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"Framing" Equity: Using Frame Analysis to Explore Superintendents' Attempts to Implement Policies for Equity

James Charles Coviello
University of Texas at El Paso, jamesccoviello@gmail.com

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POLICIES FOR EQUITY

JAMES C. COVIELLO

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Foundations

APPROVED:

_____
David E. DeMatthews, Ph.D., Chair

_____
Rodolfo Rincones, Ph.D.

_____
David Knight, Ph.D.

_____
Elena Izquierdo, Ph.D.

_____
Charles H. Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

DEDICATION

For my family – Caitlin, Jack, Lilia, James, Robin, Kristen, my grandparents, all my aunts and uncles who helped raise me, and my cousins who grew up with me.

For my friends who supported and encouraged me and made life fun.

For all of my students and colleagues that made teaching and leading such a joy amid all of the challenges.

I am very lucky.

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by

JAMES C. COVIELLO, M.A.

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ABSTRACT

As the day-to-day leaders of a school district, superintendents oversee budgetary and other district operations, help give practical meaning to federal and state policy, and set local district policy for the schools under their charge. Superintendents therefore work in a unique and important leadership space that exists between federal, state, local governments and the principals and teachers that educate students. This space is also often complex and risk-laden, with multiple constituencies and stakeholders vying for resources and striving for program changes that are often in conflict. Superintendents therefore play an important role in "framing" – or strategically communicating – policy messages to different stakeholder groups, including the elected school board, business and community leaders, parents, principals, and teachers. In this context, superintendents seem to be in a position to implement policies that might allow schools to better serve groups of historically marginalized students. This study seeks to critically analyze how five urban district superintendents utilize strategic communication to legitimize and gain support for equity-based policies in their districts. This qualitative multi-case study consists of semi-structured interviews of five large urban district superintendents, observations of school board meetings, and document collection. The results of this study contribute to a clearer view of the ways in which superintendents make decisions for (or against) equity positions and how they might legitimize their choices within a sometimes ethically ambiguous and dilemma-laden leadership environment.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background

Despite years of reform and the tireless efforts of teachers, principals, and other key stakeholders, many schools and districts remain places of stubborn inequality. Though public schools are often viewed as "The Great Equalizer" and as a vehicle to improve the social and economic placement of students, they often replicate, maintain, and reinforce the very social and economic conditions of the students they seek to address (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). A significant body of evidence has revealed the persistence of inequitable policies and decision-making for historically disadvantaged students, evidenced in unequal achievement levels, school funding inequities, unequal program offerings and teacher quality, and harsh discipline policies and practices (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). Although multiple factors contribute to this state of affairs, researchers have long noted the important role of educational leadership in altering the status quo and creating equitable change (Brooks & Miles, 2006; Brown, 2004; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007).

Superintendents and principals regularly make important decisions on policy and practice (Coburn, 2006) and their actions can have important consequences for reform efforts focusing on historically marginalized student populations. Equity-based leadership, decision-making, and policy creation will therefore be key for schools to fulfill their promised role of a vehicle for social mobilization. Previous research on equitable leadership, decision-making, and policy creation has overwhelmingly focused on the role of the principal. Numerous studies have documented and described the actions of social justice leaders – usually school principals – who put issues of equity central to their leadership efforts (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Green &

Dantley, 2013; Rivera-McCutchen & Watson, 2014). Principals who lead their schools with a social justice orientation address critically interrogate and take efforts to address issues like the racial discipline and achievement gap, the segregation of students with disabilities and English language learners, and the marginalization of LGBTQ students. Many researchers conclude their studies with a recognition that the challenges confronting schools and marginalized students are significant, deeply-entrenched, and often emerge outside of the school and the principal's locus of control (Berkovich, 2014; Lipman, 2013). In response, some call for a form of community or "advocacy leadership" where school leaders tap into the resources within a community to build the capacity for large-scale, sustained change (Anderson, 2009; Ishimaru, 2013).

1.2   Research Problem

As cited above, historically marginalized groups of students have long had to contend with inequitable policies and programs resulting in unequal achievement, school funding, programs, teacher quality, and discipline policies (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). Although seen as a serving an important role in addressing this inequity, many scholars have noted that educational leaders face tremendous practical difficulties and complex dilemmas when attempting to lead for social justice (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Gewirtz and Cribb, 2002; Theoharis, 2007). Moreover, the contextual nuances of leading for social justice makes identifying practical steps to become an effective social justice leader difficult (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Furman, 2012). Scholars have therefore called for further an examination of more pragmatic approaches to social justice leadership and the effective practices of social justice leaders (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2008; McKenzie, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2006).

School leaders who hope to create more equitable and socially-just schools must wrestle with the contextual realities, frictions, and problems that emerge in and around schools and school districts. Leaders are forced to attend to such problems through hundreds of cumulative decisions over the course of days, weeks, and months of a school year. While scholars who study social justice leadership have tended to ignore decision-making processes, several researchers interested in ethical leadership have investigated the decision-making processes of educational leaders. Multiple studies have presented theoretic ethical frameworks and heuristics for educational leaders, with much of this scholarship focused on principal decision-making (Langlois & Lapointe, 2010; Starratt, 1991; Stefkovich & Begley, 2007). Additionally, educational leadership preparation and professional standards emphasize the importance of ethical leadership and decision-making. For instance, the two most prominent sets of educational leadership standards – the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards – each have a component on professional ethics and ethical decision-making (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015; NELP Draft Standards, 2015). However, Militello, Fusarelli, Alsbury, and Warren (2013) observed that professional standards are often "garbage can" approaches to leadership "that promulgate every set of leadership skills and political ideology of the day" (p. 86). This kind of catch-all approach to leadership may be too confusing or vague for practical use. The PSEL standards themselves state that they are designed only to "communicate expectations" and "guid[e] the direction of practice" while noting that they do not "prescribe specific actions" and need to be adapted to work within differing contexts (Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 4). Professional standards may therefore lack the nuance and specificity necessary for the muddy, often ambiguous situations that educational leaders might face.

In addition to considerations of social justice leadership and ethical decision-making, scholars have also studied the implications of policy change and policy implementation on creating equitable change. Researchers have noted the important role that educational leaders play in the adoption of equitable policy and the "translation" of these policies into practice (DeMatthews, 2015; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Multiple studies have examined policy creation and implementation as a social activity, whereby members of an organization "make sense" of policy changes through personal relationships and social interactions (Coburn, 2006; Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Coburn (2006) has emphasized the importance of "problem framing" in the policy creation process by combining the above-mentioned sense-making theories with framing theories derived from studies of social movements. Framing in this sense is a part of the process of creating and translating policy into practice and is a key element of educational leadership (Coburn, 2006). The understudied concept of problem framing may therefore inform scholarship that addresses practical leadership for equity and social justice.

1.3   Study Significance

As mentioned previously, there is a need for equitable leadership to ameliorate inequitable policies and decision-making for historically disadvantaged students. Much of the recent research on equity leadership and policy implementation has utilized the school site as the unit of analysis – and in turn has focused on the actions of school principals. This scholarship on principal leadership recognizes the ability of principals to drive change efforts in instruction, curriculum, and school culture (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Leithwood & Wahlstrom, 2008; Militello et al., 2013). To be certain, principals deserve attention for their role in influencing instruction and building-level decision-making. But despite their important role,

less attention has been paid to the influence of district leaders in leading for equitable change (DeMatthews, Izquierdo, & Knight, 2017).

As the day-to-day leaders of a school district, superintendents oversee budgetary and other district operations, help give practical meaning to federal and state policy, and set local district policy for the schools under their charge. They are intermediaries between state education agencies (SEAs) and their school districts and schools. They are also responsible for working closely with school boards and providing clear information to families and local constituents (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). Superintendents therefore work in a unique and important leadership space that exists between federal, state, local governments and the principals and teachers that educate students (Woulfin, Donaldson, & Gonzales, 2016). This space is also often complex and risk-laden, with multiple constituencies and stakeholders vying for resources and espousing often conflicting program changes (Kowalski, 2006; Kowalski et al., 2011). In their attempts to change policy and practice in their districts, superintendents also have an important role in "framing" – or strategically communicating – policy messages to different stakeholder groups, including the elected school board, business and community leaders, parents, principals, and teachers (Coburn, 2006; Park, Daly, & Guerra, 2013; Woulfin et al., 2016). In this context, a superintendent seems to be in a strong position to shape and implement district policies that might allow schools to better serve groups of historically marginalized students and interrupt the status quo.

Existing studies of the superintendency are primarily descriptive in nature, examining the demographic changes as well as the shifting discursive role of the superintendent (Kowalski, 2006; Kowalski et al., 2011). Other studies are quantitative in nature, attempting to measure a superintendent's impact on student achievement as measured by standardized test scores (Chingos,

Whitehurst, & Lindquist, 2014). Few studies have examined the role of school superintendents leading for equity (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Minimal research has been done that explores how superintendents strategically communicate (or "frame") equitable policy changes to various stakeholder groups or how these groups made sense of these frames.

By examining the process by which superintendents frame equity-based policy changes, researchers might gain a better understanding of how district leaders navigate the complex decision- and policy-making atmosphere of the superintendency. This will contribute to a clearer view of the ways in which superintendents make decisions for equity and how they attempt to legitimize these choices within a sometimes ethically ambiguous and dilemma-laden leadership environment. With this understanding, educational leadership training programs may be better designed to train superintendents to lead for equity. Current educational leaders and policy makers might also benefit when making strategic decisions that have implications for equitable policy creation and implementation. For example, as a key "translator" of education policy, superintendents should be encouraged to find ways to embrace a more proactive role in framing the changes they want to see regarding equity and consider a comprehensive communication strategy for pursuing this goal.

1.4   Research Questions

Superintendents play a key leadership role in the process of creating and implementing equitable policies. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how superintendents lead for equity by utilizing strategic communication to legitimize and gain support for equity-based policy change in their districts. This study therefore seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do superintendents frame equity-based policy choices?

To study this central question, the following sub-questions will be addressed:

- o How do superintendents frame meaning for different stakeholders and what factors do superintendents consider when creating those frames?

- o How do leaders make sense of community engagement and stakeholder involvement when advocating for equity-based policies?

- o What is the substance (or content) of those frames? In other words, what frames are used?

1.5 Organization of Dissertation

The goal of this research is to explore the process by which superintendents strategically communicate policy changes intended to drive equitable change in school districts. The previous chapter introduced the need for equitable change, the gaps in the current literature on equitable education leadership, the significance of this research, the problem to be studied, and the research questions that will be utilized to explore this topic. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature on the historical evolution of the role of the superintendent, social justice leadership, ethical decision-making, and sense-making and framing theories. Following the literature review, Chapter 3 will discuss the methodology used in this study, including the reason for choosing said method as well as considerations of research design and data collection. A compendium of findings – including case descriptions, factors involved in framing, sensemaking processes related to community and stakeholder involvement, and framing examples – is located in Chapter 4. This dissertation concludes with a discussion of major findings as well as implications for policy, practice, and future research in Chapter 5.

1.6   Definition of Key Terms

Urban District: The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has compiled definitions of city, suburb, town and rural districts with subgroups based on size and location. In this study, references to "urban" districts are to be understood as utilizing the NCES classification of a "city" locale. The NCES definition of a "city" locale type is a "territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city" (NCES, 2006). This definition is further broken down into three sub-categories: large (population of 250,000 or more), midsize (population between 100,000 and 250,000), and small (population less than 100,000).

Equity: The research literature on social justice and equitable leadership describes efforts to address the historical marginalization of certain groups. A normative definition is provided by several institutions of higher education in their work towards equity. The University of Wisconsin at Madison defines equity as follows: "Equity is the guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all students, faculty, and staff, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups." (University of Wisconsin at Madison, 2013).

Equity-based Policy/Program: Because intent rather than result is being examined by this study, a normative definition of an equity-based policy is difficult to delineate. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, an equity-based policy or program is one whose aim is intended to bring about greater equity for historically marginalized groups of students in schools. This marginalization might be related to "issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 221).

English Language Learners/Limited English Proficient (ELL/LEP): According to the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the U.S. Department of Education, an ELL is "[a] national-origin-

minority student who is limited-English-proficient. This term is often preferred over limited-English-proficient (LEP) as it highlights accomplishments rather than deficits" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). These terms are often used interchangeably or are used based on state reporting requirements.

Free and Reduced-Price Meals (FARM): Students who qualify for FARMs live in "a household with an income at or below 130 percent of the poverty threshold for free lunch or between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty threshold for reduced-price lunch" (NCES, 2013). This food program is an often-cited proxy for poverty in schools.

Hispanic/Latina/o: In this study, these terms are used interchangeably due to the U.S. Census Bureau's use of "Hispanic or Latino" as a single identifying term. However, these terms have different meanings outside of the Federal government. In most cases "Hispanic" refers to Spanish-speaking peoples. "Latina/o" refers to people who trace their lineage to countries in Latin America. These terms – like most surrounding ethnicity, race and power – are often contested.

Person of Color/Student of Color: This study uses Bertrand's (2018) conception of person or student of color: "'Students of Color' includes students who identify as members of one or more groups that have been racialized in the United States, such as Black, Latinx, American Indian, Asian American, and other groups. The term excludes students who identify as White" (p. 389).

Superintendent/CEO: The nominal executive leader of a school district. Björk, Brown-Ferrigno, and Kowalski (2014) explains that "A superintendent serves as a school district's chief executive officer (CEO) and manages its day-to-day affairs" (p. 446).

School Board: The school board is a locally-elected body that serves as in a legislative and policy-making role in a school district. According to Björk, Brown-Ferrigno, and Kowalski (2014) "Their primary responsibility is legislative, including making policy, supervising school-district

operations, and collecting taxes (principally property taxes) that constitute 60% of districts' annual budgets as well as approving annual budgets and expenditures" (p. 445).

Stakeholder/Constituent: In this study, stakeholder and constituent are used interchangeably, reflecting the political and democratic nature of the superintendency. However, these words do have different meaning in most cases. For instance, teachers would be considered a stakeholder group, but certainly not all teachers may live within a superintendent's district and therefore might not be constituents, or voters, in school board elections.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Introduction

As previously mentioned, principals are only one part of the "puzzle" needed to solve the equity equation. Equity-based district leadership and district policies are also important to create equitable change, yet very few scholars have studied how equity leadership is enacted by superintendents (DeMatthews et al., 2017). This review of literature will therefore focus on several main strands: the importance of the superintendent on district performance; the evolving historical role of the superintendent, particularly the most recent role of "communicator"; theories of policy creation, interpretation and implementation utilizing sense-making, sense-giving, and framing; social justice leadership, including calls for advocacy leadership intended to increase community capacity and stakeholder involvement; and theories of ethical decision-making.

2.2   The Importance of the Superintendent

Within the complex and conflicted space of school districts, superintendents are charged with providing leadership that will properly educate all students. Despite their nominal importance in the hierarchical power structure, scholars have asked whether the superintendent improves student learning – at least as measured by standardized test scores (Chingos, Whitehurst, & Lindquist, 2014). From the extant studies, this seems unclear. A recent study by the Brookings Institute (Chingos, et al., 2014) indicates that superintendents have little effect on student test scores. Kowalski (2006) cites a number of studies that indicate that superintendents likely do not affect student achievement, while noting the important role that a superintendent still plays in other related factors, like how well resources are allocated and how satisfied varied stakeholder groups are with the school system. In other words, superintendents make decisions that may have positive impacts on a range of outcomes beyond short-term changes in test scores.

Other scholars have come to different conclusions. Some researchers have indicated that superintendents do in fact have a positive impact on instruction in their districts (Seashore Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). Others have noted the important role that superintendents play in the adoption and maintenance of reform initiatives (Bennett & Thompson, 2011; Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Woulfin et al., 2015). Superintendents can shape the "outer layer" of educational factors that influence the "instructional core" (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015) These include the theory of change and strategy used to create change in the district. The superintendent can create or alter systems and structures and make decisions about the distribution and deployment of resources. She or he can also affect the culture within as district. Most importantly for this study, Johnson et al. (2015) observed the superintendent's role in interacting with the external environment, consisting of regulations, statues, contracts, funding, and politics.

This important role may be the result of the fact that superintendents "span the boundary between the state and schools and are centrally involved in translating policy into practice" (Woulfin et al., 2015, p. 111). They therefore have a prominent place in creating and "translating" policy and shaping the various policy-related actions of the district. Describing the role of the superintendent is itself varied and complex due to the historical evolution of public schooling in the U.S. and the complex context-dependent nature of school districts. This historical evolution will be discussed in further detail below.

2.3   The Evolving Role of the Superintendent

Public education in the United States was founded as a democratic institution. From the beginnings of publicly-funded schools in the 19th century, locally-elected school boards made decisions about curriculum, hiring, and funding. This arrangement continued until compulsory enrollment led to much larger and more complex school districts. The position of the

superintendent was at first created to be an assistant to the school board – to be, in some sense, a clerical worker. The superintendent was tasked with keeping track of spending, enrollment, and other menial tasks (Brunner, Grogan, & Björk, 2002; Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2001; Petersen & Barnett, 2005). The position of superintendent grew throughout the end of the century and existed in most urban school districts by 1900 (Brunner et al., 2002).

The evolution of the role of the superintendent has been studied discursively by multiple scholars, most notably Callahan (1966) and Kowalski (2001). Callahan (1966) observed four role conceptualizations: teacher-scholar, manager, democratic-leader, and applied social scientist. Most recently, Kowalski (2001) added "communicator." Both researchers noted that as the role of the superintendent changed over time, none of the expectations of superintendent leadership was jettisoned. In fact, each role was added to the previous layers of leadership and responsibility that the superintendent was expected to fill. A brief historical summary of these role conceptions follows below.

Once initially a clerical position, the role of the superintendent changed rapidly as school districts' enrollments continued to grow and the antebellum Common School Movement, led by Horace Mann, took hold. The large scale of instruction required increased standardization of school curriculum and the supervision of vast numbers of teachers. Superintendents were tasked with filling this role. They became "teacher-scholars," (Björk, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014; Kowalski, 2005) in charge of what would might now be termed "instructional leadership." They rejected the early conception of the superintendent as a clerk or manager, shifting that responsibility to a subordinate or back to the school board. They also tried to appear above politics, as such involvement might be seen as unprofessional (Björk & Lindle, 2001). However, the

conception of the superintendent as teacher-scholar, though never completely abandoned, began to diminish after the beginning of the 20th century (Björk et al., 2014).

The role of the superintendent continued to evolve during the Progressive Era, a time period that saw a dramatic economic shift as the U.S. economy was changing from agrarian to industrial. Business and industrial leaders began to apply modern scientific management theories to increase the efficient operation of their businesses. As school systems continued to grow larger and more complex, these industrial management techniques were adopted in order to make schooling more efficient. Like executives leading modern corporations, superintendents were expected to manage a budget, oversee personnel, and maintain facilities. Their primary role shifted towards becoming "managers" as their previous role as instructional leader was pushed to secondary status (Björk et al., 2014; Glass et al., 2001; Kowalski, 2005). This transition did not come without a degree of disagreement, as this shift was perceived as increasing the stature of superintendents at the expense of school boards and moving away from parent involvement and democratic governance of schools (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Björk et al., 2014).

After the Great Depression, the role of the superintendent as "manager" waned and in its place grew a greater emphasis on the political aspects of the position. This occurred for several reasons. First, due to the perceived failure of industry leaders and business elites during the economic crisis, a business-oriented approach to managing school districts lost credibility. Second, as mentioned previously, the superintendent's managerial role relied on a hierarchical and bureaucratic style of leadership that was criticized for moving away from the more traditionally local control of schools. Third, previous supporters of management theories noted the conflict of including business values, like efficiency, into the democratic institution of a school district (Björk et al., 2014). In the place of the superintendent as "manager" grew a perception of the role of

"democratic leader," whereby the superintendent would lobby and compete with other elements of local government for state funding, get the local community on-board with education initiatives, and navigate the political demands of various stakeholder groups (Björk et al., 2014; Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski, 2005). After the failings of top-down leadership styles, the superintendent would also be expected to participate in and foster local democratic control of schools and push back against the past movement towards corporate-style management models (Björk et al., 2014).

Like most role conceptions, this perception of the superintendent as "democratic leader" fell out of favor but was not abandoned. It was criticized as being too detached from actual practice and that it "produced problems for organizations" (Kowalski, 2005, p. 8). In the 1950s and 1960s, social science research critical of the inadequacy of large institutions like public schools became more well-known and led to calls for superintendents to take on the role of "applied social scientist" (Björk et al., 2014; Kowalski, 2005). The idea behind this role was for the superintendent to use and apply scientific theories and methods to understand the problems in their district and help to solve them.

The rise of the popularity of this role corresponded with the thinking of professors of educational administration at the time, influenced by the positivist administrative theories of Herbert Simon. Simon had a significant impact on administrative theory and the role of the superintendent since he ensconced in the literature (and the popular imagination) the idea that improving organizations and making decisions were best understood through science-based, rational, and objective approaches to inquiry. As Greenfield (1986) said of Simon's contribution to educational administration and leadership, "This transformation in administrative thought is perhaps worthy of being called a 'Revolution,' for it stands for the belief that only the methods of science can yield reliable insights into the realities of administration" (p. 58). The underlying

implication is that educational administration is a science that can be improved through measurement and objective measures. This positivist take on administration and leadership, like other superintendent role conceptions, has also never quite disappeared. It has, in fact, returned to the fore with recent federal policy changes related to the accountability movement – like the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 – which mandated data-driven decision making and evidenced-based policies (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014).

The most recent role, that of "communicator," meant that the superintendent is expected to build coalitions and sustain change through relationship building and cultural change within their organizations (Kowalski, 2005). As a communicator, a superintendent needs to lead an organization through clear and consistent communication to stakeholder groups, both internal and external. This role has become so significant that, rather than a simple skill that is needed to lead effectively, it has become an indispensable superintendent role that stands on its own (Kowalski, 2005). The position of "communicator-in-chief" stems from the belief that school improvement can only take root at the local level through superintendents taking an important role in leveraging change through internal and external educational stakeholders. Within this role conception, superintendents will simply not be effective without a consistent ability to discursively signal their reform intentions and attain buy-in from varied constituencies. This most recent role of "communicator," as it relates to policy framing and advocacy leadership, will be discussed in further depth below.

2.4   Policy Creation as Social Process

In her study of reading instruction policy, Cynthia Coburn (2006) observed: "Policy problems do not exist as social fact awaiting discovery. Rather, they are constructed as policymakers and constituents interpret a particular aspect of the social world as problematic" (p.

343). Her statement is a recognition of policy creation and implementation as social activities, whereby members of an organization "make sense" of policy problems and create policy prescriptions through personal relationships and interactions (Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick et al., 2005). Policy creation and implementation are therefore grounded in a process of "sense-making," a process of social reality creation that is iterative and continuous (Weick et al., 2005). An informal understanding of sense-making is the construction of an answer to the question, "What is going on?" Sense-making in schools and school districts occur at multiple levels: identification and prioritization of policy problems, policy creation and development, and policy implementation (Coburn, 2006). Educational researchers have been interested in understanding the process by which principals and teachers make sense of and interpret policy reform and how that process influences their daily practice (Coburn & Talbert, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Researchers have also noted the role that educational leaders play in the adoption of equitable policy and the "translation" of these policies into practice (DeMatthews, 2015; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

During the policy process, members of a school or school district engage in a process of selecting information from their environment, creating meaning with that information, and then taking action based on that meaning (Coburn, 2006). However, sense-making is often a contested process that involves issues of power and status (Weick et al., 2005). Leaders in educational organizations "give sense" and are situated to do so because of their positional status within their organization (Coburn, 2006). In other words, not all individuals participate equally in the sense-making process within an organization. However, in a dialectic process, group members give sense to each other and also give sense back to organizational leaders (Coburn, 2006). Several factors influence sense-making and sense-giving for educational leaders, including the socio-economic

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status of district and school members, including students, parents, teachers, staff, and community members (Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita, & Zoltners, 2002). Though researchers have utilized sense-making theories to study policy implementation in schools, few recent studies have examined the construction of sense-making and sense-giving on the district level (DeMatthews, et al., 2017; Goldstein, 2003; Woulfin et al., 2016).

2.5   Framing Theory and Strategic Communication

Complementary to theories of sense-giving are studies involving framing analysis. Framing involves deliberate attempts to influence the process of sense-making for others and to inspire action. This is understandable given the origin of framing theories in social movement theories (Benford & Snow, 2000). Framing analysis is usually examined in "core framing tasks": diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational (Benford & Snow, 2000). Diagnostic framing involves the identification of the issue or problem that needs to be resolved. Prognostic framing is the promotion of a proposed course of action to resolve the issue or problem. Motivational framing is the creation and promotion of a reason for taking action. Though presented here in a specific order, framing does not necessarily need to occur as such (Park et al., 2013). Some recent research has focused on the important role that superintendents play in "framing" – or strategically communicating – policy messages to different stakeholder groups, including the elected school board, business and community leaders, parents, principals, and teachers (Coburn, 2006; Park et al., 2013; Woulfin et al., 2016).

