Leading for Equity:

Principals’ Strategies

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to learn about the strategies principals use in leading for equity in their schools. This study is intended to illuminate the status of principals’ equity efforts following the four year implementation of Ontario’s Equity and Inclusivity Strategy and to better understand the supports necessary for doing school site equity work. A qualitative research approach was used which included personal interviews with twelve principals who self identify as leaders for equity in an Ontario school district.

The participants shared a rich breadth of understanding of equity issues that included the notion of equity as fairness, and recognized the barriers that exist for marginalized groups as a result of the interplay of power and privilege. The obstacles to equity work identified by participants included system constraints that result from workload issues, standardized testing, funding policies, and frequent transfers of principals. Other barriers identified by participants were the perceived lack of value placed on equity work, resistance encountered from staff, parents and senior administration, ignorance of equity issues, the preponderance of a deficit mindset amongst educators, inequitable hiring practices, collective agreement constraints, the political context surrounding administrators, and the personal toll equity efforts often takes on principals. The participants described strategies they employ in moving understanding and conditions for equity forward in their schools. They articulated a strong ability to gather data and
formulate goals, strategies and monitoring measures in school improvement plans. The principals described the importance of building relationships with staff, parents and students to create an environment where open and honest discourse might take place. They expressed a belief in the importance of shifting their knowledge of equity to action through their ability to challenge existing inequities, advocate for marginalized groups, and empower others to act. The principals spoke to the need to develop and utilize political savvy to navigate the difficult waters that often exist in schools and throughout the district.

The thesis concluded that there are current and desired supports that can enable the work of equity leaders in schools. These supports include professional development for principals, human resource support, increased accountability for equity initiatives (at the Ministry and District levels), and validation by system leaders of the efforts of leaders for equity.
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CHAPTER ONE

Ontario’s Ministry of Education describes publicly funded education as a ‘cornerstone of democratic society’, and outlines its belief that education must strive to develop students as learners and prepare them for their role in society as engaged, productive and responsible citizens (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). In response to a rapidly changing society and mounting concerns of resulting inequities in education, in 2009 the Ministry of Education developed Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy with the goal of full implementation in publicly funded schools across the province over a four year period. The policy requires that school Boards and staff develop strategies that will provide students with an equitable education in which they may see themselves reflected in their learning, and realize their full potential, unobstructed by systemic barriers. The success of the strategy relies on the ability of school leaders to create a shared understanding of the issues of equity in their school communities, and their ability to collaboratively create and mobilize strategies for equity. This study makes use of a qualitative research approach to gather data from principals in an Ontario school board regarding their views on equity, strategies they employ to create conditions for equity in their schools, barriers which they perceive as being obstacles to their equity work, strategies for circumventing these barriers, and supports they identify as assisting their equity work.

Ontario’s Equity Context

The challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse population is not a new concept for Ontario educators. Ontario schools have had a diverse population and have dealt with issues of difference for many generations (Harper, 2007). Indeed, these challenges have been felt across North America as its population has grown and evolved. In the 1930’s, George Counts presented
controversial findings and recommendations that pointed to the growing wealth and power of the middle-class and the fact that schools tended to be dominated by elite controlled school boards who ensured that they reproduced the status quo (Lugg & Shoho, 2006; McClellan & Dominguez, 2006). McClellan and Dominguez suggest that educational policy makers can learn from Counts and must realize that “…to adopt the values and politics of only progressive or of any one political thought, and for that political agenda to be taught to students and then carried into society is manipulative and may, in time, reproduce hegemonic cultures.” (McClellan & Dominguez, p. 226).

Currently, educational changes in Canada are increasingly linked to global developments, and changes in Canada’s demographics, economics, social structure and technology have powerful implications for schools (Levin, 1998). Over the past 3 decades, several significant changes have taken shape. Canadian society now sees fewer people with school age children, changes in gender roles result in more women working outside the home and the structure of families has changed with an increase in single parent families. The ethnic composition of Canadian society has also become more diverse, with two thirds of new immigrants coming from Asia, Africa and South America rather than from Europe. In Ontario’s Greater Toronto Area, forty percent of citizens are people of colour and this number is expected to rise to fifty percent by 2017 (Joshee, 2008).

In the face of such dramatic changes, the task of educating students must also evolve in order to meet the needs of the diverse population. More students whose first language is not English are now enrolled in Ontario schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). The students’ cultures are quite different from the once dominant culture in Canada, and their values often differ from those espoused by schools. Young, Levin and Wallin (2008) point out that
despite such societal changes, the major elements of schools have hardly changed. Students continue to be organized by age and ability under the supervision of a teacher, and studies are based on a formal curriculum developed by the dominant group that is evaluated at the end of the year.

In reporting on the results of a national study focusing on students at-risk and the conditions that are often associated with educational failure, Portelli, Shields and Vibert (2007) note that “…the correlation between minority status (ethnicity and home language) and socio-economic disadvantage with identifications of risk is long-standing and well-established in the research literature” (p. 2). In introducing the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009), the Ontario Ministry of Education states, “Recent immigrants, children from low-income families, Aboriginal students, boys, and students with special education needs are just some of the groups that may be at risk of lower achievement” (p. 5). It notes that ongoing incidents of discrimination (e.g., homophobia, cyberbullying, racism, religious intolerance, gender-based violence) result in lower student achievement and higher dropout rates for these groups (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).

Many researchers (Portelli, Shields and Vibert, 2007; Ryan, 2006; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; McMahon & Zyngier, 2009) suggest that this discrepancy in educational success between the dominant group and marginalized groups is often explained by educators through a deficit discourse. Educational failure is blamed on individual and cultural shortcomings rather than on institutional or structural practices and power relations. Educators do not view themselves as part of the problem, and consequently display little willingness to look for solutions within the educational system itself. Garcia and Guerra (2004) suggest that “…teachers are well-intentioned and caring but are unaware of the deeper, hidden dimensions of culture which have a significant
influence on their own identity, educators’ role definitions and instructional practices” (Garcia and Guerra, p. 154). Ryan (2006) further explains the discrepancy by pointing out that marginalized students lacking cultural capital as a result of not being part of the dominant group are subtly excluded because they are unable to take advantage of the best learning opportunities. A power imbalance is highlighted by Henry and Tator (1994) when they suggest, “While lip service is paid to the need to ensure equality in a pluralistic society, in reality individuals, organizations and institutions are far more committed to the maintenance of the status quo in order to maintain or increase their power” (p. 2).

