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of
Exploring Teacher Definitions and Practices for Equity in an Equity-Oriented Context
A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor Education

in
Education Leadership

by
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

The Dissertation of Angela Guerrero is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for the publication on microfilm and electronically:

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family and friends, who believed in me and supported me through this journey. Grandpa, it is true, I am not able to operate on anyone. Nevertheless, I know you are proud of me and I hope you and Grandma continue to brag about having the *best family ever* up in heaven. Lastly, this work could never have been completed without the constant support of my committee and chair. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity I was given to learn under Dr. Kolman.

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PREFACE

When I first started this research project, I was most interested in the seemingly opposite ways I heard educators around me defining equity. I was also curious about examples of equity-oriented charter schools across the country, all using the language of equity, but with seemingly opposite school programs. What was particularly interesting to me about charter schools was the possibilities for equity when removed from the bureaucracy of larger district schools.

Unfortunately, this study was interrupted by the global pandemic, and I was unable to complete the data collection cycle at a second school site, which represented a different approach to equity. I was able to interview the school principal and observe one day at that school site, which highlighted the possibility for better understanding how a context influences teacher practices, however this study ultimately only studied a single context. The single context illuminated how teachers in the same context still hold unique beliefs about equity that manifest in unique practices for teaching. While my interest in better understanding how different contexts define and operationalize equity, seeing how two teachers in the same context can be so very different sheds light on the heart of my question: how can people who espouse the same beliefs, behave and practice in such opposing ways? In this research, I attempt to better understand this basic question.

VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Exploring Teacher Definitions and Practices for Equity in an Equity-Oriented Context

by

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While the term equity is widely used as a call to action in education, the research underdocuments how notions of equity intersect with teachers' practices, as well as how the equity orientations within a particular school context shape what teachers do. This qualitative study examined the equity-oriented perspectives and practices of two teachers within a high school with an equity mission. The study analyzed how teacher beliefs, definitions of equity, and the school context shaped their practices. The findings suggest that these teachers practice for equity in ways that align with their beliefs about relationships and the need to break outside what is done in typical high school classrooms. Moreover, the school context, which granted great liberty to teachers to design lessons in accordance with their beliefs, had a large influence on how these teachers practice. Implications include finding a balance between critical and dominant approaches to equity-oriented teaching.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

A great deal of scholarship has dedicated itself to articulating the persistence of unequal outcomes in schooling and the many systemic causes. The research has resulted in new teacher training, professional development programs, curriculum development and coaching services (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2016; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014). Charters, magnets, and managed choice assignment plans in districts have even been created in the name of equity, social justice and racial integration (Barnum, 2017; Frankenburg & Seigel- Hawley, 2009; Golan, 2015; Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Minnow, 2008; Raymond, 2014), but to what degree have these efforts been effective? If statistics on academic and achievement outcomes for historically underserved students is the indicator, it seems we have failed our mission (Musu-Gillette, de Brey, McFarland, Hussar & Sonnenberg, 2017).

The scholarship does, however, present examples of success, described as improved achievement, graduation, and college acceptance, among schools that insist that student achievement remains a high priority for equity goals (Boykin & Noguera, 2016; Corbett-Burris, 2016; Delpit, 2011; Hammond, 2015; Linton, 2011). Less clear, however, is the impact on student achievement and academic outcomes for historically disadvantaged students attending schools where the contextual definitions for equity are divorced from achievement data and standardized tests, and where such information is perceived as inherently racist or antithetical to the goals of equity (Castelli, Ragazzi, Crescentini, 2012; Cochran-Smith, Ell, Grudnoff, Haigh Hill & Ludlow, 2016; Neill, Guisbond & Schaeffer 2004).

The teacher practitioners at any given context may also define equity differently from one another and from the definition adopted by the school. In various studies, teachers were asked to

define equity, some via survey, others via interview. In such studies, few if any denied that equity in education was important, however, multiple definitions, understandings and beliefs emerged in describing equity, some in conflict with one another (Anderson, Ohlsson & Assarson, 2015; Brand, 2015; Cho & Womans, 2017; Jordan, 2010; Jones, 2013; Minnow, 2008; North, 2008). The research on teacher beliefs suggests that what teachers believe about themselves, their students and their ability to effect change for their students, have important implications for student learning (Cess-Newsom, 1999; Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff, 2014; Goe & Stickler, 2008; Hattie, 2003; Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004). So too, follows the logic that a teachers' beliefs about equity have important implications for student learning, whether measured by achievement or something else entirely.

Statement of Problem

The research suggests that teachers have an outsized impact on student learning (Cess-Newsom, 1999; Goe & Stickler, 2008; Hattie, 2003; Rockoff, 2004). The scholarship on teacher effect is abundant, and describes the work of teachers who are coined “highly effective” and whose students earn positive achievement results on standardized tests (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014; Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004). What the research does not explore sufficiently is how notions of equity intersect with teachers' practices and ultimate effectiveness in classrooms. Moreover, it is unclear how the equity orientations within a particular school context shape what teachers do. Considering the outsized impact teachers have on student learning and achievement, as well as the undeniable significance of school context and the persistence of unequal outcomes, there needs to be a better understanding of how teachers define and operationalize equity.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

This qualitative study examined teacher beliefs and practices for equity within an equity-oriented high school. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine how two teachers think about and navigate teaching for equity. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How do these teachers define and practice for equity?
2. How does the school context influence these teachers' definitions and practices for equity?
3. In what ways, if any, do these teachers' practices for equity align with their beliefs and definitions of equity?

Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by and grounded in the definition for equity advanced by Rochelle Gutierrez (2009, 2012) which argues that equity is that which operates at the intersection of dominant and critical axes. Gutierrez describes attention to achievement and access to rigorous course taking and college preparation as dimensions on the dominant axis, while attending to critical analysis of the culture of power through the curriculum and intentional ways of incorporating student identity and cultural relevance as dimensions on the critical axis. Equity is defined as the practices at the intersection of the two axes, while acknowledging the challenges therein.

Researcher Positionality

Before beginning, I must do as Maxwell (2013) suggests: name my validity threats. This forthcoming statement of positionality outlines how who I am shapes the work presented in this dissertation. I am a white, Latina educator. I speak Spanish, which constantly sparks the

question: *Where did you learn to speak so well?* And: *Is that your married name?* I am sometimes told that I am incapable of comprehending the Latina/o/x experience because of my blonde hair and blue eyes. This argument has merit and I have resigned myself to others' ability to question my identity or perspectives, for I do not disagree that there are many racial constructs in society that I have been shielded from with my blue eyes. I see myself also as an equity educator and find myself in a similar position of defensiveness about my beliefs. Educators are increasingly critical of the achievement gap narrative, and some hear my cries for improved outcomes as a Republican standard, or worse, as supportive of white supremacist ideals. Such language can stop an argument dead in its tracks, ending any consideration for instructional or assessment practices that might help improve student achievement.

The belief that closing the achievement gap should remain a priority for equity educators has increasingly come under fire as researchers, professional development workshop facilitators, education journalists and teachers I encounter, insist that messaging about closing the achievement gap is a new form of racism (Koli, Pizarro, & Nevarez, 2017; Vandenburg, 2014). I respect their opinions, and agree that the gap narrative, alone, is not the silver bullet in bringing about equity. Neither should the gap narrative be used to blame children or their families for any lagging scores, and neither should it feed beliefs that students who are not proficient on an exam are somehow inferior. Equity as closing achievement gaps should, instead, highlight areas for teacher improvement of instructional methods, encourage improved professional development and teacher support, and energize school leaders around funding programs and policies that support students and their families. The accountability that the achievement gap helps highlight can, and often does, lead to positive school change (Boykin & Noguerra, 2011; Corbett-Burris, 2016). I fear, however, that taking pressure off of achievement data entrenches patterns of

complicity, and poorly prepares students for future success which gives in to beliefs that some students simply cannot improve. I agree with Delpit (1995, 2012) and Gutierrez (2009, 2011) who both argued that historically disadvantaged students need to be given keys to pass through the doors of the gatekeepers, and that academic achievement opens doors. Progress, in this study, requires an ability to see that both critical analysis of inequality coupled with solid structures and practices to ensure all students master core, rigorous academic skills can hold truth. Student achievement is directly tied to improved academic and life outcomes which are most important for interrupting patterns of inequality, yet are the practices most criticized in education discourse today. My work as an educator is always positioned in the center of these beliefs, in much the same way my identity resides between the opposite worlds of my father and my mother.

Significance

While the national data on closing the achievement gap suggests that no progress has been made in the last thirty years, the research on equity surfaces examples of schools which have made remarkable progress, in the traditional sense of improving academic outcomes for historically disadvantaged students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Corbett-Burris & Garrity, 2008; Corbett-Burris, 2016; Linton, 2011; Moskowitz & Lavinia 2012; Pondiscio, 2020). Despite these success cases, some scholars insist that measuring success in the way these schools do is anti-equity, anti-social justice and anti-progress for people of Color.

This study steps inside an equity context in which teachers who volunteered to participate held critical views of achievement data and standardization. This study builds our understanding of equity-oriented teaching by shedding light on what practices for equity look like inside the

classrooms of teachers with strong critical and progressive views about equity which are distinctly testing and standardization averse.

CHAPTER II: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

This qualitative study examined teacher beliefs and practices for equity within an equity-oriented high school. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine how two teachers think about and navigate teaching for equity. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How do these teachers define and practice for equity?
2. How does the school context influence these teachers' definitions and practices for equity?
3. In what ways, if any, do these teachers' practices for equity align with their beliefs and definitions of equity?

The purpose of this literature review is to: (1) explain the historical development of the notion of equity as it is described in education and scholarship to help understand contemporary disagreements that surround defining, implementing and creating equity in education; (2) provide a review of the equity framework explaining its integration of the opposing arguments surrounding discussions of equity in education, which begins and ends with a firm belief that educators are responsible for improving student outcomes, helping to lay the foundation for an examination of teacher practice; (3) provide a review of the literature on the importance of teaching context as it relates to learning outcomes for students; (4) provide a review of teacher practices for equity described in the available literature and (5) provide a review of the literature on teacher effect and teacher beliefs with an explanation of how beliefs about equity might impact practices for equity. The review of the literature points toward a need to better understand equity as it is being defined and practiced by those closest to influencing children-- the teachers.

Historical Development of Equity Scholarship

For the purposes of this study, it is important to understand how I differentiate the terms equality and equity. Equality is an end result of equal outcomes, while equity is the process created to help bring about equality. Much like all aspirational language imbued with ideology, many define both terms differently. This section examining the history and development of the term equity help to explain why understanding the ways teachers define it is important.

The term equity is inextricably linked to civil rights and social justice movements which both promote racial equality in the eyes of the law. Civil rights activists long believed that equality in the eyes of the law was the path to equality in life's outcomes. Before the *Brown v. Board* (1954) ruling and the passage of Civil Rights Act (1964), the laws unequally granted children access to schools, so equality-- then-- meant access. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in *Where Do We Go From Here* (1968), "The schools have been the historic routes to social mobility" and to critics who argued schools could not do everything he said: "The job of the school is to teach so well that family background is no longer an issue." However, equal access to public education and equality in law did not provide the equality in life outcomes many hoped for.

Activists were dismayed to find that segregation persisted due to the segregation patterns of housing and development (Rothstein, 2014; Rothstein, 2016). In schools that service predominantly low-income families and historically disadvantaged students, there is less access to advanced course work, college preparation, and quality teachers (Orfield, Ee, Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2016). These facts prompted activists to push for bussing policies of the 80s and 90s in an effort to grant disadvantaged students access to schools where better teachers and better programming was offered. Gaining equality, for the activists of those movements, was intended

to bring about equal outcomes, but systems of inequality were developed while equal access laws were adhered to.

Districts and governments can say that students are treated equally under the laws, and thus equality is achieved, but inequality of results continued. In the 1980s, tracking within schools deemed racially integrated became the injustice that precluded poor and minority students from the equal outcomes hoped for in an integrated school (Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Stewart-Wells, Jones & Datnow, 1997). It seemed that every effort to bring about legal and systemic equality highlighted new ways to create inequality. It became clear that the system was not going to make the difference, so long as systems could be continually flanked, causing some to believe that highlighting and enforcing improved student outcomes on standardized measures was the answer.

In 1983, when *A Nation at Risk* was published highlighting the disparity in achievement by race, the report went further to argue that academic achievement disparity has implications for economic disparity (NAR, 1983; Darling-Hammond, 2010) thus making an important shift for discussions about equality and inequality in education. By highlighting achievement inequality, the government called for more accountability of schools and teachers. Uncomfortable as it was, it forced educators to see that there were a swath of students they were failing. It was then that the term achievement gap was born, which describes the chasm between rich and poor, English language learners and non-English language learners, historically disadvantaged groups and historically advantaged groups, non-white and white. It was then, too, that a call for equity emerged, a distinctly different definition from equality. Equality had been used to describe the legal efforts to grant equal access and equal protection. Equity, however, is the means with which systems and teachers needed to adapt in order to bring about equal outcomes for all

students, not just students who normally excelled academically (Castelli, Ragazzi & Crescentini, 2012). Here is the distinction between equality and equity: we cannot continue to deliver the same thing to all students if we want to improve outcomes for all students. Equity in education is about more than granting equal access—it is about working hard to bring about equal results for children moving throughout public school systems (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Delpit, 1995; Linton, 2011; Willie, 2006).

As a response to *A Nation at Risk*, several policies were instituted to measure growth and create school accountability. The *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) and later the *Race to the Top* grant (2011) both encouraged schools to utilize assessments to measure if students were mastering core academic content, specifically reading, writing and mathematics. The era of standardized testing, sparked by the *Nation at Risk* report and sharpened by the *No Child Left Behind* legislative policies, placed an acute focus on addressing and mitigating the achievement gap (Procon, 2018). The tests and reporting seemed the only leverage federal and state bureaucracies would levy in efforts to force schools and teachers to bring about more equal outcomes. Equity, in the early years of NCLB, would be to close achievement gaps; however, the government mandates did not come complete with new ways to teach, and left the details of precisely how to bring more equal outcomes up to states, and states to districts, districts to schools, schools to teachers. America's historical division of power and allegiance between local, state and federal authority invited space for debate, and time for creative new systems of inequality to develop.

Closing the achievement gap continues to be a goal of governments and educators; however, many education scholars and educators are deeply skeptical of what achievement data can tell, and also skeptical of taking credit or blame for student outcomes (Gillborn, 2005;

Guibond & Schaeffer, 2004; Horn, 2016; Kohn, 1999). As systematic patterns of inequality continue to surface like unequal access to college preparatory and advanced placement courses (AP Report to the Nation, 2014; Corbett-Burris, 2016; Oakes, 1995), and de facto segregation of American schools based on housing and the legacy of residential segregation (Rothstein 2016), some argue that defining equity through achievement data alone is not only missing the point of what causes the inequality, but also argue that such efforts adds to pernicious belief systems that are the root cause of the continuing inequity by highlighting consistent patterns of under performance by groups historically disadvantaged (Kendi, 2016; Van Avermaet, Van Houtte & Van Den Branden, 2010). Critical questions have even been raised about what impacts such heavy focus on test scores can have for education in general (Advancement Project 2010; Neill, Guisbond, & Schaeffer 2004; Zamudio, Caskey, Rios & Bridgeman, 2011). Focus on targeted data like test scores, graduation rate, college going rates and college completion rates --all indicators evaluated when discussing the achievement gap--problematize discussions about equity as they have come under fire. Debates about how important, or unimportant, paternalistic or realistic such data is, which seems to allow everyone an ability to free themselves of accountability to academic results.

Among those critical of defining equity through a lens of achievement data are teachers, who have held the keys to implementing any reforms being pushed by governments. Though the arguments that systemic inequality is important to address are certainly valid, there is research that suggests teachers contribute to achievement gaps through beliefs and biases about historically disadvantaged students (McLeod, 1995; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968; Simpson & Erickson, 1983; Ullucci & Howard 2015) which is why this study focuses on teachers rather than systems. Addressing teacher bias is one of many goals' equity-oriented

reforms and teacher training programs adopt (Domanico, 2015; Guerra & Nelson, 2009; Linton, 2011; Murrell, 1994; Trujillo & Woulfin, 2014) but has strengthened the arguments against using achievement data as a measure for equity, claiming it is an act of white supremacy, and instead of encouraging professional development toward improving instruction practices, has led to calls for anti-bias and anti-racist training (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2020).

The history and development of the term equity in education helps to highlight how the various ways that educators define equity can carry distinct and perhaps oppositional ways of operationalizing for equity in their practices that may be in conflict with one another. It also highlights the challenge of bringing about equity for American children. If everyone has different definitions and practices, making progress can be challenging.

