CDDDM tool. It also sets the stage for more research and practice that will help promote educational equity and inclusion. Recognizing and addressing these limitations can inform future studies and enhance the relevance and applicability of their findings.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, navigating post-pandemic education requires a proactive stance in

identifying and addressing equity gaps, where the integration of Critical Data-Driven Decision Making (CDDDM) principles alongside equity audits becomes pivotal. Through equity audits informing annual school planning, educators can pinpoint disparities and enact tailored interventions to bolster marginalized students' social-emotional well-being and sense of belonging. Embracing this holistic approach enables us to tackle the challenges of the post-pandemic era, fostering a more equitable and inclusive educational environment.

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## **Appendix A:**

### **Equity Audit Team Reflections After Each Meeting**

- a. What is my most important takeaway today?
- b. Did I encounter any equity traps today, and if so, why?
- c. Did I recognize biases in myself or others today? If so, how did they surface?  
What was the response from the group?
- d. How well did the team communicate with each other?
- e. Did we collaborate successfully, or did we fall short?
- f. How did I help or hinder today's progress?

## **Appendix B:**

### **Survey Questions**

#### **Anonymous Short Answer Questionnaire Post Audit:**

1. How did you work with peers to choose the equity question to address? What thoughts did you consider in this process?
2. What did you feel before this project began about discussing equity? During work? Now? How do you think other people feel about this work? Is that different from how you feel? Why/why not?
3. How has this work served to eliminate or perpetuate inequities? What work still feels unfinished, if any?
4. How could this process have been more positive for those on the equity team? What should the person leading the process do differently in a future collaboration for equity-minded school change?
5. What skills should the school leader develop to ensure greater success in similar endeavors in the future?

## **Appendix C:**

### **Leader Reflection After Each Meeting**

1. How did I help or hinder today's progress?
2. Did I notice bias or equity traps? If so, how did the team respond or react?
3. What was my role today?
4. What did I notice?

## Appendix D:

### Equity Stance Activity



## Equity Stances Activity

*Developed by John Newlin, Southern Maine Partnership, University of Southern Maine.*

Participants will engage in an activity to examine some of the tough questions that arise when educators act to address equity in student learning but that are often obscured by vague language about equity.

#### Goals for the Activity

- Participants will deepen their understanding of several meanings of the word “equity” in regards to student learning.
- Participants will learn an activity that can be used to effectively engage members of their school community in the issue of equity in student learning.
- Participants will engage in activities that invite them to examine potential inconsistencies between and among their beliefs, language, and actions regarding equity in student learning.

Please note: Participants will probably NOT reach an agreement during the activity on how to define equity.

#### Introductions

**10 Minutes**

The facilitators introduce themselves and ask each participant say name, workplace and town (ONLY). Provide the agenda with Appendix A on the back. Go over the agenda.

#### Introduction to Equity Stances

**5 Minutes**

Begin with something like, “The equity issue can be confusing. Clarity is elusive. Exploration of the issue often feels risky. This activity is intended to provide a safe place to explore and examine the issue in greater depth than often happens.” Ask participants to read the 5 stances in Appendix A alone and quietly for now and decide which stance **most closely** matches their own. “This is intended as an opportunity to form a first impression based on reading very brief explanations of each stance. We will dig deeper in a few minutes.” Display the stances via overhead if desired – only the stances, not the examples or the tough questions.

#### Read Full Stances Handout and Write

**10 Minutes**

Distribute Appendix B, which includes the examples in practice and the tough questions. Participants are given time to individually (without discussion) read and write their initial reactions, questions, etc.

#### Text-based Discussion

**20-40 Minutes**

Focus Question: What do you believe schools should do regarding equity in student learning? If the group is larger than 12, break into two groups. Participants will be reminded to refer to the text.

#### Three Levels Protocol (groups of 3 or 4)

**25 Minutes**

Remind participants to pick a passage that has implications for their work. There may be time for more than one round. See Appendix C below.

#### Conclusion and Debrief

**15 Minutes**

Distribute and briefly explain the Facilitators’ Notes for the activity – see Appendix D below. Participants are invited to ask questions, make comments and suggestions, and reflect on adapting the activity for home audiences. With 2 minutes left, check-in on the Activity Goals: Comments or questions? Please fill out feedback form — Appendix E.

## Appendix E:

### Data Driven Dialogue



## Data Driven Dialogue

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*Developed by the Teacher Development Group, 2002.*

*Based on work presented by Nancy Love, author of "Using Data/Getting Results," 2002.*

"Dialogue comes from the Greek word dialogos. Logos means 'the word,' or in our case we would think of the 'meaning of the word.' And dia means 'through' – it doesn't mean two. A dialogue can be among any number of people, not just two. Even one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself, if the spirit of dialogue is present. The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It's something creative. And this *shared meaning* is the 'glue' or 'cement' that holds people and societies together," (Bohm, D., 1990).

This protocol builds awareness and understanding of the participant's viewpoints, beliefs, and assumptions about data while suspending judgments. All participants have equal voice. The 3 phases of data-driven dialogue assist groups in making shared meaning of data. We encourage you to use this tool with your entire school staff and/or with your school leadership team at a special meeting on data. The dialogue tool helps to replace hunches and feelings with data-based facts, examine patterns and trends of performance indicators, and generate "root-cause" discussions that move from identifying symptoms to possible causes of student performance. In order to effectively use this tool, participants will need to have grade level, school, or district data reports.

- **Phase I Predictions**  
Surfacing perspectives, beliefs, assumptions, predictions, possibilities, questions, and expectations.
- **Phase II Go Visual**  
Re-create the data visually.
- **Phase III Observations**  
Analyzing the data for patterns, trends, surprises, and new questions that "jump" out.
- **Phase IV Inferences**  
Generating hypotheses, inferring, explaining, and drawing conclusions. Defining new actions and interactions and the data needed to guide their implementation. Building ownership for decisions.

For protocol and facilitation, see *Data Driven Dialogue Protocol Facilitation Plan*.

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## Appendix F:

### The Five Whys of Inquiry



Center for Leadership & Educational Equity

## The 5 Whys for Inquiry

*Developed in the field by educators.*

### **Purpose**

To help the presenter get at the foundational root of her/his question and to uncover multiple perspectives on the question

### **Process**

#### **1. Presentation** (3 minutes)

The presenter describes the context of their inquiry question.

One might include:

- Why you chose this question
- Why it is so important to you
- How it relates to your work back home

#### **2. Clarifying Questions** (3 minutes)

The group asks clarifying questions. These are questions which clarify the context of the presenter's remarks. They should be specific questions which can be answered with brief statements. For example, "How long has your school been involved in place based learning?" Or, "How many community members are involved with planning this project?"

#### **3. Decision** (3 minutes)

The group discusses the best line of inquiry to get at the heart of the question and decides upon the initial "why question." The presenter is silent.

#### **4. The "Why Questioning"** (10 minutes)

The "why question" decided upon is asked and the presenter responds. Another "why question" is asked in response to the presenter's answer. This continues with a maximum of 5 "why questions" being asked.

#### **5. Discussion** (5 minutes)

The group then discusses what they have heard the presenter say. Their discussion is not about solving the problem, but is an attempt to help the presenter understand the underlying causes for the issue they described. The presenter is silent.

#### **6. Response** (3 minutes)

The presenter responds to what has been said. The group is silent.

#### **7. Debrief** (3 minutes)

The group and the presenter debrief the experience.

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