Over past decades, several policies have been implemented in Ontario to support equity. In 1993, the Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity policy introduced the use of strategies to create learning environments that respect the cultures of all students. It went beyond the broad focus of multicultural and race relations and focused on the identification and change of institutional policies and individual behaviour that may have a racist impact. As a result of the 1993 equity policy, only 43 of 72 Ontario Boards of Education established policies that addressed equity issues, and only 12 of these Boards addressed religious accommodations.

Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy is a policy document that was developed in response to revisions to Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, “Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity, July, 1993”. The scope of PPM 119 was broadened in response to evidence indicating some groups of students continue to encounter discriminatory barriers to learning. The revised PPM 119 takes into account a broad range of equity factors, as well as all of the prohibited grounds of discrimination under the Ontario Human Rights Code. The aim of the strategy is to promote a system-wide approach to embrace diversity, and to identify and remove discriminatory biases
and systemic barriers for enhanced equity in education. The Strategy outlines barriers of racism, religious intolerance, homophobia, and gender-based violence, and acknowledges that barriers are evident in society and schools. These barriers are recognized as leading to higher suicide rates and inequities in education. The strategy outlines three overall goals: shared and committed leadership; equity and inclusive education policy and practices for improved student engagement; and accountability and transparency through clear measure of success. The policy has infused a stipulation that equity be woven into all board and school improvement strategies. The rationale is that this will ensure that equity be embedded in all school improvement strategies and that equity be the lens for developing initiatives. While this makes sense in theory, there is no accountability structure in place that will monitor school plans in relation to overall board plans. The policy falls short in this aspect with the only mentioned measures being the results of EQAO assessments, provision of Board plans on websites, and articulation of strategies in each Board’s yearly Director’s Address.

**The Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The nature and purpose of the research undertaken for this thesis was to learn more about how principals understand equity, the obstacles they encounter in their equity work, strategies they employ to create conditions for equity in their schools, and supports they identify as assisting their equity work. The importance of the role of the principal in creating the conditions for equity in schools in Ontario is critical. The success of the Equity Strategy ties directly to the ability of school principals to create a shared sense of importance related to the issues of equity in their school communities, and their ability to collaboratively create and mobilize strategies for equity. Stevenson (2007) notes the importance of principals saying, “The school principal, with the authority and influence that their position confers, is clearly a pivotal individual in shaping
the organisational culture” (p. 774). An understanding of the perceptions of principals regarding equity will be beneficial in supporting schools in their equity work and in monitoring these efforts as the Equity Strategy moves beyond the four year implementation. It is important to note that the study is not intended to focus on the impact of the Equity Strategy on principals. Rather, the Equity Strategy is merely part of the context in which principals carry out their own equity work.

**The research question is:**

How do principals promote equity in their schools?

**Sub-questions include:**

- How do principals define and understand equity?
- What pressures/obstacles/barriers do principals identify as impeding their equity work?
- What strategies do principals employ to create conditions for equity in their schools?
- What supports do principals identify as assisting in their equity work?

**Conceptual Framework**

The Equity and Inclusivity Strategy requires that school districts and staff develop strategies that will provide students with an equitable education in which they may see themselves reflected in their learning, and realize their full potential, unobstructed by systemic barriers. The success of the strategy is reliant on the ability of school leaders to create a shared understanding of the issues of equity in their school communities, and their ability to collaboratively create and mobilize strategies for equity.
Throughout the course of my work as an elementary school principal and my involvement in our Board’s Equity Advisory committee, I have had the opportunity to network with leaders who hold equity as a priority in their work. In my own equity work, I have also come to feel that bureaucratic pressures (e.g., rigid curriculum, standardized testing, funding and hiring inequities) constrain equity efforts. Current education priorities (e.g., literacy, numeracy, best practices) are valued in our school system and school leaders are held accountable for them. My experience working in schools as a leader committed to promoting conditions for equity has often resulted in frustration. I perceive power imbalances and hierarchical structures that exist in education systems are factors that hinder equity leaders’ ability to implement conditions for equity. It takes strategic and dedicated leadership to find the spaces to get equity work done and develop an atmosphere of critical democracy in schools.

The current fiscal reality for the province of Ontario is one of considerable debt. As a response to the dire fiscal situation, Ontario’s Liberal government has enacted a number of budget cuts, many of which impact the education budget. As evidenced in the past, times of fiscal restraint can result in ideologies reverting to measures of tight accountability and strict standards for education (Bascia, 1996; Dei, 1999). The survival of the current equity policy may be in jeopardy of being cast aside. Pair this economic reality with the fact that Ontario’s Liberal party is facing backlash from the educational unions because of cuts to staff salaries and education spending, and problems for equity policy can be forecast. The strategic work of principals will be of critical importance in moving schools toward building more equitable climates for students.

The conceptual framework upon which this study is based is outlined in Figure 1. The framework consists of four key components for principals who are working toward creating
conditions of equity in their schools: principals understanding of equity and the skill set required in their important role as an equity leader; strategies principals employ to create conditions for equity in their schools; obstacles/pressures/barriers that exist in education systems that thwart principals’ efforts; and supports that principals identify as being critically important to their equity work.

*Figure 1*

As a basic overview, the principal’s understanding of equity issues lays the foundation for the work to be done in schools that are striving to create equitable conditions for all students.
and staff. Given the power afforded principals in schools, they are able to set direction and focus for school based initiatives and target professional learning to achieve desired results. In schools where principals have limited understanding of the wide scope and critical importance of equity work, implementation is in danger of being restricted to superficial strategies that fail to uncover existing inequities and marginalization, resulting in conditions that continue to support the privileged and maintain the status quo. Having a deep understanding of equity issues, however, is not sufficient in developing an equitable environment in schools. Principals require a skill set that helps them to plot direction and strategically navigate the direction of equity initiatives. Principals who carry out their well-intentioned work are met with barriers that impede their progress. Upon being confronted by barriers, principals can either revert to previous efforts and conditions or can work strategically to circumvent these barriers, drawing upon supports that accommodate their efforts.