The Challenge of Operationalizing Equity with Opposing Definitions

The literature highlights that there are competing definitions of equity. Research that seeks to define equity in education reveals two challenges. First, there are basic differences in the ways educators define equity that may go unnoticed or unexamined (Castelli, Crescentini & Ragazzi 2010; Jordan, 2010; Minnow, 2008; Streitmatter, 1994). Second, there is disagreement among scholars about how it should be defined, specifically how much attention discussions of equity should pay to achievement data (Niell, Guisbond, & Schaffer, 2004; Noguera, 2016). Beyond the simple challenge of defining equity, comes the challenge of understanding how teachers internalize these definitions and translate them into their teaching practices.

Early studies examining the ways educators define equity reveal key differences in definitions: equity as equal access, and equity as equal results (Streitmatter, 1994). In a study working with new Canadian teachers, researchers interviewed participants asking if they could define equity. All teachers said they could easily define it, but the responses produced the

previously described two pronged responses: equity as equal access, equity as providing every child what he or she needs to equity as equal results (Jones, 2014). This represents a rather fundamental difference of definition, leading the author to conclude more uniformity was required as well as observation for analyzing how the teachers were implementing practices for equity in the classroom. Many other scholars have highlighted how teachers still define equity as equality, specifically, as giving every student the same things: resources, time, content (Jones, 2014) which signals one place where the breakdown may be for students at the classroom level. If teachers see equality and equity both as synonymous processes, there is a lack of awareness of how teachers must adapt and personalize for the students they meet each year. Equity, according to some scholars, is giving every student what he or she needs to be academically successful and in order to meet excellent academic standards (Corbett-Burris, 2016; Valiandes, Koutselini & Kyriakides, 2011). This definition implies an obvious difference in the manner in which it should be operationalized.

The latter definition proposed above-- that all students are supported according to their need in achieving academic excellence-- has a somewhat obvious goal of closing the achievement gap. Many scholars who argue that attention to outcomes is necessary also insist that attention to historical disadvantages must be considered in paths toward creating equity (Corbett-Burris 2005; Delpit 2005; Linton 2016; Noguera 2016; North 2008; Orfield 2005; Streitmatter 1994; Uluchi & Howard 2015). These scholars and educators recommend that schools implement mitigating programs and curriculum to ensure students with disadvantages can be helped to catch up. They describe school leadership efforts aimed at improving literacy and numeracy, family engagement in school and added support structures to the school day for students not on target to reach academic benchmarks. Alternatively, scholars and educators who

define equity with a critical theory lens, insist on the omission, or at least heavy critique of, standardized tests and mention of the achievement gap, arguing that such emphasis add to more racial bias and continued inequitable outcomes (Advancement Project, 2010; Dyches & Boyd, 2017; Hanover Research, 2017; McGhee-Banks & Banks, 2010; Neil, Guisbon & Schaefer, 2004). These scholars argue that to place such focus on exams contributes not only to teacher bias, but also deficit thinking and blame the victims thinking more generally, advocating instead for, changing curriculum, banning grades, banning suspensions, adopting more choice and relevancy into school and validating multicultural perspectives. Unclear is how effectiveness or student learning might be evaluated if standardized tests could actually be eliminated. Even more contemporary definitions take the critical definitions to a more extreme level, insisting that tests, standardization, emphasis on accuracy, emphasis on writing development and preparation for college are all beliefs and practices of white supremacy (Gillborn, 2005; Kendi, 2019; Kendi 2020; Shah Jahan, 2011). As teachers develop their beliefs about equity, these divisions present in the research likely trickle into teacher beliefs, however to what effect, is not entirely clear.

In a 2005 study by Reed & Oppong, they interviewed two teachers who self-identified as equity-oriented. Both were able to articulate that equity in education is an attention to achievement data and sensitivity to historical racial injustice. The study concluded that teachers who value equity had many daily instructional, curricular and assessment practices that did not comport with their views of equity as practices designed to close achievement gaps. The concepts of teacher definitions and teacher practices for equity was also examined by Stanford Center for Education for Policy Analysis in a novel survey of 1500 teachers (Rochmess, Penner & Loeb 2017). Participants were to define equity, explain what role they believed they had in achieving equity, to what degree they believed they were able to achieve equitable results for

students and what practices they utilized to achieve equity. The study highlighted only slight differences in definitions, however more problematic were the lack of teacher willingness to “endorse strategies aligned with closing racial and socio-economic inequality.” There was some indication in this study that teachers who believed more strongly in closing achievement gaps identified more practices that aligned with their beliefs, however the researchers indicated that observing the practices would be an important next step.

The studies examining how unique definitions for equity imply distinctive practices, coupled with the studies that suggest teacher practices may not always align with their stated beliefs for equity, leave open new possibilities for examining the effect of teacher beliefs on teacher practices, as well as new possibilities for examining the effectiveness of teacher practices for equity.

Contexts for Equity

The scholarship is clear on the significance of student outcomes in relationship to context: “context matters” (Gutierrez, 2012). Schools, like individuals, claim to have an equity orientation, and hint at the way it is defined through school mission statements and program offerings to students. A school’s context includes the community demographics, the student population, peer relationships, the geographic location, the parent community, the school policies, the curriculum adopted, resources available to students and teachers, the leadership and the teachers, among many other things (Bascia, 2014; Roegman, 2017). For a school to make a commitment to, and impact on, equitable outcomes for marginalized students, there are many layers of context that act as barriers in traditional comprehensive public schools, even for the most dedicated equity warriors.

According to Gleason and Gerzon (2014) the criteria for a school's ability to claim an equity orientation are the following: more than 40% of their student body must qualify for free and reduced lunch, achievement for low income and historically underserved student populations is the primary indicator, teaching is personalized to ensure academic excellence for all students and leadership places an emphasis on professional development and structural support for personalization and equity. Other scholars argue a school's need to ensure diversity in curriculum, addressing social justice concerns head on, and creating a school atmosphere of safety are primary roles of equity schools (Ross & Berger, 2009). Other conditions described in the literature are that the schools must profess a commitment to equity, and community of practice for improving equity (Gutierrez, 2012) efforts to shrink school size and absence of ability tracking, specifically low tracks and equitable access to rigorous course offerings (Oakes, 1995; Ready, Lee & Welner, 2004) are critical qualities that schools committed to equity must possess.

As more equity-oriented schools are opening or developing across the country, with the myriad of definitions about what equity is and is not, some equity schools may be in philosophical conflict with one another, which is important to document and better understand. Nevertheless, schools that value equity will want highly effective teachers who are able to help students achieve equitable outcomes and who believe that equity in education is a top priority. Advancing the work of Rochelle Gutierrez (2009; 2012) who argued that much scholarship is devoted to explaining the achievement gap, but very few studies offer suggestions to correct it, this study seeks to contribute thick descriptions of contexts for equity as well as the practices of teachers who work there to continue to add possibilities for solving the problem.

Practices for Equity in the Literature

The research on teacher practices for equity is considerably smaller than that of the research explaining the problem of inequality, but there are some pedagogical frameworks and practices described that offer helpful suggestions of what future research might examine more carefully as it works to offer more solutions and less problems.

Studies on instructional practices and pedagogies for equity help to illuminate practices that can be learned and utilized to advance equity. Those practices or pedagogies are what one might expect to find when observing in the classroom of a teacher who professes to have a commitment to equity within a school that professes a commitment to equity.

Many teaching practices are articulated in the literature for teaching equitably that remove the teacher from the center of the learning or dominant teacher beliefs, expanding the roles of both teacher and learner. Practices and pedagogies suggested are inquiry-based learning (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008), critical pedagogies, challenging systemic oppression directly, and supplanting dominant narratives in curriculum with multicultural perspectives and narratives specifically utilizing student personal histories (Dyches & Boyd, 2017), hands on or project based learning, relevant learning, 21st Century learning, Deeper Learning, (Calabrese-Barton & Tan, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2008) which are influenced by progressive pedagogy (Dewey, 1938). Other teacher practices advanced as equity oriented are cooperative learning and group work (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Cohen, 1990;1992; 1994; Dyches & Boyd 2017), simulations and role playing (Dyches & Boyd, 2017) student led discussions, reciprocal learning, and student choice in curricular choices for relevancy and interest. These are named as practices aimed at engaging students and placing them as drivers of their learning.

Equity practices aimed specifically at improving student literacy, reading comprehension, or subject mastery name practices like differentiation and scaffolding for diverse learners (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006; Dixon et. al., 2014; Valindes, Koustellini & Kyriakides, 2011), as well as factual recall, tests taking strategies, rewards in class for academic performance, regular assessment, and added teacher support for tutoring (Lambooy & Lu, 2017). Some schools implement programs for longer school years, before and after school tutoring programs and other supplementary support classes to help students who are learning English as a second language, or who are many years behind their age group peers in subject mastery (Barnum, 2017; Corbett-Burris, 2016; Marsh, 2018; Moskowitz, 2012; Raymond, 2014). These practices are often described as “drill and kill” and are also what many today describe as tools of the colonizer.

In addition to teaching and assessment practices, the literature on equity includes other qualities for teachers to consider as those attributed to the qualities necessary for equity. Some practices aimed at describing classroom management for equity are: “warm demanders” (Delpit, 1995), the use of “wise feedback” (Hammond, 2014) adopting beliefs about students that begin with an assets-based orientation (Lopez & Lewis, 2009). Practices for equity also describe practices aimed at supporting students beyond just academic improvement. Attending students' social emotional well-being with trauma informed practices, ways of improving student belongingness are a few. There is significant scholarship under the umbrella of equity that is devoted to the importance of developing positive classroom culture through strong community connections, welcome, friendliness, comfort and genuine care from teachers (Allensworth, 2005; Booker & Keonya, 2007; Finley, 2018; Lee & Robbins, 1995; Nichols, 2008). These are named as important for getting students to stay in school, care about school, and ultimately improve in school.

The list of practices examined in the literature suggests that some practices may be advanced as part of an equity stance in one class, while decried as the antithesis of equity practices in another. For example, in the classroom of a teacher with an equity definition that discounts standardized assessments as tools of white supremacy, strategies to drill and take tests and support student with longer school days and plenty of tutoring would be viewed as the opposite of equity, while those may be the very practices that a different teacher at a different school site implements, who are also arduously committed to equity.

Gutierrez (2012) points out, the work of education research should not try to tell one or the other they are wrong, but rather examine and describe the practices, the teachers and the contexts as a way of analyzing what strategies work, where and for whom as schools and teachers look to add to the repertoire of teaching for equity. She also points out, however, that the work of equity educators is to attend to student achievement along with the other critical components of teaching for equity.

Teacher Effects & Beliefs

There are certain dispositions a teacher must have to be considered an equity educator that go beyond a person's belief that equality is good. Scholars on the topic, though not in perfect alignment, articulate these dispositions in the following ways. According to Linton's Equity Framework (2011), donning the label equity educator means a focus on equal outcomes for students, a willingness to take responsibility for the success or failure of students, and use of research based curricular and instructional practices known to improve learning for historically disadvantaged students. In addition, teachers who characterize themselves in this way will pay close attention to issues of social justice (Dysches & Boyd, 2017; Kauer, 2012; McGee-Banks & Banks, 2010), inclusion (Corbett-Burris, 2016; Jones, 2014; Oakes 1995; Stavroula, Leonidas &

Mary 2011), cultural relevance (Dysches & Boyd, 2017; Hammond, 2014) and an awareness of the value of multicultural experiences of students and their families (Cho & Womans, 2017; Dee & Henken, 2002; McGee-Banks & Banks, 2010; Van Houte, 2010).

While many scholars argue that emphasis on the achievement gap cannot be the sole focus of equity work, most equity scholars do agree that omission of standardized assessments-- especially those that have serious implications for students' ability to get into and through college-- would be an irresponsible choice with dire consequences to students. If closing the achievement gap and bringing equality of outcomes to students is a goal, highly effective teachers who believe in this mission and their own ability to do it are necessary. For this reason, studies that seek to understand contexts and teaching for equity, must also understand the ways teachers think; not only about equity, but also about their students, their community, themselves and their ability to positively impact student learning.

The research about the impact of teacher beliefs on student's achievement is rich and often concludes that if a teacher believes that students are exceptional, students excel (Herrera, 2010; McLeod, 1995; Rockoff, 2004; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968; Van Houtte, 2010), and if they believe students are inferior in some way, student learning stagnates, and in the reverse achievement flourishes (Herrera, 2010; McLeod, 1995; Rockoff, 2004; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968). Teachers' beliefs about themselves are also widely studied, indicating that teachers with strongly held beliefs in their ability to improve student outcomes through their own professional actions and practices often have greater positive impacts on student learning (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003; Czerniak & Lumpe, 2014; Guerra & Nelson, 2009).

Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) landmark study (later published as *Pygmalion in the Classroom*) offered quantitative evidence. The now well-known experiment told classroom

teachers a simple lie-- that several students were gifted, or “bloomers” (p. 86). From there, IQs, reading comprehension and achievement on several standard tests in various subjects were tested. Students named as bloomers-- many of which were low-performing or behind by grade level standards-- grew exponentially more than students with their same base achievement and IQ. The teacher behaviors and written comments were examined also, revealing a tendency toward patience, softer explanations for initial lower performance and using terms like “deliberate” over “slow” (p. 86) when describing students in their early phases of the blooming process. The researchers concluded then, that when teachers have beliefs that the children, they work with are special, they hold higher expectations for students, have greater tolerance and patience for the learning process. When the student IQ assessment and achievement by subject were examined over several years, there was compelling evidence to suggest that student learning improved. This is also a compelling argument for suggesting that beliefs teachers hold have important consequences for instruction and their ability to practice equitable teaching that interrupts systemic inequality.

Several studies since then have come to similar conclusions (e.g., Rockoff, 2004) and so emerged beliefs that the reverse may also be true; teachers who hold negative beliefs about students may have negative impacts on their learning and achievement (Guerra & Nelson, 2008; McLeod, 1995; Rist, 1970). A majority of teachers are White and middle class (King, MacIntosh & Bell-Ellwenger, 2016) and research has unearthed the stereotypical beliefs that some teachers hold about historically disadvantaged students arguing the negative effects of pathologizing the poor, which approaches students from a deficit thinking model and thus negatively impacting learning and achievement (McLeod, 1995). Here, a teacher’s belief in his or her own efficacy is impacted most negatively. The research on teacher beliefs is connected to this study, because the

definitions teachers hold about equity may imply certain beliefs, they have about themselves, their role in dismantling inequality, beliefs about their own effectiveness and beliefs about students.

Studies on teacher effect are not limited to beliefs teachers hold about themselves or their students. Others also seek to identify qualifications of teachers and teacher practices that have quantifiable impacts on student achievement (Bacher-Hicks, Chin, & Hill, 2015; Nye, Knostantopolous, & Hedges, 2004; Rockoff, 2004). When auditing student achievement scores by teacher, one district was able to see that there were discernible differences in academic outcomes by teacher. Things like years of experience, degrees, and board certifications tend to be district studies (Bacher-Hicks, Chin & Hill, 2015).

Teacher self-efficacy, which is the belief a teacher holds about his or her ability to improve student outcomes (Bray Clark & Bates, 2003) is said to improve as teachers gain more practical training for effective instructional practices, and is additionally hailed as an important indicator for a teacher's ability to improve student outcomes. Although many researchers argue that high self-efficacy has positive impacts on student outcomes, contemporary studies highlight some disagreement. One North Carolina study suggested that high self-efficacy had little impact on improved student outcomes, but low self-efficacy, or lack of belief did correlate with lower performance (Eberle, 2011). Perhaps this could be explained by misconstrued studies of mindsets. Some scholars have examined the misconceptions of mindset work, and the danger of teaching anyone that simply believing in oneself is enough. To improve at anything, belief is a first step, but hard work and continued acceptance of discomfort is to persevere through challenge is essential. Treating any belief as a platitude may yield lackluster results.

Teacher Beliefs Versus Practice

Some might argue that the reason equity reforms and discourse have failed might be explained by the fact that educators do not practice according to their espoused beliefs. Complicating the research on teacher effect via beliefs and practices is research that suggests teacher practices are not always aligned to their beliefs (Domanico, 2015; Reed & Oppong, 2005; Rochmest, Penner & Loeb, 2017). One study surveyed hundreds of teachers to learn their beliefs about equity to discover that while most educators claim to view equity as important, many also stated that giving students who need more support extra resources was not fair, or were limited in the amount of extra time they would a lot to students who struggle (Rochmest, Penner & Loeb, 2017). Another study examined only two teachers through interviews, and determined that particular things teachers said revealed their inability to be truly equity oriented (Reed & Oppong 2005). While there is scholarship that explores the discrepancy between teacher's articulated beliefs about equity and their practices, most utilize interviews or surveys as the primary source for exploration, leaving open the possibility that the everyday practices reveal something more complex in teacher practices that can be gleaned for others committed to equity.