As illustrated by the quotation by Coburn (2006) in the previous section on policy creation as a social process, leaders might utilize framing to privilege certain policy problems (diagnostic), prioritize a course of action (prognostic), and using her or his positional resources, push for action (motivational). Framing theory can be useful as a framework for understanding educational

leadership and educational organizations. Park et al. (2013) acknowledge this ability, writing that "frame analysis provides an analytic architecture to examine how social actors may prime, trigger, or edit sensemaking within the organization" (p. 647). Leaders, in positions of formal authority, play an important – though certainly not an exclusive – role in influencing the process of sense-making for others in an organization (Park et al., 2013; Woulfin et al., 2016). They are also leaders in a politicized environment, where their place in the organization makes them "positioned to frame, direct, support, constrain, or transform practitioners' sensemaking of reform" (Park et al., 2013, p. 668).

In the politicized policy context of schools, theories of framing are useful in understanding how leaders utilize strategic communication to legitimize and gain support for policies (especially equity-based policies) in their districts. Implementing policies with fidelity is an important goal for policy creators, and framing facilitates an understanding of the process that leaders undertake when they attempt to achieve that goal. Park et al. (2013) recognized the ability of framing to gain buy-in, writing that leadership around policy "is not only about managing technical expertise but also an inherently political process by which certain frames are valued, and as such, shape meaning and potentially outcomes" (p. 668). In short, it is not enough to have a great idea if a leader cannot get his or her constituencies to adopt the idea with fidelity (Fullan, 2014; Kowalski, 2005). In the conflict-laden, democratic context of school districts, a superintendent – in assuming the recent discursive role of "communicator" – seems to be in a strong position to frame district policies, shape the sense of various stakeholders, and gain support for possibly contentious policies that focus on groups of historically marginalized students and interrupt the status quo.

It would be prudent here to include a brief examination of another well-known use of the term "framing." The well-known work of Bolman and Deal (2008) utilize the terms "frame" and

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"framing, though they are used differently. Rather than a process of communication that aims to influence the creation of "sense" (Coburn, 2006), Bolman and Deal (2008) use framing as an orientation or focus of the practice of leadership. Framing for Bolman and Deal (2008) is a method for understanding and perceiving organizations. Frames are to be used for leaders to view organizations and as a heuristic to help them improve or change them. The authors explain a frame as "a mental model—a set of ideas and assumptions—that you carry in your head to help you understand and negotiate a particular 'territory.' A good frame makes it easier to know what you are up against and, ultimately, what you can do about it" (p. 11). Another way to consider the different use of these terms is that the process of framing, as used by sociological researchers like Benford and Snow (2000), is open-ended and created by the persons involved in the group. On the other hand, Bolman and Deal (2008) have theorized four specific pre-existing frames that they have identified – structural, human resource, political, and symbolic – whose specific purpose is for leaders to examine or view organizations.

In addition, Bolman and Deal (2008) offer a further explanation of framing, writing that "The essence of this process [framing] is matching situational clues with a well-learned mental framework" (p. 11). This, in fact, is strikingly similar to the process of sensemaking and the use of "mental models" as described by Weick et al. (2005). Using as an example a qualitative study of a nurse's interaction with a sick patient, the authors write that "The nurse's noticing and bracketing [processes of sensemaking] is guided by mental models she has acquired during her work, training, and life experience. Those mental models may help her recognize and guide a response to an open ductus condition or sickness more generally" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 411). This comparison is in no way a critique of Bolman and Deal's (2008) conception of framing but is needed to clarify the derivation and use of framing processes in this study.

2.6   Social Justice Leadership

Educational researchers have long recognized the kind of leadership that focuses on historically marginalized students and attempts to interrupt the status quo: social justice leadership. Social justice is itself a contested and somewhat ambiguous term. Some scholars have noted this confusion, writing that social justice "encompasses a range of terms—some more powerful than others—such as equity, equality, inequality, equal opportunity, affirmative action, and most recently diversity" (Blackmore, 2009, p. 7). For the purposes of this study, I define social justice leadership as an orientation through which school leaders recognize and attempt to address the structural inequities facing historically marginalized, under-served groups in schools (DeMatthews, 2018; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012). Researchers have tried to clarify this definition by enumerating three different facets of social justice: distributive, cultural, and associative (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002; North, 2006). These aspects of social justice are related to the equitable distribution of resources in schools, the need for cultural equality (e.g., a culturally relevant curriculum), and the full participation of marginalized communities in decision-making (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002; North, 2006). Social justice leaders attempt to understand how these aspects of justice are experienced in their communities and take action in order to effect change.

Despite the somewhat ambiguous nature of this kind of leadership orientation, social justice practitioners have attempted to put forth an approach for examining and addressing the problem of inequitable schools. For instance, social justice leadership can augment a leader's "toolbox" by reimagining and transforming generic effective practices (DeMatthews, 2015). Current leadership "best practice" requires principals make decisions that are "data driven," i.e., to collect, disaggregate, and analyze data to improve student performance. A social justice leader might utilize data differently by conducting an "equity audit," whereby data is collected and analyzed

around three different equity elements: teacher quality, programming, and achievement (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). Data on teacher quality might be analyzed to determine whether the schools or students who have the highest need are assigned the teachers with the most education and experience. Data on programming might be analyzed to determine the representation of different groups of students in disciplinary cases or programs like special education or gifted and talented. Many schools collect achievement data, but additional elements – like SAT/ACT/Advanced Placement scores or the number of students on college prep tracks – might be collected and analyzed from an equity perspective (Skrla, et al., 2004). As DeMatthews (2015) notes, leaders might use this data to "highlight existing inequalities in ways that inspire and bring together our school community so that we can better serve all students" (p. 146).

In addition to re-imagining current leadership practice, social justice leadership recognizes that effective leadership requires more than one person in one school – it requires a systemic or ecological view of communities, schools, and districts. This kind of leadership prioritizes issues of equity or access for all students in their communities, including groups that may have been previously pushed to the margins – Black and Latino students, ELLs, LGBTQI, and students with disabilities. Social justice leadership goes beyond a zero-sum game whereby "my school and my kids" get resources and "that principal and that school" misses out. These leaders realize that all kids are "our kids."

To create this kind of systemic change, researchers have noted the need for school leaders to form lasting partnerships and have authentic collaboration with their surrounding communities – not just "coffee with the principal" (Auerbach, 2010, p. 728). Instead of focusing on their obvious challenges, social justice leaders try to recognize the assets within their community and their school's distinctive capacity to be a driving force for revitalization and improvement. These

leaders empower parents by making their schools an open and welcoming space (Auerbach, 2010). They proactively seek out relationships with parents and community members, creating networks of allies and advocates in the process. By doing so, school leaders help create the capacity for sustainable, positive change in their schools and their communities – and not leverage parental involvement solely to improve test scores.

Researchers have noted the practical considerations of social justice leadership. For instance, as DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) wrote, "School leaders not only recognize inequality, but also must have the necessary competencies to take actions in ways that replace preexisting structures of inequality with more equitable structures" (p. 4). This need for the development of competencies has resulted in calls for leadership preparation programs to include the advancement of social justice consciousness and skills related to such awareness (Furman, 2012). Some researchers have examined school principals' leadership for equity and have called for practical steps to train leaders for social justice and unpack the ways they struggle with resistance (Theoharis, 2007). Additionally, other researchers have called for educational leaders to turn transform their practice into a form of community or "advocacy leadership," whereby they tap into the resources within a community to build the capacity for large-scale, sustained change (Anderson, 2009; Ishimaru, 2013). Rather than staying silent, social justice leaders find ways to advocate for the needs of their schools and communities.

However, vocal advocacy can put an educational leader in a vulnerable position given that being an educational leader means existing in a political arena where important decisions about power and resources are regularly made (Ryan, 2010). Rather than being actively antagonistic, by maintaining positive relationships and creating alliances with other leaders, social justice leaders can remain in place to effect long-term change. Certain social justice leadership decisions may

require uncomfortable tradeoffs, but social justice leadership recognizes that these decisions happen in a context that is often complex and dilemma-laden (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Social justice leaders may therefore take an approach of active resistance that is politically astute and strategic (Ryan, 2010).

Social justice dilemmas. Because of their contested nature, the policies that a superintendent creates for his or her district are the products of an ethically complex and multifaceted process. For instance, school district policies are often concerned with decisions about resources and the distribution of resources. Rather than simply addressing the greatest need, resource allocation in a democratic organization like a school system often revolves around addressing stakeholder and interest groups (Anderson, 2009). Policy decisions regarding budgeting, teacher placement, programming, professional development, instructional support, principal and teacher evaluation, testing and data collection, and student placement are often allocated based not on the highest need but on the greatest political clout of constituent groups.

District leaders play an extremely important role in resource allocation and prioritization in a politicized environment. Researchers have noted that there are often multiple marginalized groups that need, for instance, additional resources, yet in a system with limited resources these decisions have few unambiguous "right" answers (Cranston, Ehrich, and Kimber, 2006; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). When presented with a dilemma that posits two social justice goals and values at odds with one another – what might be termed a "justice conflict" (DeMatthews, 2014) – there is no clear answer. Social justice leadership, like all decision-making processes, is often filled with inherent dilemmas that require prioritization based on a leader's knowledge of the community and their own goals for a school.

2.7   Ethical Decision-Making and the Superintendency

Considering the dilemma-laden environment of educational leaders, it would be prudent to understand and study the many theories on ethical decision-making and their application in real-life scenarios. Multiple studies have presented theoretical ethical frameworks for educational leaders, including superintendents. Starratt (1991) presents a theory for studying ethical leadership and decision-making in three modes of understanding: an ethic of critique (based on critical theory), an ethic of justice, and an ethic of caring. This broad framework is less focused on understanding and evaluating individual instances of ethical behavior and instead provides a framework for other researchers.

Other studies attempt to formalize ethical decision-making theories into an understandable and accessible process that leaders might use in their practice. For example, Langlois and Lapointe (2010) present an evaluation of a training model for increasing the ethical awareness and practice of ethical decision-making. Drawing on Starratt's (1991) framework, the authors present a conceptual model to help leaders understand and formalize their ethical decision-making. The educational leaders go through a three-step process for reflecting on decisions and their ethical consequences.

These theories on ethical decision-making are certainly helpful for establishing a clear ethical framework for educational leaders. However, they do not fully describe the practical, lived-experience of leadership for equity. As previously discussed, conflicts between competing equity interests may exist within a district. There are complicated political factors, like competing stakeholder groups that both need to be placated but whose support a superintendent might need for future, equally-important equity policy changes.

It may be helpful to consider a hypothetical situation. If a superintendent chooses to expand a dual language pilot project, perhaps the teachers and the teacher's union fight the superintendent on a later equity-related policy that he or she wanted to implement, like SPED inclusion. A superintendent may have a large ELL population that requires a policy change, but the SPED program, though serving fewer students, segregates students and is underfunded. Perhaps the district discipline policy needs to be updated because a significant percentage of Black students are being referred to the disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP) in the district and a restorative justice model would work better. However, an influential parent group has for years supported a "zero tolerance" policy in the district. But the superintendent might need that same group's support for the dual language program, which the parent group currently supports because they see bilingualism as economically advantageous for their children. In addition, a related policy proposal failed last year due to this same group applying political pressure to school board members that were up for re-election. Ethical leadership models provide little guidance for these sorts of social justice dilemmas.

2.8   Professional Ethical Standards

In addition to ethical theories, professional standards exist for educational leaders in general and for superintendents in particular. These ethical codes of conduct – which invite sanction from an external professional body – are slightly different from the internalized ethics that researchers have utilized in the studies mentioned above (Langlois & Lapointe, 2010). The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), formerly the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, focus on the general competencies of established educational leaders in the field. They have established national standards for educational leaders which includes guidance for how to be ethical and make ethical choices. PSEL Standard 2: Ethics

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and Professional Norms specifies that "Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote *each* student's academic success and well-being." (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 10) This standard indicates that leaders should "Safeguard and promote the values of democracy, individual freedom and responsibility, equity, social justice, community, and diversity." (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 10).

An ethical code of conduct also exists for beginning leaders or leaders in preparation programs that are specific to either building or district level leaders. Formerly the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Standards, the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards also have a component on ethics and professionalism (Standard 2). Element 2.4 of this standards states that, "Program completers understand and demonstrate the capability to promote essential educational values of democracy, community, individual freedom and responsibility, equity, social justice, and diversity" (NELP Draft Standards, 2015, p. 5).

Along with the PSEL standards, these directives provide little specific guidance for implementing and applying these kinds of ethics in practical decision-making scenarios and are difficult to apply in situations like the hypothetical presented previously. Because their purpose is aspirational and goal-setting, professional standards are too general and lack the nuance necessary for the muddy, often ambiguous situations that educational leaders might face. Additionally, the ethical decision-making frameworks mentioned previously are impractical for the pragmatic and often time-sensitive decision-making necessary for educational leaders in a real-life context.

While professional standards for ethical leadership and decision making are helpful at providing broad guidance and norms, the reality of the superintendency in a complex, evolving organizational environment is that decisions are made without the time necessary for proper

reflection and discernment. Policy-making, especially policy creation in a politically contentious context, involves complex factors that do not lend themselves well to theories or neatly organized models and prescribed processes. Furthermore, even after the superintendent decides on the "best" course of action, the policy that is created needs to gain support by internal and external stakeholder groups or else it will not last. It will also need to be implemented "on the ground," so if teachers and principals do not support the changes, they may not adopt the policy with fidelity and (either purposively or not) scuttle the policy without buy-in. These questions are related to theories of sense-making and framing.

2.9   Conclusion

Superintendent leadership and district policies play a role in creating equitable change, yet this topic remains understudied. This review of literature focused on highlighting several factors related to understandings of superintendent leadership, including the importance of the superintendent on district performance and the evolving historical role of the superintendent. Although superintendents' historical role has changed over time, they also retain these roles in varying capacities and can leverage these roles to create change. The most recent role iteration – "communicator" – is important and connects to theories of policy creation, interpretation, and implementation. In particular, framing analysis provides a lens to examine the role of superintendent as communicator when attempting to implement contentious policy changes. Theories of social justice leadership call for placing issues of equity at the center of leadership practices and call for advocacy and community capacity-building that will create large-scale support for long-lasting equitable and systemic change. A superintendent, acting as communicator, might use "framing" to build that community capacity, stakeholder involvement, and support for equity-based policies that social justice theorists say is required, while also addressing their call

for a better understanding of practical methods and dilemmas inherent in social justice leadership. This chapter has attempted to weave together these strands of literature on the superintendency, advocacy via strategic communication, policy creation and implementation, and practical social justice leadership capacities.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I will discuss the research design and methodology I used during my study. I begin with a reiteration of the research questions that dictated the research design. Then I will proceed with a discussion of my research design, including my rationale for choosing qualitative case study method. Following this rationale, I will discuss my site and participant selection process. Next, I will discuss my data collection methods and approach for data analysis. This chapter ends with a discussion of validity.

3.1   Research Questions

This study seeks to explore the process by which superintendents strategically communicate policy changes intended to drive equitable change in school districts. My interest in this topic stemmed from conversations with district superintendents who had attempted to effect positive change for historically marginalized student groups in their districts yet faced opposition from various stakeholders. Each spoke of various difficulties in gaining acceptance for their policies. In addition, I had a long-term interest in the philosophical considerations of social justice and had been exposed to various discussions of equity-focused or social justice leadership in education, either within my doctoral classes or at presentations in professional conferences. Much of the discussions revolved around the practical dimensions and "next steps" for equity-driven or social justice leadership. These experiences thereby inspired me to focus my dissertation on the experience and perspectives of superintendents who were attempting to "get equity done" in their districts. I decided to focus on the superintendents' experiences in order to better understand their attempts to gain buy-in for equitable policies rather than the actual processes of policy creation and implementation as experienced on the school or classroom level. I therefore explored how superintendents framed their presentation of district policies to different groups of stakeholders.

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This study therefore seeks to answer the following central research questions:

- How do superintendents frame equity-based policy choices?

To study this central question, the following sub-questions will be addressed:

- How do superintendents frame meaning for different stakeholders and what factors do superintendents consider when creating those frames?

- How do leaders make sense of community engagement and stakeholder involvement when advocating for equity-based policies?

- What is the substance (or content) of those frames? In other words, what frames are used?

3.2   Research Design

The subsequent section will include a discussion of my research methodology and reasoning behind my methodological choices. These decisions were based on my research questions, theoretical framework, and related paradigm preference.

Rationale for qualitative methodology. Within social science research, there has been an ongoing debate over choices of methodology, with specific focus on discussions of paradigm, or what Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe as the "basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator" (p. 105). This belief system is informed by and guides the ontological, epistemological, and methodological choices of a researcher. Guba and Lincoln (1994) identified three fundamental "questions" of paradigm: (a) ontology, or the form and nature of reality; (b) epistemology, or the nature of knowledge and the "knower;" and (c) methodology, or how an investigator can go about exploring knowledge. Considerations of paradigm are important since they underlie assumptions about the methodological approach of a researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln, 2010).

As a researcher, my own paradigm positions have influenced my research methodology. I am influenced by a constructivist paradigm, meaning I believe that knowledge is socially-constructed and that knowledge is therefore not "discovered" in the objective positivistic sense. As a result, my choice of inquiry methodology was influenced through my own paradigm lens (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The constructivist paradigm more closely aligns with qualitative research methods.

Beyond larger questions of paradigm worldview, I chose a qualitative rather than a quantitative study because of the nature of my research questions. The general aim of most quantitative studies is to identify causal relationships and generalize to a population, whereas qualitative research attempts "to develop an in- depth exploration of a central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). Another conceptualization of the qualitative research method, as presented by Merriam (2009), is a way of understanding how people co-construct knowledge and make sense of the world. This paradigmatic and methodological outlook sits well with my ontological and epistemological perspective as well as my research questions and theoretical framework. For instance, I utilized sense-making and framing theory which aligns with Merriam's (2009) definition of qualitative method as individuals making sense of the world.

Utilizing qualitative research allows the researcher to conduct an in-depth examination of the sense-making and framing processes of superintendents as embedded within the context of school districts. Qualitative research's inductive, context-rich method is therefore highly relevant to the use and study of framing, strategic communication, and the social and political context of the superintendency. Since they are so enmeshed within the contextual and socially constructed reality of schools and school districts, knowledge of the processes of framing, strategic communication, and the social and political context of the superintendency can best emerge from

qualitative study. As such, quantitative research would not be suitable, since it purposively attempts to strip out the influence of context and seeks to deductively test hypotheses in a controlled setting. Since deciding that qualitative research fits my philosophical predilections and my general research direction, I then took on the task of choosing a specific qualitative methodology.

Rationale for case study methodology. As previously mentioned, I was interested in the process by which superintendents strategically frame policy changes intended to drive equitable change in school districts. Framing involves deliberate attempts to influence the process of sense-making of others and to motivate action. Sense-making is a process of reality construction done by groups of individuals. After a review of various qualitative methods, I decided that these processes of framing and sense-making are better understood through qualitative case-study method. This is done for multiple reasons.

The characteristics of case study as a research method seemed to fit my question and paradigm approach. However, defining and classifying case study method is a somewhat complex process, given that historically there was disagreement whether it was deservedly a methodology in its own right or anything more than an initial exploratory research phase that would yield to other research methods for further investigation (Yin, 2018). Creswell (2012) in fact lists case study methodology as a sub-type of qualitative ethnography. Given their popularity in social science research, other scholars have presented case study as its own discrete methodological type (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). Definitions of case study vary. Stake (1995) leaves the definition very broad, viewing a case as a "bounded system" and should be viewed "as an object rather than a process" (p. 2). Yin (2018) is more specific and concerned with demarcating case study as a research process, writing that case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case")

in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 15). Merriam (2009) defines case study similarly to Stake (1995), calling it "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 40). However, Merriam (2009) also includes what she calls three "special" characteristics of case study research: 1) it is "particularistic," meaning it "focus[es] on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon" (p. 43); 2) it is "descriptive," meaning it yields "a rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study" (p. 43); and 3) it is "heuristic" in that it "illuminate[s] the reader's understanding of phenomenon under study" (p. 44). My study seeks to explore in-depth, lived-experience of superintendents' experience of framing, so Merriam's (2009) special features of case study method seem to fit my aim.

According to Yin (2018), it is better to utilize case-study method when the form of research question is attempting to understand "how" or "why" of an event or phenomenon and there is little ability to control or manipulate the behaviors or event, so an experiment would not be appropriate. Multiple case study researchers have also noted that case study method is suitable for intensive, holistic, and rich descriptions of a phenomenon or event in its actual context (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018). Because I seek an in-depth, rich examination of the process of framing that superintendents undertook and understanding the actions that they took, case study method is fitting. In addition, I do not seek to understand or measure the effectiveness of a particular policy, which might call for a different methodological approach. This study involves an exploration of how these frames were received and how sense and meaning was created from these frames. The objective is therefore to develop knowledge around framing processes in a particular context and not to lessen the importance of organizational structures and relationships. This understanding will

add to a view of how district leaders attempt to gain acceptance for policies related to the often problematic and complex issue of equity.

Once I had decided on case study method, I then had to decide on the type of case study I would be conducting. In addition to variation in defining case study research, scholars also have different ways of classifying different case study approaches. Cases can be classified by the three main types of social science research method: exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (Yin, 2018). Exploratory cases are usually pilot studies that are used to advance a research hypothesis or as the basis for a later (non-case study) research method. Explanatory cases can investigate reasons for why certain phenomenon or events have occurred and can be used in place of survey or experimental methods. Descriptive cases are used to describe a situation or phenomenon and its surrounding context (Yin, 2018). Stake (2005) lists three kinds of case types: "intrinsic," which is useful and has value in and of itself; "instrumental," which illustrates an issue or phenomenon; and "collective" or "multiple" case study which is a group of cases which are compared in order to understand a topic. Stake (2006) describes multi-case studies as "individual cases [that] share a common characteristic or condition" and are "somehow categorially bounded together" (p. 5). Additionally, case study types are "bounded" (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995) by their physical (location) or temporal (time) context.

Using the Stake's (2005) typology, my study can be classified as an instrumental multi-case study because I will be examining the process of framing (the 'issue or phenomenon') that a group of superintendents undertake when attempting to gain acceptance and buy-in for an equity-based policy (the 'common characteristic or condition'). These cases are bounded by the individuals (superintendents) and the school districts that they lead (location). The superintendents and each of their district contexts are what Merriam (2009) would call the "unit of analysis" (p.

41) These cases will also be bounded by time during which the data will be collected. I chose to use multiple rather than a single exemplary case for several reasons. First, according to Merriam (2009) "the more cases included in a study […] the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be" (p. 49). Yin (2012) discussed the difficult question of how many cases are enough, noting that little consensus has been reached on the issue. In short, Yin (2012) agrees with Merriam (2009), noting that the more, the better: "the more cases (or experiments), the greater confidence or certainty in a study's findings; and the fewer the cases (or experiments), the less confidence or certainty" (p. 9).

3.3   Site and Participant Selection

This study consisted of a group of five superintendents in urban school districts located in five states geographically disbursed across the United States. These sites were identified using Marshall and Rossman's (2006) definition of a "realistic site." This is a site where:

(a) entry is possible; (b) there is a high probability that a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest is present; (c) the researcher is likely to be able to build trusting relations with the participants in the study; (d) the study can be conducted and reported ethically; and (e) data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured. (p. 62)

Entry to the districts and access to the superintendents was possible through a sustained effort to gain access, a topic which will be discussed in more detail below. In addition, all of the superintendents led urban districts, four classified by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as "large" and one "medium." Each district consisted of a variety of student demographic and economic groupings, included various organizations structures and educational programs, and were from five different states located throughout the U.S. This made it likely that a "rich mix"

would be present. Given that most of the superintendents had also pursued a doctorate – combined with my experience as a teacher and leader – I felt confident that I would be able to build trust with the study participants. Regarding ethical research, I completed an IRB approval for this study and cooperated with any district-level procedures for outside researchers. In sum, the selection of these sites and individuals will provide me with a good probability that I will be able to understand the framing processes of superintendents when making equity-based policy changes (Creswell, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Participant selection criteria. For my study, I utilized purposeful sampling since, unlike quantitative research methods, I was not looking for a random population in order to generalize my findings. I was instead hoping to explore a phenomenon and needed a sample that might yield the most information and useful insight (Merriam, 2009). To be more specific, I used unique purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009). This was due to the fact that I chose to focus on superintendents in urban districts, therefore basing my participant selection on "unique, atypical, perhaps rare attributes or occurrences of the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam, 2009, p. 78). These sites are "atypical" because, of the approximately 13,500 public school districts in the U.S., only 764 are urban districts (NCES, 2014). That means that urban districts are less than 6% of all the districts in the country. I chose to focus on urban districts due to the complexity of leading such large districts and the likelihood for complex framing efforts involved. An additional rationale for choosing urban districts is below.

Since selection criteria are important in purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018), what follows is a brief discussion of the characteristics that drove participant selection. Yin (2018) suggests creating a "case study screening procedure" (p.105). For my participant selection, this procedure was based initially on large urban districts. As stated previously, I sought large urban

districts due to the increased chance of examining a rich context of equity challenges. I therefore decided to begin with the eighty largest school districts in the nation and expand my search if establishing consent from this initial group was unsuccessful. After an initial level of interest expressed by the superintendent, I focused on choosing district leaders who had demonstrated public efforts to implement policy changes that attempted to address groups of historically marginalized student populations.