**Outline of Thesis Chapters**

The chapters that follow include Chapter Two, which presents a review of existing literature for clarification of key definitions. The literature review is divided into subsections that include understanding leadership for equity, leadership strategies for equity, barriers faced by administrators and supports for equity work. Chapter Three explains the research design and methodology used in this study. This chapter includes an overview of the research design, sample selection, participants, school board terminology, instrument, procedure, data analysis, ethical considerations and limitations of the study. Chapter Four summarizes the study’s findings obtained from the semi-structured interviews. Salient topics are identified within each of the subquestions, and participant quotes are used to portray a picture of participant experience and thoughts around leading for equity. Chapter Five provides a discussion and analysis of the
emergent themes. The Conceptual Framework is revisited to reflect a shift in my understanding of learning for equity. Chapter Six provides a summary of the study. Suggestions for further research and implications for future practice are also presented in this chapter. References and Appendices complete the study.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

To build a deeper understanding of the conceptual framework, a review of existing literature will allow for a better understanding of the term equity, and clarification of key definitions in each of the four components:

- Understanding leadership for equity
- Barriers faced by administrators
- Leadership strategies for equity
- Supports for equity work

**Equity**

Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) defines equity as, “A condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences” (p. 4). Equity needs to be distinguished from equality because same treatment simply extends already existing inequities (Ryan, 2012). Jencks (1988) cautions about the use of an approach to education that advocates for equal opportunity. He describes five common ways of thinking about equal opportunity in education, each of which has a distinct view of whom we should treat equally and whom we should treat unequally.

1. Democratic equality: Every student is given equal time and attention, regardless of need.
2. Moralistic justice: Virtue is rewarded and vice is punished. This approach rewards students who make the most efforts to learn.
3. Weak humane justice: Students with disadvantaged home lives or pasts are compensated—but not students who have been shortchanged genetically.
4. Strong humane justice: Students who have been shortchanged in any way, including genetically, are compensated.

5. Utilitarianism: Education is viewed as a race that is open to all, run on a level field, and judged solely on the basis of performance.

(Jencks, 1988)

Each of these ways of thinking about equality benefits different groups while disadvantaging other groups. Stone (2012) speaks of this as a paradox in which equality often means inequality, and equal treatment often means unequal treatment (p. 41). She advocates for equity since it moves away from sameness and towards fairness and giving people what they need to succeed.

Equity is closely related to inclusion and social justice. Ryan (2012) defines inclusion in education as a process that targets exclusive systemic practices, emphasizes the importance of access, participation and achievement of all students, and advocates for the meaningful participation of all people in decision making of schools. He describes social justice as the rightness or justice of everyone being meaningfully included in social institutions and communities (p. 7). Leaders who advocate for equity, social justice or inclusion often encounter many of the same obstacles and adopt similar leadership strategies in moving forward their causes. For this reason, research on leadership strategies for equity, social justice and inclusion have been included in this literature review to provide a broader understanding of the dynamics at play in school leadership.
**Understanding Leadership for Equity**

Researchers (Apple, 2000; Counts; Dewey, 1916; Feinberg, 1993; Foster, 2002; Friere, 1994; Lugg & Shoho, 2006; McClellan & Dominguez, 2006; Portelli, Shields & Vibert, 2007; Ryan, 2006; Staratt, 2003) have long pointed to the inequitable nature of schools asserting that schools maintain societal status quo, advantage the dominant culture and perpetuate cultural divides. Hoff et al (2006) suggest that building a new social order is the essential work of public schools.

Working to create conditions of equity in schools requires leaders to go deeper than the mere creation and implementation of strategies. In recognizing the dynamics of power and marginalization in schools, Foster (2002) speaks to the moral responsibility of leaders in education to ask probing questions about who benefits from educational policies and practices and who loses out. Staratt (2003) furthers this discussion by pointing to the need for educational leaders to adopt a critical stance “…to uncover which group has the advantage over the others, how things got to be the way they are, and to expose how situations are structured and language used so as to maintain the legitimacy of social arrangements.” (p. 141). Theoharis (2007) suggests the need for a critical approach to leading for equity saying:

Leadership that is not focused on and successful at creating more just and equitable schools for marginalized students is indeed not good leadership. I caution us all to consider that decades of good leadership have created and sanctioned unjust and inequitable schools. The kind of leadership that needs to be defined and discussed as good leadership is the leadership the principals in this study have pioneered, leadership centered on enacting social justice, and leadership that creates equitable schools.  

(p. 253)

Recognizing the importance of adopting a critical stance in leading for equity, I propose the following definition of leading for equity for the purpose of this study:
Leaders for equity evaluate systemic inequities that result in marginalization of groups and make these issues central to their leadership, practice and school improvement efforts.

Critical Reflection, Praxis and Rational Discourse

Leading for equity requires educational leaders to possess skills and attitudes that allow them to uncover systemic inequities that result in the marginalization of groups. Many researchers (Brookfield, 1995; Brown, 2004; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Cranton, 1992; Dantley et al, 2008; Grogan, 2004; McMahon, 2007) suggest that leaders need to be self-reflective and able to challenge their own assumptions. Brown (2004) offers a definition of the term critical reflection as a combination of critical inquiry (the conscious consideration of the moral and ethical implications and consequences of schooling practices on students) and self-reflection (examination of personal assumptions, values and beliefs) (p. 89). Brookfield (1995) breaks critical reflection into three interrelated processes:

1. The process by which adults question and then replace or reframe an assumption that up to that point has been uncritically accepted as representing commonsense wisdom;

2. The process through which adults take alternative perspectives on previously taken for granted ideas, actions, forms of reasoning and ideologies; and

3. The process by which adults come to recognize the hegemonic aspects of dominant cultural values.

Dantley et al (2008) articulate the benefits of critical reflection by quoting Freire:

Questioning the tenets of our position and concomitantly interrogating the core of ourselves and others allows us to adopt the idea that “to learn is to construct, to reconstruct, to observe with a view to changing- none of which can be done without being open to risk, to the adventure of the spirit” (p. 67)

(p. 127)

Researchers (Foster, 1986; Freire, 1994) suggest that reflection alone is incapable of change and must be accompanied by action. Drawing on the Greek work praxis which means moving back and forth in a critical way between reflecting and acting on the world (Brown,
2004), Foster refers to the praxis of leadership as “action working with theory” (p. 189). Freire notes that policy praxis involves inductive and deductive reasoning and uses dialogue as a social process with the goal of “dismantling oppressive structures and mechanisms prevalent both in education and society” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 383). He suggests that the more critically aware leaders are, the more they are able to transform society (Brown, 2006). Furman outlines two levels of praxis, intrapersonal and extrapersonal, saying,

At the intrapersonal level, praxis involves self-knowledge, critical self-reflection, and acting to transform oneself as a leader for social justice. At the extrapersonal level, praxis involves knowing and understanding systemic social justice issues, reflecting on these issues, and taking action to address them.

(p. 203)

Dantley et al further articulate the inadequacy of reflection without action declaring, “The noble intentions of social justice are becoming more codified and solidified in the language and imaginations of many educators. However, these intentions are mired when these same individuals value social justice in terms of verbal articulation but not social action” (p. 124).