Summary

The long history of inequitable outcomes has spurred a new era of school choice with charter schools that seek solely to address the issues of inequality. The current research on equity shows that there are many competing definitions, and some are in direct conflict with one another (Andersson, Ohlson & Asserson, 2015; Jordan, 2010; Minnow, 2008; Rochmest, Penner & Loeb, 2017). Scholarship also highlights many teaching strategies and curriculum suggestions for the equity (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008, Corbin-Burris, 2016; Cohen, 1994). Research

also makes clear that teacher beliefs have serious implications for the learning outcomes and academic growth of their students. What is not well understood in the research, are the ways that individual teachers within equity contexts operationalize their beliefs. Though there are some studies which suggest teacher beliefs do not match practices, the methods of the studies utilized surveys of thousands of teachers, conducted in large schools and districts where a mission of equity may not have been established, or were different from context to context. The study looked solely at teacher beliefs and practices without analysis of the context. By conducting research in self-professed equity schools with self-professed equity teachers, the hope is to add more suggestive information for educators looking for ideas to try in the work of advancing equity.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examined teaching for equity within an equity-oriented high school. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine the intersection of teacher beliefs and teacher practices for equity and describe the practices found. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How do these teachers define and practice for equity?
2. How does the school context influence these teachers' definitions and practices for equity?
3. In what ways, if any, do these teachers' practices for equity align with their beliefs and definitions of equity?

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized purposeful sampling in interviews and observations as a means of understanding how self-professed equity educators within an equity-oriented school defined and operationalized equity, and the ways in which the context for equity influenced their practices. The equity context was found and selected by utilizing documents collected from publicly available information on the web along with searching for qualities and characteristics of equity contexts as described in the literature (Gleason, 2014; Ready, Lee & Wellner, 2004; Ross, & Berger, 2009). Once identified and granted permission to conduct the study, I utilized purposeful sampling again to find participants. I emailed teachers on campus, asking for equity-oriented educators to participate in the study.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

This qualitative study used document collection, teacher interviews, and observations of teachers classroom practices. Table 1 provides an overview of the data collection.

Table 1: Overview of the Research Design

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Data Sources & Purpose</i>
1. Digital Document Review & Equity Context Identification	Purposeful sampling in Equity Context Search. Review of school websites, mission statements and the California Dashboard for School Success, LCAP documents & public charter document in southern California schools
2. Purposeful Sampling to Find Teacher Participants	Email to teaching staff requesting participants who self-identify as equity-oriented. Identify equity-oriented practitioners for the study.
3. Introducing the Equity Educators within the Equity Context	Introductory Interviews utilizing an interview protocol, recorded and transcribed. Learn the individual teacher definitions and descriptions for equity before beginning the observation cycle.
3: Observation and post observation interview cycles	Each teacher was observed two to three times for a full class period and engaged in post observation debrief interviews to ask questions about specific practices or interactions observed. Notes were kept in research journal and an observation note taking tool for examining equity was be used
4: Final interviews	Met with teachers for the final interview using interview protocol questions. Interview was recorded and transcribed. Purpose was to summarize thinking about equity.

This data collection cycle dedicated time toward building rapport with participants before observations and interviews began in order to create safety and understanding for more authentic data in the field. The study ended with final reflections on the process through the exit interview, which allowed for teachers themselves to reflect on the questions this research aimed to answer, adding to my understanding (Seidman, 2006).

Table 2 explains which data collection tools were used to answer each of the research questions. Although this process began with a sense that some information would only be relevant to some questions, ultimately, the publicly available information about equity and school outcomes, interviews, and observations helped to answer all of the questions.

Table 2: Data Source & Collection Materials

RQ1	Document Analysis	Interviews	Observation
RQ2	Observation	Interview	Document Analysis
RQ3	Interview	Observation	Document Analysis
RQ4	Interview	Observation	

Document Collection

I examined the following documents: the school website, the school profile report, the school project catalogues, the school mission statement, the school’s charter agreement, the school’s LCAP report, and data from the California school dashboard. These documents (e.g., mission statement, student demographics, student admissions plans) helped me to understand the equity orientation of the school. Much of the espoused mission for equity on the website helped frame how teachers who decide to work in this context might define and practice for equity, although there appeared to be some inconsistencies in how the school would evaluate or support equity, many of the hallmarks of equity schools existed.

Interviews

The teachers in this study participated in three different interviews: an introductory interview, one to two post-observation interviews, and a concluding interview. These were used to help me answer all three of the research questions.

Introductory interviews. The purpose of the introductory interview with each teacher was to build trust with the teachers who volunteered to let me in their classrooms. In qualitative research, there is a goal of creating “intimate familiarity” (Lohfland & Lohfland, 1995) with subjects in the field. Such familiarity was necessary to build rapport (Seidman, 2006) with the teachers whose classrooms I entered for observations. The introductory interviews (Appendix A) helped me gain greater insight into each teacher’s personal history and how their personal history helped shape their beliefs about education, their role as educators, and their beliefs about equity. The definitions they offered for equity helped me to begin a process of sorting ideas-- those that comported with the school’s stated mission, and where on the spectrum from critical to dominant each teacher fell. Both teachers adopted decidedly non-dominant preferences for defining equity, although in quite unique ways.

Post-Observation Interviews. The interviews after observations allowed me to understand their perspectives on what I witnessed firsthand. The interviews followed a basic protocol (Appendix C) and asked the teachers to describe how they were practicing for equity during the classes I observed. They lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Other questions surfaced during observations, however, that could not be planned for because they were specific to the events observed, which make space for understanding alternatives to assumptions I was making (Maxwell, 2013). For example, I was able to ask how Gil was supporting a student who I

observed was struggling. I was also able to ask Chelsea to describe the findings of an in-class assessment I observed. All questions were focusing on teacher practices for equity, but in many cases, the ability to ask about specific moments or activities allowed for greater exploration of a single practice to help me better understand teacher motivations.

Concluding Interviews. The closing interviews were an opportunity for the teachers and I to learn together (Kvale, 1996). In Gil's closing interview, he was able to elaborate on many of his beliefs about equity, teaching and learning but with knowledge that I had seen his students work, and had observed him in his teaching role. With Chelsea, we went through more of her practices, and because our conclusion interview took place after schools closed due to the pandemic, she was newly reflecting on how some of her practice might work in an on-line setting, as she was deeply concerned for her students while away from school. The closing interview allowed us to not only summarize what I had seen in the observations, but what her next steps had been after I was gone, and a run through of her equity practices not observed as well as an opportunity to examine her assessment practices more deeply, as I was not understanding them in our first few meetings and in the class observation. See Appendix D for the closing interview protocol.

Teacher Observations

In an effort to know the teachers, their classrooms and their contexts well, I conducted two full observations with another short visit in Chelsea's class and three full class observations with another short visit to Gil's class. Each observation was of a full class lasting 90 minutes long. I was also able to arrive early and stay through lunch time to see teachers welcome students, how teachers interacted with students in hallways, and create a greater familiarity with

the school's culture. The time spent on campus helped to better see equity in practice and to better understand the ways teachers' work aligned with (or did not align with) their expressed beliefs from the interviews (Lohfland & Lohfland 1995). It also illuminated the various ways a context contributes to shaping a teacher's beliefs and practices.

The observation notes were recorded on a template (Appendix B) which allowed space for me to sketch some general classroom features such as seating and table arrangements, teacher location, entrance location, white boards and information posted for students and visitors. These sketches revealed how simple structures like classroom arrangements and seating can facilitate equity goals named in the literature such as creating space for collaboration and group work.

The observation template also had a section for transcribing dialogue heard in classes. Although most of the dialogue was focused on what teachers said, due to group work or student teacher interactions, I captured conversations among students to showcase how students understood directions or activities teachers asked students to engage in. All students whose interactions or dialogue were significant to understanding the teacher practices were given pseudonyms in the study. Because both teachers supported the same cohort of students, I was able to see the same students across two different classrooms and the ways teachers' practices impacted students. In particular, were three students who I provided pseudonyms for in the descriptions. These students helped illuminate how teachers responded to a student needing additional support, a student who might have been viewed as disruptive in some classrooms and a student who excels in school and might be viewed as privileged.

In Gil's class, I observed a lesson on sharing research information in groups, and reflecting on the research learning through a "Cento" which was described as a type of found

poem. I also observed an independent research day, and a building day. The project was described to me during an interview as an environmental topic connecting to the community and the students were building garden boxes for a neighboring elementary school. In Chelsea's class, I observed two different partner feedback activities, a circle assessment, a math puzzle activity and a project assignment description. In both classes, I was able to observe teachers as they welcomed students to class, how they paired students for partner or group work, and protocols in place to support student discussions.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this case study followed a systematic approach to preparing the data and creating analytic memos from the observation notes recorded and interviews. Then with prepared data, a system of coding that corresponds to various components of the conceptual framework was applied as I worked toward answering the research questions and generating themes (Creswell, 2015; Saldana, 2016). A priori codes that corresponded to the conceptual framework were devised in order to help focus the observations and analyze the observations and interviews (Creswell, 2015; Saldana, 2016; Seidman, 2006).

Descriptive & Analytic Memos. After each observation and interview, I wrote memos capturing "thick description" (Gertz, 1973). The process of capturing a moment or an interaction in great detail helped both with empathy and critical analysis. For me, the process of descriptive writing humanized an experience, as well as pushed my curiosity about the motivation behind an observable action. Memo writing helped me develop follow up questions, and focus for future observations. Descriptive memo notes, once written, could be categorized and sorted into examples that described the various themes as they emerged.

Codes. The codes described below were used to analyze all data collected. I created a set of codes that correlate with each part of the conceptual framework. The codes developed for defining equity followed the threads of definitions present in the literature: equity as systemic social justice and reform, equity as social justice curriculum, equity as closing the achievement gap, equity as granting all students access to rigorous and relevant curriculum (college preparatory), and lastly, equity as personalization and supporting all students within their academic needs.

Table 3 represents a priori codes for the various ways equity was described in the literature, and what I began with as I analyzed the interviews and observations. It began as a long list of attributes, but in the end, all attributes could be distilled to the four listed below: the critical, the progressive, the dominant, and the personalized for social emotional wellness. Progressive approaches are characterized in the scholarship as promoting equity through engagement, relevance and personalization necessary to ensure all students succeed (Fitch, 2017; Kohn, 1999; Meier, 2002). Although many of the descriptions of progressive education also seem to fit into the critical descriptions of equity, there is a distinct race and class consciousness imbued in the critical definitions that set these two apart.

Table 3: Codes representing teacher definitions and descriptions for equity

Codes for Equity Definitions

CRT	Critical Axis: Social Justice, Critical Race Theory, Cultural Relevance
PRG	Progressive Themes: Hands-On Learning, Engagement, Inspired Work, Authentic
DOM	Dominant Axis Themes: Closing the achievement gap, College Readiness, Content Mastery
PS	Personalization & Social Emotional

The codes in Table 4 capture those related to the teacher's beliefs. Teachers selected for the case studies expressly sought to interrogate bias and hold positive beliefs about students, and as such, their expressed beliefs about students did not fall into categories originally described in the research. Codes that were originally devised to describe teacher beliefs about students used for the following beliefs explored in the literature: teacher beliefs that all students can achieve excellence, beliefs that all students need and deserve support for academic achievement and growth, beliefs that students who struggle emotionally or academically can be supported to growth. The converse to each belief was also originally coded: not all students are capable of academic excellence, struggling students may not value education. These codes were changed entirely, because the teachers simply did not think or speak about student learning in terms of academic growth, knowledge or understanding. Instead, the teachers used language of assets based thinking, and interpreted all else as deficit thinking, so the codes were re-written to analyze quotes and examples through that lens, which became a clear theme for the thinking and practices of both teachers. It is important to note that student cultural background is typically described as impacting teacher bias and expectations for students. Interviews and observations will examine whether or not teachers' practices match or adjust toward their beliefs about students.

Table 4: Codes representing themes in teacher beliefs about students

Teacher Beliefs About Students

ABG	Assets Based Thinking (General): Students bring knowledge, skills and assets to the learning space which must be surfaced and honored
ABS	Assets Based Thinking (Support): Any perceived negative behavior or achievement only signals emotional need, or cultural differences in approaches which must be respected and curriculum adjusted to meet
ABC	Assets Based Thinking (Curriculum): Students are intellectual beings who know what they like and need access to content that which is relevant, or need to see themselves as positively represented in the content
DBD	Deficit Based Thinking (Discipline): Students need to experience consequences when they do not abide by rules in order to learn how to better behave
DBS	Deficit Based Thinking (Status): Student backgrounds hinder their ability to fully participate in learning and education ~ OR~ Students with power must have their status diminished through teacher intervention

The codes in Table 5 were useful in examining teacher beliefs about themselves and their practices as possible ways of understanding their beliefs and practices for equity. These codes became blurred, too, as traditional ways of describing teaching and achievement and learning were so radically unique. The codes remained useful, however, in early phases of analysis. The teacher redefining key education terms related to equity helped to consider the implications of such unique and context specific definitions for terms more broadly understood.

Table 5: Codes to describe teacher beliefs about themselves as practitioners

Teacher Self Efficacy

TBA	Teachers believe they are equipped to support improved student achievement
TBS	Teachers believe they are equipped to support students who struggle
TBC	Teachers believe student achievement is not in their control
TBG	Teachers lack confidence in their abilities to support student growth

Table 6 is a list of teaching practices I observed that were described by the teachers and the literature on practices for equity. This collection of codes shrank from the original list, as I knew it would. The literature describing practice for equity is vast and numerous. Once interviews and observations were completed, I included only the practices observed or heard described by the teachers. Some key equity practices were specifically refuted by the teachers, like standardized assessments, teaching study skills or note taking, and differentiated instruction. Others, like scaffolding for language learners, small group instruction, vocabulary development, language frames, use of realia in content delivery instruction, structures for supporting critical analysis of text or information, and active cognitive engagement with learning objectives were simply not observed, but should not be assumed as not present in the teaching practices. With two to three observations and three interviews, it would be impossible to capture every practice utilized by each teacher.

Table 6: Codes describing teacher practices for equity observed or described in interviews

Equity Practices in Assessment, Instruction & Curriculum Design

PRC	Personalization for student interest (curriculum)
PRA	Personalization in assessing students
OE	Open Ended Questions, Research, Topics
DAS	Democratized assessment that includes student voice
COL	Collaboration
CRC	Culturally Relevant Curriculum (student see themselves in curriculum)
B	Belonging and Relationship Building

Table 7 represents the codes that correspond with ways the literature describes student support in equity contexts. Although some of these strategies were not observed, their absence helped to analyze the context for equity and how it supports or communicates equity for students and teachers. It also helped analyze teacher practices for the context and became central to original and concluding beliefs about equity: student achievement and accountability are essential. Support to ensure achievement, too, is essential.

Table 7: Codes describing practices observed or described for supporting students

Equity as Student Support

PRSL	Personalized: Know students well & Positive View of Students
TOH	Tutoring Office hours: Support outside of class time for academic improvement
ASMT	Teacher use of assessment to Adapt work & support student starting point. Using data to inform practice and plan support
FMCN	Teachers connecting with families as a source of supporting and communicating student growth

Trustworthiness of Study

Qualitative research is sometimes criticized as too subjective, which is why strict attention to validity is necessary. While objectivity in qualitative research may be much more challenging, validity in this qualitative case study comes from knowledge of the current literature, clarity of my bias threat, close attention to answering the research questions, and developing methods for collecting and analyzing data in ways that answer the stated questions. Maxwell (2013) warns that no matter how expertly designed the methods, validity is not guaranteed. The purpose of creating codes for the various components of equity, equity contexts,

equity teaching, and teacher beliefs related to equity was to keep my listening, questioning and analyzing lens focused on answering the research questions.

The use of case study to answer these research questions was critical in order to move beyond what has been unearthed in several studies examining teacher definitions, beliefs and practices for equity. Case study, almost by definition requires observation or interview, but this study utilized both methods for collecting data in order to allow the practices to not only be described, but also to allow practitioners to describe their reasons for the practices observed. Additionally, allowing the teachers to specifically identify practices observed as compared to their stated beliefs. This data allowed a much richer opportunity to examine the work at the Equity Collaborative.

Once interviews were transcribed, I highlighted quotes and labeled them according to the codes originally created, looking for patterns and themes. The codes helped me to identify which practices and beliefs repeated, and which ones I never observed. What quickly became apparent was the absence of many codes I originally created to represent the various definitions, practices and beliefs related to equity according to my own definitions and those found in the literature exploring equity. Many practices that might have been considered representative of the *dominant* beliefs about equity, were not observed, although some were mentioned in the school's information available online.

During each observation, I made notes using an observation protocol tool (Appendix C) in which I sketched classroom desk arrangements, noted words or information on white boards, captured content of slides (if any) and noted where students sat. I also captured which student entered class, left class, number of students, number of boys versus girls, and where the teacher

stood, sat or moved throughout the classes. The observation tool also had a section for keeping a script in which I wrote much of what teachers said, and also captured some student responses. Once observations were completed, a section of the protocol allowed for journalistic note taking to capture immediate impressions, questions for the debrief interviews, and reflection on the research questions. A similar process of highlighting and labeling the observation tool and notes section according to the codes happened, and again the codes revealed a tendency to observe very few practices in what are now characterized simply as the dominant practices.