I began by contacting approximately eighty of the largest urban school districts in the U.S. through multiple email communications. Special effort was made to contact superintendents directly and bypass their professional offices. If that was not successful, I contacted the highest level executive staff member that had access to the superintendent in the district. Of those approximately eighty superintendents, nine superintendents responded. Of these nine, I looked for leaders that had regular contact with external stakeholders through public meetings, such as school board meetings, and made recent significant programmatic or resource distribution policy changes. In order to create a more robust set of findings, I also tried to ensure that I included superintendents of varying district demographics, personal backgrounds, and experience levels. During this process, two superintendents declined to participate. Two others, after I had exchanged more information about the purpose of the study, also decided to decline. In total, five superintendents finally agreed to participate.

However, it should be noted that gaining access to superintendents in urban districts is extremely challenging given their high public profile and tremendous demands on their time. As an indication of the difficulties in gaining access and the severe limitations of time for urban district leaders, superintendents and their staffs canceled a scheduled interview seven times throughout

the course of the study. Many times these cancellations occurred on the same day of the scheduled interview.

Rationale for urban districts. This study focuses on how superintendents frame equity and equity-based policy changes in large urban districts. It would be sensible to lay out the reasons for narrowing this study to include only urban districts. Researchers have long focused on the struggles of urban schools and urban school reform (Anyon, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kozol, 1991; Ravitch, 1999). These struggles persist today. For instance, on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – what is often termed "Our Nation's Report Card" – students who attended urban schools had a lower percentage of students who scored "At or Above Proficient" in reading, math, and science compared to the national average (see Table 3.1) (NCES, 2015). The average graduation rates for urban high school students (71.1%) also trails those of suburban (81.4%), town (79.9%), and rural (80.6%) districts (NCES, 2010).

Table 3.1 2015 NAEP Percentage of Public School Students "At or Above Proficient" by Locale

	Total	City
Reading – Grade 4	34.8	29.6
Reading – Grade 8	32.7	27.7
Reading – Grade 12	35.6	31.3
Math – Grade 4	39.4	34.5
Math – Grade 8	32.1	28.1
Math – Grade 12	22.9	19.2
Science – Grade 4	36.5	29.9
Science – Grade 8	33.1	26.2
Science – Grade 12	21.0	17.0

In addition, my interest in equity and social justice leadership has also led to my focus on urban schools, given the demographic and socio-economic context of urban districts. Nearly 31% of all students in public schools in the U.S. – over 15 million – are in urban districts (NCES, 2013).

But a higher percentage (43.4%) of urban students attend a school where more than 75% of the students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch, an often-cited proxy for poverty. This percentage is more than twice as high as suburban (17.9%), town (19.1%), or rural (13.9%) students (NCES, 2013). That means that urban students are far more likely to attend a school with a high concentration of poverty than their classmates from other locale types. To be clear, in order for students to be eligible for free or reduced priced lunch, "a student must be from a household with an income at or below 130 percent of the poverty threshold for free lunch or between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty threshold for reduced-price lunch" (NCES, 2013).

In addition to students from low SES backgrounds, urban districts serve higher percentages of students who are termed Limited English Proficient (LEP) (15.1%) than suburban (8.6%), town (6.5%), or rural (4.8%) districts (NCES, 2013). Of the approximately 4.5 million LEP students in the U.S., approximately 47% attend an urban school district (NCES, 2013). Because of the added difficulty in learning a new language while also learning their other academic subject matter, these LEP students often struggle. For example, the high school graduation rate for LEP students is 65%, compared with an overall U.S. average of 83% (NCES, 2016).

Compounding these challenges, the effects of what is often termed the academic "Achievement Gap" between white and non-white students is acutely felt in urban districts. The demographic data of urban districts paints a picture of diversity in urban schools. Compared to national averages, urban schools have a lower percentage of white students and higher percentages of Hispanic, Black, and Asian students (NCES, 2013; see Table 3.2). But the achievement struggles of these groups of students is borne out in NAEP scores as well as high school graduation rates. For example, on the 2015 NAEP reading assessment, Black students in 8th Grade scores averaged 26 points lower than their White peers. Additionally, 8th Grade Hispanic students

averaged 21 points lower than White students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). As previously noted, the national high school graduation rate is 83% but the rate for Black students is 75% and for Hispanic students is 78% (NCES, 2016). These rates are significant given the higher proportion of students of color in urban districts.

Because urban districts face the compounding challenges of student poverty, language status, and ethnic and racial diversity, a study of leadership for social justice and equity in this context is likely to yield complex, insightful, and rich results. Although variation exists among the different sites, the contextual factors enumerated above are reflected in the five urban districts included in this study (see Table 3.3). How these factors are experienced in the districts in this study will be explored in further detail below.

Table 3.2 Distribution (Percentage) of Public K-12 Students by Race/Ethnicity & Locale (2013)

	National Average	**City**
White	50.3	30.0
Hispanic	24.9	35.1
Black	15.6	23.9
Asian	4.8	6.7

Table 3.3 District Demographic Data – Students

	Race/Ethnicity				**FARMs**	**LEP/ELL**
	White	**Latina/o**	**Black**	**Asian**		
Wyndale Public Schools	40%	25%	20%	10%	75%	20%
Greenwell Unified School District	25%	10%	55%	5%	70%	15%
Linwall Unified School District	30%	15%	40%	5%	65%	10%
Matira County School District	10%	85%	5%	<5%	70%	30%
Valston Public Schools	45%	10%	15%	15%	35%	15%

Note: All percentages are approximate in order to protect the anonymity of study participants.

3.4   Data Collection Methods

The data collection method that I used was drawn from my use of qualitative case study methodology (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018) and a review of studies involving framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000; Coburn, 2006; Park et al., 2013; Spillane et al., 2002; Woulfin, et al., 2015) and social justice leadership and equity (DeMatthews et al., 2017; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). Following the example of these studies, my data were derived from a variety of sources. In order to make the findings as robust as possible, Yin (2018) presents six different possible sources of data for case studies: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Using as many different sources of evidence increases the chances that what the researcher finds will be accurate (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2018). This process of data validation is known as triangulation, where a researcher will "develop converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 2018, p. 127). Triangulating my data allowed for more vigorous and convincing findings.

The data from my study were derived mainly from semi-structured interviews, observations of school board and other public meetings, and document collection (Yin, 2018). The reason I chose these sources is based on similar studies utilizing framing and sense-making as well as my research questions, which aim to understand the lived-experience of superintendents when framing a policy change, rather than the effectiveness of that framing or of the policy itself. These three sources of data also allowed for an in-depth exploration of their framing experiences and how they made decisions about messaging and strategy for their communications with different stakeholder groups.

I conducted an initial round of interviews with each superintendent, with four interviews lasting approximately seventy-five minutes and one interview having to be cut short to forty-five

minutes due to the superintendent's scheduling constraints. Three superintendents agreed to follow-up interviews which lasted from forty-five minutes to one hour. The remaining superintendents also agreed to a second interview. However, one was forced to reschedule the interview several times, to the point where it could not be included in the study. Another could not find time to schedule the interview before the study concluded.

Interviews were conducted by telephone, recorded with the knowledge and permission of the informants, and transcribed. Interviews were conducted over the telephone due to the prohibitive cost of traveling to five sites across the U.S. I also decided to conduct telephone interviews rather than a video-conferencing method to avoid any problems with technology access and the possibility of technical glitches. The difficulty of accessing these sites drove my judgement to choose a communication method that would limit any loss of valuable interview time. However, research exists that indicates telephone interviews allow interviewees to be relaxed, feel safe, and speak freely while also allowing the interviewer to take notes discreetly (Novick, 2008).

I utilized a semi-structured interview protocol which allowed for an open conversation to take place, rather than a standard interview process that is more structured and standardized (Merriam, 2009). I took detailed notes during these interviews and highlighted important quotes and themes on which to follow-up later.

Again, because of the prohibitive cost of traveling to observe the participants, I was forced to limit my observations to video of publicly-available meetings. However, each of the districts in this study makes school board meetings available on their websites. In addition, multiple outlets – including local media and newspapers, non-profit groups, and district external communication departments – provide a varied set of examples of public communications that I was able to review. During these observations, I took highly descriptive field notes (Merriam, 2009). Document review

consisted of publicly-available district mission and policy instructions, internal memos from superintendents to the school board and other district staff, and related instructional or programmatic modifications. I used pseudonyms for the research participants and their school districts in order to protect their anonymity.

3.5   Data Analysis

This section consists of an explanation of ways I analyzed my collected data. Data analysis in a qualitative study is ongoing and iterative during the course of a study (Creswell, 2012). I therefore began analyzing data as soon as collection began. Because qualitative data can be quite extensive, I used NVivo12 to organize and analyze the collected data. I began by transcribing the interviews myself, a process that allowed me to deeply familiarize myself with the data. I then read and re-read each data source (interviews, observations, and documents), looking for broad themes and taking brief notes of these themes as well as marking key quotations. I also continually engaged in a process of analytic memoing. According to Creswell (2012), "Memos are notes the researcher writes throughout the research process to elaborate on ideas about the data and the coded categories" (p. 438). These memos helped track my thoughts on emergent themes and guided my data analysis.

Inductive and deductive codes were derived from my conceptual framework and from emergent themes. Analysis of the data was influenced by the results of the conceptual framework used, specifically Benford and Snow's (2000) three-part conception of framing. This framework consists of three modes of framing: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. Codes were based on these modes and on emergent themes related to the language of the frames of leaders, the reasons they provided for framing a policy in the way that they did, and on themes related to the sense and meaning making of superintendents around community and stakeholder involvement.

3.6   Validity

In qualitative research, there are a number of concerns regarding study validity. In qualitative studies, the researcher is involved as a part of the research. In other words, the researcher is placed within the context of the study, among study participants, and is the chief means of conducting the research (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). As a result of this close contact, the results and interpretation of a qualitative study is strongly influenced and limited by the assumptions and biases of the researcher (Merriam, 2009).

Although I cannot completely eliminate bias, I took several steps to minimize this risk. First, I attempted "triangulation" of my data in order to increase the chance that my findings will be accurate (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2018). By using interviews, document review, and observations, I strove to the improve the strength of my data and allow for more vigorous and convincing findings. Additionally, as the data analysis process proceeded, leaders participated in "member checks" in their follow-up interviews to ensure the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2012). A member check "involves taking the findings back to participants and asking them (in writing or in an interview) about the accuracy of the report" (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). These member checks occurred in each of the three follow-up interviews, with each of the superintendents indicating that my initial findings were accurate and reflected their experiences.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1   Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the contextual background of each of the districts and superintendents and present the results of my analysis of the data examining how superintendents frame equity-related policies and programs in their districts. First, I will describe each of the five districts and the background of each superintendent. Then, I will present the themes that emerged from an analysis of how superintendents create meaning around equity and how they attempt to frame equity for others. This chapter continues with an examination of how the superintendents made sense of community engagement and stakeholder involvement. Finally, I present themes to framing theory as well as the three core framing tasks – diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational – that were used as a theoretical framework.

4.2   Case Descriptions

Before beginning a description of the five cases in this study, it would be prudent to briefly mention the need to ensure that the participants' identities remain confidential. Of the 13,491 school districts in the United States, there are 764 urban or "city" districts as defined by NCES (NCES, 2014). Large urban districts are even fewer in number, totaling 190 districts (NCES, 2014). Measures taken to ensure the confidentiality of study participants are therefore critical given their high-profile leadership positions as well as the small number of urban districts. I have therefore made a concerted effort to detach certain informational markers from their related case descriptions with the aim of masking the identity of study participants. It is my hope that this does not take away from the "thick, rich" descriptions which make qualitative case study such a useful and insightful methodology.

District descriptions. The following information is an aggregate description of the districts that are included in this study. First, each of the five districts is located in a different U.S. state. Second, the districts are geographically dispersed around the country. The U.S. Census Bureau delineates four large regions in the United States: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The study participants are spread across three of these four regions. Of those that share a region, none are located in neighboring states.

Of the five districts in this study, the National Council for Education Statistics (NCES) defines four as located in "large" urban areas and one as "midsize." The descriptor "large" indicates that the district is "inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more" (NCES, 2006). The descriptor "midsize" indicates that the district is "inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000" (NCES, 2006). Many of the districts are the largest in their respective states. Many of these districts are also the largest employers in their communities.

The average (mean) student population of the five districts in this study is approximately 54,000 students with an average (mean) of 100 schools and 7,200 staff (see Table 4.1). The districts' average overall budget is $680 million.

Table 4.1 Aggregate School District Characteristics

Average Student Population	54,000
Average Number of Schools in the District	100
Average Total Staff Size	7,200
Average Annual Budget	$680,000,000

Note: District Details from 2015-2016 school year. Fiscal data from 2013-2014 school year.
All averages are arithmetic mean.

Participant demographics and experience. The five participants in this study are all superintendents of urban school districts in five different states located throughout the United States. A brief description of the demographics and experience level of the superintendents will follow. However, as previously indicated, issues of participant anonymity are crucial given the small number of urban districts. Furthermore, it is also sensible to be cautious when disclosing specific demographic information of these five participants given the current state of the superintendency (see Table 4.2). For example, Kowalski et al. (2011) has observed that only 24% of superintendents are female and only 6% of superintendents are persons of color. Additionally, the Council of Great City Schools (2014), an organization representing the largest urban school districts in the U.S., has noted that only 13% of their member districts were led by Black female superintendents and 2% were led by Hispanic females. Given these small percentages, the individual ethnic or racial background of the superintendents who are people of color have been left intentionally unspecified.

Of the five superintendents that participated in this study, four are male and one is female. Three are people of color and two are white. The years of experience in their current positions – not including a possible term as interim superintendent – ranged from one to five years. Three had no experience as a superintendent before being hired to their current positions, one had over five years of experience in a previous district, and one had experience leading several different districts over a 20-year career (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 Superintendent Demographics and Experience

Sex	4 Male; 1 Female
Race and Ethnicity	3 Persons of Color; 2 White
Current Tenure	1-5 years
Previous Tenure	0-20+ years

Dr. Robert Riley and Wyndale Public Schools. Dr. Robert Riley is a white man in his late forties. He looked younger than his age, but presented himself as a mature, professional leader. During interviews, he was personable and carried a seriousness of purpose when speaking about the issues that were important to his district. He was consistently thoughtful and took care when answering interview questions. During my observations of him interacting with the public, Dr. Riley was serious but not stuffy, and personable but not silly. He might strike someone as what an archetypal school principal looks like. Dr. Riley did not seem to smile very much or get over-excited about anything. I observed him say that he was really excited about an opportunity but in no way came across as excited. He had moments where he was funny and self-deprecating and therefore likable, but he would likely not have a successful career as a motivational speaker.

In public, Dr. Riley did not present himself as a "politician" or as anything other than genuine when he spoke about schools or equity issues. He came across as smart and easily reached into his memory for data and background information on the district. Dr. Riley also seemed comfortable raising the issues of race, ethnicity, and poverty and how they affect education in general and his district in particular. He grew up in a small, rural town but most would be hard-pressed to guess that fact, given his desire to confront the struggles of people who did not come from a similar background. He admitted that his background may have contributed to this sort of humility, saying "I knew that one thing that I was confident of was that I did not know anything because of the real isolated nature of where I grew up."

Dr. Riley had been in education for twenty years but admitted that he never intended to be a teacher or to make education his career. His undergraduate degree was not in education, but during college the idea of teaching stuck in his mind. After graduating, Dr. Riley decided to give teaching a try and ended up staying in the classroom for more than ten years. He conceded that it

was during this period that his passion for equity began, saying "In that time, I ended up having quite a large number of students in poverty and English Language Learners. That really started lighting my fire." He later became a successful school principal for three years and was subsequently hired as a central office staff member in Wyndale Public Schools. During his time in central office the superintendent resigned, but Dr. Riley remarked that he "was very invested in the community and the work we were doing" and was concerned that if another superintendent was hired, he might be forced to leave his position in the district. He decided to apply for the superintendent position and was hired. During our conversation about his career path, Dr. Riley noted his initial reluctance to pursue any kind leadership role, from principal to central office. Regarding his becoming superintendent, he concluded, "So I'm not here by design."

Wyndale Public Schools (WPS) is a racially and ethnically diverse urban district in a state that is not otherwise known for its diverse population. Like many cities throughout the country, it is located in an area that once had an economically powerful industrial base which had seen a steady decline for more than thirty years. However, over the past two decades, in place of the previous industrial base grew other industries, including banking, publishing, higher education, and insurance. Like many other cities, Wyndale saw its wealthier white residents de camp for suburban areas after the 1960s, which had an adverse effect on the public schools in the city due to the loss in enrollment and lower tax base.

The demographics of the city and the district had changed over the past several decades. Since 1990, the population identified by the U.S. Census as non-White increased by nearly 15 percentage points. The majority of students in WPS are non-White (see Table 3.3) and approximately 20% of students are LEP. Dr. Riley often remarked that over one-hundred languages and dialects are spoken by students in his district. In addition to the logistical challenge

of this language diversity, approximately 75% of WPS students are eligible for free and reduced priced-meals, meaning they are near or below the Federal definition of poverty.

The voters of Wyndale elect their seven-member school board to four-year terms. The majority of board members run to represent an individual district in the city with the remaining chosen "at large" by voters from the entire city. Every two years, Wyndale voters will choose either three or four board members, but like many school board elections, turnout is usually quite low. The board members are charged with establishing the budget and related tax rates, creating district policy, and hiring the superintendent. The length of the superintendent's contract is three years. This means that if voters in the district are dissatisfied, it is possible to change the composition of the board before the end of the superintendent's contract term. Dr. Riley knew well the effect that board member turnover can have on the affairs of the district, saying:

> I find that every two years, even if there's only one new member, it almost feels like starting over again. And then close to the end of the second year, I feel like we're usually hitting a groove. And then it's 'apple cart upset' again.

Throughout our conversations, Dr. Riley commented that maintaining a positive working relationship with board members was central to the success of any effort. His efforts seemed to be working, given the fact that Dr. Riley had recently completed his second contract term and it seemed likely that he would be hired for a third.

The recent academic performance of the district had been celebrated for its success in areas of growth in student achievement, but the district faced criticism for gaps in proficiency. For instance, groups of non-White elementary school students consistently scored lower on the state mathematics exam, with the gap between White and Black students reaching thirty percentage points. WPS struggled with resources, having to cut millions of dollars from the budget because

of issues getting state funding. The district has faced other issues, including a scandal involving a previous superintendent that resulted in his resignation. Dr. Riley was the next superintendent hired after this scandal. (As an unfortunate side note, many of the districts in this study had similar experiences with scandal or mismanagement that resulted in the forced resignation or removal of the superintendent.)

Despite its struggles, Dr. Riley felt that the district had made some great strides when it came to equity in the district. He defined equity in the following manner:

> Well, to me equity means that no one person is advantaged or disadvantaged because of their race or gender or creed or color or sexual orientation or sexual identity or religion. That everyone is provided opportunity in an equal way in that regard.

Dr. Riley attempted to enact his vision of equity in the district in many ways. He altered district discipline policies to address the disproportionate number of Black students suspended or expelled. He also increased student enrollment in Advanced Placement classes, expanded the use of technology in schools serving large numbers of students from low-SES backgrounds, and pushed for the construction of new school buildings in areas of WPS that were previously underserved. He also lobbied state legislators to increase funding for programs serving ELL students. He was very vocal in speaking about the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the student body of WPS and often spoke of the value, rather than the challenges, that this diversity brought to the district.

Dr. James Bell and Greenwell Unified School District. Dr. James Bell is a person of color in his mid-fifties. He values professionalism in attire and conversation, having the look and sound of a college professor. This made sense, given that he had experience in higher education earlier in his career. In his interviews, he came across as serious, concerned, and attentive leader with a laid-back, staid manner. During my observations of him, the unhurried pace of his speech

left an impression of Dr. Bell's calm, composed demeanor. But most would likely not think of him as an inspirational or charismatic leader.

In his public appearances, Dr. Bell did not come across as laser-focused on equity and did not mention it often without being prompted. This was noticeable and somewhat surprising, given his background as a person of color. But in our conversations, he was certainly not indifferent to the struggle of marginalized groups in the district and was sincere in stating his desire to help them. In one interview, he mentioned the larger transformations that he wished to see in the community:

> For me, I think that's what we should be about, is trying to take away those barriers that might create the inequities in the first place. And if we can eliminate those barriers that create the inequities, then we don't have to worry about providing the supports to create equity for every child.

Dr. Bell was also concerned with the larger policy issues, like state taxation and funding formulas, that created structural inequities in school districts.

The focus of his concerns made sense given Dr. Bell's professional background. He was never a K-12 classroom teacher or school principal, having started his career as a university professor and afterwards getting involved in public policy and state politics. It was later in his career that he was hired as a central office administrator, with his position focusing on facilities, human resources, and logistical support. This experience seemed to give Dr. Bell more of a "30,000 foot" view of schools and districts, as reflected in his repeated reference to organizational, programmatic, and systemic change. This is not mean that Dr. Bell is uncaring or set apart from the struggles of everyday students. It is simply an observation of the way Dr. Bell seemed to look at school district improvement. For instance, when mentioning equity in the district, he remarked:

Even though [equity] has been a strong message of ours and our policies reflect that strong message, we still have not developed the programs and activities to make that message real in our day-to-day practices and in our day-to-day interactions with each other.

Dr. Bell's view of equity and change seemed to reflect his experience in the arena of public affairs and public policy. When asked where he wished he could spend more of his time, he replied,

I think I would rather spend more time working on the work plan and working on the different activities and strategies that we have developed, in terms of monitoring that work and coming up with corrective action plans if things aren't going the way we would like them.

He also discussed his reasons for seeking the superintendency:

I think primarily once I started working here in the district and seeing the type of work that a superintendent does and the type of impact a superintendent can have, with improving opportunities for students and having a programmatic and systemic impact, [helping] students to achieve their goals and dreams. I thought that was pretty awesome.

Compared to some of the other participants in this study, it seemed that Dr. Bell's main purpose in becoming a leader in his district was less about "serving others" or "fighting injustice" and more about "having a programmatic and systemic impact" by effectively and efficiently managing the district.

Greenwell Unified School District (GUSD) is a predominantly African American urban district in a city that is majority White, but whose non-White population is increasing. The size of Greenwell's White population has declined in the past two and a half decades while the Black, Hispanic, and Asian population percentages have increased. The city of Greenwell itself has grown rapidly in the past twenty years – upwards of 20% since the 1990s. This is especially notable when

compared to other cities in post-industrial areas of the U.S. Like Wyndale, Greenwell had been a city dependent on heavy industry but had slowly reinvented its economy over the past thirty years. It is now expanded to include insurance, education, medical research, banking, and technology.

Although Greenwell had weathered the economic storms battering other urban areas, their public schools had experience a similar flight of White residents from the city to the suburbs following desegregation efforts in during the Civil Rights era. This left GUSD with a higher population of low-SES and minority students than the surrounding communities. The overall student enrollment at GUSD declined for nearly thirty years and only recently has been stabilized. The majority of GUSD students are Black and the vast majority (over 70%) qualify for free and reduced priced lunch (see Table 3.3). The percentage of GUSD students who are White is only approximately 25%, which is nearly half of the overall percentage of White residents in the city.

The people of Greenwell elect their seven-member school board to four-year terms, with all of the board seats chosen "at large" by voters throughout the city rather than being chosen to represent one geographical area of the city. Elections are held every two years, with either three or four seats open. Like many other school boards, GUSD charges their school board members with choosing the superintendent, setting and monitoring a budget, and creating district policy. The board is also able to put tax rate increases and bond proposals to a city-wide vote by adding them to fall election ballots. The superintendent's contract term is renewable every four years. The district had been dealing with budget shortfalls contributing to a backlog of deferred maintenance. However, Greenwell voters approved a tax increase and bond issuance, leading to ongoing construction projects throughout the district. Dr. Bell noted that this construction project was a significant initiative that would have an effect that was widely felt, given that "every sector of our school district had buildings that were in very bad shape and were very old." But he also noted

that this issue had an equity component, remarking that "we were able to get the community to take ownership of the idea that those buildings that are the worst off and the oldest, we should take care of those buildings first." These buildings were predominantly located in historically underserved areas of the city, but under this plan would be prioritized.

Although progress in construction and renovation were taking place, the academic performance of the city was under criticism. GUSD had underperformed on state tests and under the state ranking system were identified as a "failing" district. The state identified gaps in test scores among different racial and ethnic groups as a particular problem. For instance, the percentage of White students who hit the state goal in English Language Arts and Math were approximately twenty percentage points higher than African American students. GUSD also faced a recent scandal in its district leadership, forcing a previous superintendent to resign. GUSD was also facing steep budget issues, with tens of millions of dollars in cuts proposed for the coming year.

Dr. Bell noted that the district had a long history of focusing on equity issues, but that "it began to wane after a number of years." Despite this lapse in focus, Dr. Bell maintained that it was still a part of GUSD. He said:

> But [equity] still continued in terms of policy and in terms of an expression as a part of our cultural values as an organization, that we value all students and, not only students, but adults that are part of our organization and who work with us to provide opportunities for our students. […] That equity and diversity message is still a strong part of our culture here in the district.