Another attribute identified as being of critical importance to equity leaders is the capacity for establishing a dialogic context and being willing and capable of engaging in rational discourse (Brown, 2004). Rational discourse involves “a commitment to extended and repeated conversations that evolve over time into a culture of careful listening and cautious openness to new perspectives, not shared understanding in the sense of consensus but rather deeper and richer understandings of our own biases as well as where our colleagues are coming from on particular issues and how each of us differently constructs those issues (Brown, 2004, p. 93). Lipman (1991) notes that this form of dialogue differs from regular cooperative conversation in its aim at disequilibrium through counter argument (p. 232). Grogan further speaks to the power of rational discourse through its ability to circulate and repress (p. 232).
Barriers Faced by Administrators

Researchers have identified a number of barriers often encountered by leaders who are seeking to lay the conditions for an equitable and inclusive environment for diverse groups of students. As outlined in the Conceptual Framework (Figure 1), it is important to understand the barriers that often exist for leaders for equity. Principals who lead for equity can be met with barriers that impede their progress. Upon being confronted by barriers, principals can either revert to previous efforts and conditions or can work strategically to circumvent these barriers.

Managerial Demands

The time required to complete the many managerial tasks of a school has been identified as a barrier to administrators who desire to implement conditions for equity in their schools (Furman, 2012; Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; Lugg & Shoho, 2006; MacBeath, 2007; Shields, 2004; Stevenson, 2007). With the myriad of tasks that need to be completed in a timely manner (e.g., dealing with student behaviour issues, meeting with parents, supervising teachers, managing paper flow, dealing with state regulations), administrators find themselves pressed for time. Cuban observes, “I argue that schools as they are presently organized press teachers, principals, and superintendents toward managing rather than leading, toward maintaining what is rather than moving to what can be.” (Cuban, 1988, p. xxi).

Lugg & Shoho (2006) suggest that school administrators who fail to attend to the management functions would not last long in their positions. However, school administrators who do not meet the leadership aspects of their jobs generally survive. This managerial imperative consequently supports the educational, political, economic, and social status quo (p. 197).
Neoliberal Pressures

Currently, a neoliberal context exists in education systems and constrains efforts for equity work (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Foster, 1986; Furman, 2012; Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009; Grogan, 2004; Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; Lugg & Shoho, 2006; MacBeath, 2007; Portelli, Shields & Vibert, 2007; Ryan, 2011). This market approach to education values prescribed curriculum, standardized testing and school choice, and maintains power differentials and marginalization of diverse groups. Gronn (2002) suggests that the act of creating standards “is an inherently biased process in which preference is given to a particular perspective and other points of view are silenced” (p. 206). Giroux (1992) warns of the potential for educators to be lulled by standardized curriculum saying, “If teachers are not alert and alive to the what and how of their practice, there is a danger that they come to be seen as simply the intervening medium through which knowledge is transmitted to students, “erasing themselves” in an uncritical reproduction of received wisdom” (p. 120).

Educational leaders also contend with the challenges that arise from standardized testing. Relying on standardized tests as a means to evaluate school performance can be dangerous. Portelli, Shields and Vibert (2007) point out that, “Research has repeatedly established the consequences of such assessment for disadvantaged schools; typically, they perform poorly, leading to further stigmatizing and marginalizing, more teacher blaming, more individualizing of problems that are fundamentally social, and often reductions in resources for such schools” (p. 41). Larson & Murtadha (2002) further suggest “The adoption of high stakes testing has silenced discussions of curriculum and closed school doors to their insights, concerns, and needs” (p. 146).
Preparing for these tests diverts attention away from the significant issues as teachers and students ‘prepare for the test’. Pedagogy that is more effective with marginalized students is abandoned and teaching attention is focused on mid-level achievers who are more likely to pass the test (Ryan, 2011). Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken (2009) add that this focus on testing and accountability results in educational leaders being challenged to attend to an education that fully serves a participatory democracy (p. 409). Shields (2006) suggests that the combination of standardized curriculum and testing “contradicts alternative instruction and assessments for students who are at risk of not learning, thus subverting “culturally relevant curriculum in socially just pedagogies” and challenging “socially just school leadership” (p. 2).

Constraints of System Statutes

A school principal’s work is guided by a host of policies and regulations, few of which focus on equity issues and many of which act as resistance to efforts to create conditions for equity (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; Marshall, 2004; Ryan, 2003; Theoharis, 2007). Dealing with legislation such as funding cuts for ELL learners, mandatory standardized testing, and constraints on programming, principals find themselves in the position of having to work with and against shifting and conflicting positions.

The very framework of education systems presents challenges to leaders engaged in equity work. Wright (2004) points out that for principals, “the system in which they have to operate stipulates the overall framework, values direction and often the detail of what they have to do” (p. 2). Ryan and Rottman (2009) further comment on this saying, “bureaucratic and market structures work hand in hand...to disrupt democratic efforts in schools” (p. 493). Friere & Macedo (1995) advocate for the need to “dismantle oppressive structures and mechanisms prevalent in education and society” (p. 383). MacBeath (2007) points out, “The more
hierarchical the structures of the schools, the more distribution seemed to rest on a downward flow, a trickling down which might not ever reach the lowest layers of the organization” (p. 258). Cuban (1988) suggests that the oppressive nature of systems is present in the structure of schools themselves. He notes, “The images, roles, and practices dominant in teaching, principaling, and superintending, shaped largely by the ways that public schools have been designed over the last century and a half, shrink the margin for the practice of leadership further” (p. xvi).

Lack of Internal Support

A lack of internal support serves as a barrier to the efforts of principals working toward implementing equitable conditions in their schools. Theoharis conducted a study to investigate the resistance faced by principals in their social justice work (Theoharis, 2007). During interviews, principals shared the opposition they often face from teachers, parents and central office administrators. Theoharis suggests that staff and parents who feel that their dominant position and way of life may be threatened can act against efforts to create more equitable conditions. In addition, he suggests that superintendents and senior administration put up barriers by their failure to provide adequate resources, and support for equity issues (240). Theoharis proposes that this lack of support negatively impacts on the ability of principals to lead for equity saying, “Meeting resistance from these sources left the principals feeling isolated, without models of how to do their social justice work, in a system not designed to support them, and working with and for people who did not share or value their social justice commitment” (p. 240).