Once the unidentifiable codes were removed, and general themes observed, the themes were organized using a thematic note sorting tool for analysis (see Appendix F). A process of sifting through the interview transcripts and observations looking for evidence to support thematic answers to each question ensued, and quotes and notes were copied underneath each relevant theme. The themes, too, were more numerous throughout most of the writing, but the process of writing multiple drafts and a need to return to the data and attend to the questions helped me distill the themes even further. The definitions, practices and teacher beliefs could all be distilled into far fewer general themes: dominant, critical, progressive or social emotional.

This system was essential for my analysis to ensure my findings were more than a mere hunch or feeling, and also as a way to organize the thinking. Observations and interviews provided rich data to answer the questions, but their richness also contributed to possible lack of focus, which early versions of this work suffered from. The tools of collecting and analyzing the data, however, proved to be extremely useful in capturing information precisely enough to return to the data and write a more focused case study. It allowed me to conclude that the organization professed some beliefs about equity that it did not seem to hold teachers accountable to, suggesting an explanation if there was ever a logical disconnect between stated beliefs and actual

practices. Within the context and especially in the teacher classrooms, a distinctly dominant averse (via aversion to standards and standardized assessment and talk of achievement), critical or progressive approach, often in the name of social justice, was professed and practiced.

Summary of Methods

In summary, this study followed a plan that began with choosing a school through concept sampling (Creswell, 2015), getting to know the participants and building rapport (Seidman, 2006), then delving into the iterative process of observing and interviewing, (Creswell, 2015), until the final reflective interviews which allowed the participants and I to consider what we learned. The analysis process utilized codes for key terms and ideas represented in the literature on equity to help identify themes in teacher beliefs and practices for equity. These themes were organized in analytics memos, and quotes and observations were sorted accordingly. The next chapter outlines the findings from this study.

CHAPTER IV: THE FINDINGS

This qualitative study examined teaching for equity within an equity-oriented high school. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine the intersection of teacher beliefs and teacher practices for equity. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How do these teachers define and practice for equity?
2. How does the school context influence these teachers' definitions and practices for equity?
3. In what ways, if any, do these teachers' practices for equity align with their beliefs and definitions of equity?

These findings are organized by first describing the context, then describing each teacher participant in the study. Next, I describe the themes related to beliefs and practices for equity found in Gil Villa's classroom, then I describe the themes related to practices and beliefs for equity in Chelsea Fuerte's classroom. Embedded in each theme is an explanation of the research questions. Teachers in this equity context had many practices that aligned with their beliefs about equity, although their definitions were slightly different from one another. Gil's definition drew on the progressive traditions, while Chelsea's drew on the critical. Although each of the theoretical orientations is unique, they similarly de-emphasize standardization, standardized assessments, while emphasizing an assets-based orientation and student-centered descriptions of ideal learning.

Research Setting: The Equity Collaborative School

The Equity Collaborative school is situated in a high-income coastal California city. The neighborhood surrounding the school is affluent with the average median cost of a single family home cited as 1.3 million in 2020, and predominately white according to City-Data (2019); however, the student population is much more racially and economically diverse as a result of the school's recruitment efforts. Students are enrolled through a lottery that offers a statistical advantage to students living in poverty or of color. The school makes public its desire to erase school segregation through this lottery, noting that school segregation is the natural and intended consequence of the city's housing segregation policies common in many American cities (Rothstein, 2017). The school is a Title I school with nearly 50% of the student body receiving free or reduced lunch. According to the California Dashboard (2020), the students are predominantly Latino, 7% of which are classified as English Language Learners, and 12% of students receive special education services. Students who attend Equity Collaborative come from affluent and low-income neighborhoods alike. There is no bus service or transportation provided to the students who commute.

Students at Equity Collaborative are placed in heterogeneous classrooms on a college preparatory -- what is called the A-G track ---trajectory, another component of the school's public facing equity stance. When the school opened, the practice of tracking poor minority students into non-college bound courses was pervasive (Corbett-Burris, 2016; Corbett-Burris & Garrity, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Stewart-Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997; Orfield, Ee, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2016). The school utilizes a project-based learning model and requires academic student internships; both structures act as defining components of the non-tracked equity model. According to the school's website, students are all placed in A-G courses,

and are required to earn grades of C or better in all classes in order to meet California university application standards. Students who do not earn a C or better in classes must take remediation courses in the summer. It is the goal of the school, according to the profiles provided on the school website, to ensure that all who graduate have the ability through courses taken and passed, to apply for college if they so choose. Additionally, school profiles state that there are no Advanced Placement offerings. According to the website, this is because the rigidity of curriculum interferes with the project-based learning model's goal of exploring topics in-depth rather than covering content quickly. It is stated on their website in numerous places that the founding principle of the school is that all students can and should be prepared for college and not tracked or segregated into non-college bound pathways.

Though naming college preparation and access is a clear equity stance, the school's lack of A.P. courses present a unique approach to equity more in keeping with progressive traditions, and one that appears somewhat oppositional to typical ways of describing access, rigor and equity. At the Equity Collaborative, there is a distinct departure from the no-excuses definition of rigor and rigorous course taking that is common at many equity-oriented charter schools (Barnum, 2017; Golan, 2015; Knight & Marciana, 2013; Lamboy & Lu, 2017). The emphasis on hands-on learning through project-based learning and the depth of topic exploration afforded through projects is, seemingly, the way the school defines rigor.

At the Equity Collaborative School, the word standardized seems to have no place, something substantiated by the equity scholarship on the critical and progressive end of the spectrum (Gillborn, 2005; Kendi, 2016; King, Houston & Middleton, 2001; Shah Jahan, 2011). Rather than emphasize the importance of rigor in the traditional sense, the school's message is on

the importance of innovation, authentic work, collaboration among students and staff, and the skills needed to complete real-world projects for work and citizenship in the 21st century.

The publicly accessed school dashboard for success suggests that overall school results are slightly higher on math and language arts than overall state comparisons, although they are trending downward over a five year period (2015-2019), but when disaggregated, language learners and other historically disenfranchised groups perform similarly or worse than others in the state. However, on state assessment of college readiness, assessing the number of students who complete and graduate an A-G sequence, all students and sub-groups at the Equity Collaborative outperform the state data. There is no low track, special education track, English Learner track or Advanced Placement track and the graduation rate is consistently near 100%.

The Equity Collaborative school had clearly created the conditions for an equity-oriented context, although structures to support leaders and teachers in defining, evaluating and making continued progress toward equity or the goals were unclear.

Participants

This study focuses on the beliefs and practices of two veteran teachers at The Equity Collaborative school: Gil Villa and Chelsea Fuerte. Pseudonyms were used for both participants. These individuals were chosen for this study because they work at the Equity Collaborative and agreed to participate in this study.

Teacher #1: Gil Villa

Gil Villa is an 11th and 12th grade biology and environmental science teacher who has been teaching at The Equity Collaborative for fifteen years. Like most of the teachers I see at the

school, he appears and identifies as White. He described growing up aware of his whiteness, and aware of his placement in gifted classes and honors in high school as a way to segregate him from Latino and African American students. He describes also having regular classes where he saw more integration with “true immigrants, you know, farm families, immigrant families, Mexican groups of people.” This, he notes, was bad, and the intentional lack of tracking at The Equity Collaborative was, and continues to be, part of the appeal for him. His parents were educators, but he had not intended on becoming a teacher. He stumbled upon the Equity Collaborative school after having been invited to be a guest speaker for a class, then was invited to apply for a Biology position. He was told about the school’s intentional desegregation along with its emphasis on projects and real-world study, and that opened the possibility for him to think of himself as a teacher. He explained to the hiring principal that he had no teaching credential and no teaching experience but was told, “they kind of hire on demeanor and all the rest of the stuff can fall into place. So they brought me in really really quickly and kind of overnight made me a teacher here.” He was supported by the school in completing his single subject credential and remains a biology teacher today, which all 11th grade students take in an untracked, full inclusion class together.

Teacher #2: Chelsea Fuerte

Chelsea is an 11th and 12th grade math teacher who shares the same students as Gil. Chelsea is a white woman who has worked at The Equity Collaborative for thirteen years. Her math class, Integrated Math 3-- the same for all students-- has no textbook, but is instead guided by units of study which she developed and shared with math teachers throughout the school. It is unclear how many math teachers use her units of study. These units of study are described by

Chelsea as open-ended math questions with multiple entry points for students, and multiple ways of expressing information. She is a self-described “equity warrior.” She cites equity scholars with ease, and uses terms like “status intervention” when explaining how she hopes to elevate voices of non-white students in class, or “nepantla” (Gutierrez, 2012) when describing her equity stance, which she admits leans toward the critical but is nevertheless suggestive of a need to address the critical and dominant axes of teaching and learning for math. She is well-versed in much of the literature. In fact, she has authored several articles examining assessment in mathematics and mathematical trauma done to students. Additionally, she hosts student teachers (one of which I met during observations) and is a mentor to many new math teachers that come to her school.

The Equity Collaborative school had clearly created the conditions for an equity-oriented context, although structures to support leaders and teachers in defining, evaluating and making continued progress toward equity or the goals were unclear.

Gil Villa’s Classroom & Themes. Every aspect of Gil’s class that I was able to observe bucks tradition. From the classroom design, to the curriculum, to grading policies, and assessment practices. The first sign of his unorthodoxy is evident in the classroom space itself. Gil’s 11th and 12th grade Biology and Environmental Science classroom looks more like an art studio than a science classroom. There are lab tables. No microscopes are visible anywhere, but rather heavy wooden work tables and benches splattered with paint. Students sit on stout stools. Storage shelves that line the walls are filled with wood of all shapes and sizes, canvases, power tools and cleaning materials. Student art work of robots, nudes, and animals are hung on the walls that are taller than what one finds in traditional classrooms. A laptop cart is plugged into a

wall nearest the classroom entrance, fitted next to a desktop station with design capabilities and a color printer.

Curriculum and Assessment. Gil's approach to designing curriculum is no less avant garde. It is entirely in keeping with his belief that equity is, above all else, an exercise in personalizing for students. So, what he crafts for student learning experiences is a shell of an idea with space for students to make curricular choices based on interest within a theme and product creation. He described the project students were engaging in as I came for my first visit.

There's an overarching kind of question that is something that would be like *How does feeding the global community impact the environment*. But then they get to kind of shop for areas where they are most, like, kind of feel that connection or they're interested and there's a pretty big open initial kind of entry to that.

With an overarching question, students write independent research of personal choosing connected to the question in some way. This allows for students to find the information without classroom lectures or teacher talk. On the days I observed, there were no packets or handouts to describe the project or assignments, nor any central location for students to collect or organize learners. Neither were rubrics or grades described or discussed. Gil emphasizes student voice and choice in his design.

Although the research writing component was independent, students were placed in groups to design and build something together. Gil explained:

We're trying to build things that connect to the community, to the food that they eat and being able to grow plants, but then they get to really look for different inspirations, come up with different concepts, come up with different designs and at the end of that the students are building something that they designed and so there's just that kind of, like, as much as we present to them kind of the direction

they're going, there's total choice to them as to what that's going to look like for them.

One benefit of open-endedness and choice, according to Gil, is that this much choice helps to develop student passions and agency. It gives the students a chance to take ownership, and with that comes real learning. He explained that giving students choice begins the process of independence and self-reflection so necessary for life and something so frequently absent in traditional academic experiences. "Students ask me always, '*Is this a good topic?*' or '*Is this a good design? Can I do this? Can I do this?*' and I'm like what do you think about that?"

Students relying on teachers for validation or affirmation is not preparing them for a good world, he argues, and following standards and standardized paths frightens Gil, who worries students are choosing unhappy lives because it is what school tells them they should want. He is as resistant to telling students how to live their lives as he is to abiding by a prescribed curriculum that may or may not be of interest to students. Lack of engagement is, in Gil's view, the biggest failure of public education.

Instead of a curricular outline with topics to cover, Gil has a question to examine and freedom for students to explore it however they see fit. I asked what the students had already learned in class, or what he could definitively say they knew. Gil paused, then pivoted his response to explain some research he had read that insisted homework and tests and grades are not just bad in general, but bad for historically underprivileged students. Instead of explaining content coverage, or his science curriculum, he explained his general assessment for the year:

So, our whole first three weeks is a process without academic consequence in grading so that we, it's kind of a diagnostic period to like get to know who your kids are and how to figure out how to support them... Three weeks into the semester and I have kids that have dug themselves into some academic hole and

then they spend the rest of their semester digging themselves out of it versus the rest of the semester feeling productive and supported.

To Gil, assignments traditionally used to help tell teachers what students do and do not know are simply assignments students do not do, especially students who can least afford academic consequences. Thus, such assignments end up acting as penalties rather than helpful assessment tools. In many ways, Gil's approach is supported by scholarship which is critical of grades and tests (Allensworth, 2005; Kohn, 1999; Krone-Phillips, 2019). Scholarly arguments that might also support Gil's choices here are described in critical pedagogy and social justice learning: the work simply may not be interesting, relevant or accessible for historically disadvantaged students and imposing a curriculum is not allowing students to explore topics they find relevant (Gillborn, 2005; Kendi, 2019; Shah Jahan, 2011, Zamudio, Caskey, Rios & Bridgeman 2011).

Early in his teaching career at the Equity Collaborative, he chose deliberately to cease the practices of giving quizzes or tests, handing out graphic organizers, giving lectures, assigning homework or any other hallmarks of traditional, standards-based teaching. For Gil, all those vestiges of tradition represent what is wrong with education, and the story he shared represented why he felt the practices were also racially problematic.

I was handing out tests to kids one day and as I was handing them out I was realizing that I could absolutely with, like, really really sharp accuracy predict what they were going to get on it and I was just like doing it in my head and by the time I had finished handing them out I was like why am I doing this if I already know how they're going to do, this, just seems like a cruel exercise 'cause, you know, some kids get A pluses but some kids D's and they're just like *"ugh, I got another D"* and what kind of impact that has on them after years and years.

Gil described this moment of guilt with clarity and conviction leading him to develop a stance against such predictability. His reaction, notably, was not to develop new supports or

instructional practices to see if he could help change the predictability-- something the “No Excuses” equity educators would insist upon-- but rather to cease the practice altogether. Importantly, Gil continued by explaining that his principal was wholly supportive of his decision to delete such practices from his teaching and classroom.

I was able to kind of tap into my own instinct and be like “*this doesn't feel right*” and just be like “*I'm going to stop doing this*” and then checking really quickly [with my principle] like, “is it okay if I stop doing this?” and people being like “I don't know, sure. Stop giving quizzes and tests” and then I did and I never gave them one since and it's felt great.

Gil's decision to abandon a practice that so clearly yielded, for him, predictable outcomes is applauded by many equity scholars. Traditional, standards aligned curriculum, assessment, and teaching is assailed as a tool of colonial, white supremacy in much of the literature on equity and social justice (Bass & Gerstl-Pepin, 2011; Kendi, 2016; Kohli, Pizarro & Nevarez, 2017; Vandenburg, 2014). Doing away with all vestiges of the traditional school seemed, to Gil, like a natural response in support of equity. Something inferred, but never confirmed, was that all students in Gil's class pass. Gil hinted at his awareness of the research described in *The Make or Break Year* (Krone-Phillips, 2019) in an interview as corroborating his disbelief in grades and grading, and affirming his stance on removing grades and traditional assessments from his practice.

I pursued the question of subject specific content learned once more. But again, Gil seemed to equate the question to one of grades. Gil responded:

When you take away the structures of grading and schooling a lot of kids flounder because they're so used to, and they've gotten so good at, schooling which is just a performance. It's just like you set up this little gauntlet for kids to walk through or pass through and they're going to get points in exchange for that, and that's not really what life looks like.

I was no longer asking how he graded, or what tests he used, only what content he could name or assessment practices in general that help him troubleshoot, but his return to responses -- wholly justified in the literature on equity, yet not quite answers to the question-- suggested the possibility that there was no structure to assess student knowledge or understanding of science subject specific learning assessment. There was also little evidence of curriculum offered to students on the subject of biology or the environment other than access to laptops and a guiding question to find articles of interest, which comports with the student choice and voice conviction so strongly held by Gil.

In a post observation interview, I asked about a student I observed in a group discussion who had declared that he did not understand the point of an assignment his group was tasked with discussing, and stated aloud that he did not understand what he was reading about or why. This student will be referred to as Joey. I asked what supports were in place for Joey, or what Joey struggles with in the content or project. Gil appeared baffled by the question, yet after a moment, did suggest he knew Joey was struggling, but he was not sure how Joey was struggling. I inquired about reading level, or if he and the English teacher (who Gil partners with to plan projects) discussed Joey's academic skills with reading comprehension or the writing skills needed to tackle this independent research. Gil shared that he and the other teachers all agree: Joey is kind and likeable and that "he tries hard to engage in class", but that teachers just needed to "spend more time checking in and getting to know him" because they could not explain why he did not finish projects, or why he left class, or why he vocally shared that he was confused. To Gil, Joey's professed struggle of confusion was actually a struggle of productivity, and an inability to focus or complete products for class projects.