He did observe that the district had previous adopted a district-wide equity policy and had done a study of equity in the district approximately fifteen years ago. A review of the school board's

policy documents revealed that this was indeed the case. Dr. Bell himself defined equity in the following manner:

> For me it means recognizing that all of our students are different, and because they are different, we have to provide services and resources that not only challenge them to exceed and excel, but also offer services and activities that recognize the differences that they bring to the table, and help them to maximize those differences, to be the best person they can be.

He also noted that the district had "a lot of work to do" when it came to equity, but that GUSD was "further along than others here in the state."

Dr. Vanessa Powell and Linwall Unified School District. Dr. Vanessa Powell is a person of color in her late forties. She carries herself with an air of confidence and with a professional demeanor of someone who loves her job. In her interactions with the public, she comes across as smart, composed and even-keeled. She fit the profile of the "happy warrior," being focused on pushing for equity while also remaining upbeat and positive when interacting with stakeholders. In most of our conversations and in her public communication, she seemed laser-focused on issues of equity in her district. Unlike some of the other superintendents in this study, her leadership style might be termed "inspirational" – but she was certainly not preachy. She was very comfortable speaking about issues of equity without seeming like she talked down to people.

Dr. Powell has spent her entire twenty-year career in education. She started as a classroom teacher and then became a successful principal in a school with a high percentage of low-SES and minority children. She was subsequently promoted to a position in central office and was then hired by another district where she served for several years as an assistant superintendent. Dr. Powell came to Linwall Unified School District (LUSD) after a multi-year stint as a superintendent

in a smaller district outside of the state. Unlike Dr. Riley, when asked about her career trajectory, Dr. Powell noted that pursuing the superintendency was in fact her long-term goal:

> I think I always wanted to have a broader impact, and certainly my drive to create a more just society and a society where more students had access to education, as the driver for improving their life outcomes, inspired me to want to do a job where I had greater influence. And so, from even when I was teaching, I wanted to be a superintendent.

According to Dr. Powell, her broad focus on improving society and her ambition to be a superintendent was purposeful. But Dr. Powell remarked that her decision to come to a large urban district like LUSD came about by her capitalizing on a mix of fate and choice, saying:

> I actually just received a telephone call one day from a search consultant saying they were looking for a superintendent in [LUSD] and I guess they had been looking for some time. […] And I actually knew of the work of [LUSD]. They have been pretty infamous under the leadership of [masked] for their equity work and doing really good equity work for students. […] So I said, 'Sure, I'll interview.' And two and a half weeks later I was superintendent.

Dr. Powell admitted that she was not actively searching for the opportunity to lead a large urban district, especially one that seemed to fit her own hope for creating a more equitable school system and a more just society. However, when the opportunity presented itself, she pursued it in order to further her goal of having a broad impact.

LUSD is a racially and ethnically diverse urban district with a history of struggles with racism, segregation, and court battles over school funding and district boundaries. Local industries that had once employed large numbers of people, like manufacturing, had long been in decline, but other sectors of the economy had seen great progress. The city of Linwall had become an

economic hotbed of high technology, communications, healthcare, and higher education. Like many of the cities that are a part of this study, LUSD had endured a long history of racial segregation in the early 20th century and, during the Civil Rights Era, had taken steps to integrate their schools. However, White families reacted to these changes by moving out of the district into neighboring suburban areas. Although some of these more affluent families recently had begun returning to the district, the demographics of the LUSD's enrollment do not come close to mirroring the demographics of the surrounding county. For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than half of the children under 18 years of age living in the district's catchment area are White, but the percentage of White students enrolled at LUSD is less than a third.

However, because of the strong economy, the city and the surrounding area had seen double-digit population growth in the past twenty years. This growth was accompanied by a shift in the demographics of the region. According to the U.S. Census, from 1990 to 2010, the percentage of White residents in the Linwall area decreased by approximately ten percentage points. Concurrently, the proportion of Black residents grew by more than five percentage points and the proportion of Hispanic or Latino grew from nearly non-existent to almost ten percent of the population. Like several other districts, Dr. Powell observed that the students of LUSD spoke over one hundred languages and nearly two-thirds were eligible for free or reduced priced lunch.

LUSD is governed by a larger board than the other districts in this study, with a total of nine board members. Elections are held every two years, with either five or four seats up for a vote. Only one seat is "at large," with the other members representing a different geographical area of the district. The board is in charge of creating district policies and monitoring governance of the budget, curriculum, and student achievement. The board is also responsible for hiring the superintendent, whose contract term is four years. Dr. Powell observed that this governance model

– with the board directly hiring the superintendent – meant that she must focus a great deal of effort towards the board:

> The district's not going to move unless the superintendent and board are working together as a strong governance team with the same value and belief system. So I spend a lot of time trying to move the board, otherwise everything I do, with schools and communities, will be undone by board members.

This recognition of the importance of the board was similar to most other superintendents in this study. However, Dr. Powell faced some early resistance from some of her board members. This resistance is reflected in the public revelation that a board member had discussed trying to get the votes to oust her.

Despite the tumult of this revelation, the academic performance of the LUSD had been improving on state-wide tests. The percentage of students scoring at or above grade level had been increasing steadily and the assessment of student "growth," in addition to measures of proficiency, was also positive. However, like many other districts, the gaps between different student groups had proven hard to eliminate. For example, the gap between Black and White students in district-defined "college or career-ready" math standards was approximately forty percentage points.

Dr. Powell understood the importance of addressing these gaps. She noted the importance that she placed on equity efforts in the district and said the following about equity:

> It's about making sure students have what they need. It's about acknowledging and dismantling classist and racist systems that predict achievement until we can no longer predict achievement based on race, poverty, disability, or immigration status, and aligning resources to make sure that happens.

Although her definition was precise and critical of the current status of education, during our conversations she also observed the difficulty of making equitable change in schools, especially in her capacity as a prime figure in relating with the school board. She said:

> In a district like this, I have half the board members who believe in that change and half who do not. What you have to capitalize upon is a board is going to be hard pressed to say publicly they don't believe in equity. So they are going to go with it in public.

Dr. Powell acknowledged the complexity of change efforts in school districts and made concerted efforts to navigate these intricacies. She created an equity working group consisting of teachers, principals, and staff from across the district. This group met regularly to discuss equity in the district and were trained in how to address some of these issues in their schools and offices. Dr. Powell also conducted recurring listening sessions with groups of teachers and regularly spoke to community groups about issues of equity. She was very comfortable broaching the difficult subjects of race, class, and gender in public venues despite her own acknowledgement that these issues are often contentious.

Superintendent Eric Solano and Matira County School District. Superintendent Eric Solano is a person of color in his early fifties. He typically wore a well-fitting suit, though he did sometimes forgo the tie. This may be due to the fact that he had been an attorney for nearly twenty years and then a business-person after leaving his legal career. Despite his background in what might be a stereotypically staid career, Mr. Solano was personable during our interviews and seemed to easily connect with others during public appearances. He was outgoing and self-confident while also exuding a genuine care for the students in his district. I once observed him get emotional when speaking about the challenges that the students in his district face. Mr. Solano

was also a physical presence and gave the impression that he was the one "in charge" when he entered the room.

Despite these qualities, Mr. Solano would admit that he was not always effective on the political side of the job of the superintendent. He had a brief time as a classroom teacher before beginning a successful law and business career, but he had no other experience in leading schools before becoming a superintendent. This may have contributed to his struggles in navigating the complicated politics of the school district. He said, "I'm really kind of a substance over form guy. I just like to do the work. And the political side of the superintendency, especially at a large urban like us […] is the hardest part, in my mind." He later admitted:

> I fought [the politics] the whole time, so it's been tough. But if you don't fight it and appreciate that that's the way it's going to be, I think it's easier to manage. And I just hadn't done a good job of that.

A review of the public meetings and comments of Superintendent Solano reinforced his perception of his difficulties with the school board. Although he may have struggled to find his way in the political realm, Mr. Solano focused his efforts on improving the standing of the district. This is due to the fact that the district was still dealing with residual effects of a scandal that resulted in the resignation of the previous superintendent. Mr. Solano saw this scandal as one of the reasons that he decided to apply for the superintendent position, saying that "For me it was more the challenge of propping the district up, getting it back on the right track, and then hopefully setting the course for the next superintendent to come in." He had no allusions that this job would be for the long-term yet felt compelled to serve in order to rectify some of the issues facing the district.

Matira County School District (MCSD) is a predominantly Hispanic district in a city that mirrors this "majority-minority" status. According to district records and the U.S. Census, more

than three-quarters of the district and the surrounding community are Hispanic or Latino. Less than a quarter of the city is White and Non-Hispanic and less than five percent is Black. The demographics of the community is related to the somewhat high percentage (approximately 30%) of ELLs in MCSD (see Table 3.3). The economy of the region historically had been based on manufacturing, mining, oil, and gas production but has recently diversified to include healthcare and logistics. The city and county are poorer than the rest of the state, and funding inequities existed among differing areas of the district. The district had approximately 70% of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals (see Table 3.3).

The voters in MCSD elect seven members to a school board who serve for four-year terms. All seven board members represent geographical areas of the district, with either three or four seats up for election every two years. The board is in charge of approving the district's budget and related fiduciary responsibilities, proposing tax levies and school bonds, establishing district policy, and hiring the superintendent to a contract that typically lasts four or five years. Mr. Solano recognized the powerful role that the board can play controlling the direction of his district as well as his apparent difficulty in pushing them to adopt his agenda, remarking that:

> [A superintendent has] to have a lot of courage and strength to push stuff through, but the reality is you are just a through-put. I mean, you are balancing the politics of the board so that we can work. We have senior staff, leadership team, and cabinet. They have got a lot to do, their hands are full. We have got plenty of work to do to move the boat in the direction that we've decided to move it. And sometimes as a superintendent you just have to take all the shit that comes your way at the board level. I've fought with the board a lot, we've all had our issues, but me fighting with the board doesn't help my team do the work.

Sometimes if you really want to do the right thing for kids, you have to just grin and bear

it and then try to clear a path for your team to work. I just don't see another way forward.

Despite his self-professed difficulty in working with the school board, Mr. Solano's contract was renewed during this study and, at least externally, held onto their support. But other stakeholders, like the local teacher's union, pushed back on some of his agenda and attempted to build support for his ouster. Additionally, notwithstanding their low numbers, affluent White parent groups held outsized political influence in the district. In fact, one of Mr. Solano's self-described accomplishments – the district-wide adoption of a dual-language program for ELLs – gained initial acceptance because of the support of affluent White parents that saw the program as a way to make their children more economically competitive in the future job market.

As measured by state test scores, MCSD had a number of academic concerns. Though judged as meeting overall state standards, certain areas of the district and certain schools persistently struggled. The most recent data released by the state indicated that nearly twenty-five percent of the schools in the district failed on at least one measure of effectiveness. Though on firmer financial footing than five or six years ago, MCSD faced a budget shortfall for the coming school year and longer-term financial challenges. This shortfall was related to MCSD's falling enrollment, with parents choosing to move or send their children to different districts. These factors combined to cause Mr. Solano and the board to recently call for the closure or consolidation of several schools in the district. These issues were in addition to the aforementioned superintendent scandal, which may also have pushed families away from the district.

Mr. Solano was well-aware of these struggles and their implications for equity in MCSD. In defining equity, he said:

I think for me it means, that irrespective of your ZIP Code or what part of town you live in, we really should try to offer a quality education for every child. And it's really so much easier to say than it is to do. We look at all of the inequities all the time here, and in terms of school performance – if you use that as a metric or scorecard – time and time again, the same schools in the same neighborhoods are performing at a specific level relative to their peers.

Mr. Solano held these equity issues in his mind while also navigating the complex political nature of the position of superintendent. He helped implement the expansion of dual language from a small pilot program in an affluent area to a district-wide initiative, instituted professional development programs centered around project-based learning and technology, and worked to reestablish trust in the district and move it away from its troubled past.

Dr. Stan Clark and Valston Public Schools. Dr. Stan Clark is a white man in his sixties. He was friendly and considerate during interviews and expressed a genuine interest in the larger issues of district leadership and the superintendency. This may have been due to the fact that he had nearly twenty years of experience in the position. When speaking about education, he came across as learned and polished, as if he had been a long-time professor at a prestigious university. He was the kind of person that cites sociological and political science theories or brings up the book he is currently reading while engaging in everyday conversation. But he was relaxed and forthright in our conversations together and did not seem overly-formal or pompous. He was open in identifying and reflecting on his own shortcomings, a trait that made him seem humble and likable. In public appearances, Dr. Clark could seem a little stiff and uncomfortable. This was not due to a lack of knowledge. In fact, Dr. Clark would often refer to statistics about the district or

research studies to reinforce his point. But perhaps this tendency contributed to the professorial way that he spoke and interacted with people.

But despite his seemingly distant and detached air, Dr. Clark was an open advocate for equity in education. This was at least partly due to his long career in schools and districts that served marginalized groups of students. Like Dr. Riley, Dr. Clark admitted that this career choice was not intentional:

I never intended to be a superintendent. I just kind of ran afoul of certification requirements again and again and again. So I was kind of like, "I don't know, I guess I'll take administrative courses. I won't ever need them, but I'll take them." So then I end up as principal in [masked] and then the superintendent told me that he'd take care of all of my expenses to become a superintendent. […] So I had a very, very, truncated teaching, principaling career. Five years before becoming a superintendent at a small district in [masked]. So obviously I'm glad that I did it and I've learned a lot along the way. But it wasn't with malice of forethought.

This lack of forethought did not slow down Dr. Clark's career or his desire to address equity, something that he saw as his main leadership priority. Speaking about equity, he said:

We can't keep throwing away half of our kids. I mean, I can get off on my rhetoric. [It] get me in trouble real quickly. And I just think it's a travesty. It is the problem of our time. If we cannot figure out how to do this, we do not have a future as a country.

Dr. Clark was very open and comfortable talking about issues of equity in the district – perhaps to a fault. He admitted that his openness to confront these issues and willingness to speak a consistent message about equity could get him into trouble. When asked how he navigates this fraught topic, he responded:

Well, I've navigated it by saying the same thing to all of the audiences and then I get all of the White pushback. I don't know that I recommend that. I mean, that's kind of who I am and what I've done.

In addition to his conceding that reiterating a message about equity could be problematic, Dr. Clark also admitted that he struggled with some of the community-relational aspects of the superintendency:

I only half-jokingly say that it takes one full-time job to keep the doors open. It takes another full-time job to move the needle instructionally. [...] And it takes a third full-time job to keep the community engaged. And that's the one that I seemed to have failed on again and again.

These struggles occurred despite Dr. Clark's long experience in leading districts. And as much as he purposefully and publicly spoke about equity, Dr. Clark was self-critical during an interview in a local newspaper, conceding that he had not been vocal enough about these important issues. Despite his self-criticism, Dr. Clark took further steps by establishing school-level working groups of principals, teachers, and staff to help increase capacity and support for equity which will eventually expand to each school. He also created a taskforce to identify and address specific equity needs in the district.

Valston Public Schools (VPS) is a diverse urban district with a growing enrollment in a fast-growing, vibrant city. Like some other districts in this study, Dr. Clark noted that over one hundred languages and dialects were spoken by students in VPS. Unlike other districts and cities in this study, VPS had a much lower overall percentage of students who were eligible for Free and Reduced Priced Lunch (see Table 3.3). But stubborn issues of inequity and marginalization remained throughout the city and the district. The city of Valston had been a fast-growing urban

area over the past decade, and a vibrant economy brought overall low unemployment. However, social issues resulting from rapid gentrification left the city dealing with several crises, from rising housing prices to an epidemic of homelessness. The prosperity of the city was not evenly distributed, and certain pockets of the city and the district did not benefit from the explosive economic growth experienced throughout the surrounding region.

The inequity in the city was mirrored in the district. A study by a large nationally recognized university concluded that VPS had one of the largest achievement gaps between white and black students in the U.S. State-level test scores also reinforced the case that VPS had an equity problem. The most recent state test scores showed that 75% of White students were performing at grade level in Math and were college or career ready, while only 45% of Hispanic or Latino and 30% of Black students scored at the same level.

VPS has a seven-member board with members elected to four-year terms. All represent an area or district of the city with no "at-large" board members. The elections are staggered so that either three or four board members are up for reelection every two years. As much as board turnover was an issue at other districts, it was a serious issue at VPS. Of the seven board members who had hired Dr. Clark, only one remained by the end his first contract. Two years after he was hired, four of the board members were no longer there, representing a possible shift in his support and, given that there were seven members, a majority voting block. Speaking of the changes occurring at the board level, Dr. Clark said:

> So I am four years in, and I have one board member left that hired me and the others have
> been elected on this activist platform, that we want a "change superintendent," we want to
> mix everything up. I have no idea what they want to create, but they want something
> different.

Dr. Clark's perception was that he had witnessed tumultuous changes at the school board and that these changes affected his ability to lead the district.

The high turnover rate on the board was similar to the very high turnover in superintendents; VPS had a gone through far more superintendents in the past decade than the other four districts in this study. In fact, during the course of this study, the VPS board decided not to renew Dr. Clark's contract and hired a new superintendent to run the district. Dr. Clark decided to retire from the superintendency. He reflected on his struggles with the board and their capacity to boost or undermine his agenda:

> So like I said, I mean it's three full-time jobs. And we've done the first two really, really well. We have reestablished systems, we have put the house in order. We have won over the hearts and the souls of our teachers and our principals. […] And I guess, 20/20 hindsight, I should have spent maybe a little bit less time on those two first things. […] I won over the mayor, won over the city, won over CBOs – Community Based Organizations, won over our church community, won over our African American community. But not the school board. I could not pivot fast enough to make them happy.

Throughout our interviews, Dr. Clark often commented on how the school board and dissatisfied stakeholders could derail the changes that he wanted to implement, no matter his overall level of support in the community. When pressed as to why he had so much trouble if he had the support of so many stakeholders, he replied:

> Well, I obviously don't know that. We had two board members that were very over-the-top opinionated. They would beg to differ vehemently. They would say they're just representing the public, nothing racist in their bones. But they worked hard to unseat me from the beginning. One [masked] is now board chair, and she is probably the galvanizing

lightning rod that convinced her colleagues that they needed to have a change. […] [Voters] don't think much of the school district and they want some change. So part of it is just a delayed… I couldn't advertise the district very well when I came because we were in chaos. We're now no longer in chaos and we have a good story to tell, but I haven't been able to get the traction to tell the story.

Here Dr. Clark indicated that one of his tasks as a superintendent was to "tell the story" of the district in order to gain the support of stakeholders for his agenda. Unfortunately, the context of the district – the "chaos" to which Dr. Clark referred – limited his framing options. This "chaos" was the persistent turnover of VPS superintendents as well as a large number of high-level district staff. Although turnover slowed during his tenure, Dr. Clark himself became another data point in this "churn."

4.3   Framing Meaning and the Factors that Influence Framing

The previous section addressed the context of each of the five districts and their superintendents. The following section addresses the first research sub-question, which is "How do superintendents frame meaning for different stakeholders and what factors do superintendents consider when creating those frames?" When creating the frames described in a subsequent section, as well as during other instances of framing efforts in their time as superintendents, each district leader drew from their experience and background and considered a great deal of factors when framing meaning and their policy choices for stakeholders. Below is a collection of these themes and a description of how they were created and expressed by the superintendents.

Making sense of equity. During interviews, each superintendent revealed some of the process by which they made sense of equity. This process is important because how a superintendent makes sense of equity influenced how she or he makes sense of and frames equity

for others. A simple way of defining sense-making is the answer to the question "What is going on?" (Weick et al., 2005). When prompted, each superintendent provided a basic definition of equity. But the sensemaking processes that these superintendents experienced went beyond a basic definition of equity and explored complex levels of nuance and meaning. For example, after defining equity, Dr. Riley quickly noted the complexity of pursuing that goal:

> So [defining equity] is easy to say and what we've been attempting to do is to find ways where we actually have something in our system […] that is not true to that ideal. And the rub comes in when you try to correct a wrong that the district has been long engaged in, because anytime you change something there's a perception that there are winners and there are losers. And even though there is not necessarily an articulated rationale for why things are the way they are in every program or in every school, it also isn't random. And often times those things are in place because those who are in a position to exercise their voice get their way, because it becomes for the leadership of the district, including the school board, the path of least resistance.

Dr. Riley acknowledged that changes relating to equity are often defined as a zero-sum game, where one person or groups of people "win" while others "lose." He also thought of equity in moral terms like "right and wrong" but also observed that leading for equity was not as simple as choosing the "just" path or exercising his leadership according to a prescribed set of ethical standards. He identified the complexity of leading a large urban district, given the powerful voice of those in the mainstream versus those at the margins.

This powerful voice, combined with the democratic nature of school board governance, means that making equitable change is difficult and often fraught. Dr. Riley and others observed that, at least publicly, few would speak out against a more equitable school system. Dr. Riley later

observed, "Now, you won't hear people argue it, but that doesn't mean they're on board with [equity]." This passive resistance meant that making changes for equity in the district might be harder to achieve in the long-term or could result in a more stubborn resistance that might lead to the superintendent's ouster.

Additionally, according to Dr. Riley, the district struggled to hire teachers and staff that could mirror the diversity of the student body of WPS, saying:

> We have an extremely diverse student body, but we have a devil of a time getting, for instance, teachers of color to apply in our district, because they just don't exist in [the state]. And we don't think that's the be-all-end-all in being successful with our equity work.

Dr. Riley contended that hiring a representative staff did not guarantee an equitable outcome and that staff members that were members of historically marginalized groups could be just as inequitable as anyone else. He chose instead to focus his efforts on other ways of achieving his vision of equity in the district.

Dr. Bell's process of making sense of equity involved his experience in the world of state-level policy-making. When asked what significant issue that we had not discussed, Dr. Bell identified school funding. He said:

> I think I guess I was of the impression that when you said you wanted to talk about equity that we would talk more about the financial equity and the academic equity issues, so in that sense the achievement gaps that we have between students. And then how [do] the financial inequities, whether they're based on funding, how funding is allocated or distributed from the state to local communities, or how the taxing structure of the state creates inequities between local communities.

Dr. Bell made sense of equity in his district partly through what he perceived one of its most important causes: inadequate or inequitable funding. This is in line with his previous experience as a professor in public policy and in state-level politics.

For Dr. Powell, sensemaking around equity was complex and involved constant calculation and often tradeoffs. She noted that issues of equity can be extremely contentious and therefore affected her own perception of her leadership. She said:

> Most of all I think the superintendency is about courage. And having the courage to do what is right for 100% of the students. And that sounds, in so many ways, like something so simplistic. 'Of course we do what is right for 100% of the students.' But we do not. We actually make the politically easy decision or a decision that serves the great majority of the students. But we don't make decisions that would positively impact every single one. And I think that takes extraordinary courage, extraordinary leadership.

Dr. Powell's focus on courage is a recognition that simplistic notions of equitable actions can fall short in the often-contentious context of district leadership. She believed that courage was key to face down the resistance that she might encounter when leading for equity. Similar to Dr. Riley, she also noted the tendency for superintendents and board members to choose a path of least resistance when making decisions around equity.

Like Dr. Riley, Dr. Powell perceived that she had perhaps half of her school board in favor of equitable change, but that most of the board would be hard-pressed to publicly rail against this kind of agenda. She said:

> So in a district like this, I have half the board members who believe in that change and half who do not. What you have to capitalize upon is a board is going to be hard-pressed to say

publicly they don't believe in equity. So they are going to go with it in public. But you

continue to keep moving them and moving their thinking.

Dr. Powell saw the importance of capitalizing on this public support for equity, regardless of the

passive resistance that might lurk below the surface. This strategy aligned with her belief in the

ability of a superintendent to be savvy when framing her policy choices, a topic which will be

discussed in further depth below.

Superintendent Solano's conception of equity revolved around resources and his own

understanding of academic achievement. After discussing his own definition of equity, he

commented:

> The easiest part of equity is giving everybody a laptop, for example, or the same textbook.
> I think the harder part is trying to hopefully create the same output, which is the
> performance side of it. And that is the part that we just haven't figured out, I think across
> the country. And we are certainly challenged with it, working with it here at [our district],
> trying to figure it out.

Although Superintendent Solano's example was a demonstration of an equal, rather than equitable,

distribution of resources, he observed that an equity of resource inputs did not necessarily result

in an equity of academic output as they are currently measured. He made sense of equity through

his own view of how schools and districts work.

Given his long tenure as a superintendent, Dr. Clark's sense of equity was tied to his own

perceptions of successes and failures throughout his career. These successes and failures were

rooted in larger education policy arguments over whether to hold districts accountable for

proficiency or for progress. When recounting his effect on students of color in his district, Dr.

Clark said:

We have three middle schools that are among the most populous African American enrollment in [the state], and they have the three highest scores for black students in math. Then you look at the money, and we spent a boat load of money on them. We've created great success and it's been marginal, you know? So even though we are best in the state, we're still about 50% proficient. And so some of our community of color look at that and say, 'Well, we could care less whether you are the best in the state. This is still a travesty. You should be embarrassed.' It's kind of like, 'How can you, with a straight face, even say out loud that you're proud of 50%.' And they are right. But I go back the other way and say, 'Well, gee, the state average is about [35%].' So let's go multiply [that number] times however many African American students are in those buildings. So we are changing the lives of hundreds of kids per year. And, so I don't know, maybe we just have to take a seventh-generation approach. That's hundreds, and maybe thousands, of kids that are going to be better off generationally.