Principals as Company People

Leading for equity requires people who question the status quo and fight to remove unjust practices. The nature of people who become principals, however, tends to be more complacent
and accepting of current conditions (Marshall, 2004; Ryan, 2003). Ryan points out that people selected for the administrative track typically demonstrate higher levels of allegiance to the system. As well, they have benefited and continue to benefit from the system, which makes them less likely to challenge and oppose its unjust practices.

This tendency toward complacency is maintained through the limited speech rights afforded principals (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006). Because they are not unionized or covered by tenure, principals face the possibility of reprimand or termination if they openly criticize board policy, even when advocating for the welfare of children. As well, curriculum and policy driven work is held in higher regard than equity work by senior administration that focus their attention on accountability and test results. Mullen et al (2008) nicely summarize this conflict for principals saying:

Leaders who mindlessly follow dictates and mandates enact a puppetry drama that can only hope to effect change where accountability principles are synthesized with democratic principles and daily actions. Similarly, leaders who focus exclusively on democratic agenda as though their actions exist in a vacuum apart from policy-driven accountability pressures...may “win the battle but lose the war,” so to speak. That is, they may exemplify democratic leadership only to be relieved of their leadership positions when the schools they lead do not achieve the requisites scores on various accountability measures.

(p. 240)

Limited Understanding of Principals

The ability for principals to detect and understand the existence of racism and inequitable practices in their schools lays the groundwork for equity leadership. Research has found, however, that many principals lack this critical knowledge (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; Ryan 2003; Shields, 2004). Shields (2004) believes that an educational framework for social justice must value, rather than ignore, diversity. She points out that many principals define themselves as being colour-blind. Through their belief that we are all members of the human race and are the
same, they are ignoring differences that may lead to deeper relationships and richer understanding of cultural differences. Similarly, Shields suggests that principals often remain silent about class differences. This serves to perpetuate the implicit knowledge that some lived experiences are more acceptable than others (Shields, 2004). These forms of ‘pathologizing silence’ prevent critical dialogue amongst school staff on issues of equity.

In a study that probed principals’ recognition of conditions of equity, Ryan found that many principals are reluctant to acknowledge the existence of racism in their schools (Ryan, 2003). Ryan speculates that this denial could be the result of a narrow view of racism that focuses on individual acts rather than systemic issues. He also suggests that principals may reject the notion that racism exists in their schools because of a concern that this would reflect badly on their leadership as a principal. Whatever the reason, this lack of recognition of racism has serious implications for the social justice work that must be done at a school level.

*Insufficient Educational Leadership Preparation*

Research suggests that educational leadership preparation programs fail to adequately address issues of equity (Brown, 2004; Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; Marshall, 2004; Theoharis, 2007). Given the changing demographics in our schools, one would expect these issues to receive serious attention and coverage in leadership training programs. Instead, many faculties touch only lightly on this subject and fail to employ a critical lens to unearth social inequities and the need for social justice approaches.

*Leadership Strategies for Equity*

discuss several different leadership dispositions and strategies: leaders’ skill set; the ability to work within educational structures; political acumen; and curricular inclusion. These skill sets allow principals to set direction and focus for school based initiatives and target professional learning to achieve desired results. Principals require the ability to plot direction and strategically navigate the direction of equity initiatives. These strategies enable principals in working strategically to circumvent barriers.

**Skill Set of Equity Leaders**

Bogotch (2002) suggests there are no fixed models for equity leadership. Instead, he advises that “all social justice/educational reform efforts must be deliberately and continuously reinvented and critiqued” (p. 154). To do this, leaders must develop a skill set that equips them for the work at hand. Describing this skill set has been a focus for a number of researchers.

In a national report sponsored by a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada grant, Portelli, Shields and Vibert (2007) examined a number of Canadian schools that were working to implement conditions for equity to develop an understanding of effective approaches and strategies with the objective of making recommendations to educators and policy-makers. Among their findings, the researchers provided an outline of school administrators who were effective equity leaders. These leaders were proactive, determined and persistent, flexible, worked hard at building connections with the community, rejected deficit thinking, and effectively built trust with the stakeholders in their schools (p. 34).

Furman (2012) makes use of a framework that describes five dimensions of equity leadership:

- **Personal:** Leaders engage in self-reflection and explore their own values, biases and assumptions.
- **Interpersonal:** Leaders build trusting relationships with all stakeholders.
Communal: Leaders develop an in-depth knowledge of the community and cultural groups and make use of inclusive democratic practices to build community across all cultural groups.

Systemic: Leaders assess, critique and work to transform the system at both the school and district levels. They critically examine existing structures, policies and practices for injustice and barriers to learning.

Ecological: Leaders act with the knowledge that school related issues of equity are situated within broader sociopolitical, economic and environmental contexts.

(pp. 206 – 211)

Each of these dimensions requires leaders to develop the capacities for reflection and action, and serve as a base skill set for the equity work to be done in schools.

Working within Educational Structures

Researchers (Brown, 2004; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Furman, 2012; Grogan, 2004; MacBeath, 2007; McClellan, 2006, McMahon, 2007, Stevenson, 2007) speak to the importance of principals working within existing educational structures. McClellan (2006) suggests that principals must learn “to work within traditional structures, initiate lucrative and legal strategies for institutions, maneuver within political arenas, and recognize what conventions will unlikely change” (p. 227). Grogan (2004) further suggests that existing policies can be used to serve equity work in schools saying, “Principals and superintendents can still find ways to incorporate policies and practices that serve more than the economic ends of the reforms. Superintendents and principals do have discretion, which can be exercised to further efforts at bringing greater equity and equality” (p. 230). Stevenson (2007) adds to this discussion noting that principals “were not passive implementers of policy from above, but were able to shape institutional policies in ways that reflected personal and institutional values” (p. 774).
**Principals’ Astute Political Action**

In order to negotiate the often conflicting demands of their jobs, state policies and social justice work, principals must become politically astute (Day et al, 2000; Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2009; Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; MacBeath, 2007; McLellan & Dominguez, 2006; May, 1994; Ryan, 2012). May (1994) suggests that principals must be aware of the institutional barriers they face and become familiar with current educational legislation so that they might use this knowledge in resistance efforts (p. 83). Reference is made to educational leader Jim Laughton who was able to lead the staff at Richmond Road School in New Zealand to transform the school in a manner that allowed it to become more equitable and inclusive for its diverse student population. Laughton ‘learnt what the rules were and played right up to the edge of the rules’ (p. 84). He made a point of knowing where the sources of power were so he could access resources for his students and became knowledgeable about policies so he could work to find spaces for his social justice work.