Though Gil was honest in the fact that he could not quite name specific information about Joey's reading level or content knowledge, his experience with traditional assessment via tests and quizzes made him believe they were too alarming to continue. The literature that is critical of standardized assessments and modes of assigning and grading students that can cause students to fail argues that standardized assessments operate in a deficit model, highlighting for disadvantaged students what the world and society at large are always quick to point out-- their deficits (Koli, Pizarro, & Nevarez, 2017). Many scholars question the end goal of assessing and tracking achievement, arguing that college and career pathways are vestiges of "white culture" and a dominance of white cultural values (Kendi, 2019). A look at much of the literature on equity, social justice and critical race pedagogy makes it understandable and even justifiable for teachers to abandon standardized content, curriculum, assessment and instructional practices aimed at identifying student progress on any traditional trajectory, however, observing in the classrooms where the practices that such literature recommends is actually happening, the student who seemed to struggle most was the very student the literature insists these changes are for.

Personalization: Assets- Orientated & Attending to Emotional Needs. One key feature of Gil's definition for equity is personalization and knowing students well. In an interview, he described the practice for achieving this as "spending time to get to know kids." On my first visit to the Equity Collaborative to meet and interview Gil, he saw a student slumped in a corner near the desk of the front office clerk. He gestured to me that he would be a moment. He crouched low to match the student's seated position. He asked the student how he was doing, looking him in the eyes. There was a short exchange that I could not hear, but that gave the sense that this was a familiar situation between Gil and this student. Gil nodded affirmatively, then

placed a hand on the student's back as he listened. Then Gil raised his voice to inquire about the student's brother. He explained to me later that he had also been the brother's teacher. "Be sure to come visit me after tomorrow, Bud. I wanna hear how that goes." The student nodded, then Gil gave two more pats on the back and made his way over to greet me.

The snapshot captured an example of Gil's manner of working with teenagers. He is decidedly friendly. While he could easily have looked past the student already in the peripheral care of another adult, he chose to spend a moment checking in and noticing. When Gil describes knowing students, this appears to be one of many ways he knows students. He makes time to understand the emotional experiences of his students while offering a caring and supportive adult.

In another observation, Gil's students were working in stations; some outside building garden boxes with power tools, and some inside researching environmental topics of choice on laptops. The layout inside his classroom is like a communal dining table, individual tables pushed together in a long oblong shape so students must sit and face one another when inside. Outside, power tools and safety equipment are organized in the stations for students. Gil moved around, inside and outside, stopping to check in with the different groups to help untangle a cord, or straighten a plank, making friendly chatter with each group as he walked by.

At one group, Gil asked a student about a recent injury incurred while playing basketball. Gil wanted to know how recovery was going, and the young man told his teacher about doctor visits and the recovery prognosis. At another group, Gil inquired about a student's older sibling-- who Gil had taught in prior years-- and the student shared updates on college. Another student he stopped to check in on, who was researching inside, began a conversation with Gil about his

recent sailing adventures. After congratulating the student on sailing successes, Gil asked the student, a white male, if he had read a recent article about cheap land in Italy, where the province was hoping to attract international home buyers. A conversation with the students nearest the young sailor ensued about the price of housing, and what it must be like to live in Italy. A moment later, a student asked jovially, “Gil, we’re your favorite class, aren’t we?” Gil joked in response, “Yes, you’re my favorite senior junior mixed class of the 2020 winter semester.” The young man laughed, saying that this was the only junior senior mixed class ever, to which Gil replied that he loved all his students and classes equally and that every group is special in their own ways.

There was a palpable feeling of affection from teacher to students, and students to teacher. The research on belongingness suggests that these genuine and positive interaction and relationships between teachers and students is one factor contributing to the educational persistence and academic perseverance (Finley, 2018) and a driver for equity-oriented classroom practices.

The atmosphere was generally positive, and student responses to Gil’s affability appeared to be well-received, although there did appear to be limitations with his knowledge of students. As demonstrated above, Gil seems almost intentional about not knowing or learning what students struggle with, signaling his assets-oriented approach. Gil did notice that Joey had not brought an article or personal choosing to discuss in a group discussion activity as he was walking around to listen in on group discussions. Rather than mention the lack of assignment at the moment of hearing this, Gil waited until the end of class, when he asked Joey to check in on his way out of class at the end of the period. I could hear, through lowered voice, Gil commenting to Joey that he noticed the lack of bringing the personally selected article. I did not

hear Joey's response, but Gil was positive and affirming, saying he believed in Joey, and extended an offer of support. Joey nodded his head and said he'd try to focus as he left class. In the debrief interview, I inquired about this student and the interactions observed. Gil stated:

Yeah we're still well in process with him and I mean he's kind of an anomalous student. I would consider him a very engaged student in the class and in the classroom dynamic and he's always offering some sort of contribution in that way where he's very much on board and with us, but then he struggles to be productive and I would describe him as a student where there's imbalance [...] he really wants to kind of contribute, socially and chime in and offer perspective and things like that, but then when it comes time to ... create something he just sort of falls back and doesn't really produce much.

Gil works to de-emphasize grades and points by not giving quizzes or tests of regular points for assignments, while surfacing student strengths. Gil's awareness that Joey is engaged in the typical ways, but not productive, is a noticing that Gil employs to keep his frame of thinking for Gil positive. When I asked if the student was reading or writing at grade level or learning the vocabulary of the content explicitly, Gil looked perplexed.

So I think developing relationships and trust with kids is probably the biggest equity move that exists, right? [...] What are their strengths? What are their struggles? Kind of what their goals are. All that, all that really is just boiled down to, like, do you know a kid? Do you really, like, know a kid outside of just their academic abilities? I think a lot of times people, they really really focus on kids and their academic abilities and it's just like how is this kid as a reader? How are they as a writer? And then that's kind of what they are focusing on and maybe that is kind of like an accidental move on our part, is that there's so many things that happen in our classes, that you get to see all those kind of, like, versions of a kid, you know?

The suggestion here seems that a reading assessment, or writing samples would be the antithesis of truly knowing students. To Gil, knowing students is about knowing what they like, how they work with others, when they need a friend, but not necessarily knowing their academic skills, or their understanding of the content or learning goals.

Groups, Group Work & Reciprocal Learning. A great deal of scholarship on teaching for equity within the critical and progressive theories emphasize student-centered learning that happens in groups and through opportunities to collaborate. Gil said in an interview: “I think the biggest thing is having students work in groups, having students choose their groups and then having students create outcomes that have a place in the community.” When I began my observations, students were a month into a new semester and working in groups on a project to make garden boxes for the neighboring elementary school and researching global agriculture and environmental impacts.

Prior to this observation, students had been asked to select any topic related to agriculture and the environment that they wanted and on the day I arrived, they were asked to write a “cento” on what they had learned from their research topic so far. There was no worksheet nor were there directions visibly written anywhere to explain what a cento was, but I inferred it was a form of found poem from articles they found while researching. In the post observation debrief, Gil said that it was a way of artistically capturing learning. The students were given ten minutes to write quietly, after which Gil counted them off to work in groups of four or five and assigned a discussion facilitator for all groups.

The student facilitators selected were evenly split between boys and girls-- a move he made deliberately. When he assigned a girl, he retracted the assignment saying aloud, “there are too many female facilitators, I need another male for your group” then made a quick swap. Facilitators were tasked with ensuring all group members read their centos from the task just completed. Once groups were formed, students got up and moved around to different parts of the classroom, and Gil rolled open a back door of the classroom, which was a rolling garage door that opened onto a patio and grass area outside. Students were told they could move outdoors if

they wanted. Students moved efficiently into their groups, and discussions started promptly, indicating this was a routine students were familiar with. As students shared out in their groups, Gil floated around the indoor and outdoor areas, listening in on conversations with an interested expression, and occasionally chiming in that he had read the same article a student was referring to. Academic curriculum appeared to be the current events and on-line article searches that students completed.

I sat near Joey's group. Tommy, the young man who had insisted that this was "Gil's favorite class" was the assigned facilitator. Joey admitted that he had not done the writing and did not understand what a cento was. Tommy encouraged him to join the discussion anyway, asking him to share what his topic was. Joey said he did not know and he was not sure. Tommy pressed further, asking how many articles he had found in research. Joey said four, but he could not remember what any of them talked about. Tommy then tried to offer a light joke to encourage participation from Joey, "Just try to share. C'mon, all our projects at this school are about the environment, you can say something you know about that." To which Joey responded, "I'm sorry guys, I just don't know anything." Tommy said it was okay, and encouraged Joey to think of a question to ask others about their research. The rest of the students shared about their topics: growing food in outer space, electric cars, and nuclear power. It was clear that students are comfortable with group discussions, familiar with roles in group discussions, and generally supportive of, and kind to one another. Although Joey was lost, he stayed with his peers, and was convinced to ask questions of others by his peers-- a part of the discussion protocol. Tommy acted as the group facilitator with the hallmarks of a good cheerleader, modeling his teacher's positivity and enthusiasm.

Gil said in the debrief interview:

I try as much as I can, in a way that feels healthy, to like [...] partner kids so that you can have some sort of reciprocal teaching where students are teaching other students, just because of what that does for connections.

The group discussion format was familiar to the students, and the students charged with the role of being facilitators did so with positive leadership. Although assigning leadership and ownership of the class discussion and learning to students with facilitators, I wondered what impact these roles had on student status. I wondered how often Joey's role was one in which his peers were kindly "helping" him.

I try to model collegiality for them and for other teachers and just try to be as collegial and as kind of helpful as I can, trying to make sure that teacher culture and collegial culture is still doing well.

The research on collaborative learning as an equitable structure is well-documented, and in keeping with much of what the Equity Collaborative espouses as important structures within the learning context. The ways that Gil's students interacted, discussed and supported one another was particularly positive and a structure they seemed to know well. Joey was encouraged by his peers, however interviews with the students would be necessary to better understand a sense of interdependency, or ways students who struggle receive support from one another, or how these protocols help students stay engaged with the content.

Open-Ended Questions & Hands On Learning. Inquiry-based learning and hands-on opportunities with relevant work is often named in the literature examining practices for equity (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Calabrese-Barton & Tan 2018; McGee-Banks & Banks 2010). Gil sees building time as the best time for his class and for his teaching. "I mean, I think the biggest thing is having students work in groups and then having students create outcomes that are for, that have a place in the community." On my third observation day, class was in full

build-mode. There were no lessons to observe examining the research or the articles they were looking up. It was a construction site.

Some students sat inside the classroom doing research. Others were working in their small groups outside. They were clustered around planers, miter saws, and circular saws. Another group was setting up the air gun and practicing nailing pieces of wood together to make a square. One female student was crouched on the sidewalk over a camera that was set up on a tripod. She was fastidiously capturing footage of wood shavings flying off the planer as students slid a two by four over it. She told me she was “documenting the process,” and hoping to edit all scenes together to display at the exhibition when the class was ready to present the boxes to the elementary school. She liked how the light reflected off of the wood shavings, creating a luminous cloud effect, and she was hoping to learn how to do slow motion effects, create sound effects and other editing tricks for the finished product. I asked if she had been taught to use the editing software and she said no, but that the computers at school had the programs loaded. She also said she had some programs on her personal computer at home, so she could figure it out. I had observed this particular young woman when I last visited the class and they were in group discussions. She was verbose and serious, and had a seemingly better understanding of and ability to expand upon her article, which had been about nuclear waste. This student, who had demonstrated a clear academic readiness during group discussions, also demonstrated self-directedness when approaching her project contributions. These were the kinds of skills—self-reliance, personal interest-- Gil suggested he was hoping for all along.

There was a sense of what Gil described as “purposeful productivity,” a term intended to move away from hyper emphasis on constant active engagement. “I get creeped out when kids are too hyper focused and very regimented about their learning and almost feel like they are, as a

group, too controlled. Like, I don't think that that's a good look.” I watched Gil stand with seeming pride over this cacophony of sounds, in which students still held serious and focused expressions while cutting wood or filming the cutting of wood. He smiled and nodded as he walked around observing the productivity.

When students were informed that class would end in fifteen minutes, they immediately went to work sweeping up sawdust, re-coiling cords, covering saws, rolling tools and tables back inside and tidying up work spaces. Gil did not help at this point. This, he declared as we stood watching the students clean, was also an important part of being in a community. In an interview he had said “the best way to form a community is to jump into the authentic process.” Making sure everyone cares about cleaning up and cares for the expensive equipment they get access to is an authentic process for this classroom. He interjected an appreciation every few moments. “Thank you for getting the floor so clean.” Or, “The laptops are all plugged in and the cords straight today! Thank you to whoever made sure about that.” He praised their efforts and said aloud that he appreciated their commitment to the classroom community and handling of necessary equipment for them to do project work.

Gil’s emphasis on collegiality and collaboration seemed to be paying off on the building day, although neither Joey and one other student I noticed on a previous observation who seemed to struggle to engage, were both gone. The students actively engaged in class discussions were actively and creatively, engaging with the project. According to Gil, the engagement with the process is the means through which he hoped to engage students.

Decentering Authority & Removing Dominant Expectations. Gil is keenly aware of his privilege, which makes him deeply uncomfortable with anything that might be seen as

traditional in a classroom. To put it simply: tradition is synonymous with colonizer, and colonizer culture is bad. Colonizer education is too much teacher talk, lectures, discipline, quizzes, tests, homework, standardized curriculum and grades (Gilborn, 2005; Shaha an, 2011). These are the vestiges of tradition that Gil has shed from his classroom.

Gil shared in an interview that standardization and teaching for college access “scare the shit” out of him. To be an educator that is hyper-focused on grades, college preparation and SAT scores is to ignore what students want, and perhaps need more.

Because, it’s just like, this kid is marginalized, they don’t have access, we’re going to give them instructions on how to become an engineer and we never payed attention to the idea that they might not even want to be an engineer, but we’re going to convince them that, that is a significant role in society and with it comes the package of safety and you know monetary success and things like that but like what about knowing kids well enough?

His worry that dominant culture imposes beliefs on marginalized students, is something that is highlighted in literature examining equity in schools as colonizer education systems (Kendi, 2019). For this reason, Gil resists any authoritative decision making as a teacher. He will not dictate curriculum completely, nor will he lead a class in a standard way, like direct instruction or lecture style teaching. He instead opts for seeking out opportunities for students to teach one another, thus highlighting their own capabilities.

I try as much as I can [...] to like, be like, “oh you don’t know how to use a nail gun, this kid does,” and partner kids for reciprocal teaching.

Gil’s beliefs are that student engagement and positive relationships are mission critical for equity, which explains why talk of students’ knowledge of certain topics is overlooked. It matters not. Though he was perplexed as to how he might best support Joey, the student in class struggling, he was more clear sighted in the method he would employ to break through and reach

him. Gil names reciprocal teaching as one way to support students who struggle in class. His goal is always to surface student strengths and shine lights on what they do well.

I really love when I can do that for a student that might've otherwise, or in other areas, kind of struggled, because they get to feel like a bit of an expert every so often and that I think helps with their own perceptions of themselves as learners. You know, and focusing on bright spots.

Taking the time to know them well pays off when an opportunity arises to offer students leadership opportunities. Gil's belief is that in knowing students well, he can help with building their self-perceptions and self-confidence, something he sees as missing in traditional school, traditional curriculum, and traditional assessments.

As Gil moves through the classroom during observations, his teaching style can be described as that of a facilitator. He poses topics for students to investigate, and allows liberty for students to investigate topics on their own. He provides clear structures for discussion and makes students the facilitators and leaders of their learning.

Concluding Thoughts on Gil. Gil's beliefs about equity are not centered around equitable (and thus measurable) outcomes or college going, as The Equity Collaborative states to its stakeholders on public facing document. Instead, he emphasizes personalization and knowing students well, with a clear stance that knowing them well does not necessarily include knowing their academic strengths. He describes projects, student choice and voice and collaboration as key features of his teaching practice, much of which is in line with progressive approaches (Dewey, 1938; Kohn, 1999; Meier, 2002). He suggests an opinion that college preparation, and maybe even college, are vestiges of rigid and oppressive thinking. Although he may not be aligned with the Equity Collaborative's stated emphasis on equity as college preparation and entry, his approaches have been endorsed by administrators.

In general, Gil is a warm and kind-hearted teacher who seems intent on demonstrating to his students that he cares for them as people, and he aspires to foster in them the self-confidence to follow their passions. I was most struck by what he described as a defining moment for him as an educator: the day he decided to never create predictable outcomes by doing away with all vestiges of traditional school. While other contexts and school leaders may have taken his early concern about predictable outcomes as an opportunity to coach his teaching practices, support structures, and curriculum development for projects, he was granted the freedom to abandon all such practices that might lead to different outcomes on the quizzes and tests. Gil, however, has “never looked back.” Today, his biology class looks much more like a woodshop class.