Dr. Clark attempted to create some nuance in his understanding of the academic performance of African American students in his district, a population on which he professed to focus his efforts. This nuance shaped his perception of equity. For him, advancement on equity might mean expending resources that result in an increase in students' math test scores. At the same time, he also believed that this increase was not equitable if it did result in an overall high level of achievement for this group of students. His preference to take a long-term view of the district's performance – to celebrate the success but recognize the work to be done – seemed to be his way of reconciling these two conflicting conceptions of equity.

Framing equity for others. When framing the meaning of equity for others, the superintendents in this study each took a slightly different tack due to the differing ways that they

made sense of equity for themselves. Each had a specific method of strategically communicating the issue to their stakeholders based on the circumstance of the individual policy or programmatic change, their own sense of equity, and their understanding of the context of their district. However, during our conversations around equity framing, as well as in my observations and document analysis, there were some common conceptions that arose when framing equity for others. The following three themes were the most common to arise during analysis of the five superintendents' framing efforts around equity: moral, economic, and community.

Moral framing. The most common way that superintendents framed equity for others was through terms centered around morality. For many, equity touched on the values that drove their decision to become a superintendent. Thus, when they perceived a policy or program change to be based on equity, these superintendents often spoke of them using messages and wording noting its moral value. They often perceived equity in terms of "right" and "wrong" and therefore included this in their strategic messaging about the changes they wanted to make in their districts.

As with many other superintendents, Dr. Riley faced resistance to some of the changes that he had wanted to make in his district. When attempting to navigate this resistance, Dr. Riley often attempted to frame the change using moral terms. For example, when he spoke of the resistance that he faced from a group of parents, he said, "As [parents] experience a change that's tied to equity, [I am] helping them understand how *it's the right thing to do* even if they don't particularly see it as something that's advantageous to their particular child or family member" [emphasis added]. Dr. Powell also used framing language that was centered around a conception of the moral "rightness" of her cause, saying "So I try to convince [the school board] that [...] it's not a fair policy and that *we have to stand up for what is right*, even when there are parents or groups of

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people who disagree with us" [emphasis added]. Dr. Clark acknowledged that he often used morally-rooted, emotionally-charged language to discuss issues of equity, saying:

It's kind of like, we can't keep throwing away half of our kids. I mean, I can get off on my rhetoric. They get me in trouble real quickly. *And I just think it's a travesty.* It is the problem of our time. If we cannot figure out how to do this, we do not have a future as a country. [emphasis added]

This quotation from Dr. Clark encapsulates much of what he thought about the current inequities in education, from the dehumanizing effects of writing off a large percentage of children to the long-term societal damage that he felt was likely if effective action is not taken.

Economic framing. Although a moral framing was perhaps the most common way of framing equity-based policy changes, superintendents often used a message that appealed less to the emotional or moral side of the issue and more to the rational. Many superintendents used framing language that pointed out the economic effects of inequity and the positive effects that equity would have on the local and regional economy. They often connected policies and programs intended for equity to economic or business-related topics like workforce preparation. They also spoke of the benefits of improving the school system and pursuing equity as a way to attract business investment, observing that companies might be more likely to move to the community and invest only if the schools are seen as high-achieving. Superintendents would also speak of gains in equity as a long-term method for governments (and therefore taxpayers) to save money on social services. For instance, superintendents might note that fewer high school dropouts would likely result in lower costs for the criminal justice system or fewer people on public assistance – and perhaps higher tax receipts from productive, employed workers.

For instance, Dr. Riley spoke about the value of including an economic framing of equity, especially for audiences that he felt might be open to this argument:

How we get the job done with equity in the district does require different approaches to getting the resources that we need from the business community and the legislature and the governor, for sure. Because I would argue that my legislature, by and large, does not want to believe that we have students from [over one hundred] different countries, most of whom are brown and black. They are not particularly concerned about them. That might not seem fair, but I believe that that's true. They don't want to be bothered with English Language Learners. And they don't want to own that even as the economy is purportedly thriving that a whole ton of our families are not economically thriving. So you have to try to play cards that makes sense in your receiver's deck. Even if there is a bigger moral question.

Here Dr. Riley is positioning an economic framing of equity as fundamentally "good" i.e., it is a framing of the problem that is factually correct and should be highlighted. But he also posits that an economic framing of equity is a valuable pragmatic approach that can be utilized when speaking to an audience that might be receptive to this kind of message.

Of the five superintendents in this study, Dr. Powell had perhaps the most forceful and well-rounded economic framing of equity policies and programming. Although she certainly spoke about the moral implications of inequity, she also very forcefully framed efforts to combat inequity in economic terms. When asked why she chose to do so, Dr. Powell responded, "It does have an economic effect. It is not just a moral argument. We are decimating the future, the potential decimation of [our state's] future, if we don't think about the impact of education on economic development." Dr. Powell was able to back up these claims with data from a study that the district commissioned on the economic effects of inequity. This study included other data points on the

economic implications of inequity, and Dr. Powell was very open about discussing them in front of stakeholders. For instance, she noted the economic power of the district itself, given its role as one of the larger employers in the region and its related purchasing power. I quote her here at length because of the power of her analysis:

For example, we have studied over time that our lack of investment, or giving contracts – 98% of our contracts – to white vendors instead of MWBE [Minority- and Women-owned Business Enterprises] vendors who might reside right here in the county, when 70% of the children are of color, is taking about $200 million a year out of the black and brown community. And we know that a student's academic performance is directly correlated to the parents' position on the socio-economic ladder there. Directly correlated. So if you look at that and see that, we even take their taxes and then give their tax dollars to outside vendors instead of investing in the vendors right there in the community, like black-owned businesses, brown-owned businesses in the community. We are further exacerbating the achievement gaps. We also look at who we hire, had something like 40% of those who are employed and make the least amount of money are the parents of our children. They're black and brown parents of our children. The highest paid are white and they are not parents in the district. That impacts the academic outcomes of our students, but most superintendents don't pay attention to the operations. We pay attention to the academic side because we don't know the operations side as well. And that has a very negative impact on students when we're not paying attention to how money is used in a community and what happens to these students' lives when their parents don't have enough money or middle-class jobs.

According to Dr. Powell, the economic effects of the district's decisions, in addition to the academic effects, could contribute to inequity in the broader community. It was her contention that the purchasing, staffing, and salary decisions of the district should reflect the focus on equity that was required of the academic programs. An analysis of Dr. Powell's public comments and speeches confirmed that she does, in fact, include these arguments when speaking about how she would like to change how the district operates.

Community framing. Beyond efforts at establishing equity as a moral or economic issue, superintendents also attempted to frame equity around an inclusive and broad message of community. Rather than thinking of marginalized students as "other," superintendents attempted to bring them out of the margins and conceptualize them as an authentic part of the community. Superintendents often did this as an effort to align the interests of equity efforts with the interests of the larger community. For example, Dr. Riley spoke of his effort to tie the success of students from low-SES backgrounds with the fortunes of the district at large:

> And so my response to [the school board], and I think we're pretty much on the same page – pretty much – is look, we have a 75% poverty rate, and if you want the district as a whole to perform well, we need to be serving effectively our students that live in poverty. *Because if they're not performing well, the district isn't performing well.* [emphasis added]

Dr. Riley's approach in this case was to ensure that any discussions of the success of the district must also include the relative success of low-SES students and to value their performance as much as the performance of the overall student population.

Dr. Powell also included framing language that attempted to cast equity efforts as inclusive by connecting the fate of the larger community with the fate of historically marginalized groups in the district, saying:

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[W]e are trying to show it's going to cost all of us. Don't think it's just about, 'These people have no morals and no good home raising and training.' You cannot escape it. No one in this community is going to escape if we do not provide every child with a great education.

Dr. Powell's approach was to break through her perception that some in the community believed that they were insulated from the effects of inequity. She attempted to undercut this group's assumption that they were therefore not responsible for the future success of all of the students in the district.

Dr. Clark lamented his inability to include framing language that referenced the commonality of different groups in the community and how they all might benefit from a more equitable system, admitting: "I probably do need to learn from [masked] and I need to change my rhetoric and I need to have it be more inclusive and talk about how everybody gains." Dr. Clark felt that a more inclusive approach – rather than his consistent use of possibly contentious messages – might bring out less resistance allow for more support from stakeholders that might not perceive themselves as benefitting from these policies.

Factors superintendents consider when creating frames. Superintendents considered multiple factors when creating a strategic messaging approach around equity. Superintendents often prioritized and struggled with these issues during their sensemaking processes and took time to consider how they might influence their framing strategy.

Opposition and resistance. The most common factors cited by superintendents that influenced their framing efforts were opposition and resistance. Superintendents would often spend some time trying to identify sources of opposition and resistance – either anticipated or active – and would spend much of their framing efforts attempting to mitigate them. Some superintendents were proactive and others more reactive in framing against these sources of

opposition and resistance. These differing approaches will be discussed in further detail in a subsequent section.

Each of the five superintendents that participated in this study noted the overall complexity of getting nearly anything done. Given the large size of the districts, almost every policy or programmatic change involved a group that put up some level of resistance. Some superintendents thought that some opposition occurred for its own sake. For instance, as Superintendent Solano observed, "We've got a lot of people in the school business who just want to agitate and go against anything that we try to do. And so we have to be prepared for that. Sometimes that's the reality. It's hard." Dr. Clark mentioned the difficulty of a superintendent staying focused on her or his agenda, saying, "No matter where you start, [an initiative] either ravels or unravels […] It leads you somewhere else, and then before you know it you're chasing too many loose ends and you're not moving on any of them." Dr. Clark continued, speaking about the added difficulty of addressing a contentious issue like race, "It's certainly getting the right people in the room, in that virtually everything that matters in race has to work across silos, so it really only takes one silo to put a wrench in it." According to Dr. Clark, an initiative or program that is directly related to race or another controversial issue may present too many opportunities to be derailed before it can reach fruition.

What seemed to make this problem even more vexing is the tendency for a small but vocal opposition to trump the tacit support of a large number of community members. Several superintendents observed this phenomenon. Speaking of her framing considerations, Dr. Powell said:

[The board] are just really difficult to convince to change their ways, and they are easily influenced by a handful of constituents. I always think about what's the magnitude of the

problem. You know, five constituents complain in a district in this large, they'll change course.

Dr. Riley spoke similarly about his board's hesitancy to make a change based on a small amount of opposition. He relayed an instance where he embarked on a months-long process to make a policy change that would have an effect on nearly every school in the district:

Now three months later, one guy shows up at the board meeting and says we shouldn't change [the policy]. And then, at the next board meeting, both he and his wife show up. And then at the board meeting after that, he found somebody else. He was going all over town trying to drum up support for his case. And then finally, in May, he gets – I don't know – there must've been a dozen people show up to speak against it. And to me, it was like, 'Well, yeah, that's nothing. We got [tens of thousands of] kids. If we have a dozen people opposed…' I was expecting a lot more than that when you are making a change that's going to impact [everyone].

However, at the time this study was completed, Dr. Riley expressed his likely intention to shelve the change due to the opposition that this group caused by complaining to the school board.

It seemed that it was those who are displeased that are more motivated to attend a school board meeting or write a message to a school board member than those that hold lukewarm support for a measure. Dr. Riley summed it up: "When you do something that people like, nobody shows up to support it." Dr. Clark also spoke of this issue when it came to the topic of race, saying "As soon as you talk about race, it brings out all of the opposition. And it brings out none of the support." This may result in what may be an outsized influence for those who are public opponents for a given initiative. School board members, beholden to their constituents through the ballot box,

might avoid upsetting a small number of individuals if they are unsure about the overall public's support and would like to avoid conflict in meetings or in the media.

This phenomenon meant that superintendents often needed to take all opposition – however small it might seem – very seriously. For instance, Dr. Riley laid out his strategy for framing against these sources of resistance:

> The other thing that I attempt to do is, if people are raising hell in that way over email, to take the time to, not necessarily respond to the naysayer, but to respond to the message to my board and break down their argument or arguments and disprove some of their accusations or their efforts to misrepresent. Give them credit where credit is due. Just to try to stay above the fray, to not be painted into a corner where it's you versus this crazy person or crazy people. […] I tried to do it behind the scenes with board members. Yeah, that's what I try to do. And sometimes if I know in advance that somebody is going to be addressing them, I preempt them, unbeknownst to them. Because sometimes you have a pretty good idea of what their real agenda is and you can take some of the air out of it before they even get their message in front of the board.

Superintendents like Dr. Riley took a proactive approach by reaching out to individuals who attempted to obstruct an initiative and use the opportunity to frame the superintendents' own message. These superintendents would also attempt to counter-frame the opposition's arguments in front of the board in order to maintain their focus on the superintendent's agenda.

Tensions and dilemmas. In discussions of the factors underpinning specific framing choices, several themes emerged which often revolved around dilemmas or tensions related to the superintendency and the complexity of leading an urban district. Because of the often-contentious environment of schools and policies related to equity, the superintendents in this study faced

various tensions and often encountered dilemmas in their efforts at framing equity and equity-related choices. These tensions and dilemmas were among the more powerful factors that superintendents had to consider when creating frames around equity.

Being consistent or being savvy. Some superintendents noted the importance of being consistent in their messaging to constituent groups. Consistency would allow stakeholders to understand a superintendent's motivations and expect her or his likely response on most given topics. It allows for simpler and more straightforward framing strategies, as noted by Dr. Riley "[O]ver time it has very much permeated the culture, and we certainly have data that would support that there is a lot better alignment and a lot more clarity about what our district is about and how we make our decisions."

Consistency also avoids the pitfall of political "double-speak," whereby a superintendent is perceived to say anything that will push forward her or his agenda. If a superintendent speaks about a policy or program change in one set of framing terms with one audience and then frames it differently for another, there is a danger that the superintendent will be perceived as disingenuous or deceitful, as noted by Dr. Bell:

> I think you have to be very careful with that, and I don't think I've been a big fan of doing that over the years. I think that [if a] particular nuance that doesn't apply to one group, then I think it's appropriate at that stage. But if everybody is being impacted by what you're doing, then I think having a message that's the same message that's given to everybody is going to serve you better in the long run then it will be trying to create different messages for different populations. Because inevitably, especially in a district like ours, those folks are going to talk to each other. And they're going to say, 'Well, wait a minute, that's not what he said to us.' And I think you just get yourself in a whole lot of trouble that way.

The perception of "double-speak," whether accurate or inaccurate, might cause increased resistance and decrease a superintendent's chance that a policy or program change would gain support.

However, many superintendents indicated that being "savvy" or "shrewd" when communicating to different groups might allow for less resistance and a greater chance that her or his agenda is supported by the community. In short, rather than consistently repeating a similar message to all stakeholders in a district, savvy framing would involve an intentional choice to emphasize or de-emphasize certain aspects of a give change in order to gain support for the policy or program. This follows the communication maxim, "Know your audience." Several superintendents indicated that they attempted to be savvy when engaging in framing efforts with different stakeholder groups. For example, when speaking of framing a program change for board members, Superintendent Solano said:

> If you've got a tech savvy board member, I'm going to talk to him about [an] initiative from the tech side. If you've got a person who cares about equity, I'm going to talk about the initiative from 'every kid is going to get one no matter where they live.' That's the same issue, just approaching it differently based on the audience.

Superintendent Solano understood that getting a board member's support might involve framing an issue around his or her interests.

Other superintendents tried to leverage their inside understanding of the district's context. Dr. Powell cited her district's governance, tax laws, and politics when explaining her framing strategy:

> The other thing, quite frankly, is the board cannot levy taxes. We are completely dependent on our county commission for all educational funds. They are a Republican board, the

County commission. So they could care less about the moral argument. But they do understand the economic argument.

Dr. Powell's understanding of the context of her district led her to alter her message around equity. She perceived that the politically Republican board would be sensitive to economic framing efforts and attempted to pursue an equity agenda by matching what she saw as the right message to the right stakeholder group. She later reflected on her decision to be savvy when strategically framing issues that might be contentious:

But I'm still who I am. And I'm not going to act like it has nothing to do with race. Now sometimes I won't talk about race as directly because I have to get more people on your side. You have to hook them, you know? But I still talk about it.

Dr. Powell tried to make sense of having to be savvy, acknowledging that she was still rooted in a critical consciousness around issues of race. However, she perceived that the larger goal of her equity agenda might be reached through a savvy framing strategy.

This did not come without an emotional cost. When asked how she felt about this choice, Dr. Powell responded:

It infuriates me. I don't know how else to say it. It infuriates me, if you want the truth, that I have to go through all of this to do what is right to give children a basic education. And then I had to sit up all night long and, like if I know I'm giving a speech, I have to study the group and the leadership and what they believe and what they do in the community so I understand how to present and best approach them and get them to be supportive.

All of this extra work and contortion that Dr. Powell felt she had to endure was something that she was open to do in order to pursue her larger goals. But Dr. Powell resented the fact that being savvy was a necessary part of leading for equity. In her eyes, the moral argument should be enough.

When discussing his strategy for framing equity, Dr. Clark reflected on his long experience and whether or not his approach was effective. He said:

I'm kind of "meat and potatoes," "call them like I see them," and a sense of integrity to say the same thing to every group. And I do kind of take it as that's who I am. Now, 20/20 hindsight, could I, should I have learned how to do that differently? And I certainly think that I have tried, but I left [a district] under even more compelling circumstances where the community was becoming majority-minority, majority Hispanic. And all of the conservative groups got together and said 'We got to get rid of this guy, he's actually sounding like he wants all of our Hispanic kids to learn well.' So, I thought I was getting smarter about how to navigate that, but apparently not.

Dr. Clark said that he had a tendency to be consistent in his framing messages around equity, but admitted that on further examination, this might not have been the most effective strategy since he believed it led to his ouster. As quoted earlier, when asked how he navigated contentious equity issues, he conceded, "Well, I've navigated it by saying the same thing to all of the audiences and then I get all of the White pushback. I don't know that I recommend that [...]" From his perspective, consistency brought him further resistance and being savvy might have been the better choice.

Other superintendents noted the tension involved in deciding whether to be savvy about framing around equity. Some superintendents volunteered their desire to engage in larger conversations around equity issues and their disappointment in having to avoid these conversations in order to avoid resistance and increasing opposition. As quoted above, Dr. Riley initially indicated that his understanding of his district's context led him to be savvy when strategically communicating around equity, saying:

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How we get the job done with equity in the district does require different approaches to

getting the resources that we need from the business community and the legislature and the

governor, for sure. Because I would argue that my legislature, by and large, does not want

to believe that we have students from [over one-hundred] countries, most of whom are

brown and black. They are not particularly concerned about them. […] So you have to try

to play cards that makes sense in your receiver's deck. Even if there is a bigger moral

question.

Dr. Riley reflected on the larger public and political realities of his district and his state, observing

that there is not much support for equity issues. He therefore decided that being savvy and shrewd

might get him the most progress on these issues within the limits of a system that does not share

his equity priorities. But later on in our conversation, Dr. Riley said:

Well frankly, I do think we have to have those larger conversations [around equity]. In fact,

it's becoming more and more urgent that we do. Because there is a push, an anti-public

education push afoot in the country, more acute in some places than others. […] So yeah,

I do believe that bigger conversation needs to be had more frequently and more potently

than we currently are. Finding the venue to do that is a bit of a challenge.

Although admitting that being savvy might yield tangible results, Dr. Riley also believed that

avoiding larger conversations around important issues related to equity was also a poor choice to

make, given their greater long-term significance.

Embrace or avoid politics. One of the other tensions with which superintendents grappled

was one of the discursive role conceptions discussed by Björk et al. (2014): democratic leader.

Many superintendents observed that a superintendent's role in the political world of the district

was a necessary part of the position and embraced the expectation to get involved in politics.

Others found the politics distasteful and a distraction from their other perceived roles related to running the district.

Many superintendents referenced the term "the politics" when discussing the inner-workings of their districts, especially related to their framing efforts. When asked to define what "the politics" means, Dr. Riley said, "navigating the varied interests of multiple groups that can have an impact on your ability to serve students and do what's best for the district." He was firmly on the side of embracing the politics of the district since avoiding it seemed like a lost cause. When referencing this tension, he said: "So, yeah, people say they want to stay out of politics, that's all well and good. You can't. If you have […] a public organization that is governed by 'elected's' [sic], it's automatically political." He accepted that his role included some level of political maneuvering and leveraged this perception in his dealings in the district. However, Dr. Riley avoided getting in too deeply into partisan fighting. When asked how he operated in this political realm and how that affected his framing efforts, he commented:

> How I try to navigate that primarily is to lead with students and what's best for students and then people can make their assessment as to whether I am playing politics or not, after that. […] The person who was superintendent before me, it was perceived that she had a very close relationship with a couple of board members. And when those board members were in the officer positions, there was a perception that they, sort of, figured things out together behind closed doors. And then that's what would end up happening. Now I don't know, I don't think that's the way she really operated, but there was certainly that perception out there.

Dr. Riley took lessons from the previous political operations of his predecessor and sought to avoid similar issues in his own practice. He said that he did so by framing his efforts as doing what is best for students and then letting others make judgments regarding his intentions.

Dr. Riley also noted that there were some situations or actions that would be perceived through a political lens regardless of his intention. He said:

There have been some things that haven't necessarily been directly tied to schools that I felt I needed to be… I wasn't thinking of it as being political, but I know it was absolutely interpreted that way. When I put out a statement regarding the safety of our students in regards to immigration and customs enforcement actions, I absolutely know that that was political. That wasn't my desire. My desire was to reassure my families that it was safe to have their kids in school and that we would continue to take care of them and protect them.

This example shows how it may not be possible to resolve Dr. Riley's desire to lead for equity while also frame equity issues in non-political terms. There may be instances where "the politics" cannot be kept out of it.

Dr. Bell was very open and comfortable discussing the political aspects of the superintendent's job. This may be due to his own experience in state-level politics. When asked if being involved in politics was necessary, Dr. Bell responded:

A superintendent has to, I think, be involved in the government affairs of their community and of their state. And that's especially important for my district […] And so the opportunity to have your ideas put out there into the public square, and to have those ideas considered by others, is something that is definitely an opportunity in this particular school district.

From Dr. Bell's perspective, the political role of the superintendent presented a valuable opportunity to be involved in the marketplace of ideas in the public realm. He believed that "the politics" should be embraced rather than avoided in order to advocate for important education issues in his district.

Dr. Powell was also a strong believer in embracing the political aspects of the superintendency. She saw this approach as a useful way to pursue her equity agenda and framing efforts:

> [This job] is more 80% political, 20% educational. […] But I cannot forget, in order to help children, you must be able to convince those in positions of power to support your policies and support them in spirit, in practice, and financially. And that takes some work. And I think that takes political savvy. They don't want to hear about the reading program. All they want to know is that students will have the reading skills to enter the university system and to work at their industries, in their businesses. So trying to convince them about the [masked] reading program is just a flawed approach.

Here, Dr. Powell explored the nuanced context of leading for equity from the position of the superintendency by strategically considering how to frame her policy choices. She observed that the position requires much more political skill than educational knowledge in order to be effective while also noting a situation where savvy framing efforts might yield greater results for the students in her district.

Compared to others in this study, Superintendent Solano hesitated to be seen as engaging in a political fight when engaging in his framing strategy. When discussing his political work, Superintendent Solano said:

See the problem is, if you are proactive [with strategic messaging], then you're going to get into the politics, right? You got to be real careful. You have to be politically adept and you have to be able to appreciate and understand it to work in it. But honestly, if you are too much of a politician […] they are going to see you as a politician, and that's certainly not going to help you either.

Superintendent Solano very much preferred to avoid the political realm of his district and sought at best a middle ground where he might be savvy if he needed to be. He remarked that he was "really kind of a substance over form guy. I just like to do the work." However, when reflecting on his efforts in the district, he later conceded:

I fought [the politics] the whole time, so it's been tough – but if you don't fight it and appreciate that that's the way it's going to be, I think it's easier to manage. And I just hadn't done a good job of that.

This moment of self-criticism aligns with the conclusions of other superintendents: embracing the political role of the superintendency might be a better choice when making changes that could be contentious.

Dr. Clark certainly understood the political role of the superintendent, though he might admit that he did not always perform that function at the highest level. When discussing his struggle with the politics of his district and their relation to equity and framing, Dr. Clark said:

How do you get enough [political] will to focus on one or two things and stick with it long enough so that we have the small wins, have people say 'Wow, that really matters. It can be done. It makes a difference.' Machiavelli says you have as enemies all of the people who did well under the old system and you have as lukewarm supporters people who might do well under the new order. And so even within the communities of color, I will oftentimes

get beat up [by] one part of that group by not going fast enough. And I get beat up by another part of it by not going slow enough. So it's a true leader that can constantly keep sharing the message about 'Well, we haven't accomplished as much as we want, but we haven't been sitting idle. Look what we have accomplished. Look what we have accomplished together.'

Dr. Clark overserved that framing efforts might be the key to successfully navigating the resistance that often accompanies efforts around equity, but also underscored the need for political skills to actively build the political will necessary to support these changes in the long-term.