Day et al (2000) expand upon this by speaking about three types of leader response to ‘hostile policy contexts’: subcontractor (leader who uncritically implements policy), subversive (leader who challenges policy by undermining it), and values-driven (leader who mediates policy environment to align with personal vision). They advocate for the latter form of leadership explaining that these leaders find the space to stay true to their beliefs and convictions while also maintaining integrity. Karpinski and Lugg (2006) further suggest that equity leaders “should examine how to utilize accountability for their own purposes” (p. 287) and confront obstacles with a pragmatic approach. MacBeath (2007) states that “schools require a quality of leadership which is a constant irritant, not allowing a slide into intellectual complacency” (p. 247). This form of leadership requires commitment and energy and Rapp (2002) points out that these
leaders must be willing to “leave the comforts and confines of professional codes and state mandates for the riskier waters of higher moral callings” (p. 233).

Curricular Inclusion

While many school jurisdictions mandate that a standard curriculum be used for instruction and assessment purposes, there are ways that educators can create alignment with children’s lived experience and begin to educate students to become critical thinkers about equity issues. A useful resource can be found in Toward an equitable education: poverty, diversity and students at risk (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007). This report is based on the findings of a four year national study in Canada that provides an in-depth look at the notion of students at-risk and the conditions that contribute to educational failure. The report clearly outlines the barriers to equity and democracy and suggests steps that can help to level the playing field. A ‘Curriculum of Life’ is described that recognizes and accounts for social conditions in communities and schools. It describes programs that are framed within the context of a critical democratic practice that take into account issues of power, difference and marginality. Students and community are involved in the co-construction of knowledge and learn to critically interact with issues that impact upon their personal and social lives.

Supports for Equity Work

As principals go about the difficult task of implementing conditions for equity and circumventing barriers that arise, there are supports that can assist their efforts. Supports may take the form of concrete resources, professional learning opportunities or a sense of urgency for equity work created by jurisdictional equity policy.
Researchers (Brown, 2004; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Capper et al, 2006; Furman, 2012; McClellan & Dominguez, 2006; McMahon, 2007; Ryan, 2003; Theoharis, 2007) agree that one of the most basic but fundamental strategies for improved equity leadership is one which enhances the professional development that is offered to principals in educational leadership preparation programs and board in-services. Not only does there need to be a more proportionate representation in these professional development opportunities, but programs must also be developed in a way that will give administrators a deeper understanding of the issues that exist in schools. These programs should include approaches that challenge principals’ assumptions, clarify and strengthen their own values, and align their behaviours and practice with these attitudes and philosophies (Brown, 2004). Principals must also be provided with opportunities to learn about the nature and consequences of racism (Ryan, 2003).

Capper et al (2006) stress that professional development must involve more than equity content. Preparation programs typically focus on raising critical consciousness but don’t develop the actual skills leaders need to effect change in schools (p. 218). They suggest that leaders need to be taught social activism skills to rebel, resist and challenge. McClellan & Dominguez (2006) further articulate this saying that there is a need to instill in leaders “the complexities of working within while changing throughout” (p. 227).

Professional development should occur prior to principals assuming their roles in schools, but must also continue and be woven into the learning that takes place regarding other policies and mandates. Principals must begin to employ a social justice lens so that they can implement policies in a manner that will respect and validate different lived experiences. In turn, principals must ensure that they model and educate their staff on equity issues (Ryan, 2006).
Using the Context of Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy

Ontario’s current move toward implementing a more equitable school system is outlined in the Ministry’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. Principals who advocate for equity reforms would be encouraged by the promising opening message in the Strategy written by then-Minister of Education, Kathleen Wynne. In her forward, she speaks of the need to move from tolerance and acceptance to respect, the need to identify and remove barriers, and the importance of creating school climates where students feel respected and see themselves reflected in learning and the environment. Minister Wynne highlights the importance of inclusion by quoting George Dei (2006):

_Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone._

This opening message promises to lay the groundwork for a document that will seek to uncover hidden biases and provide the mandate and structure for equity in education.

Whether or not this equity document provides the insight, tools and resources necessary to help schools to sufficiently tackle the large issues of inequity that are inherent in Ontario’s education system is up for debate and worthy of study in and of itself. Where this policy can be of use is in affording weight and credence to the issues. Too often, educators feel overwhelmed by the many demands that are placed on them. Facing a multitude of mandated initiatives, schools often respond by prioritizing issues and focusing on topics that will demonstrate improvement. The mere fact that the Ontario Ministry of Education has mandated that strategies be included in all Board and School plans opens the door to principals who feel strongly about creating environments that are equitable and democratic.
Concluding Comments:

In conclusion, the literature review has focused on several key areas that shed light on leading for equity: understanding leadership for equity, barriers faced by administrators, leadership strategies for equity, and supports for equity work. The literature speaks to the need for principals to adopt a critical stance to uncover existing inequities and to move from self-reflection to action. It outlines a number of potential barriers that can serve to undermine the efforts of leaders for equity. Principals need to possess a skill set that will allow them to set direction and strategically navigate initiatives in a manner that circumvents barriers and draws upon existing supports. For the purpose of the current study, it will be interesting to ascertain whether the research on leading for equity aligns with the experiences and intentional strategies of principals in an Ontario school district.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research takes the form of a qualitative methodology in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with a group of twelve principals. The interviews gathered data to learn about participants’ experiences and their reflections in leading for equity.

Qualitative research lends itself well to the research question because the nature of the information to be elicited is descriptive of principals’ experiences, strategies for circumventing barriers, and implementing conditions for equity. Merriam (2009) notes that researchers who make use of qualitative research “...are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). She further quotes Patton when he speaks of the richness and depth of understanding that can be achieved through qualitative research. Patton asserts:

This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting- what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting...

(p. 14)

My intent in conducting this research was not to prove that barriers exist for principals who are working to implement conditions of equity or to ascertain the prevalence or frequency of strategies to overcome these barriers. Instead, I wished to unearth the understanding principals hold around the notion of equity, and to get into their heads to comprehend the obstacles they face in their work and their experiences in trying to overcome these barriers. Further to this, my research assumes a critical stance in that I wanted to go beyond interpreting these understandings. I strive to challenge and critique structures that exist and that hinder efforts of
equity, and I aim to empower the efforts of equity-minded principals. To do this, the rich data generated through qualitative research was necessary.