Considering Gil’s work in the school with at least two different principals (the current principal is not the same as the principal who he described from his early teaching revelations), it is possible the mission of equity as college for all is less emphasized.

Chelsea’s Classroom and Themes. Chelsea cited education scholar Rochelle Gutierrez as a source that helps explain her beliefs and definitions for equity. Chelsea believes that equity is first and foremost about social justice, explaining how Gutierrez’s axis (2012) helped frame her thinking:

In an equitable environment we are giving all students access and equipping them to succeed in what is dominantly considered success in this society, and then we’re also equipping them with a critical lens to understand that the system is kind of messed up. So I think the “nepantla” is the intersection of those axes and trying to balance them in some way or another, and to me that’s also equity and so I think the outcome of doing that would maybe be my first definition of equity.

This viewpoint was also reflected when I asked her what she thought her most important role as a classroom teacher was: “disrupting systems of power that seem corrupt and trying to live things out differently in our classroom space. Whose voices get heard, who gets to share,

whose ideas are valued, what is valued.” Within her definition, there is clear awareness of the literature on equity, and a sense of obligation to disrupt systems of power that have allowed her and other white educators to succeed, and particularly succeed in math. Although Chelsea describes the SAT and ACT as “racist structures,” she acknowledges these are required tests on the dominant access, so she cannot ignore them entirely.

Her skepticism regarding standardized math curriculum and assessment is in keeping with the Equity Collaborative’s design. The lack of Advanced Placement classes, standards aligned curriculum (or any schoolwide curriculum for that matter), and standard assessment practices, are all components of the school’s equity stance articulated in school public facing documents. Chelsea’s extended definition does not dismiss the need for providing students access to the dominant math culture, although it appears, in our interviews and in her teaching practices, that she views such components of her equity beliefs as necessary evils. It also appears that her definition of “access” to dominant math may not match Gutierrez’s in that her description of access is informing students that they exist, rather than granting access to the content through mastery with the content.

Belongingness Buddies. It was clear from the interviews that Chelsea has spent a good deal of time researching equitable teaching and firmly believes that attending to student belongingness in academic settings is crucial. She has published several articles on the topic of belongingness in mathematics, which she also cites. As such, she has created structures to intentionally support belongingness and make it transparent for students. One way she does this is by creating what she calls Belongingness Buddies (BB). Chelsea assigns students a BB at the beginning of a semester who are asked to support each other in multiple ways. She asks them to swap phone numbers and text one another when they are late or absent to check in on them. They

are also asked to catch each other up if one or the other is absent or provide feedback to one another on their involvement in class. In one observation, she asked students to text their BB if they were not in class while she took attendance. She described the process in an interview.

They'll walk in and say they already texted their buddy, so they just take in on themselves and I love that because they are looking out for each other and acknowledging that we are better when we're all there together, we are a community and we need all of us there and we need to make sure that we get all of us there.

She then went on to tell the story of a student who was absent for several days because of participation in a rowing event in Hawaii who was supported by her BB to participate in a classroom routine that Chelsea calls *Daily Discourse*. The student joined class sessions via Facetime. Chelsea was pleased that the absent student understood how much her partner needed her, and that the two continued collaborating despite absences. She shared this as an example of the value of Belongingness Buddies. To her it exemplified how the practice supported positive student connections and students knowing the importance of being in school and utilizing a classroom structure to engage. In an interview, Chelsea said this practice is intentionally used “in the spirit of fostering community.”

She acknowledges that the BB system is not perfect. She noted that when a student is partnered with someone who is chronically late or absent, the attendant students are often texting and missing out on the buddy aspect. During an observation, students were asked to text their Belonging buddies as Chelsea took attendance. Once she finished, she walked around the room to make sure students were texting those who were not yet present. Several students ambled in late, and when one was asked if his Belongingness Buddy had texted him, he looked confused. Another two late arrivers also seemed perplexed by the question, but Chelsea did not dwell on it, and class continued. It is possible these were the students she was referring to who were often

late or absent, and thus were less aware of the structure. But it also appeared to be a possibility that these students were not receiving texts.

Informal Check-Ins & Lunch Bunch. For Chelsea, knowing students well extends to paying close attention to students' emotional well-being. During observations in Chelsea's class she opened the door and stood at the entry to greet each student by name as they passed into the classroom. As they ambled in, she chirped friendly greetings, asked about sporting events and family members, indicating (like Gil) that she knew many of her students as people outside of class and was genuinely interested in their lives. This manner of "noticing", she stated in an interview, is a way of assessing student wellness. "I notice when someone looks like they're feeling down and invite them into the lunch bunch."

Lunch-Bunch is an informal structure Chelsea created to support students. It is her catch all for helping students struggling academically, getting kids who have been absent caught up, conducting optional "honors" sessions, re-taking assessments, as well as mental-health or personal support conversations. Scholars on the subject of equity in current literature often discuss the importance of truly caring for students, knowing their stories, valuing their experiences and cultures, as well as attending to social-emotional needs. If educators are to help students achieve greater levels of academic success, especially in areas that are challenging or out of comfort zones, and especially for students who have less favorable life advantages like English speaking, college-educated parents, demonstrating true care for their well-being is essential (Hammond, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Chelsea also notices behaviors that may require teacher corrective actions, but she is extremely careful in those interactions, and even in describing them, not to demean or assume

malintent. In an interview, she explained that teachers must examine their own bias, and she acknowledged that her middle class, White upbringing makes her more than susceptible to implicit biases when viewing student behaviors and she pushes back on herself constantly. She mentioned noticing when students “flee the scene” frequently:

We’ve got a lot of hallways roamers at our school so I try to be really thoughtful about who is regularly leaving class when they think the teacher isn’t looking. I ask why and I check in with them. Or I tell the groups to be sure to fill them in when they get back.

She wants the students to know she (and their peers) wants them in class more than she wants the students to be punished for their absence, though the observations and her comment that there are “a lot of roamers” suggests that her attempt at keeping kids in class with this positive effort may be challenging. At the Equity Collaborative School, there seemed to be few, if any, consequences for a student standing up and leaving class. In both observations, I witnessed students entering and exiting class regularly and in some cases for nearly an entire class period. In a place that seems to view sitting quietly as the antithesis of learning, it is up to teachers to create content that is engaging and worthwhile for students’ attention to stay in class. This onus of responsibility on teachers to be engaging, coupled with Chelsea’s sincere desire to disrupt her own assumptions that may be based on stereotypes about what students may be doing when leaving causes her to view these noticings and conversations in a more supportive manner. She asks students to come visit her during Lunch Bunch to explain or “check-in”.

Knowing students well, for Chelsea, seems to pertain largely to emotional well-being, life outside of school. Where Gil seemed less interested in knowing a student academically, Chelsea devised an intricate system for knowing students academically. Her asset-only assessment coupled with students’ responsibility for tracking growth allows her to quickly view students’

self-professed growth and say confidently who has grown. When asked to explain growth, the description was unclear and unspecific. When I asked how students fared on SAT specific content, she said in an interview that she exposes students to the SAT, meaning she showed them some questions, but she did not give quizzes or cover all the content. She simply wanted to make sure she was doing her due-diligence in providing access to the content. The SAT, as a standardized test lying squarely on the dominant axis, was viewed suspiciously by Chelsea. When discussing this, it seemed her method for providing what Gutierrez calls access (2012) is by exposing students to an awareness that the test exists, some practice questions (though not observed when I was visiting) but not devoting time to practice tests, timed tests or evaluating student performance or growth.

Peer Knowledge, Group Work & Status Interventions. Chelsea made intentional efforts to remove herself, the teacher, from being the center of authority in her efforts to advance equity. She told me that she often asks students to work in pairs or groups to give one another feedback or solve problems so that students engage with one another. The goal is to ensure they are the knowledge producers, and also to ensure they are valuing the contributions of their peers as well as their own. Students in high school, however, come to math class with preconceived ideas about who in class is “good” at math and who is not, so she must work to elevate students in order to show them the validity of their ideas.

In an observation, students were put in groups to complete integer puzzles. There was nothing on the board for me to see an explanation of this, and no examples provided. I tried to look at a sample provided to the students at tables nearest to me, but it was not clear to me what they should be doing. One student asked if they were getting graded and Chelsea responded, “Um, sure?” Then she asked “does it matter?” A boy at Joey’s table muttered under his breath,

“that means no.” Joey chuckled, then stretched out and began to stare at the ceiling of the classroom. Another student at the table tugged his coat to get his attention, made a gesture in my direction to indicate he knew I was watching, to which Joey responded by dropping his chair back to all four legs, sat up and hunched over the puzzle saying, “Okay, let’s do this!” but I could hear him say a moment later, “I don’t get what we are doing.” None of the other boys at his table were working on the puzzle, and a moment later, Joey got up and left the classroom.

Another group of girls that were further away from me, seemed to be actively engaged in the puzzle work and Chelsea spent time talking with them, asking questions, raising her voice in pitched interest at something noted by one of the girls. The group was too far away for me to hear the details of the conversation, but I could hear Chelsea asking questions with sincere interest, “Oh, how did you get that?” and, “Hmm, that’s really interesting, what numbers did you plug in to get that?” After moving away from their table, she walked over to the board and wrote the name of one of the girls on the board and asked her to go up and write out her problems. As one of the girls wrote her work on the board, the rest of the class continued in their groups. Visible signs of engagement were present for this group of girls; however, the rest of the class did not show many typical signs of engagement. There were many students on their cell phones, sitting in angles of repose, making faces at friends across the room, and some--like Joey, left.

In a post-observation interview, I asked about the activity and what she was assessing and how. The activity represents a collection of mathematical thinking exercises, but like Gil, Chelsea does not grade or assess in typical ways, in part because she believes assessment in the traditional way harms classroom culture and status. Chelsea explained that traditional grading and tests in math create “competitive” cultures that are “toxic and traumatizing” and that she aims for “a more communal vibe of togetherness” where every student understands that “we are

better together” this last phrase was repeated throughout our interviews. My data collection plan did not allow for me to assess if students felt a strong community with one another, but observations did not show strong evidence of cognitive engagement with the mathematical activity with the mere introduction of having a partner or a group, although group work and collaboration are often cited in the literature describing practices for equity.

Chelsea shared in an interview that communal and community thinking is essential as part of her work to disrupt beliefs of intellect, power and status. She is intentional about her actions as she interrupts student perceptions about themselves and their peers, making sure their own biases don’t veer to traditional beliefs about status or intellect in class:

Kids can create a narrative about a student who’s gone or absent, like that they’re bad or like you don’t want to be in their groups, or they don’t help. I want them to fill them in and instead think like we need them here. We are better together, we are better as a community.

In an effort to create community, Chelsea does not speak negatively about students who might otherwise be disparaged as a “slacker” by peers. She has “retrained her brain” to always look for assets, and focuses on celebrating students for anything that they do well so as to not deflate their status. Chelsea explained that her manner of speaking about and thinking about students who traditionally struggle is intentionally devoid of deficit thinking (Hammond, 2014; Landson-Billings, 2008). Much has been written of status in classrooms (Boaler, 2008; Cohen, 1990; Dyches & Boyd, 2017) and about how teachers perceive students, how students perceive themselves, and the academic impact perceptions have on student achievement (McLeod, 1995; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968). In Chelsea’s class, she claims that every utterance is one that works to systematically disrupt stereotypes that might be damaging to students who are traditionally at-risk, and she pays particular attention during group work. Chelsea explains that

she is working with great intention to interrupt those ideas that students have been passively accepting throughout their educational lives. “They pretty much only have dominant views of what it means to be a mathematician and if you have those you’re the smart one in the room and if you don’t you’re not.” Although most status interventions and interactions observed sought to intentionally uplift students, some examples observed worked to dismantle beliefs about a student who others in class perceived as being “good at math.”

Chelsea was reading quotes from student work completed on an assignment called “Dear Math” which was a letter students were asked to write to math. As she read quotes from student writing aloud, she noted that many of them had had “traumatic relationships” with math, indicating a nod to the literature in math research (Boaler, 2008; Lange & Meaney, 2011). She wanted to remind them all that there was “no math gene.” Many students rolled their eyes visibly, but one student, Joey interjected “I don’t know, I think there might be a math gene because Timmy always gets problems right without trying” before putting his head down. Timmy, a white male student, grinned. Chelsea responded, “We all have strengths. Timmy’s strength is blurting out half-baked ideas.” Some students chuckled, and Timmy winced, although with a smile that suggested playfulness. His friends at his table covered their mouths and widened their eyes as though shocked or holding back laughter. Other students darted expressions of surprise at one another. Joey’s head remained down on the table.

Critical Pedagogy. In Chelsea’s classroom, every practice observed was easily traced to scholarship on practices for equity. Her curriculum is designed to critique systems of power, in part through structures described already, and also through project curriculum observed. In her project, she utilizes open-ended questions that have multiple answers and honors multiple ways of thinking about problem solving (McGee-Banks & Banks, 2010). She works to create

structures that intentionally disrupt stereotypes and shift status of students in her classroom (Cohen 1994; Dyches & Boyd, 2017), and she intentionally creates assessments that are open-ended, something mentioned briefly above, offering multiple interpretations of success for students (Boaler, J. 2008; Cohen 1990; Gutiérrez, Brown, & Alibab, 2018).

In an effort to help students reclaim the curriculum, a move that might be considered culturally relevant (Hammond, 2014), Chelsea told me in an interview that she attributes mathematical ideas encountered in class to her students. When describing a technique that she says all students need to know, but that a student demonstrated on an assessment or activity, she says things like, “this is Sophia’s idea, this is Leslie’s idea, let’s use Leslie’s strategy even though it might have been, like, Pythagoras’ strategy.” I observed this in her classes, too. This seems aligned with Critical Race Theory, and Critical Pedagogy, which both renounce traditional and dominant norms in education, and seek to empower the disenfranchised by reclaiming the curriculum, questioning dominant theories, and showcasing student culture as academic.

Chelsea stated that in accordance with her reading of Rochelle Gutierrez’s (2009, 2012) work and her understanding of the term “nepantla,” which Chelsea cites as, “the intersection of these axes of equity, one that’s the dominant axis and one that’s the critical” she aspires to give students enough access to standards-based content to give them access to opportunities, but that she also hopes her curriculum and methods make students aware of the inequities in the world. She goes on to say this:

So, that in an equitable environment we are giving all students access and equipping them to succeed in what is dominantly considered success in this society and then we’re also equipping them with a critical lens to understand that, that system is kind of messed up and so I think the nepantla is the intersection of those axes.

As an upper grade high school math teacher, this means teaching math that students might encounter on the SAT, which I saw hints of as she exposed students to information about circles.

She was also partnered with Gil's Biology project which was loosely based on the topic of the environmental impact of global food production. At the end of one class I observed, after the circle assessment, she projected an example of a science poster on the topic of food access in a particular neighborhood. The example was created by Chelsea's student teacher, and representative of the type of critical curriculum the literature on equity has described. She asked students to share bright spots and noticings about the example that was projected on the screen. Some students were looking at the protection, others were packing up their bags getting ready to leave for the day. After a moment with no responses, Chelsea then changed slides and projected an image of a quote that read: "Privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it's not a problem for you," and asked how it might connect to the project. The class was still silent. She went on, saying that the quote reminded her of the class and went on "Maybe no one here has ever had the problem of no access to fresh food." She then went on to explain that the project was examining the statistical inequality of access to healthy food. The students were then told their assignment for the night, which was to find an article that examines that topic and also select a school in their city that might give them an opportunity to explore the topic further. This was the open-ended question students were asked to explore. Shortly after that brief explanation, students were given the final few minutes of class to get a laptop and find and print an article. Some students left. Class was coming to a close, and those who chose to leave were not asked to wait until the official end time of class. I could hear one student ask a friend nearby, "what are we doing?"

Assessment: Assets-Oriented Only. Assessment in Chelsea's classroom is not traditional and she reports that it intentionally responds to literature on equitable teaching practices for mathematics. Her intervention to the critique that standard and traditional assessments are creating deficit thinking about and for students of color, is to purposefully create assessments that focus only on assets. She also ensures that she allows multiple ways of expressing mathematical ideas, allows students to provide feedback on assessments, and allows students many opportunities to refine their mathematical work (Boaler, 2008; Cohen 1990).

Chelsea informed me that she uses narrative and open-ended assessments as a regular feature of her class. There is an open-ended assessment that students add to every week, thus exploring the same content throughout a unit or project.

I don't do anything traditional-looking like tests, they find these as a way to confirm for themselves that they are learning math. I think in more traditional math classrooms you have your homework or tests and quizzes and you can very firmly say I learned stuff and I have an A or I didn't and I'm failing-- a lot of kids fail-- and my hope in this is that there is a journey that everyone's on and that they all feel that they are always learning and growing and hopefully there is less of a competitive feature because I don't have grades or scores.