Doing your job versus keeping your job. Another of the tensions and dilemmas superintendents faced was a complex consideration that most encountered when pushing for change in their districts. It often involved a calculation of how far a superintendent could push their district to make change while also remaining in position to see that change through to fruition. Most superintendents indicated that they sought out the position in order to make a significant positive change for their district. But most also admitted that these changes, if seen as too radical or controversial, can bring resistance and this opposition may lead to the superintendent's ouster – and likely a reversal of the "controversial" policy or program. Thus, most superintendents confronted dilemmas whereby she or he wanted to push for significant changes while also recognizing the need to maintain community and stakeholder support. This deliberation sometimes included a balancing of personal and community values and also influenced the framing efforts that superintendents would consider.

For instance, when considering changes around equity, Dr. Bell observed the need to balance reforms with the district's values:

I think, from my perspective, you can never get too far out in front of the people you're trying to lead. So it's a constant balance of figuring out where people are, but also trying to figure out ways to stretch them to where you think we should be as a school district and as a community.

Dr. Bell's stated intention to try to "stretch" the district's stakeholders is the consideration he felt he needed to make when choosing what policies or programs to implement. But Dr. Bell also believed that superintendents should consider which parts of their agenda are so important to their personal and professional values that they would not compromise. Speaking about a contentious policy issue that required a principled stand, Dr. Bell said:

I think some superintendents had to dig deep into their own core values to define where they were on that position and then being able to articulate that and to educate their community about why they think that position is the right position educationally for the community to have. And so, yeah, it is something that I think happens, but I don't think it's something that happens every day or every year. I think there are certain points and times when those type of issues come to the forefront. And in my opinion, that's a major part of being a leader, where you have to decide where you are on those issues and then be able to lead from your position.

Dr. Bell felt that it was important for a superintendent to recognize that certain issues were going to be connected to her or his values and would therefore require framing efforts in order to get stakeholder support and perhaps "stretch" their understanding of the issue.

Dr. Powell had a similar perspective when it came to certain issues in her district. When discussing her vision for her own leadership in the district, she said:

[Good leadership] means being an advocate for public education. It means being a really good listener for the many, many stakeholders that you have. And many of them have very different viewpoints, but you have to, kind of, synthesize. You have to sort through, first, those varying viewpoints and then synthesize what's being said, and try to represent the cultural values of your community. And sometimes those cultural values are not aligned with your own. And if you believe that they are harming students, you have to actually engage in efforts to try to encourage modification of the values and changing some of the long-held beliefs of the community that you serve.

At first, Dr. Powell offers a view of superintendent leadership as one that reflects and perhaps amplifies the values of the district. But she quickly points to a superintendent's role in proactively changing the values of stakeholders in the district if they do not match those of the superintendent and are harmful for students. This value-changing effort involves advocacy and framing efforts around equity.

However, given the push-back that often results from these efforts, Dr. Powell later acknowledged the tension that other superintendents felt around the changes they might want to pursue while also keeping in mind the possible effect they may have on their job status:

So if I believe in it strongly enough and I feel the district won't move or I'm not sure they're going to move, but this is my thing – like I believe in equity – I'm going to push on it. And push on it. I'm going to be smart about it. But I'm not going to sell my soul. So, all superintendents are losing their job – from the day you step in it, you're on your way out of it, you know? Especially if you're in a large district, nobody stays in the job. So you have to think about what you want to accomplish and what your core values and beliefs are.

Dr. Powell observed that there were some issues that are non-negotiable, and though she wanted to serve out her time as superintendent and remain in place to make important changes, she would not compromise on certain issues and would continue to engage in public framing efforts around these topics.

A somewhat surprising finding related to the tension between making significant change while also remaining in the job was most superintendents' stated intention to resign their position rather than compromise on certain issues that they viewed as highly important. They certainly may not actually do so despite their stated intention, but without prompting most superintendents volunteered situations where they would resign if their values and the values of the community were in conflict. When speaking about a contentious change that he successfully saw to completion, Dr. Riley commented:

> You know, perhaps I'll come up against one of those fights that I'll just lose, you know? But the result of that probably will be me losing my job, because I don't advance those ideas without being highly confident that it is the right thing to do for the system as a whole.

If Dr. Riley put forward an issue related to equity that he felt was right thing to do for the district, he posited that he would resign if he lost a fight related to equity.

During a conversation about current equity policy issues, Dr. Bell offered as an example several topics related to LGBTQ students, saying:

> I'm one of those people that believes very strongly that we definitely should provide the environment where students and staff members aren't being harassed or being bullied. And so for me, that's one of those […] core values or issues for me. […] Then I'm going to always stand up for that, right? And if I happen to be way out in front of people on something like that, then it's my responsibility to then try and educate and bring people

along to where I am on that. And if I'm unsuccessful, then I have to face that decision of, 'Do I wait until they get rid of me, or do I just go ahead and resign and move on to something else?' […] That type of decision point doesn't happen a whole lot, but yeah, there are times when those types of decisions have to be made by a superintendent.

Dr. Bell felt that there were times that a superintendent would have to stand up for what she or he believes in and try to engage in framing efforts to get district stakeholders to agree; if that was unsuccessful, like Dr. Riley, Dr. Bell said he would decide whether to resign or wait to be fired.

Dr. Powell admitted that for most issues – including equity – compromise might bring the change that she wanted to see. However, she declared that there were limits:

Now, I think that you do have to make concessions, but they can't be concessions to the point where what you believe about equity no longer looks like equity. I won't do that. The job's not that important to me. […] I can go work where what I believe is more aligned to the community and board's beliefs somewhere else. And I've seen people try to sell their souls just to keep a job, that's not worth it to me. And that's part of a joy of getting older, actually.

Dr. Powell's threshold for compromise around equity issues stopped at her own sense of what equity should look like. She also felt that, when it came to certain issues, she would rather resign than betray her core values.

4.4   Making Sense of Community Engagement and Stakeholder Involvement

The second research sub-question in this study is "How do leaders make sense of community engagement and stakeholder involvement when advocating for equity-based policies?" As a brief recap, sense-making seeks an answer to the question, "What is going on?" Therefore, this question seeks to explore how superintendents understand community and stakeholder

involvement and how this understanding affects superintendents' framing efforts. Understanding the vision or strategy for community engagement and stakeholder involvement is important for understanding the process of framing for superintendents. A superintendent's overall vision of community engagement and stakeholder involvement can influence how they view her or his process of strategic communication. For instance, if a superintendent sees the role of the community in limited or narrow terms, she or he will focus less on the broad support-building possibilities in proactively gaining their support. Since a superintendent cannot create broad, durable change on her or his own, framing efforts that are related to and strive for community and stakeholder support were cited as key. What follows are the findings related to this study's second research sub-question broken down into themes: school board relationship-building, perceptions of support, and leveraging community support.

The importance of relationships. Although the singular nominal leader of a school district, the superintendent operates amongst multiple stakeholder groups that often espouse conflicting priorities. In order to navigate this space while pursuing her or his agenda and priorities, the superintendents in this study noted the need to build and maintain relationships with stakeholder groups and influential individuals in the district. Maintaining regular contact with stakeholders allowed a superintendent to listen to their concerns and present her or his vision for the district. Regular interaction also allowed the superintendent to ask for support for initiatives without seeming impersonal or transactional.

Dr. Riley saw the importance of build trusting relationships and crafting a strategic message around equity. Like many superintendents, Dr. Riley especially emphasized and prioritized clear and consistent communication with the school board. Regarding the importance of the school board, he commented:

[T]he dynamic of working with a school board – and in most cases like mine, an elected school board – is a huge part of the job. Because ultimately there is not a whole lot that I can do outside of the routine day-to-day stuff that happens whether I'm here or not, there's not a whole lot that I can do without getting approval of the school board.

In pursuit of his goal of influencing the school board, he sent out regular memos to his board, which in his words was "to keep them informed [about] a bunch of stuff that's not particularly important, but that they might hear about, so that they're informed of it." He sought to keep the lines of communication open in order for him to form a close relationship to the board and keep them informed of affairs in the district. A review of internal communications between the board and Dr. Riley verified his practice.

Dr. Bell echoed the importance of maintaining a strong relationship with the school board through regular communication efforts. When asked where he spends most of his time, Dr. Bell commented that:

[Most of my time] is spent meeting with stakeholders and meeting with board members and dealing with issues with relationships with the board members and making sure that they're prepared for either meetings that they're attending or prepare for the board meetings that we have.

Maintaining his relationship with the school board took up most of Dr. Bell's time, an indicator of how important they were to his agenda. Dr. Bell therefore spent much of his framing efforts around influencing the school board.

Dr. Powell also commented on the importance of maintaining the support of the school board and how crucial this support was for implementing the changes she wished to see in the district. She said:

The district's not going to move unless the superintendent and board are working

together as a strong governance team with the same value and belief system. So I spend a

lot of time trying to move the board, otherwise everything I do, with schools and

communities, will be undone by board members. […] I think that one of the areas that I

have felt there's not enough attention to in thinking about school districts and doing any

sort of work – whether it's equity, whether it's improving literacy, whatever it is – is

attention to board-superintendent relationships. And I think that we really underestimate

how that relationship impacts whether or not a school district moves forward.

Dr. Powell observed that a superintendent might be able to achieve some short-term success on

her or his own, but given the power and influence of the school board – as well as the often short

tenure of superintendents – any unpopular changes may be short-lived. This reality meant that

some superintendents attempted to build public stakeholder support for their agenda rather than

solely focusing on the influencing members of the board. This topic will be discussed further

below.

Like Dr. Powell, Superintendent Solano also observed that a significant amount of his

time was spent communicating with the school board. When discussing where he expended the

most time and communicated the most, he commented:

Unfortunately, at this level you're spending a lot of your time with the board. So that's

clearly a big part of it. And that means that you're meeting with them, you are preparing

for them, you are putting meetings together that will give them information, making sure

they are well-informed.

Superintendent Solano noted here that he was not particularly happy about having to spend most

of his time with the school board. However, he observed that much of that time involved

communicating about issues that were occurring in the district, therefore providing him with many opportunities for framing the policy or program changes he wished to see in the district.

For Dr. Clark, building positive relationships with the board were also important. He noted that he had some success building relationships and support from other stakeholders in the district. Unfortunately, he also admitted that he struggled with maintaining a positive relationship with the board, in part due to the high volume of electoral turnover in the make-up of the board. He recounted his experience:

> So I am four years in, and I have one board member left that hired me. And the others have been elected on this activist platform, that 'We want a change superintendent. We want to mix everything up. We want to…' I have no idea what they want to create, but they want something different. […] So I won over the mayor, won over the city, won over CBOs – Community Based Organizations – won over our church community, won over our African American community. But not the school board. I could not pivot fast enough to make them happy.

Dr. Clark believed that, despite high levels of support from different stakeholders and community groups, he could not get maintain the support of the school board. Because he was unsuccessful in his efforts, the changes he attempted to implement were often stymied. For Dr. Clark, this was indicative of the board's vital role in determining the success of a superintendent and the need for superintendents to focus on influencing board members.

Create avenues to engage with stakeholders. In order to further the goal of building and maintaining relationships, the superintendents in this study often created structures or avenues that would provide them opportunities to interact with stakeholders, even those besides the school board. These opportunities were used either to foster clearer communication and maintain good

relations or as listening sessions where the superintendent would pick up on issues that are important to their stakeholders. This information might later be useful when crafting a message that would fit the constituent group. Whether intentional or not, these venues were often moments that the superintendent utilized for framing.

For example, Superintendent Solano expressed his desire to create spaces to communicate with different stakeholders, saying "I think it's very important that we find time and space to communicate and then, in the school systems, you have to over-communicate." When attempting to change ELL education in his district, he attempted to create avenues to engage with different stakeholders. He created committees and teacher roundtables around problematic issues of implementation and used well-placed advocates to promote the changes he wanted to make and therefore mitigate opposition to his agenda.

In the school construction plan, Dr. Bell also created a standing committee to involve stakeholders while also providing the district with opportunities to frame the plan that they had created. When discussing the initiative, he said:

> When I say that we developed this through the community, I don't think I mentioned earlier when I was describing this, that we had a committee, made up of members of the community from across the entire city. And so most communities, if not all communities, were represented on this committee and had a voice on that committee. […] It wasn't something you did in one meeting. We had to have several meetings with these groups to have that dialogue and conversation with them.

Dr. Bell observed that maintaining regular contact with the community was important to his framing efforts. He also perceived that district-wide representation was important in order for

different areas of the community to take ownership of the issue while also creating an opening for the district to frame their plan.

Develop support "behind the scenes." Since messages can be misunderstood or misconstrued, some superintendents observed that framing in public can be fraught. In addition, some noted that sources of resistance in the community often attempt to build support among stakeholders and contact influential individuals – including board members – to sway their opinion on an initiative or program. As quoted in part above, Dr. Riley mentioned that he utilized this framing strategy often:

> I try to prevent there being a perception that [me and the board] are in cahoots. Something that does happen, is people will say 'Oh yeah, he has got a 7-0 board.' If most of the votes are 7-0, some people think, well, the board is asleep at the wheel and the superintendent has too much liberty. Which can be the case, if you have a disengaged board. But what it typically means is the superintendent is vetting things with the board in advance before he puts them in a position to be voting on something. […] I tried to do it behind the scenes with board members. Yeah, that's what I try to do. And sometimes if I know in advance that somebody is going to be addressing them, I preempt them, unbeknownst to them. Because sometimes you have a pretty good idea of what their real agenda is and you can take some of the air out of it before they even get their message in front of the board.

As mentioned in the section on "counter framing," superintendents like Dr. Riley used their knowledge of the local context and engage in efforts to counter arguments or contested frames in order to proactively avert or forestall the source of resistance. This counter framing sometimes will occur out of the sight of the public or without the knowledge of the stakeholder that is attempting

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to bring the board to her or his side. Developing support for an initiative behind the scenes might help to mitigate resistance before the issue is put before the public.

Perceptions of support. Some superintendents felt that they had the overall support of the public or more often the school board, and therefore felt more comfortable bringing up important issues during their framing efforts and facing down the resistance that they expected. As mentioned previously, this study took place immediately after the school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Dr. Riley released a statement about some of the actions that his district would and would not take following the incident. Of that statement, he recounted:

> In the whole gun debate, I put out a very public statement about how I would not ask my teachers to take up arms. That got quite a lot of play in the media and I'm sure sounded political. It wasn't intended to be, but it necessarily was. But my teachers were upset with the debate, thought it was… they are uncomfortable, by and large, with the idea of being asked to carry weapons, and so I wanted to reassure them that I was paying attention and have my eye on the prize and that I was going to take care of them and advocate, if necessary. Now I will say that I was able to do that because I was relatively confident in both circumstances that my board was supportive of that message, from their own political perspective.

Dr. Riley made a statement about guns that might be seen as politically dangerous (at least in his context), but he made the decision to release the communication because he thought it was appropriate response for the situation. But he also admitted that he was more comfortable doing so because he knew his board supported that stand.

Other superintendents commented on their perception of their standing in their districts and how that might affect their decisions to take on contentious issues or changes in their districts.

During our conversations, Dr. Powell perceived that she was hired with a mandate to continue the equity work of her predecessor. She was also a "known quantity" when it came to her equity work in a previous district. Superintendent Solano admitted that he was able to push for dual language and bring up the importance of that program for ELLs because he had the support of the community as well as a mandate to "right the ship" after a previous scandal. When speaking of the time after his hiring, he said: "I think initially because we were under state control, I drove most of the change top-down – just ideas I had and issues we put forth. And we had that runway because the state had given it to us." He later noted that he had faced more resistance to his agenda since this initial support had faded. Dr. Clark mentioned that he was hired as what he called "a bridge-builder" more than a disrupter and was therefore not expected to be vocal about equity issues in public. He said that he therefore often worked more behind the scenes than out in front of issues.

An established vision or brand. Superintendents also observed that establishing a vision or brand allows for a simpler and more straightforward framing of policy choices. If a superintendent is a "known quantity," where stakeholders are aware of the values that guide and motivate her or him, framing efforts can be simpler. For instance, Dr. Riley said his experience as an interim superintendent in the district:

> I chose to make some decisions that were a bit controversial but helped me brand myself in terms of what my values were and what was going to drive me as a leader. So when I was hired, the community and the board couldn't really claim ignorance.

Dr. Riley believed that coming into the position of superintendent with a recognized vision or brand could therefore alleviate some of the resistance from stakeholders since the expectations of the community were primed.

However, one superintendent warned against sloganeering, whereby mottos devoid of real meaning are repeated and become a distraction from the real changes that need to occur within the district. Dr. Clark experienced this phenomenon during his equity work in the district. During a committee discussion of equity, Dr. Clark and the others in room noticed that a common phrase came up repeatedly. He recounted what happened next:

> And then somebody came up with a t-shirt. And the initials, we all went with it. And so that's become our brand. And that's been I think unfortunate, in that it doesn't mean anything. […] It's like 'world peace.'

As much as a brand around equity could have been beneficial for Dr. Clark's framing efforts, he believed that the slogan distracted from the more practical – and more demanding – work that needed to be done.

Leveraging constituent or community support. Because of the local political space in which they lead, superintendents often mentioned that they – like local politicians and office-seekers – proactively sought the support of constituents or stakeholder groups. This support might then be utilized to support policy or other changes that a superintendent might pursue. This might play out in a general way, whereby a superintendent maintains a general favorability of the public or powerful groups within a district. Superintendents observed that this favorability, if made publicly and widely known, then became useful when meeting and speaking with members of the school board. This also might unfold within specific circumstances, whereby a superintendent advocated for and attempted to generate support for a specific programmatic or policy change. A superintendent then might be able to point to specific stakeholder groups or influential members of the district as supporters of a given policy or program.

Dr. Riley mentioned his efforts to get board support for his agenda through his interactions with influential members of the community:

I mean, I sit on six different boards in the [area]. So that I'm talking with, on a pretty regular basis, with some of the big players in the community. So that's probably what does me the most good. If my board thinks that I'm in good stead with the business community, they have a higher degree of confidence that's what I'm proposing is something that generally will be supported by the community.

Dr. Riley used his involvement in non-profit and business groups as a tool to build support for his agenda with the board. He proactively sought out support for his work through these avenues.

Dr. Powell was also proactive in her efforts to gain support for the changes in policies or programs she wanted to see in her district. She noted:

I try to build support instead of 'head off.' So I build support and I think about who I need support from. And the most difficult group is always the school board. Always. And I would say that in every district. So what I do is work with the larger community, business leaders. And then, when I have them onboard, I use them to work with my school board.

To get the school board to support her work, Dr. Powell would drum up support from the board members' constituents and leverage this support to get the board to act on her agenda.

Rather than a proactive approach, Superintendent Solano preferred a more reactive and less forceful method for getting board members' support. When asked how he attempts to get an initiative adopted by the school board, he responded:

Well, it's all situational. […] Typically we make broad statements about the things that we want to do, whether it is through a board meeting agenda or through other avenues. So the stakeholders we are talking to already have a position and they've more often than not

stated [it]. When we approach those stakeholders, we do it in a way that maybe addresses their particular need or interest and try to get them… I mean, at the end of the day it's always about finding common ground.

This search for 'common ground' seems to preclude an active, assertive effort to gain the support of the community and then leveraging that support to push for change. Superintendent Solano's strategy for finding overlapping interest contrasts with some of the efforts of other superintendents.

Later in our conversation, Superintendent Solano discussed his limited view of how the community or other stakeholders could influence the board or his own hope for swaying their opinions (some of this conversation was quoted above):

Sometimes as a superintendent you just have to take all the shit that comes your way at the board level. It's almost like… I've fought with the board a lot, we've all had our issues, but me fighting with the board doesn't help my team do the work. Sometimes if you really want to do the right thing for kids, you have to just grin and bear it and then try to clear a path for your team to work. I just don't see another way forward. Neither you nor your team can control – well, you can to a certain respect, you can try not to agitate – but you can't control the board.

Superintendent Solano felt that no amount of framing efforts could get the school board to change its position on an issue and felt his way of controlling the board was to avoid agitating them. When asked if he – like other superintendents – sought out community support to leverage their influence to sway the board, he responded, "Not often… I just can't… No, because that's a really slippery slope, that's something dangerous. Because they can be with you on one issue but maybe turn on another issue, so you have to be really careful about that." Superintendent Solano was concerned

that any effort to proactively gain support from stakeholders would get him caught up in the complexity of district politics that he did not feel that he could control.

Like many other instances of community involvement, Dr. Clark lamented his inability to gain the support of others and then utilize their support for lobby on his behalf. He referred to this work as "co-sponsorship" of a policy or program. Speaking of these efforts, he said:

> I have [gotten co-sponsorship] by accident a few times, and then I try to do it through my network-weaving, […] I need an advocate in the communities of color and probably I needed an advocate on the board that would have my back for me and be my interpreter and/or tell me to back off.

Dr. Clark understood the value of getting stakeholders to advocate and act as a "champion" of his equity agenda but admitted that did was not able to proactively pursue that strategy.

4.5   Core Framing Tasks

The final research sub-question in this study is: What is the substance (or content) of those frames? In other words, what frames are used? The following section is a compendium of findings that answers this research question. It is organized using Benford and Snow's (2000) three main framing tasks: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. Although presented as such, these tasks do not occur in any particular order and often overlap in strategic communication and messaging. The superintendents in this study made sense of equity for themselves and then used this sense to diagnose and identify a problem in the district, propose a solution to this problem, and attempt to motivate others to make the change suggested. Each superintendent identified a different problem related to equity, proposed various solutions, and had differing messages for motivating others to create change.

Diagnostic. Diagnostic framing is a process of identifying and communicating a problem that needs to be addressed. As Coburn (2006) observed, policy problems do not exist objectively. They are identified and prioritized, and in the context of schools, superintendents go through a process of diagnostic framing of the problems they want to solve in their districts. In addition to identifying a problem, diagnostic framing often involves ascertaining to what or to whom we should assign blame. This often comes down to other considerations and factors. For instance, is the problem an unfair practice or a moral issue? Is the problem a small, discrete issue that can be solved with a single policy change or is it some larger social issue like poverty, racism, or sexism? Each case involved specific changes in policy or programming and highlighted individual instances of diagnostic framing. They were also influenced by contextual factors that affected what problems were identified and prioritized. What follows is an overview of selected diagnostic framing from each of the five cases.

A boutique school at WPS. Dr. Robert Riley was very open and direct about pushing for equity at Wyndale Public Schools. But soon after he was hired, as he was going through the budget and planning process for his district, he noticed, in his own words, "We are spending about twice as much per student at [a] school than we were at our other schools, other middle schools." This observation led Dr. Riley to examine the reasons for the creation and continued operation of this school. He summarized how it came to exist:

> [A school] was created so that, in theory, because there were some International Baccalaureate elementary schools on our south side of the district that did not have a middle school MYP [Middle Years Program] program to feed into. So they created this special school that was serving only a handful of students and had staffed it appropriately so that we had the right authorizations of the teachers to provide the credits that were required.

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[…] And it baffled me that the board had ever approved the creation of that school in the first place.

For Dr. Riley, a program like International Baccalaureate (IB) that served the high achieving students in the district was important, but not so much that extra resources were spent to serve this small group of students. Dr. Riley believed this was an issue of equity because the parents of these students, in his view, "wanted basically a boutique school for their kids - where there weren't poor kids, there weren't special ed kids, there weren't English Language Learner kids, there weren't black kids, there weren't brown kids."

When diagnostically framing this issue, Dr. Riley focused on several reasons for identifying this school as a problem. First, he argued that there is a financial or budgetary issue at play here, as previously stated in his observation that, compared to other middle schools, a disproportionate amount of district money is going to fund this school. Additionally, Dr. Riley identified an equity component when discussing the reasons why this school was a problem:

And as I told them, we are putting extra resources into this school for the students who least need them. And because we're doing that, we're not providing some opportunities we could be providing for the students who are most in need, and this doesn't comport with my vision for equity.

When diagnosing the problem, he referenced the importance of addressing inequity for the district as well as his own personal vision for what equity should look like in the district. Dr. Riley observed that the problem here was that the district should be equitable in its funding choices and that providing extra funding for those who are already advantaged is not equitable. He also placed blame at the feet of the board as well as an influential group of parents that had allowed this school

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to remain open. He utilized two main themes – financial prudence and inequity – when framing how he identified the problem.

Prioritizing areas for school construction in GUSD. Although superintendent for only a short period of time, Dr. James Bell was a leader who had long experience on the technical and management side of running a district like Greenwell Unified School District. Prior to becoming superintendent, the district had passed a bond issue that was to use funds to repair or renovate a number of school buildings and Dr. Bell was involved in the planning process. Knowing the long issues of inequity in the district, he and the staff at GUSD quickly confronted a problem. He said that "one of the big questions, and big issues, that we had to address was which buildings do we tackle first and how do we balance equity in making that decision." This was an important issue for Dr. Bell because, when meeting with community groups, he faced constituents that, in his words, said "I want to see my community taken care of first, because who knows what's going to happen in the future. You guys may run out of money and never get to my neighborhood." For Dr. Bell, the problem in prioritizing school construction funds was that resources were limited and therefore choices about where to start construction first were a real concern. Additionally, the age of the buildings and their locations were also factors identified by Dr. Bell's diagnostic framing, saying "a district our size, those [masked] buildings at that time were spread out across the entire city. And some of them were very old, built in the late 1800s and the early 1900s, and some were relatively new that were built in the 1970s."