**Sample**

This study examines the insights and practices of principals leading for equity in a single school district in Ontario. This school district was selected based on accessibility to the researcher and the size of the district. The district selected is a large school board in Ontario and is comprised of a number of different municipalities. Together, these municipalities are comprised of a wide array of racial, cultural and ethnic groups, and include suburban, rural and small town communities. As well, the district has devoted its efforts in recent years to developing strategies and resources to fulfill the requirements of the Ministry’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. The district’s equity plan is a component of the Director’s Annual Plan.

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling. As explained by Patton (1990), purposeful sampling “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insights and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 62). The first three participants for this study were selected based on their involvement on the district’s regional equity committee. This committee was formed by the district’s Director of Education and is composed of educators who provide leadership and guidance to the school district planning processes pertaining to the implementation of equity and inclusivity. The committee is comprised of teachers, vice principals, principals, curriculum consultants, managers/supervisors, union representation (ETFO, OSSTF, CUPE), superintendents and senior administrators. Criteria for equity committee membership include:

- Strong skills, knowledge and background in equity and inclusive education;
• Demonstration of commitment to equity (through specific work in one’s workplace and/or community);

• Demonstration of expertise evidenced through ongoing professional practice;

• Support for participation from immediate supervisor.

Following the interviews with the initial three participants, a snowball technique was used to identify further participants. The snowball technique involved asking principals at the end of their interviews if they could provide names of other like-minded principals who lead for equity.

I sought to ensure that the participants had a wide range of educational experience, had served as principal/vice principal in more than one elementary or secondary school, and were representative of the different geographic regions of the district. This helped to make certain that their combined experiences had exposed them to school communities that include a large proportion of students having diverse racial, socio-economic, and intellectual abilities. It also helped to provide differing perspectives based on diverse school climates and contexts. Representation according to gender, race and ethnicity were taken into account.

Prior to participants being contacted by the researcher, the district’s External Research Committee sent an introductory email to participants granting approval for the research. The email stressed that participation was optional. This was followed up by an email invitation from me (Appendix C) that included the attachment of a Letter of Invitation/Informed Consent (Appendix B). The form included a brief explanation of the study, potential benefits and risks to participants, and an outline of the interview questions.
The Participants

Twelve principals in the school district participated in the study. All participants who responded with interest were included in the study. Table 1 introduces principal participants. Each principal is presented using a pseudonym for the purposes of anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality. These pseudonyms are used throughout this report. Information about the participants includes their approximate age and information about the schools in which they work. As well, each of the participants volunteered information about their own personal backgrounds that often included racial/cultural background and information about their upbringing. Only information provided by participants has been included in this chart; thus, the information may appear inconsistent across participants. For example, several participants self-identify as being Muslim or Jewish, but other participants do not identify their religious affiliations. From my perspective, it was important to honour the participants’ self-descriptions and not impose my own observations or labels. Participants also shared a basic description of their current school. This information has been included in Table 1 to add clarity to the backgrounds of participants.

Of the twelve participants, eight were female and four were male. This is closely reflective of the proportion of principals within the district. An intentional decision was made by the researcher to include principals from each of the different geographical regions of the district. It was hoped that this would help to capture some of the different interpretations and equity work being carried out in all areas of the school district. Of the twelve participants, five came from schools in the East, two from schools in the West, three from schools in the North, and two from schools in the Central area. Each of the participants confirmed that they had been an administrator for a minimum of three years and had worked in 2 or more of the geographical
areas of the district over their career as an administrator. Four of the participants were White. Eight of the participants were raised in families in which either they or their parents had immigrated to Canada. Two of the participants identified as homosexual. Ages of the participants ranged from middle thirties to early fifties. All of the participants worked in medium to large population schools. Student populations in the schools ranged from a minimum of 360 students to a maximum of 900 students. Eleven of the participants’ schools were racially diverse. In general, the socio-economic status ranged from low to upper-middle class within schools.

Table 1

Principal Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Personal Background</th>
<th>School Profile as described by participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Early 50’s</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>• 500 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• French immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Minimal racial diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amal</td>
<td>Early 40’s</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>• 520 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jinan</td>
<td>Early 40’s</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>• 680 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rory</td>
<td>Early 40’s</td>
<td>Mediterranean</td>
<td>• 360 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Late 40’s</td>
<td>Jewish Northern European</td>
<td>• 800 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Late 30’s</td>
<td>Northern European homosexual</td>
<td>• 500 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Gifted community classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Late 30’s</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>• 830 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>Early 40’s</td>
<td>Northern European Jewish</td>
<td>• 680 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakota</td>
<td>Late 40’s</td>
<td>Northern European Homosexual</td>
<td>• 640 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grew up in poverty</td>
<td>• French Immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>Mid 40’s</td>
<td>Northern European</td>
<td>• 900 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Autism community classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avery</td>
<td>Mid 40’s</td>
<td>African-Canadian</td>
<td>• 590 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>Early 50’s</td>
<td>Northern European</td>
<td>• 580 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Racially diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Autism community classes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School Board Terminology

The participants often used terminology that is unique to the school district. The terms used in the interview excerpts include structures and practices such as Learning Networks, Instructional Rounds and the Challenge of Practice, and Positive Spaces. These terms are defined to provide clarity for the reader.

**Learning Networks:**

All schools in the district belong to Learning Networks. Each learning network is composed of 5 – 6 schools that have a common learning focus. This focus is determined through the use of student achievement data. Network learning takes place on a monthly basis with school teams coming together to engage in a half day of professional learning targeting their area of focus. School teams are composed of principals, vice principals, literacy teachers and special education teachers. As well, the schools’ superintendent and a consultant attend meetings.

**Instructional Rounds and the Challenge of Practice:**

The district has partnered with Richard Elmore, Lee Teitel and Stephanie Reinhorn to introduce Instructional Rounds as a method initiating targeted school improvement strategies that focus on student and teacher learning needs. Each school makes use of a variety of data sets to identify student learning needs and where the school is ‘stuck’ in helping to reduce achievement gaps. Schools address these learning needs by developing a Challenge of Practice (CoP). The CoP is a statement that outlines the student learning needs, teacher learning needs, and specific focused response by the school staff. As schools implement strategies to address the CoP, the Board supports the learning by lending system staff for a Rounds visit. This visit involves an
overview of the school context, visits to classes by teams of system visitors and school staff, deconstruction of observations of the classroom visits, and recommendations for future work.