As mentioned previously, during the first observation, students were given a circle assessment, in which they were told to simply write everything they knew about circles on a blank piece of paper. She provided the blank paper and crayons if they wanted to draw. She assuaged the students who interpreted assessment as a quiz by saying there are no right or wrong answers. She continued by explaining students do not need to cram or stay up all night studying or taking notes because sometimes they just "might be having a really bad day or hard time", so not to worry. If they did not do well on the circle assessment, she added, they could "come in another day during lunch to revise the assessment."

Her method of evaluating the assessments was explained thoroughly in our post observation interview. She scans the assessment making check marks next to every idea that is mathematical. She said in the interview that “It’s pretty wide open to what is considered mathematically correct.” The number of check marks does not translate to a grade, but students are asked to keep track of the number of check marks they receive on each assessment to evaluate their own growth. Chelsea notes that this method allows her eyes to “get trained to being less deficit thinking while grading. Like in traditional grading there is like wrong, wrong, wrong, but in this way I’m like *oooooh what a neat idea*. I genuinely never thought of it that way before.”

When I asked how to determine what students knew, or struggled with conceptually she responded, “I don’t do any traditional tests” but she explained that she asks students to keep all of their assessments in a folder and keep track of their own growth so they can “confirm for themselves that they are growing.” They keep track of growth by virtue of the number of checks on a paper and come in for help only if there were not a larger number of checks on a returned assessment. If a student had only one check, for example in week one, and grew to three checks by the next week’s assessment, they do not need to come in for help. Conversely, if a student fully comprehends much of the mathematical concept and formula for circles and writes a great deal on week one assessment, but writes little in the subsequent assessment, and thus does not grow beyond an already high number of checks from week to week, he or she is asked to come in for Lunch Bunch. Though it is of note that there is no penalty in terms of grades, students are required to give up a lunch break in order to learn new ways of explaining their understanding of circles or learn new content that may stretch their current knowledge.

In an observation, she announced before returning the assessments that she was “floored by the level of articulation” she witnessed in the student work. She then went on to highlight students by name and explained how they articulated their understanding. With genuine enthusiasm, she verbally detailed how a student drew a variety of circles on the paper and showed depth, and continued describing another students’ work, but she did not project or print the work samples, thus I struggled to understand what she was talking about. Students in the classroom could be observed texting and whispering. One student got up and left the room unannounced. Chelsea continued cheerfully, then began to return the assessments to students, and announced it was *Partner Palooza* which meant they were tasked with providing feedback to a peer. Their job was to highlight something in the peer’s assessment that was “cool” or “interesting” a “bright spot” worthy of celebration or recognition.

Another feature of Chelsea’s assessment practice is ensuring students have equitable participation in the evaluation of their work. This activity represented the way she engages students in the process of assessing work. These “bright spots” that students were asked to note on the papers of their peers was a way for them to receive some form of credit, though it was unclear how, even after the explanation in the interview. She explained to me that, “there are many layers of assessment, self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment, and then we can also bring in experts to give feedback too, that’s another layer.” She believes strongly in ensuring student voice in assessment: “It lends greater equity to your assessment when it's not just the teacher telling you, but there is always a space for students to self-reflect and provide feedback among peers in a way that I couldn’t.” As I scanned the class, I could see that the students were writing very little, some looking around quizzically. In a post observation interview, I asked Chelsea what kinds of things students wrote and she reflected that she was not

pleased with the level or quality of their feedback to their peers. It was an area to continue improving for this group. Chelsea's honest reflection and candid acceptance of what works, what doesn't and what she may be blind to is an important feature of her thinking as a teacher.

Noteworthy, too, is the freedom of the context to assess in this manner. Her lack of tests, quizzes and grades in ways typically understood by students, parents, and teachers was an indicator that such practices are allowed, where in other contexts they might not be. She also mentioned that she and an administrator were hosting a family math night to demonstrate some of her practices with parents, which was an indicator that her practices are encouraged by the school.

Concluding Thoughts on Chelsea. Embedded into most of Chelsea's practice is an overarching goal of systematically restructuring every aspect of learning and being a student to ensure social justice for historically marginalized students. This required a restructuring of her thinking, her modes of instruction, her curriculum, and her modes of assessment. All required a distinct and purposeful assets based orientation. She also described her process of interrupting her implicit bias through intentionally reframing her thoughts whenever she perceived (or misperceived) a negative interaction.

She has pulled together her theoretical knowledge of equity and social justice scholars to create a classroom replete with practices named in the studies on teaching for equity and social justice, and yet, her classroom felt somewhat tense. Although I did not interview students, eye rolling and sneering were observed frequently. In my observations, students blurted expletives, left class frequently and articulated confusion or apathy when in groups. Chelsea seemed aware of some struggles with the practices when reflecting during our debrief interviews and explained

that some practices did not yield her desired effects. Her honesty, reflectiveness and depth of knowledge regarding the scholarship on equity and practices for equity stand out as important features in understanding her teaching.

Conclusions

Data collected found that teachers in this equity context seem to practice teaching according to how they describe and define equity, even if small inconsistencies exist. Gil, whose definition for equity was rooted in progressive theory, ensured his students were building, working with peers, collaborating and actively engaged in the process for planning and choosing their learning through projects. Chelsea, whose definition for equity fell well within the critical pedagogy realm, utilized many practices named in scholarship for teaching equitably. The context for equity seems to afford teachers great latitude in making decisions related to curriculum development, assessment and instructional practices which allowed each teacher to practice according to their beliefs more freely than might be allowable in a school context with adopted curriculum requirements or schoolwide assessment structures.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This qualitative study examined teaching for equity and social justice within an equity-oriented high school. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine the intersection of teacher beliefs and teacher practices for equity. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How do these teachers define and practice for equity?
2. How does the school context influence these teachers' definitions and practices for equity?
3. In what ways, if any, do these teachers' practices for equity align with their beliefs and definitions of equity?

In this chapter, I summarize the findings, explain the implications the findings have for teacher practices, research, and leadership for equity, while acknowledging the limitations of this work. This study began with the belief that something must be done to address educational inequities, faith that equity of academic and achievement outcomes translates to equity of all other significant outcomes (achievement gap Dashboard, NCES 2017; Barnum, 2017; Dossani, 2017; Karoly, 2015; King, MacIntosh & Bell-Ellwenger, 2016; Predictors for Post-Secondary Success, 2013), and awareness that academic achievement data is not the only indicator of student learning and potential for success. I set out to examine the ways equity definitions held by individual teachers impacted how equity was operationalized in these teachers' practices, with an additional interest in the ways contexts for equity contribute to teacher practices.

The greatest challenge for achieving equity is the ideologically partisan ways equity is defined (Castellini, Ragazzi, Crescentini 2012; Minnow, 2008). These opposing beliefs have been blurring the path to equitable outcomes for decades. The research is consistent, however, in naming the importance of teachers on student learning and achievement (Bray-Clark & Bates,

2003; Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004) which is why understanding what and how teachers practice their craft, and with equity in mind, is so essential.

Summary of Findings

While some scholars argue that teachers' practices may not align with their stated beliefs about equity (Rochmenst, Penner & Loeb, 2017), this study found that the teachers' practices were aligned with their beliefs. Additionally, their specific beliefs and definitions for equity significantly impacted the development of teaching practices. Although there were distinct definitions and practices for equity, the teachers both referenced research and scholarship on educational equity, and named practices learned or adapted to respond to the literature's call to decolonize their classrooms. The themes that emerged from both classrooms were: assets-oriented approaches, an anti-standards and anti-standardization stance, knowing students well, and decentering teacher authority in the classroom. My discussion of these themes is framed by my belief in the theoretical framework advanced by Rochelle Gutierrez (2009) that asserts equity teaching must reside at the nexus of the critical and dominant axes of equity, but found that the teachers' beliefs and practices of this study resided more squarely in the critical zone of Gutierrez's framework. The findings compelled a question about balance between the critical and dominant, and the discussion of each summarized theme explores the question.

Teacher Beliefs: Assets Based Teaching, Thinking & Assessing

In response to the literature on implicit bias in the classroom and a need for assets-oriented teaching, both teachers in this study heed the suggestions made by the research which are to examine their privilege (Linton 2011), recognize that their way of viewing student

behaviors may be erroneous (McLeod, 1995), celebrate diverse thinking and culture (Hammond, 2014), invite critique of inequitable structures (Dyches & Boyd, 2017), and challenge bias wherever it may exist (Kendi, 2020).

Adopting an assets-based approach is often described in the literature on teaching for equity (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2008) and was a theme widely observed in this study. Both teachers in this study were aware of the harmful impacts that negative stereotypes can have on students (Domanico, 2015; McLeod, 1995; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobsen 1968; Simpson & Erickson, 1983; Van Houtte, 2010) and thus both were intentional about the ways they described students. Each of the teachers cited the impacts of deficit thinking for students from the research they had read, and insisted on highlighting the positive in students, especially those who struggled, or who had behaviors that might traditionally be viewed negatively. They each adopted a stance of affirming students who might not otherwise feel affirmed in educational settings. Underneath their practice of affirming students was a belief that having positive thoughts about students would yield positive results, much as the research on this topic has suggested (Herrera, 2010; McLeod, 1995). However, when the curriculum, grading policies and path to achievement are completely altered in ways that do not translate to tangible or typical academic growth, understanding the impact of teacher beliefs is somewhat complicated.

In Gil's classroom, for example, his *no grading just noticing* practice was a way of surfacing student strengths while not creating "academic holes" resulting from missed assignments or grades from which they could not escape. It was devised as a way of only seeing the good in students on his journey to getting to know them better and his efforts to support them. Chelsea, on the other hand, devised an entire assessment and grading system of "bright

spots” and completely removed traditional assessments of quizzes or tests that have problems to solve. Her assessments were blank sheets of paper. It was unclear to me how this approach informed Chelsea’s practice in supporting students on the dominant-traditional axis for mathematics or if such assessments or practices existed. Chelsea could, however, say that students were generally growing in her class, evidenced by the number of additional checks marks on open-ended assessments. She did not mark problems wrong. There were no problems to solve, in fact. There were open-ended questions that were repeated weekly to which students could add information and get more checks each week.

While asset based (or strengths based) teaching is described as a practice in critical pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy and equity pedagogy (Krutkowski, 2017; Lopez & Michelle, 2009), it goes beyond addressing implicit bias related to student behaviors. It also includes utilizing student identity in the curriculum. Gil’s insistence on student choice and voice as ownership of learning and Chelsea’s practice of naming math concepts after the students who use them were both examples of the teachers making strides to ensure students are viewed as integral and connected to the learning and content, however, it was unclear what access students had to the standard names for content, or the growth of student understanding and knowledge on dominant-traditional content topics. Rochelle Gutierrez (2009) points out in her explanation of teaching mathematics equitably that, “the goal is not to replace traditional math” but rather to help students see themselves as a part of the overall curriculum. The assets only approaches observed in each class deviated sharply from standardized ways of viewing the subjects, and assessed for subject mastery in ways that seemed to make student progress opaque.

In general, each teacher is making strides to deliberately implement strategies for creating classroom cultures that affirm students and acknowledge their lives and thinking as assets. This

is an important feature of teaching for equity and creating classrooms where student identity is valued. The challenge is striking a balance between this, and helping students toward academic success in traditional ways, too, that will translate to success beyond these classrooms. It is a challenge and a tension that Chelsea explained in our first interview that she grapples with, and worthy of continued examination in research as educators make choices about how they will believe and practice for equity based upon the available literature on equity.

Critical Pedagogy & The Anti-Standards Stance

Both teachers' practices fell on the critical end of the spectrum of teaching for equity. Critical pedagogy questions power structures (Friere, 1970) looking to bring learning and knowledge to the oppressed with possibilities for systematic change in service of equity. Critical pedagogy has always sought to undo structures of oppression, and critical race theory builds upon that by arguing that the oppression is always racial, with whiteness acting as the oppressor worldwide (Gillborn, 2005; Zamudio, Caskey, Rios & Bridgeman 2011). Both teacher participants were white, and acknowledged their privilege and power in society as white people and white educators. A part of the privileges named were those that privileged their success in traditional schools, covering traditional curriculum, which caused each to reflect on the negative consequences of dominant axis teaching practices and curriculum or anything that might be considered traditional or standards-oriented. The problem with dominant tradition, according to critical scholars, is they do not have diverse representation in their curriculum, prize accuracy, good grades, college going and financial success as the best outcomes for students, all of which are tools and cultures attributed to colonizers (Dyches & Boyd 2017). To these scholars, the system must be toppled before students (or teachers) can be held responsible for any notion of an

achievement gap. Further, anything that hints at a gap is structurally racist and must be abandoned.

Both Gil and Chelsea had suspicious reactions to any dominant sounding teaching practices, even those named in practices for equity such as practices for classroom management, assessment and assessing student acquisition of content, scaffolds for meeting learning targets, grading practices or differentiation strategies responding to assessment. The teachers could both cite research claiming such practices were racist or deleterious to historically disadvantaged students. Gil named the harmful impact of grading policies described in a study he read from Chicago schools (Allensworth, 2005; Krone-Phillips, 2019) and decided never to grade again. He also worried that his path of college might not be a truly personalized approach that honors the diversity of interest his students held, a sentiment he could cite as expressed in the literature on equity (Kendi, 2020). Gil also shared that he wanted to make sure that the curriculum was personally interesting and relevant to his students, rather than worry about covering content standards that may or may not be valuable to them. In Chelsea's class, assessments were intentionally not standardized or traditional. Her curricular contribution to the project on global food production was to examine equality of access to healthy food within neighboring communities, an almost textbook question to guide learning for critical practice. And her practice of naming mathematical concepts after children is an approach aimed at validating students and making them a part of the curriculum.

While teaching that only operates on the dominant end of the equity spectrum of education is not a path forward that yields, bucking all traditions, especially those demonstrated to improve student outcomes, or those that might help students access power and agency over their futures, seems potentially harmful to students. There are schools which are named in the

research as accomplishing clear goals for equity, and begin to improve the outcomes for students. Given the strong evidence that suggests student achievement is closely tied with improved life outcomes, giving up on all such structures will surely harm students. Chelsea seemed to grapple in earnest with this tension as she described her beliefs in our first interview. My time in her class, along with the descriptions of her practices in follow up interviews showcased practices that were squarely in the critical domain, with seemingly little attention to the dominant. The balance between the two is one worth examining more carefully, and more time in her class would be necessary to surface such practices.

Knowing Children Well: Belongingness, CRP & Choice

The literature on teaching for equity name practices for creating belongingness (Allensworth, 2005) sometimes by way of knowing students well, and sometimes knowing and teaching in response to their cultural background (Hammond, 2015). Both teachers spoke at length and provided many ways in which they work to know students well. They each described approaches in their classes that utilized asset-based teaching which required knowing students well and personalizing or tailoring instruction to that end. The need to know and care about students as people, and foster genuine and positive relationships were highly prized by both teachers, however, an omission of knowing students academically was observed and commented on during interviews.

When questions of grades, content mastery, or literacy levels were asked of Gil, his response suggested that knowing students academically was a lesser form of knowing students. Chelsea's system for describing student growth eclipsed any discussion of subject mastery due to the expansive definitions for what constituted mathematical thinking or correctness in her

classroom. This made knowing what students needed, academically, very challenging for both teachers to describe. Both teachers consistently used positive language when talking about their students and were affable and approachable. They demonstrated, through questions and informal conversations, that they knew the students as athletes, siblings and out of school interests, but lacked clear knowledge of the students' content knowledge for their teaching subjects.

Embedded in the literature examining equity is discussion of the deleterious effects of grading and standardized assessments (Allensworth, 2005; Krone-Phillips, 2019). Some scholars posit that teaching and assessing in standardized ways is white supremacy or colonizer education in action (Gillborn, 2005; Shah Jahan, 2011). This scholarship has had a significant impact on both teachers at the Equity Collaborative, filling them with guilt at the thought of being another white person contributing to the problem. To respond to these worries, both teachers have devised intricate assessment systems that are qualitative and strictly asset oriented which they believed helped them better know and understand the students. Examples include Gil's month-long "no-grades, strictly noticing" practice, and Chelsea's bright spot check mark system on assessments.

The observations suggested the possibility that students might have been struggling, but when asked the teachers were not clear how, academically, they were struggling. Growing academic skill and content mastery with the careful support of knowledgeable teachers who can help students see and understand and support student growth is a possible by-product of utilizing some structures in the dominant domain of teaching for equity. Another component of *Belongingness* when students get to college, is their sense that they feel prepared for the academic rigor, which is why access to rigorous coursework is such an important part of equity.

Decentering Teacher Authority: Group Work & Student Choice

Within critical theory and critical race theory, best practices for teaching are those that remove dominant authority structures like teacher centered, lecture oriented or teacher selected curriculum covering traditional, dominant topics (Koli, Pizarro & Nevarez, 2017). In an effort to decolonize their classrooms, both teachers were adamant that lectures, lessons, worksheets or teacher directed learning were absent or minimal.