When identifying the problem, Dr. Bell was guided by those meetings and discussions with the community. Of the process, he said:

> Those folks, some of them were a little upset that we weren't touching the areas of the city
>
> on [masked]. But we were able to make the argument that they had the newest buildings in

the district. And so with the newest buildings in the district, it definitely seems inequitable for us not to – because we only have limited resources, we don't have unlimited resources – and so I think we were able to successfully make the argument that the worst needed to be addressed first.

Dr. Bell identified the problem of school funding and resources and framed this choice as about addressing the greatest need first, due to the financial constraints of the district.

When diagnostically framing this problem, Dr. Bell was forced to balance the needs expressed by the opinions of constituent groups by noting problems of "limited financial resources" while also highlighting the problems inherent in the various differences in age and condition of school buildings throughout the district. For Dr. Bell, school construction was an issue of equity due to his desire to deploy those limited resources to schools that were in the greatest need, and to acknowledge the concerns of constituents who were worried that their schools would not receive funds.

Discipline and enrollment policies at LUSD. During our conversation about equity and values, Dr. Vanessa Powell admitted that making schools and society more equitable is "what I believe to my core." Her focus on issues of equity seemed to have led her to identify and advocate for a change in discipline and enrollment policy at Linwall Unified School District. A parent complaint about a district-wide policy on discipline had been brought to her attention. LUSD has several "magnet" schools that students can choose to attend which are many times outside of their catchment area i.e., outside of their home neighborhood. School district policy states that principals have the discretion to expel a student from these schools if they have a serious disciplinary infraction. The student would then have the option of applying to another "choice" school or to attend her or his neighborhood school.

Dr. Powell had described that she had recently been communicating with a board member to try to get the policy changed. She said:

> So in this particular case, we have a student who is a drug addict who came to school, a school with an IB [International Baccalaureate] program. […] And he's under the influence, and the principal has him kicked out. But there isn't another IB program. So the problem I have with that is, if two students in the IB program had come to school under the influence, and one of them happened to just be lucky enough that his or her parents could afford a home in that neighborhood, that student would have received a suspension and gone back to the IB program. The other student, just because his or her parents live in a different neighborhood, not only receive a suspension, but then get kicked out of one of the best programs we have in the district. It's inherently unfair. […] That one student receives one consequence, the other student receives a double consequence because of where their parents can afford to buy home.

Dr. Powell identified the problem in terms of "fairness" or "right and wrong" while also diagnostically framing the problem in socioeconomic terms relating to the realities of larger school policy issues. Because school attendance is determined by geographic locale, the socioeconomic status of neighborhoods – including property values – are important factors in the creation of school policy and can affect the education a student receives.

In discussing this policy in these terms, Dr. Powell is highlighting the complexity of leading a school district and diagnostically framing policy problems. In this particular case, Dr. Powell hinted at the problem of inequitable housing policies or the sorting of neighborhoods into differing socioeconomic strata, despite the fact that she had little direct influence on these larger scale issues. Additionally, Dr. Powell speaks about the problem as one of "bad luck" for the student

who is being negatively affected by the discipline policy, emphasizing the effect of socioeconomic status brought on through no fault of the student.

Language policy at MCSD. Superintendent Eric Solano led a district that had a high percentage of ELL students and a history of underserving that particular population. Matira County School District had also experienced a period of turmoil, including a scandal involving a previous superintendent. The vast majority of ELL students at MCSD were in early-exit bilingual education programs, but a small group of schools in a more affluent area of the district had adopted a dual language approach. This approach was lauded for its additive, rather than subtractive, approach to ELL education as well as its appreciation for and cultivation of cultural diversity. However, dual language schools were attended mostly by English speaking students who saw the program as a way to give their children an edge in what is seen as a very competitive future job market.

When Superintendent Solano was hired, he made the expansion of dual language a priority for the district. He identified the problem as a response to historical mistreatment of ELLs in the district as well as a response to the recent scandal which had a disproportionate effect on ELLs. Speaking of the sense of isolation and the difficulty of being an ELL, Superintendent Solano said: "I grew up as an English language learner. I know what it's like trying to learn English and what those experiences are like." He often referred back to his experience as a student when diagnostically framing the change that he wanted to make. In addition, Superintendent Solano often observed that there was a long-term history of ELL policies that were damaging to students and left them with inadequate programming and opportunity for years. He said, "I must be an advocate for our ELL's. They must be our priority now." He highlighted this group and their needs as a problem area that required redress.

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Separate and unequal school programs at VPS. In his interviews, Dr. Stan Clark related several examples of successes in his multi-decade career as an administrator. Although he pushed for the adoption of equitable policies and attempted to change the culture of Valston Public Schools, he admitted that not all of his efforts were successful. One of those efforts was an attempt to integrate two parallel school programs, one high performing and one struggling, housed in the same building and separated by SES and race. Speaking of the effort, Dr. Clark said:

> We have several schools, maybe a [masked] program placed into a neighborhood school. So you've got a White [masked] program and a Black neighborhood. And as we've been preaching eliminating opportunity gaps, principals and other teachers and parents have recognized, well, we've got apartheid working right within. One side of the hallway is White and the other side of the hallway is Black, and how can we address that. […] We are running out of space there and we are faced with gentrifying the neighborhood so all of the White kids can go to this prestigious high school in the middle of our rapidly changing, but historically underserved, students of color.

Like Dr. Powell, Dr. Clark diagnostically framed the problem through the lens of important, large-scale social issues. He puts the problem squarely in terms of race and class and their connection to inequity relating to district policies.

Like most districts, school enrollment at VPS is mostly determined by geographic location. But VPS, like many other districts, offers differing programs that are often co-located within a neighborhood school and are open to students from outside of the neighborhood. According to Dr. Clark, in this case the popular choice program was populated by more affluent, mostly White students, while the neighborhood school was less affluent and mostly Black. In addition, the choice program had become so popular that space considerations became an issue within the school. Also,

more affluent families began moving into the school's catchment area and were pushing out children who had been living in the neighborhood. Dr. Clark diagnostically framed the resulting neighborhood change, or "gentrification," as resulting in a more sharply segregated school programs, with the original residents of the neighborhood pushed out due to rising housing prices.

Prognostic. The prognostic framing task is a proposed solution to an identified problem. Coburn (2006) noted that a problem does not always predicate a solution; many times a solution exists in search of a problem. Framing the solution to a policy problem with often involve short and long-term considerations as well as practical matters, like the details in how a policy or program is going to be adopted or changed. Oftentimes prognostic framing involves discussing specific changes to current policy or a redistribution or reallocation of resources. Prognostic frames are also often intended to solve the problem that was diagnostically framed, therefore prognostic tasks can overlap or center on how the solution proposed would address the defined problem.

Each of the five cases contained examples of prognostic framing, though the methods and language used to communicate the required changes were dependent on the context of the district as well as the related diagnostic frames. The themes that emerged from an analysis of prognostic framing often centered around efforts at getting and maintaining support for a change effort (which is related to motivational framing) and addressing the possible resistance that the superintendents might face when proposing their preferred solution.

A boutique school at WPS. When speaking of the problem of the "boutique school" at WPS, Dr. Riley commented that he quickly came to the conclusion that the school should be closed and the students reassigned to nearby schools with a similar program. He then decided on a course of action that would allow this to happen while also dealing with the expected resistance that he would face from the stakeholders that would be affected. These stakeholders included the parents,

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students, and teachers of the boutique school as well as the school board members that represent their interests. Dr. Riley commented that "Ironically, […] the board members who claimed that they were most about equity were my biggest resistors. But they were directly impacted by the parents of the students that attended that school." When he began the proceedings to close the school, he faced resistance from the parents of the students that would be affected, and those parents attempted to sway school board members. Because these parents were influential members of the community as well as constituents of those board members, their opinions held considerable weight. He therefore adopted a course of action that he thought would achieve his ends – closing the school – while also giving parents options for moving their children and teachers being assigned to another school. Although he theoretically could have done so, he did not simply cut the program and the teaching staff.

In addition, Dr. Riley spoke of his intention to reallocate the resources used to keep the boutique schools open and use them for students with a greater need. As quoted above, he remarked that due to this misallocation of resources "we're not providing some opportunities we could be providing for the students who are most in need." Even during a contentious issue like a school closure, he was very open about his intention to focus the changes he wanted to make around his vision for equity in the district. In short, in his prognostic framing, closing the school would cut waste but also make the district more equitable.

Prioritizing areas for school construction in GUSD. Dr. Bell's discussion of school construction centered around the need to be equitable and to reassure community members that the staff of GUSD would not ignore areas of the district that may have previously been ignored. The district attempted to send the message that they would take great care in addressing the schools with the greatest need. In order to set priorities for construction as well as gain community buy-in,

the district held community meetings and created a committee made up of stakeholders from throughout the city. Speaking of the result of those efforts, Dr. Bell said:

> Through the community, we adopt what we called at that time a "worst first" strategy. And that was that, whether you look at it as being fortunate or unfortunate, every sector of our school district had buildings that were in very bad shape and were very old. And so we were able to get the community to take ownership of the idea that those buildings that are the worst off and the oldest, we should take care of those buildings first. […] And to those of you who are on [masked], as the program was implemented, we will be able to get to your parts of the city as the program progresses.

This "worst first" strategy became a common refrain when engaging in prognostic framing of the solution to prioritizing construction needs. He mentioned that he appreciated the help of the district's communication team, saying that he was fortunate to have them "work with us on messaging and branding and communicating our ideas and our programs in the most effective way possible."

Although Dr. Bell claimed that the strategy had its merits, he remarked that there were some holdouts in the community that did not feel that the district's approach would address their needs. As quoted above, some constituents felt that "You guys [the district] may run out of money and never get to my neighborhood." Dr. Bell felt that it was important for a leader to listen to those concerns and to try to educate, rather than persuade, those that disagreed. Speaking about those moments of intractable disagreement, he said:

> At that point, because we felt like we did have the backing of the majority of the community with the approach that we had developed, those groups that didn't agree with our approach, we just had to say to them that we just have to agree to disagree. And then we just moved

on. And because of the type of outreach around that, we were confident being able to move

forward because that group of people who felt like that wasn't the right approach was a

small group of people in the community as a whole.

Despite the district's best efforts, Dr. Bell felt that there was sometimes no way to please every

stakeholder in the district. His remarks indicate that from his perspective, no amount of prognostic

framing will sway all parties involved.

Discipline and enrollment policies at LUSD. Dr. Powell viewed the particular case

involved in this discipline and enrollment policy as a matter of "right and wrong." In her view, a

student with a drug problem should not face a disproportionate punishment simply because her or

his family could not afford to live in the catchment area of an advanced academic program.

However, she needed to contend with the fact that, in her words, "the parents at his school want

this [student] kicked out." Dr. Powell's prognostic framing centered around the need to change

this policy so that this student would not face a "double consequence." Although centered on one

student, this district policy needed board approval, so Dr. Powell focused her efforts on swaying

board members to her side. She mentioned that the night before our interview, she had been on the

phone with a board member at 10 p.m. trying to convince her or him to change the policy.

Her description of the solution to this problem involved her own feelings of empathy for

the student, saying "He's a drug addict, he's not selling drugs. He's a drug addict. He can get some

help." She saw this particular instance in very personal terms and felt strongly about the issue,

saying that certain values and decisions are "non-negotiables." Speaking of the considerations she

made around prognostic framing, Dr. Powell remarked:

You also have to think about, there are some things, I say, 'okay, this has been broken a

long time. I'm not fixing this overnight. It's wrong, but I can't fix it overnight.' There's

some other things, like the one I told you about, 'I'll kick the student out of school.' No, I'm not doing that. […] But he's not going to be kicked [out] when someone else was using drugs, and because their parents were wealthy enough to live in the neighborhood, they get to stay there. I won't do that.

Along with many of the participants in this study, Dr. Powell noted that in certain instances she would take a hard stand on an issue that she felt passionately about, even if it could potentially cost her the support of stakeholders or even result in her dismissal. She later remarked:

So, all superintendents are losing their job – from the day you step in it, you're on your way out of it, you know? Especially if you're in a large district, nobody stays in the job. So you have to think about what you want to accomplish and what your core values and beliefs are.

Dr. Powell understood the short tenures of most urban superintendents and took this into consideration in her prognostic framing efforts. In her statement, she seems to indicate that framing the solution to certain problems is straightforward if it involves a moral or value-laden choice.

Language policy at MCSD. Superintendent Solano felt the need to address some of the long-standing marginalization of ELLs in his district as well as the historical inadequacy of their treatment in the state and the country. When discussing his attempts to expand the program district-wide, he said:

Truly a community-based project, something the community wanted. And then working across the board with parents, teachers, students, and curriculum folks, and then also outside vendors, to put together all of the pieces of a program. […] Honestly that's something that everybody wanted. It was more that I could lead and steer it and then we could identify the right resources and put the right leadership in place. It was easier from

that standpoint, because so many people wanted to do it and it is sort of a sexy topic in education.

He remarked that he was fortunate that there was pre-existing level of support from the community. This support was rooted in the backing of dual language programming by a White affluent group of parents who had already expressed their approval for its expansion.

When considering the implications of expanding this policy and how to gain the support of a range of stakeholders, Superintendent Solano decided to roll-out the expansion over time by starting with a few schools and increasing the enrollment in the program one grade at a time. He also instituted a series of regular meetings and listening sessions that included include faculty and principals to help talk through problems they faced during implementation. When speaking about being able to make this change in the district, Superintendent Solano said:

> The jury is still out in terms of longer-term success, but in terms of the success in the first three years of it, I think we can certainly point to that. That's really exciting, I mean that's been great. But that's been a big one, and that's districtwide.

Superintendent Solano recognized that support for the change might be temporary and that his efforts might not be enough, given the long roll-out process and the speed at which support could evaporate.

Separate and unequal school programs at VPS. When speaking of the problems of the two parallel school programs separated by SES and race, Dr. Clark faced an issue that, in his words, was "very apartheid." When discussing the solution to this problem, Dr. Clark observed the need to integrate this school and not allow the district to be complicit in "gentrifying the neighborhood so all of the White kids can go to this prestigious high school in the middle of our rapidly changing, but historically underserved, students of color." He therefore pushed for the school's choice

programming to be merged with the more traditional programs that served the students from the neighborhood. This would remove barriers between new wealthier residents and historically marginalized members of the neighborhood.

Dr. Clark hoped that this approach would bring about a more equitable result and was very open in discussing the issue in terms of racial justice. When speaking about his hoped-for change, he said:

> We thought it was a good time to take that on. We had a track record. We had rhetoric. We had all of those kinds of things. And it just brought people out in droves. 'What will happen to my kids? What will happen to my program? We haven't spent enough money on this. You have got to dot the i's, cross the t's.' And six months later, we lost. And I think the board passed some watered-down resolution saying that three years out or five years out they would look at it, if they had money and if they had time they would try to do something about it.

Dr. Clark had thought that his approach to speaking about the changes he wanted to make would be effective. However, Dr. Clark underestimated the level of resistance that he would face when attempting to address the inequity in this school and was left with an unsatisfying result.

Motivational. Beyond defining a problem and solution, framing theory involves the use of motivational frames. These frames form the basis of or rationale for taking action or making this change. Motivational frames attend to such issues as getting people "on board" or having them take ownership of a policy, program, or project (Benford & Snow, 2000). This kind of framing often overlaps with the defined policy problem and proposed solution, given that the motivation for solving a problem is often seen as self-evident: the problem itself. But the leaders in this study

often communicated various messages to motivate the stakeholders in their districts to accept how they defined the problem and how they intended to solve it.

A boutique school at WPS. When speaking of the need to close the school, Dr. Riley used multiple motivational frames to attempt to get his school board as well as the affected parents to support his plan. He couched his plan in financial terms, commenting how the school cost "twice as much per student at that school than we were at our other schools, other middle schools." He also commented on the apparent academic struggles of the schools, which was especially stark when one considers the extra resources going to fund the school. Of the school's academic performance, he said, "It looked like they were performing very well, but when you corrected for poverty and ELL, the students were actually performing worse than even our worst middle school." In addition to the academic concerns, Dr. Riley was upfront about identifying this action as rooted in his desire for a more equitable district, saying that spending money to keep this school open "doesn't comport with my vision for equity." In order to push his case for closing the school, Dr. Riley used frames relating to school finance and resources, academic performance, and equity.

Prioritizing areas for school construction in GUSD. During our interviews, Dr. Bell often spoke about the importance of communication when making changes in GUSD. In order to motivate others to accept the prioritization plan for school construction, GUSD relied on a set of community meetings and a taskforce made up of stakeholders from various areas of the district. In these meetings, Dr. Bell and the staff of GUSD could address concerns and also engage in framing efforts around this program. Of the process, he remarked that:

> For those individuals who lived [in areas that were not an initial priority], it was a matter
> of just trying to, just having the same message that we're going to do 'worst first,' and that

this program, over the life of this program, is going to touch every building in the district and every part of the community in the district.

In order to motivate those who might not initially benefit from the program, the staff of GUSD relied on the lines of communication established during the planning process. In addition, Dr. Bell identified the slogan or motto of "worst first" as an important reference point in garnering the support of the community.

Discipline and enrollment policies at LUSD. Dr. Powell's strategy for motivating others to change the aforementioned discipline policy relied on her powerful view of equity and her conviction that the policy was morally or ethically wrong. Believing that this instance was a very clear case of injustice, she had told a board member that, "we have to stand up for what is right, even when there are parents or groups of people who disagree with us." This approach was intended to stir the courage of the board member to face the possible backlash from parents or other stakeholders.

Dr. Powell admitted that this way of speaking about the policy change might leave her without many supporters, but said, "Sometimes you have to stand by yourself or help [board members] understand how the policy is inherently unfair." Like some other superintendents, Dr. Powell said that there were situations or policies that were so egregious that she would be tenacious about altering them and pay little attention to the resistance she might face as a result.

Language policy at MCSD. When speaking of the need to change ELL educational programming at MCSD, Superintendent Solano often referred to the historical injustice and mistreatment of ELLs in the country and state as well as their recent unfair treatment in a district scandal. He also utilized his experience as an ELL when attempting to get others to make their needs a priority. As referenced earlier, Superintendent Solano said: "I know what it's like trying

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to learn English and what those experiences are like." The inclusion of his personal story of struggle gave the initiative a sense of purpose that might not have existed under another superintendent.

In order to ensure further support and buy-in, Superintendent Solano also placed known advocates of dual language and other supporters in places of influence and leadership in order to mitigate resistance and push for support. He also created principal and teacher roundtables to discuss issues of implementation and to provide suggestions for improvement. These efforts were done with the aim of gaining the long-term support of these stakeholders.

Separate and unequal school programs at VPS. School related issues connected to SES and race were long-standing struggles in VPS, with people of color underperforming other groups in measures of achievement. Dr. Clark's administration had a reputation for wanting to address race-related issues like the achievement or opportunity gap. He leveraged this reputation when attempting to address the parallel programs in a segregated school and referenced the obvious equity component that was reflected in his desire to combine the programs. Despite his efforts, Dr. Clark admitted that he was not successful in achieving his aims. When reflecting on his framing efforts, he said, "As soon as you talk about race, it brings out all of the opposition. And it brings out none of the support." He believed that including race in the discussion surrounding his proposed solution brought out opposition and resistance, therefore making the change more difficult.

Counter framing. Benford and Snow (2000) note that framing efforts often involve addressing or refuting possible reasons for resisting the change that is being advocated. This "counter framing" often occurs through pre-existing knowledge of the contextual environment.

However, unlike the three core framing tasks, counter frames are not always present in framing language.

Several examples of counter framing were observed though the course of this study. Some superintendents were very aware of how their arguments might be perceived and countered, and they took deliberate action to engage in counter framing efforts. For instance, Dr. Riley referenced an argument that he had encountered from board members during his attempt to close that school in his district:

> What used to come up is, 'Well, if we change this, if we do away with that school that I was talking about earlier, we're going to lose these families that have money, and they're going to open enroll out to another district.' And this is that a time when our poverty rate just continues to climb. And so my response to them, and I think we're pretty much on the same page – pretty much – is look, we have a 75% poverty rate, and if you want the district as a whole to perform well, we need to be serving effectively our students that live in poverty. Because if they're not performing well, the district isn't performing well. And frankly, if those families want to leave, is it a financial burden? Yes it is, but if they're not satisfied with what we're doing, it also helps some of your decision-making.

Dr. Riley was aware that his decision to close the underutilized boutique school would face resistance and was prepared to proactively address the arguments against it. Board members attempted to reframe the decision around the long-term fiscal health of the district and the potential for losing more affluent families to other neighboring districts. Dr. Riley tried to push the argument back to a message of equity and unity, explaining that the change would result in an improvement in the overall performance of the district – including those in poverty.

In addition to Dr. Riley, Dr. Powell discussed her counter framing efforts that she undertook in an action separate from her push to change the aforementioned discipline and enrollment policy. This study took place during the time immediately following the high-profile school shooting in Parkland Florida, and many superintendents commented on issues in their districts relating to school security and student safety. The constituents in Dr. Powell's district, being "majority-minority," had serious reservations about including more police in their schools. But at the same time, Dr. Powell felt the need to ensure that students were safe and to provide adequate security. She said:

> I would say the vast majority of people in the black and brown community are opposed to more law enforcement in schools. At the same time, I understand deeply this is a very unsafe world and we need some support. I'm trying to reconcile the very real and true feeling that black and brown kids… their first negative experience with law enforcement actually happens in schools. And it leads to the school-to-prison pipeline, lots of unnecessary arrests, with the need to keep schools safe. So how do I create a win-win here? Because I do need more support from law-enforcement. But at the same time, what the black and brown [community is] complaining about is real.

Being a person of color herself, Dr. Powell understood the perspective of the communities that might oppose increasing the police presence in schools. She also felt an obligation to keep students safe and supported increased security measures. Speaking of her framing efforts, she said:

> The other thing I'm doing in the meantime is trying to introduce really, sort of innocuous programs with the police department in schools. […] And sometimes you start there to get where you want to go, showing that this isn't always about policing students and schools.

This is about building stronger relationships between the police department and communities of color.

In her conversations with community members, Dr. Powell attempted to counter the framing of an increase in security as "building relationships" rather than "policing students."

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1   Introduction

This study sought to answer the question: How do superintendents frame equity-based policy choices? In Chapter 4, I presented findings that attempted to answer that question, broken down by my theoretical framework and related sub-questions. Themes developed through this analysis presented a detailed description of how five superintendents framed equity-based policies and programs in five urban districts located throughout the United States. These framing experiences were influenced by the superintendents' personal backgrounds and various elements of district context as well as how they made sense of stakeholder involvement.

This chapter will discuss the main research findings of this study as they relate to framing theory and the superintendency in urban districts. I begin by briefly restating the significance of this study. I then discuss the main findings and present implications for future research. Next, I will discuss related recommendations for preparation and policy. Finally, I will describe any limitations of this study and end with some closing comments.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, qualitative case study research requires gaining access to research sites. Gaining this access to urban districts and their superintendents was especially difficult given their high-profile public position and the extremely busy nature of their work schedules. In fact, many superintendents shared the mental, emotional, and physical difficulty of the position during interviews as well as the high demands on their professional and personal time. In addition, this study adds to a space in the literature on how urban superintendents lead for equity in their districts. Nevertheless, because of the qualitative nature, of this study any statistical inferences or attempts at generalizability for other superintendents and districts is not

appropriate. But these findings contribute to an understanding of leadership for equity, the superintendency, and framing theory.

5.2   Major Findings

Framing theory proved to be a useful analytical lens through which to examine how superintendents used strategic communication to push for equity in their districts. Each of the superintendents presented examples of a policy or program that they had attempted to implement with equity in mind. Each of the superintendents also engaged in framing when discussing the policy or program with stakeholders in the district. This aligns with the discursive role of "communicator" whereby a superintendent is expected to explain policy and programmatic choices to the public and gain the support of stakeholders (Björk et al., 2014). The five superintendents made sense of equity for themselves which subsequently affected their how they attempted to make sense or frame their equity-related policy choices for others. The five superintendents also indicated differing sensemaking experiences around community and stakeholder involvement which affected their framing efforts.

According to Benford and Snow (2000), framing involves three main tasks: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. Diagnostic framing is the process by which certain policy problems are identified and prioritized over others. Prognostic framing is the identification and promotion of a solution to a policy problem. Motivational framing involves communicating why a policy or program needs to be addressed at that moment and how to get stakeholders on board with their proposed changes. Each of the five superintendents experienced these three framing modes in their efforts to implement a specific equity policy or program, but each based their framing choices on a variety of factors.

The first set of factors are contextual. In short, context matters when it comes to leading for equity in urban districts. Each of the cases highlighted the incredible complexity of leading an urban district and support researchers' interest in urban schools and urban school reform (Anyon, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kozol, 1991; Ravitch, 1999). These five districts mirrored the often-cited interconnected challenges of student poverty, language status, and ethnic and racial diversity found in urban districts.

In addition, these cases reinforced the difficult educational policy context in which superintendents must lead and which makes durable reform difficult. The current emphasis on narrow conceptions of data, top-down policy approaches, a lack of public trust in institutions, and limits on funding make the job of an urban superintendent nearly unmanageable. As illustrated in these cases, toxic school board and local district politics can create a complex and often risky leadership environment for superintendents. Most superintendents in this study knew that the statistics for a long-tenure were not in their favor. Therefore, most chose to actively engage with the community in order to mitigate resistance and build capacity for lasting change. Each superintendent also understood the importance of their local context and drew from that context when framing issues related to equity.