In Gil's class, students were placed in groups or pairs, sometimes with clear roles. Student facilitators were tasked with guiding discussions, a structure designed to ensure students led the class. He also regularly sought opportunities for reciprocal teaching, preferring that students get opportunities to showcase that they know as much as he does. Chelsea described how she assigns partners, and in some cases allows students to evaluate the work of their peers. She named this as a "democratic" assessment practice where students get feedback from peers, community, themselves and teacher, not just the teacher. Teachers were intentional in creating structures to demonstrate that they were not the most important person in the room nor the only person in the room from whom students could learn. These practices are clearly named in the literature on equity, but what makes them particularly effective, in more traditional settings with high accountability, is that students must engage with one another in order to succeed and grow in the class by virtue of a standardized assessment or class grade. When the accountability or clear assessment are absent, a concern that the balance of the critical and dominant is off and potentially less effective with the ultimate goal of equity.

Limitations Affecting Validity

In any qualitative study, the researcher's bias threats pose a challenge in objectively explaining and interpreting the data. Although the methods and iterative process of coding and re-writing the research allowed for clearer answers to the questions, more data was needed in order to add validity to this study and create greater opportunities to push my own interpretation and analysis of all I heard and saw. Access to the school college data, student perspectives and voice and parent perspectives and voice would contribute to a much better picture of the work happening inside of the Equity Collaborative and thus provide for more robust, and thus valid interpretation.

There were many students who stood out to me as I observed in classes. Whether it was for an extra long yawn, and flippant remark, or an enthusiastic expression toward a teacher, I wanted to learn more about their experiences in these classes. Surveys or interviews (or both) with students would have been a good way to confirm or denounce some of my interpretations. Or, more likely, demonstrate that students, too, have differing opinions on the school, all of which are nuanced. Understanding how students describe their learning and their teachers would not only have kept me from guessing what various gestures or expressions meant, but would also have allowed me to learn more about their needs, whether their needs were being met, and more about their perceptions of the teaching styles in general. In order to improve teaching, an important and often missing component is the perspective of those more impacted: the students. Additionally, learning more about the students and their families and what brought them to the school could have strengthened the analysis which suggested a miscommunication between the school's stated emphasis on college on the website and the seeming lack of support for college in daily practices. It is entirely possible that college going is not what brings families to this school.

It is possible project based learning and academic internships are the message more resonant in the community. Lack of community voice in understanding these factors would not necessarily change an analysis that the website is a slight mismatch, but if the message is broadcast differently in the community, that is another contextual element to consider.

Lastly, I return to the framework that guides my beliefs about equity in the first place. My own sense that teaching for equity is a challenging yet necessary balance between the critical and dominant axis tints my analysis in ways that I attempt to keep visible, however, when such a belief exists it can't be overlooked that what gets noticed or overlooked must certainly get impacted. As I observed and interviewed the teachers in this study, I admired their genuine enthusiasm and love for their students, but also found myself concerned that the lack of "traditional" or dominant structures might be harmful. The competing thoughts represent my sense that the critical is equally important in teaching. I cannot say I spent enough time in either teacher's room to say there are no dominant structures present. I can only say that for my time there and in my interviews, I was unable to see or hear about many, and thus I write with equal parts admiration for the critical practices devised with sincere care, and concern for the content, access and practices that I view as necessary for success. Success in college, career and civic life, all of which are now described as the dominant, white supremacist cultural beliefs.

Implications

This study employed qualitative study design to answer the questions about teaching practices for equity within an equity-oriented context. The data collected show that teachers at this equity oriented school do practice for equity in ways that comport with their beliefs, and the

school context was one in which teachers were granted great liberty in designing learning according to their beliefs.

The findings lead to implications for teaching, for leadership, for policy and for research. As teachers continue examining privilege and bias as significant factors limiting equity, a continued focus on improved teaching practice and assessing student learning is needed. An emphasis on the skills students need, and how to improve in such skills, may offer fruitful possibilities that allow teachers to continue progressing in the craft. As school leaders and policy makers work to ensure curriculum and practices are

Implications for Teaching: Teacher Practices to Foreground

These findings are relevant to the future of teaching for equity. As the discourse in educational equity increasingly disparages policies and practices aimed at improving student achievement outcomes, opportunities to see what kinds of teaching happens when all concern for achievement is abandoned will be necessary. As Gutierrez argues (2012) a need for the critical and dominant axis are necessary.

Teaching for equity is defined and practiced many ways, but it should always include practices often described as those of highly effective teachers (Valiandes, Koutselini & Kyriakides, 2011): differentiation with opportunities to learn in students' zone of proximal development as well as challenged in new ways with rigorous curriculum, strong assessment practices, emphasis on analyzing student work and data to make instructional adjustments along with caring and support. Also, developing teachers in ways that help them become experts in their assigned content area to ensure curricular strength in addition to making curriculum culturally relevant (Czerniak & Lumpe, 1996; Hammond, 2014). Developing teachers' craft for

teaching their subjects, managing their classrooms, and creating classroom conditions for optimal learning should not be ignored as an essential component of equity work. While racism, implicit bias and white supremacist structures are culprits behind many of the inequities we see and know in society and in schools, the current trend of attributing these terms to practices essential for student academic growth as a way to remove them entirely should be carefully considered.

Some practices observed at the Equity Collaborative can easily be traced in the literature on equity: teacher friendliness, absence of punitive discipline policies or class rules, belief in student ability to achieve, opportunities for students to collaborate, giving students choice, clear structures for dialogue and collaboration. These are all practices worth investing in, however in tandem with known teacher effectiveness practices.

Caring teachers are presented with a moral dilemma. To care about improving achievement used to be closely linked to equity, but more and more has become labeled as practices supportive of White Supremacy. This study recommends that teachers reexamine popular claims criticizing such practices by exploring the literature that ties achievement data to many positive life outcomes (Barnum, 2017; Gullo, 2017) in order to return the discussion of equity to a more balanced view that allows teachers to cover mathematics and history with confidence instead of guilt.

Implications for Leadership & Policy: Ecosystems for Equity

The framework of equity guiding the analysis of this study is one that insists that both the critical and the dominant axis of equity are necessary in order for equity to be achieved. The need for “the dominant” insist on clear goals for academic growth, clear structures for support

and clear and consistent monitoring and accountability to the goals. In any context, there will be teachers who hold unique beliefs about equity and social justice, as has been demonstrated many times in the literature (Castelinni, Ragazzi & Crescentini, 2012; Jordan, 2010; Minnow, 2008; Rochmest, Penner & Loeb, 2017) so it is incumbent upon the leadership to not only design schools and school policies with clear equity missions, but also hold all stakeholders accountable to the mission and offer support in service of the mission. Leaders help to create the ecosystems for equity, and maintain the ecosystem through accountability and support.

The Equity Collaborative stated in its mission that college preparation is a key component of its equity mission offering a single, A through G, college preparatory course-taking track. It also intentionally works to dismantle segregation by admitting students via zip code lottery and offering statistical advantages to children from neighborhoods of high poverty, another significant leadership policy structure for equity. These key structures are clearly equity oriented (Corbett-Burris, 2016), and no doubt created an ecosystem for equity, however, it did not appear that the college emphasis was carried as an expectation to the teachers. Given remarks from Gil who said in an interview that such an emphasis on college frightened him, or Chelsea who worried that such a push was her own beliefs carried over from her “upbringing”, “expectations”, and “constructs” which are all dominant white beliefs, being foisted on her students. Given the definition and construct of equity that guides my own thinking about equity, leaders must help assuage the fears as well as hold the community accountable to the equity mission professed. The liberty granted to teachers as they innovated and interpreted their beliefs about equity and the practices to match, seemed to blur an ability to measure equity. The school’s publicly available data suggested a significant decline in academic achievement on standardized tests over the past five year, which may signal consequences to students as they exit

high school. Structures for accountability have been described in leadership for equity and come in many forms (Blankstein & Noguera, 2016; Corbett-Burris & Garrity, 2008; Linton, 2011). In the literature, leadership practices such as the adoption of new curriculum, training for specific instructional practices, changing from a tracked to an untracked course sequence, and equity audits at all levels of the school structure are named as some of the moves made in the name of equity. Each of those, coupled must be coupled with consistent support and accountability (Fullan, 2011).

In addition to holding the stakeholders accountable to the equity goals, leaders and policy makers can do more to support teachers in their development and as on-going professionals by creating and funding professional development that supports improved teaching practices throughout teachers' careers. In Gil's formative teaching years, his guilt at witnessing students' failure on his assessments and assignments caused a reaction against the practices all together. Rather than instructional support to help adapt practices, add student supports, or re-design the assessments to examine student work as he continued to adapt, he was simply told his abandonment was acceptable. In considering professional development for equity, there has been much said and written about anti-bias, anti-racism, equity-oriented professional development (DiAngelo, 2019; Dyches & Boyd, 2017; Guerra & Nelson, 2009; Kendi, 2019). While the literature examining the benefits of such professional development as it becomes more frequently practiced will surely tell in the future, the professional development I advance here is the type that addresses academic skill growth, improving instructional practices, balanced use of assessment and student achievement data, and teacher content mastery. Explanatory and experiential professional development that models the kind of learning that teachers can aspire toward in student-centeredness and that encourages teachers to look at data and student work to

examine their own effectiveness and improve when necessary. Practices like early, developing and critical literacy and numeracy, scientific inquiry, structures for engagement, management, assessment, examining student work, differentiation and personalization. Although the literature on the impact of professional development for teachers has offered mixed results (Lovelace, 1999; Minnow, 2008) there is research that suggests how to ensure the stickiness of professional development which is partly differentiation for teacher interest (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell & Hardin, 2014) and partly school leader attention to accountability (Fullan, 2011; Linton, 2011).

Better support and guidance via teacher coaching and ongoing professional development for instructional practices, coupled with leadership's attending to accountability are critical factors for equity to be accomplished.

Implications for Future Research

These findings are relevant to the future of teaching and teacher training for equity. As the discourse in educational equity increasingly disparages policies and practices aimed at improving student achievement outcomes, and the call for anti-racist and anti-bias professional development are taking root and being realized, scholars have new areas to explore. Exploration and examination of school contexts able to answer such calls unabated will be critically important as educators and leaders consider future change ideas in the name of equity. Additionally, exploration of the experiences within, and resulting effects of, the professional development that advances critical practices embedded in Critical Race, Anti-Racist, and Anti-Bias trainings will be helpful tools aiding schools and educators as they make budgetary decisions about how to spend school funds.

Both teachers who participated in this study alluded to research on equity and professional development opportunities that exposed them to critical theory. Gil explained in an interview the impact of some scholarship: “You know, *The Make-or-Break Year* where you're like, Oh, woah! Look at this impact that grading and assessment can have on kids and failure can have on a very specific group of kids and what that means.” Chelsea also cited scholarship on equity and her own work as a scholar influenced by the equity work in mathematics.

The findings of this study suggest that the teachers devised some complicated practices and forms of assessments in the name of equity and anti-racism which may require greater examination to evaluate effectiveness and impact on student learning. But, as the limitations I described earlier suggest, much of the analysis and interpretation presented in this study are framed by my own belief in the need for a balanced approach with respect to the critical and dominant axis. Another limitation of the study that shifts to implications for research, is the absence of student voice, parents voice, and more detailed school data. Future research that seeks to describe equity teaching and contexts should include, as part of the same study, the student and parent perspectives as well achievement, college, attendance and suspension data. Students and their families are critical considering they are the beneficiaries of the education models provided. Omission of their perspective, in this study, left room only for speculation on my part. Addition of such voices and data for future research describing equity work will help advance more complete and robust descriptions, making room for more expansive analyses of the efficacy of practices.

Further research on the psychological impact of loaded language like white supremacy and racism directed at educators and the impacts on practice is another area not well understood. While there is research examining white fragility, white saviorism, and white guilt (DiAngelo,

2018; Estrada & Matthews 2016; Kendi, 2019) they are typically framed as teacher's unwillingness to accept culpability for race and racism. But as white educators embrace that they are a part of a larger problem with racism in society, and work to undo historical injustice by turning over their power, it will be important to understand what practices and systemic changes emerge. Understanding what implications such training has for classrooms will be instructive. Understanding the various ways educators answer the call to Anti-Racism, and the ways their students and communities experience it will be important as education discourse moves in this direction.

While I agree with Gutierrez (2012) that both the critical and the dominant axis are necessary for equity, it seems the discourse on equity is shifting more and more away from this centrist thinking. As the call to dismantle white supremacy and racism by overthrowing tests, standardization and other such tools of oppression used by the dominant pressures in education, a need to see more examples of equity classrooms is of increasing importance. But as future researchers consider their cases and contexts, I urge an emphasis on complete picture analysis through mixed-use studies. Of particular need, are studies of that kind that examine classrooms in which such critical and progressive theories are adopted and practiced whole heartedly. Such examples, more deeply examined from multiple perspectives, can shed light on promising practices, pitfalls to avoid, further analysis of the impact of context, and possibilities for progress within the realm of equity.

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APPENDIX A: TEACHER INTRODUCTION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Teacher: _____

Interview Start Time: _____

Interview Stop Time: _____

School Site: _____

Date: _____

Background/ Overview: Before beginning the interview, explain this.

I'm really interested in schools who are explicit about their equity stance, and the teachers working at such schools. Specifically, I'm trying to better understand how teachers within equity-oriented schools define equity for themselves, where those definitions come from, and how they see creating equity as a part of their daily teaching, curriculum and instructional planning

1. Tell me about where you grew up.
2. When did you know you wanted to be a teacher?
3. What do you see as the most important part of your work?
4. What brought you to apply at _____(school name)?
5. Describe for me your definition of equity in education.
6. Describe for me a time in your classroom when you felt your teaching was designed with this vision of equitable practice in mind.
 - a. When students struggle?
 - b. Communication with families?
 - c. Modifying/ adjusting work
 - d. Curricular adjustments for demographic?
 - e. Assessment guided teaching/ reteaching?
 - f. Support?
 - g. Discipline?
7. Describe your favorite memory or story from teaching so far.

Post Interview Memo Notes:

APPENDIX B: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Project: Teacher definitions of equity and their equity practices Time of observation: Date of observation: School site of observation: Teacher being observed: Subject & grade: Lesson topic:		
Sketch room/ seating/ boards/ agendas/ teacher position		
Timing	Script	Questions
Equity Practices Observed:		
Student Engagement:		
Post Observation Reflections/ Notes/ Descriptions/ Impressions:		

(Source: Creswell, 2015)

APPENDIX C: DEBRIEF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Project: Teacher definitions of equity and their equity practices

Time of interview:

Date:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Project description for participants: The purpose of this study is to better understand the many definitions teachers hold about equity and what practices are aligned with teacher beliefs.

Questions:

1. Can you describe how this lesson or, parts of it, align with your beliefs about equity?
2. Tell me about the context of this lesson within the unit/ project/ course sequence.
3. Tell me about the instructional practices in this lesson.
4. How engaged would you say the students were in this lesson? With this class?
5. Were there any students who struggled with the concepts/ content/ lesson?
6. Were there any students who needed more support/ challenges?
7. What support did you offer or do you plan to offer in future lessons to support students at different levels of comfort with the content?
8. Tell me about a student who has impacted you as a teacher and keeps you motivated to teach.

Thank you so much for taking this time to meet with me. As I transcribe these interviews and use them in the research, I will be sure to keep them confidential by creating pseudonyms.

Source: Creswell, 2015

APPENDIX D: CLOSING INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Project: Teacher definitions of equity and their equity practices

Time of interview:

Date:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

The purpose of the closing interview is to help interviewee and interviewer alike to reflect on the observation cycles and

Questions:

1. Describe a moment when you felt you were truest to your beliefs about equity this year?
2. Describe a moment when you felt challenged to meet your beliefs in practice?
3. Has there been any new reflections about your practice through this observation and interview process?
4. What would true equality look like in our world and what role do teachers play in it?
5. What is your greatest hope for your practice moving forward?

(Source: Creswell, 2015)

APPENDIX E: ANALYTIC TOOL FOR GATHERING EVIDENCE FOR RESEARCH

QUESTIONS AND THEMES

<i>Theme #1: Personalization</i>			
<i>Source</i>	<i>Teacher/ Administrator</i>	<i>Quote</i>	<i>Analysis/ Questions</i>
Interview/ Observation/ Data Collection	Name	“Text copied from interviews” OR Observation notes (which could also be quotes from the script)	Further research, reflections, and connections

<i>RQI: Definitions for Equity</i>			
Source	Teacher/ Administrator	Quote	Analysis/ Questions
Interview/ Observation/ Data Collection	Name	“Text copied from interviews” OR Observation notes (which could also be quotes from the script)	Further research, reflections, and connections
Document			
Principal			
Teacher 1			
Teacher 2			