The second set of factors are related to how superintendents make sense of equity. The superintendents in this study attempted to understand the meaning of equity for themselves and their districts. This sense of equity in turn affected their framing efforts. However, equity in the complex environment of urban schools was complicated and filled with different levels of nuance and meaning. Some superintendents conceived of equity in moral terms but also observed that leading for equity was not as simple as making the "right" or the "wrong" choice. Most observed the struggle of leading for equity in an urban district given the powerful voice of those in the

mainstream versus those at the margins. This aligns with researchers who noted the dilemma-laden and "messy" context of leading for equity (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

Additionally, superintendents' personal experience and identity were important factors in their sensemaking efforts around equity. A superintendent's background in teaching and leading schools with high percentage of students of color and from low-SES backgrounds seemed to give superintendents a personal connection to the need for equity leadership and therefore informed their framing efforts. Some superintendents' intention to have as broad a social impact as possible and their stated desire to be community rather than simply school leaders also provided a sense of purpose that influenced how they framed equity for their stakeholders. Although a small percentage of superintendents overall are people of color, I was fortunate that several did agree to participate in this study. Those superintendents surprisingly did not frame issues of equity in terms much different than their White counterparts nor exhibited a more critical consciousness around these issues. This finding certainly requires further study.

The third set of factors that influenced superintendents' framing choices surrounds how they utilized their sense of equity to frame equity for others. Certainly, the way that most superintendents framed equity was through moral terms like "right" and "wrong." For most of the superintendents, issues of equity were not simply another policy or program to be checked off of an agenda. Equity was an integral part of their self-conceptions of leadership and the values that influenced their decisions. Therefore, superintendents used moral messaging when identifying a problem and proposing a solution that they perceived had implications for equity. This moral framing was often put forth regardless of its perceived effect, given the personal and emotional attachments to equity that many superintendents had.

There were, however, other framing strategies used that depended on the sense of equity that a superintendent had. Many superintendents used economic framing language that highlighted the negative effects of educational inequity on individuals as well as the local and regional economy. They often referenced equity-related policies as creating a better-prepared workforce that would attract business investment to the region. Superintendents also discussed the money that governments – and taxpayers – might save on social services and the criminal justice system if the district could increase the academic achievement of marginalized students. Some superintendents noted the possibility of higher tax receipts from increasing economic productivity from broadening educational opportunity through equity. Superintendents often framed equity in economic terms as an intentional strategy, whereby superintendents would present this equity frame to those stakeholders who superintendents thought would be amenable to that message.

Beyond efforts at establishing equity as a moral or economic issue, superintendents attempted to make sense of equity around an inclusive and broad message of community. Some superintendents observed that there were some stakeholders that did not recognize the problems of marginalized students as an important priority or the responsibility of the school district. Superintendents therefore undertook efforts to pull these students out of the margins and reconceptualize them as a valued and authentic part of the community. Superintendents often did this by attempting to show stakeholders and community members that equity efforts are aligned with the interests of the larger community and to frame the fate of children facing marginalization as intertwined with their own.

The fourth set of factors that influenced superintendents' framing choices is based around opposition and resistance as well as the tensions and dilemmas that superintendents faced when framing around equity. Nearly every superintendent encountered some level of resistance to their

agenda and sought ways to mitigate or subvert this opposition. Issues relating to equity were especially troublesome for superintendents, given their sometimes-contentious nature. In addition, creating change was particularly difficult in the often toxic atmosphere of school district politics and the outsize influence of even a small but vocal opposition. Superintendents therefore sometimes avoided publicly discussing contentious issues or utilized various framing efforts to lessen this resistance.

In addition, superintendents faced various tensions and dilemmas when creating frames around equity. Some superintendents had to consider when it was more valuable to be consistent or be savvy when strategically communicating their equity choices. Superintendents observed that public discussions of equity issues, like those around race, might be uncomfortable and could create more resistance to an equity agenda. However, some superintendents believed that these discussions might have longer-term value for the district and the community at large by bringing to light long-standing structures and systems that contribute to inequity. Superintendents also considered how much to embrace or avoid the political role of the superintendency. Some superintendents believed that stakeholders will likely pre-judge an initiative, so they attempted to use their framing efforts to find common ground and avoid a political fight. Others proactively engaged with a wide-ranging group of stakeholders, built coalitions of support, and attempted to sway the opinions of stakeholders and constituents. Superintendents also sought to balance "keeping your job" with "doing your job." Many believed that when it came to certain equity issues, the educational and moral values of the community and the superintendent may sometimes come into conflict. Some superintendents thought that there would be moments where they might have to choose between reflecting the will of stakeholders or acting on their own values around equity. Others pointed to a superintendent's role in proactively changing the values of stakeholders

in the district if they do not match those of the superintendent and harm students. This value-changing effort would involve advocacy and framing efforts around equity.

The fifth set of factors that influenced superintendents' framing choices was how superintendents made sense of community and stakeholder involvement. Superintendents need a vast array of both technical management as well as visionary leadership skills in order to push for change. They therefore need an effective vision for engaging with stakeholder groups in order to identify possible sources of resistance as well as sources of support. Some superintendents felt the need to create a framing vision or set of strategies to advocate for change both inside and outside of their organizations. This vision or these strategies affected the process of framing for superintendents.

Most superintendents perceived that the most significant group that could most directly support or derail their efforts was the school board. They therefore made building and maintaining a positive relationship with the school board a high priority. This relationship was often maintained through consistent and clear communication around the superintendent's values and vision for change in the district. In addition, most superintendents had a sense of their level of stakeholder support from the start of their hiring which affected their framing efforts. Some superintendents felt more comfortable to push more aggressively for change and frame issues in terms that might be seen as controversial if they felt they had the support of their board or other stakeholders. Also, many superintendents believed that deep, durable change could only happen with broad community and stakeholder support. Therefore, some attempted to proactively build broad support and tried to leverage this support to get their agenda adopted.

5.3   Implications for Future Research

Very little research exists on how superintendents attempt to lead for equity by framing their policy and programmatic choices (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Thus, there are many possibilities for future research along these lines of inquiry. Researchers should consider applying framing analysis to examine the strategic communication of specific policies or programs related to equity. For example, this study noted several types of equity-related policies or programs that superintendents attempted to change, like closing a school or merging a racially-divided program. A multi-case study that examines a particular policy or program action might provide a deeper understanding of the considerations that superintendents must make when framing specific issues of equity. Exploring superintendents' framing of policy or programmatic issues related to race, gender, LGBTQ rights, ELL students, or students with special needs might provide useful cases that explore how superintendents frame these themes for stakeholders and create durable change in their districts.

More case studies might also yield a greater understanding of the factors involved in superintendents' framing of individual policies and how they play out in differing contexts. For instance, the setting for these cases were all urban districts, but it is likely that superintendents of rural or suburban districts would have differing framing experiences and strategies. Issues of equity would likely play out differently in these contexts and the interactions among the superintendent and stakeholder groups would likely also differ as well. Also, further study examining the connection between identity and framing efforts would be important for expanding the literature on superintendent framing. Although a small percentage of superintendents overall are people of color, I was fortunate that several did agree to participate in this study. Those superintendents surprisingly did not frame issues of equity in terms much different than their White

counterparts nor exhibited a more critical consciousness around these issues. As noted above, this finding certainly requires further study.

The cases in this study gave voice to some of the nuance and complexity of leading for equity for superintendents. More studies that attempt to inform this understanding would be valuable to help counter the view that equity simply requires leaders to act ethically or make the "right" decision. Other studies that seek to problematize this view and seek nuance in how leaders push for change in the real-life context of schools would be a welcome addition to the literature.

Additionally, quantitative studies examining frame effectiveness would be a useful addition to the study of equity, framing, and the superintendency. A study of frame effectiveness which analyzes which frames work best with which issues and with which populations would certainly be valuable. In fact, quantitative studies of framing effectiveness are common in the world of politics. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff (2004) has examined how different political parties frame political issues for different constituent groups. In addition, many modern political parties and non-profit do "message testing" to see what frames work to gain the support of voters (Frameworks Institute, 2017). This approach might be valuable insight into how policy and programmatic framing messages are received by stakeholders.

5.4   Implications for Policy and Practice

Current educational leaders and policy makers might benefit from this study when making strategic decisions that have implications for equitable policy creation and implementation. This study presents useful case studies about how district leaders navigate the complex decision- and policy-making atmosphere of the superintendency and provide a clearer view of the ways in which superintendents make decisions for equity. These cases also show how superintendents attempt to

legitimize these choices within an ethically ambiguous and dilemma-laden leadership environment.

This study has several implications for policy-makers. First, superintendents play an important role in policy translation and implementation on the district level. Scholars have noted the role of leaders in translating policy from text to practice (Coburn, 2006; Woulfin et al., 2015). Local and state-level policy makers should therefore consider the role of the superintendent in supporting (or possibly scuttling) policy changes as they are applied at the district level. How a superintendent makes sense of a policy and in turn frames it for others should be an important consideration for policy-makers and may perhaps motivate them to include superintendents more fully in the policy-making process.

Second, superintendents, board members, and other stakeholders should lessen unrealistic expectations for new district leaders and reject the narrative that one heroic leader can come in and "save" a district. Many equity issues are stubborn and contentious, so overnight change is likely impossible. Many superintendents in this study advocated taking the "long view" when considering equitable changes. They observed the challenge of finding a way to push for change and frame their choices while also remaining in place long enough to maintain support for their agenda.

Third, many superintendents noted the important influence that board members had on their agenda and how toxic local politics and board dysfunction could upend any progress on equity. Some suggested that changes in board governance, including altering the term length of board members, could lessen the churn at the board level and cut down on the immense task of training and advising board members. For instance, a common board governance structure is a seven-member board that has staggered elections every two years. That means either three or four

board seats are up for election every two years and could therefore result in a huge swing in board membership in the middle of a three- or four-year superintendent contract term. To alleviate this concern, board terms could be lengthened to four years with only two or three board seats open at any one election. These longer terms would allow for board members to remain in place, gaining experience and cutting down on the need for training. Superintendents would have less of a chance to see new faces every two years and deal with having to establish new relationships with board members. Of course, this would stop unhappy constituents from having the ability to quickly overturn the make-up of the board, but it would also lessen the chance for drastic changes on the board level that disrupt progress and add to dysfunction.

This study also has several implications for practitioners. Many superintendents noted their lack of training and preparation in communication and stakeholder involvement. Educational leadership training programs may be better designed to train superintendents to lead for equity and current practitioners could take important lessons from these cases.

The first implication for practitioner is the observation that the superintendency is a position unlike any other in a school district, from teacher to principal to central office staff. Any background in education or instruction is valuable for a superintendent, but according to this study's participants this experience will not be at the center of the day-to-day work of the superintendency. Many superintendents noted that much of a superintendent's time is spent with adults, and much of that time will be spent interacting with the school board. Nearly every superintendent noted the incredible importance of maintaining positive board relationships through clear and consistent communication. Superintendents who seek to create change should have a vision for equity and be open with the board about how equity drives her or his decisions.

Second, this study provides practical lessons for the application of professional leadership standards for educational leadership programs and current superintendents. Current leadership and preparation standards like PSEL and NELP each address professional ethics and ethical decision-making and include an element on leadership for equity. However, these standards offer little specific guidance on how these ethics are lived out in day-to-day practice. This study provides some lessons on how leaders might make sense of these standards in realistic decision-making scenarios. For instance, Element 2.4 of the NELP standards states that prospective leaders should be able to "demonstrate the capability to promote essential educational values of democracy, community, individual freedom and responsibility, equity, social justice, and diversity" (NELP Draft Standards, 2015, p. 5). This study provides some useful, pragmatic examples of how educational leaders make sense of ambiguous and complex leadership scenarios and take nuanced actions for promoting equity. Leaders might therefore have a clearer understanding of how they might promote equity, social justice, and diversity and demonstrate that capability in authentic circumstances.

Third, current practitioners should consider making an effort to be proactive in framing the changes they want to see regarding equity. They should reflect on how comfortable they are with altering their framing messages – with a concurrent risk of coming off as disingenuous – when speaking to different stakeholder groups. Superintendents should take great care to study and know their audience. If she or he believes that a person or group would be receptive to a moral, economic, or community message around equity, a superintendent should think about how she or he might incorporate that message to gain their support. However, superintendents should consider the feasibility of having uncomfortable and contentious conversations about equity in public since they may have long-term benefits for a community grappling with these issues.

Fourth, although superintendents should focus on board relations, they should not neglect the connection that the board has with the larger public – especially through the ballot box. Superintendents should create multiple avenues to engage with as broad a swathe of stakeholders as possible. This effort should be undertaken even if a particular group does not have a direct involvement in the policy or program that the superintendent is prioritizing. These relationships might be useful in supporting a superintendent's overall agenda and provide important instances for framing her or his policy and program changes. This strategy is supported by the research on the superintendent's discursive role of "communicator," a conception of leadership that realigns and redistributes the power to make change from a singular leader to the wider community (Björk et al., 2014). Superintendents should regularly take stock of their district by assessing who the influential power-players are, keep them regularly informed, and utilize their support to try to sway the other stakeholders.

Lastly, superintendents should consider how powerful and influential a small opposition group can be in derailing efforts to make equitable change. A superintendent should take this resistance seriously and frame her or his message accordingly. A superintendent might engage in proactive counter-framing in behind-the-scenes conversations with board members, or if more appropriate, during public meetings or with the media. However, these leaders should reflect on their own values and priorities and consider how they might conflict with those in the community. They should consider where they would draw a line where they would no longer compromise and understand the effort that might have to be taken to, in the words of Dr. Powell, "engage in efforts to try to encourage modification of the values and changing some of the long-held beliefs of the community that you serve."

5.5 Limitations

This study was a multi-case study of five superintendents' framing of equity in five urban districts in the United States. These superintendents differed in their racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender, preparation, and experience. Their districts varied in size, demographic make-up, and other contextual factors. But qualitative case studies do not lend themselves to generalizability. This study consisted of five urban superintendents in five different states, but their experiences are certainly not representative of all superintendents throughout the country. Superintendents in smaller urban areas as well as suburban or rural areas are likely to experience leadership, equity, and framing in different ways.

Being the researcher in a qualitative study, I was a part of the research and was therefore a conduit of the research itself (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). As a result of my close contact with the participants and the data, the results and interpretation were likely strongly influenced and limited by my assumptions and biases (Merriam, 2009). These assumptions could be ontological, epistemological, and methodological (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln, 2010). However, as I conducted this study I attempted to consider these assumptions and, importantly, to remain "reflexive." According to Creswell (2012):

> This means that you reflect on your own biases, values, and assumptions and actively write them into the research. This may also involve discussing personal experiences and identifying how you collaborated with participants during phases of the project. You may also discuss how your experiences and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Asian American perspectives) affect the interpretations and conclusions drawn in the study. (p. 18)

In this vein, I should report that my previous research experience has led me to assume that there are superintendents who act in socially-just ways and frame their policy choices to different

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stakeholder groups. I also assumed that superintendents' framing of these policy choices would affect the sense-making of these groups.

Additionally, I privileged the perspectives of superintendents and de-emphasized the voices of a broader range of stakeholders who could have played a role in framing or sense-making experiences within a school district. However, my study was focused on the framing experiences of superintendents, therefore it made sense to focus on their perspective.

Future studies into this area of research might allow for a broader perspective on framing and sense-making of equity-based policies. If time permitted, I would have included these voices in my study. I also would have expanded my study to include a further set of interviews or to include more participants from other urban areas in the U.S. Time was therefore a limitation of my study.

5.6   Closing Comments

These five cases provided a perspective into the incredibly difficult job of leading an urban district and the challenges superintendents face leading such large and complex organizations on a daily basis. The superintendents that participated in this study faced this job with a seriousness of purpose and a real commitment to improving the educational systems in their districts. However, leading for equity on any level is often problematic and "messy." Regardless of intent – as some of them observed – not all superintendents live up to the commitment to "do the right thing" for all the students in their district.

However, there is frequently a desire among the public (often understandable) for quick fixes to long-standing issues of inequity. This sometimes results in a "change-" or "turnaround-superintendent" being hired with an expectation to come in to "overturn the tables" and "disrupt the status quo." But without building support, this kind of superintendent will likely face enormous

resistance, be quickly replaced, and their policies and programs subsequently ignored or overturned. Long-term change is likely to happen only with broad community support and a superintendent remaining in place long enough to make that happen. This durable change is derived from powerful ideas and effective messages that can gain wide acceptance from members of the community. The superintendents in this study contemplated various ways to talk about equity policy and programs and considered how to utilize these frames to pursue their agenda. They took care when speaking about the changes that they want to see and thought about how their messages might be received. In short, they believed that words matter – and that these words could bring people together to make change. As the (possibly apocryphal) African proverb states, "If you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together."

The research literature on social justice is what brought me to this topic. Scholars on social justice leadership have focused on school principals and observed that they attempt to recognize unjust practices and take action in order to effect change (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Green & Dantley, 2013; Rivera-McCutchen & Watson, 2014). These leaders are also supposed to speak up and advocate for those at the margins whose voices are not privileged. But this advocacy can be difficult within a school system that requires principals to conform to rules and policies and can result in termination and replacement for those leaders who attempt to resist.

For me, this observation raised the question: are there social justice superintendents? Being the nominal leaders of a school district, superintendents may be in a better position to advocate for equity. Superintendents are in a high-profile public role – likely more high-profile than a school-level leader – and can attract a lot of attention when they speak. They regularly interact with powerful stakeholders that have influence in allocating and distributing resources, changing unjust

policies, and funding programs aimed at creating a more equitable district. But being an advocate for equity is not easy at this level either, given the level of resistance to even seemingly small and innocuous changes in a school district. Additionally, scholars have observed that social justice leaders put equity at the center of their practice (Theoharis, 2007). It would be hard for me (and I hesitated doing so) to label any of the superintendents in this study "social justice superintendents." Superintendents might simply be unable to put equity at the center of their practice without compromising their job status – or perhaps someone so "radical" would not be hired by the school board in the first place. This thought leads me to be critical of superintendents and school boards for lacking the courage to take action when there is so much evidence of inequity in their districts and seemingly putting self-interest above those whose needs are so great.

However, at these moments I recall the admonition of Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribb (2002) that researchers should avoid "critique from above" (p. 504) and examine the nuanced dilemmas of creating social justice in practice. As an outsider, it is often easy to be critical of the choices that leaders make regarding equity. Like some of the superintendents did in this study, I am reminded that context is key, that issues of inequity are stubborn and persistent – and that solutions are often beyond the actions of any one person. And I hope that each reader of this dissertation takes away this lesson as well.

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Interview Protocol

Principal Investigator: James C. Coviello
University of Texas at El Paso – Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations
Interview Date/Time: _____

Question Guide:

1) Personal introduction; description of study

2) Tell me about yourself and your background

    a) [Probe] – What in your life drove you to become a superintendent?

3) What brought you to your district?

    a) [Probe] – What were the most important factors that spurred your choice to lead there and not somewhere else?

    b) [Probe] – Is this your first position as district superintendent? If not, what made you move on from your last position?

4) What, in your view, is the purpose of education?

    a) [Probe] – How important is equity in education [or How important is doing what's best for all students]?

    b) [Probe] – Do you try to make equity issues a priority in your district?

        i) [If yes] Can you give me an example of an action you took to try to address inequity in your district?

5) What does good educational leadership look like on the superintendent level?

    a) How does a good superintendent set priorities?

    b) On what do you spend most of your time at your job?

       i)   [Probe] – On what would you prefer to spend your time?

6) Describe your leadership style.

7) Take me through the process for a significant policy change on the district level.

    a) [Probe] – Where does this process begin?

    b) [Probe] – How is the decision made to change a policy?

    c) [Probe] – What happens after a decision is made?

8) How is a new policy communicated to different stakeholder groups?

    a) E.g., the school board, principals, teachers, parents, students, local business leaders,

       citizen groups, media?

    b) [Probe] – How do you try to gain support for the policy change?

    c) [Probe] – How do you address "push-back" or resistance to a new policy?

9) Share with me your most successful moment working with other stakeholders to make a

   positive change in your district.

10) How important are good communication skills for a superintendent?

    a) [Probe] – Why (or why not) are they important?

    b) [Probe] – Where did you learn these kinds of skills?

11) How much of your job involves convincing others that a policy or program change is a good

   idea? Take me through one of those conversations or experiences.

12) Are there different communication skills or styles you utilize when communicating with

   different stakeholder groups?

    a) How might you try to frame or tailor a message to these different groups?

    b) How do you communicate the reasons for a policy change? (diagnostic framing)

    c) How do you communicate that the policy solution you are presenting is the right one?

(prognostic framing)

d) How do you motivate others to get on-board with the new direction you are taking?

(motivational framing)

13) When addressing different groups of people in your district, how might you alter:

a) the reason you give for the policy change?

b) how the policy solution is presented?

c) how you motivate them to gain support?

14) How important is it to be "shrewd" or "savvy" in crafting your communication with different

groups?

a) How should context be considered?

b) How important is it to know your audience?

c) Do you find yourself using different kinds of wording or terminology when

communicating the need for a policy change with different groups?

d) By focusing on or highlighting the positive aspects of a new policy, you might be playing

down its other, less popular aspects. Is that okay? Please explain.

15) What role do politics play in your role as superintendent?

a) [Probe] – These could be on the local, district, or even state level.

b) [Probe] – What about intra-district (or within-district) politics?

c) [Probe] – How do you navigate these political concerns while still making positive

changes?

16) An instance when your professional experience or expertise conflicted with the policy

proposals of a stakeholder group?

17) Can you describe a situation when you knew what the right decision was – what was best for

the students –but you faced resistance? How did you make sense of a situation like that? How

deal with this?

18) [Interviewer gives summary of the major topics covered] How well does that summarize

what we spoke about?

19) Is there anything that I missed or anything that you would like to add?

Thank you for your time and for the important information you have shared.

Study Participant Recruitment Email

Participant Recruitment Email

Dear Superintendent _____:

My name is James Coviello and I am a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Texas at El Paso. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation, which includes interviews of school district superintendents. I would like to extend you an invitation to participate in this research.

In these interviews, you will be asked questions about your various leadership actions, specifically regarding how you communicate with various stakeholders in your district. The interview will last approximately one hour, with the possibility of adding another hour-long follow-up interview.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you will be assigned a pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of your interview responses throughout this research project.

I understand that you have a very busy schedule, therefore I very much appreciate your time. If you choose to participate in this study, please respond to this email message.

If you have any questions, please email me at JCCoviello@miners.utep.edu or call xxx-xxx-xxxx. If you would like, you can also contact my advisor, Dr. David DeMatthews at DEDeMatthews@utep.edu or xxx-xxx-xxxx. If you have any concerns about this research project or if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the UT El Paso Institutional Review Board at 915-747-7693.

Sincerely,

James Coviello
Doctoral Candidate
Educational Leadership and Foundations Department
The University of Texas at El Paso

IRB Approval Letter

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
Office of the Vice President for Research and Sponsored Projects
Institutional Review Board
El Paso, Texas 79968-0587
phone: 915 747-8841   fax: 915 747-5931

FWA No: 00001224

DATE:	January 31, 2018
TO:	James Coviello, M.A.
FROM:	University of Texas at El Paso IRB
STUDY TITLE:	[1185530-1] 'Framing' equity: Using frame analysis to explore superintendents' attempts to implement policies for equity
IRB REFERENCE #:	College of Education
SUBMISSION TYPE:	New Project
ACTION:	DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE:	January 31, 2018
REVIEW CATEGORY:	45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. University of Texas at El Paso IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

Exempt protocols do not need to be renewed. Please note that it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to resubmit the proposal for review if there are any modifications made to the originally submitted proposal. This review is required in order to determine if "Exemption" status remains.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at (915) 747-8841 or irb.orsp@utep.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

cc:

VITA

James C. Coviello was born in North Bergen, New Jersey to parents James A. and Robin Coviello. He attended Horace Mann (#9) Public Elementary School until the eighth grade. After receiving a scholarship to attend, he graduated from Saint Peter's Preparatory School in Jersey City in 1999. Following high school, James attended Syracuse University in central New York and graduated in 2003 with a degree in Fine Arts with a concentration in Music History. He began teaching music and social studies at Saint Anthony High School in Jersey City and later Cristo Rey New York High School in East Harlem. In 2008, James took a position at Saint Peter's Preparatory School teaching world history where he remained for six years. He received his Master of Arts in Education from Saint Peter's College (now Saint Peter's University) in 2011. James was named History Department Chair at Saint Peter's in 2012 and served in this leadership role for two years. He moved to El Paso, Texas after marrying his wife, an officer in the U.S. Army, and they were stationed at Ft. Bliss. James began his doctoral studies in the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at the University of Texas at El Paso and became a Ph.D. Research Associate under the supervision of Dr. David DeMatthews. There he assisted Dr. DeMatthews' research on social justice leadership and dual language policy implementation. His wife's military commitment brought him and his family to Washington, D.C. where he was accepted as a 2017 Graduate Fellow in Public Policy at the Archer Center of The University of Texas System. In 2018, James was named a David L. Clark Scholar by the American Educational Research Association. Today he is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.