Positive Spaces:

The district’s equity committee has a subgroup called the Positive Spaces group. This subgroup works to develop strategies and initiatives to create a positive space for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer) people. Included in their mandate:

- To welcome, respect and advocate for LGBTQ people
- To challenge homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and heterosexism
- To reduce many of the risks that LGBTQ people can face such as invisibility, exclusion, disengagement from school or work, social-emotional challenges and poor academic achievement or work performance
- To make available resources that support LGBTQ people and educate others about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Instrument

The instrument used in the study was a semi-structured interview guide that made use of open-ended questions (Appendix A) and probes to elicit descriptive detail of the concepts outlined in the research questions for this study. The interview guide (Appendix A) consisted of twelve questions that supported and aligned with the primary research question and the sub-questions described in Chapter One. The relationship between the research questions and the interview questions may be viewed as providing content validity as the questions related directly to all of the possible responses to the research questions. Table Two, titled The Relationship between the Research Questions and the Interview Guide Questions, illustrates these relationships.
Table 2

Relationship between Research Questions and the Interview Guide Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Interview Guide Questions (Appendix A)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Question:</strong> How do principals promote equity in their schools?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Subquestion 1:** How do principals define and understand equity? | • Definition of equity  
• Interest in equity  
• Perception of current conditions | Interview Guide Questions: 1, 2, 3 |
| **Subquestion 2:** What strategies do principals employ to create conditions for equity in their schools? | • Strategies for equity  
• School Improvement Planning  
• Moving from knowledge to action  
• Relationship building  
• Leadership style | Interview Guide Questions: 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 |
| **Subquestion 3:** What pressures/obstacles/resistance do principals identify as impeding their equity work? | • Barriers encountered | Interview Guide Questions: 9 |
| **Subquestion 4:** What supports do principals identify as assisting in their equity work? | • Current resources  
• Desired resources | Interview Guide Questions: 11, 12 |
Procedure

Interview participants were given their choice of engaging in a telephone interview or a face-to-face interview. All participants requested a face-to-face interview. Participants were offered their choice of location and each of them requested that the interview take place in their school office. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were digitally recorded with participant permission and notes were taken by the researcher.

Prior to commencing the interview, an overview of the research was provided and participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study. The informed consent was reviewed and participants were reminded of confidentiality agreements and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Time was taken to engage with the participant to develop a positive rapport that would help to maintain a comfortable interview experience. Throughout the interview, the Interview Guide (Appendix A) was used to guide the discussion and prompts were used to clarify comments of the participants. All participants presented as eager and interested in the interview process and each spoke willingly, with ease, and at length about their experiences. On several occasions, the audio-recording was stopped so that the participant could deal with interruptions. Upon their return, a review was offered of where the conversation had left off and the last question was restated. On one occasion, a participant requested that the audio-recording be paused because the nature of a particular comment was very personal and the participant expressed concern that it could be used to identify them. The recording was paused until the participant had privately shared the information and indicated comfort and readiness to proceed with the remainder of the interview. This private information was not included in the transcript.
Data Analysis

Upon completion of each interview, I transcribed the audio-recordings to better develop familiarity with the text and emerging patterns in the data. No computer software was used in the transcription. Participants were provided with a copy of the transcription of their interview and were invited to add, delete or provide clarification where needed. No revisions were requested by interview participants.

A constant comparative method of data analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2009) was used to code the transcriptions for emerging themes. The themes were based upon, but not limited to, the conceptual framework and research questions. New themes and patterns were sought by reviewing the transcriptions on numerous occasions. Emerging concepts were captured through colour coding of the data and clustering of the data into categories.

While a thematic text analysis guided the initial portion of the data analysis, a grounded theory approach was also utilized. Denzin and Lincoln describe grounded theory as “an iterative process by which the analysis becomes more and more grounded in the data and develops increasingly richer concepts and models of how the phenomenon being studied really work” (2000, p. 783). The text was analyzed against the categories of the conceptual framework for key emerging phrases, and themes were identified by pulling concrete examples from the text. Once these themes were identified, quotes were selected that helped to provide clarity of participant thinking and understanding. Where there was convergence in participant thinking, quotes that best represented and illuminated the theme were selected. It is important to note that participants did not always express the same opinion. Where participants differed in opinion, quotes were
selected to reflect each side of the topic so that the discrepancy in perspectives and thinking were heard.

**Ethical Considerations**

The ethics process required by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and the school board were followed with diligence.

Potential benefits derived from participating included participants being afforded an opportunity to reflect on their own views and practices. As well, they had the chance to understand more about how other principals implement conditions for equity in their schools. Potential limitations lay in the researcher’s ability to guarantee anonymity as participants may know some of the other participants in the study. To guard against this, participant names were removed as were any identifying information that could mitigate the chances of participants being recognized by others.

Once the audio-recordings of the interviews had been transcribed, the original or raw data was stored under lock and key in my home office and the recordings were erased. All information stored electronically was kept on a password protected computer belonging to me. I am the only person to have ever had access to this raw data. The timing for the destruction of the raw data is one year after completion and defense of the thesis.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the data gathered for this study. The chapter includes a thorough description of the findings that emerged from the interviews and supportive quotes from participants. Gender-neutral pseudonym names are used for the participants to protect their identity and also to provide the reader with an understanding of whose voice is being heard. Information that might result in participant identity has been removed. The results are organized in accordance with the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Two. Findings are presented in four main categories:

- Principals’ understanding of equity and their role as a leader for equity;
- Obstacles/pressures/barriers encountered;
- Strategies for creating conditions for equity; and
- Supports to principals’ equity leadership.

Each of these broad categories of findings has a number of sub-categories of findings.

Principals’ Understanding of Equity and their Role as a Leader for Equity

The Conceptual Framework (Figure 1) identifies the principal’s understanding of equity and their role as an equity leader as being the foundation upon which conditions for equity can be built. The opening segment of each interview gave principals an opportunity to share their definition of equity, the origins of their interest in leading for equity, their perception of Ontario’s current equity climate, and the skill set they bring to their role as a leader for equity.
Definition of Equity

To commence each interview, participants were asked to state their informal definition of equity. All of the participants define equity as ensuring access of opportunity for all. Dakota states:

If each student can get what each student needs in order to be successful- academically, socially and emotionally- then that is my informal definition of equity.

A similar sense of the importance of equity going beyond academic success is expressed by Rory.

I would define equity as the overarching understanding and belief that each student has a right to be included, feel a sense of belonging, feel a sense of connection, feel that they get exactly what they need in their school to help them achieve not only academically in terms of their school subjects and learning but also in terms of their personal well-being and personal growth.

These participants express a belief that student success is greater than mere academic achievement. They articulate the importance of students feeling engaged and connected to the school. In their opinion, equity entails the provision of the conditions that will allow students to thrive academically, socially and emotionally.

Jesse articulates the difference between equity and equality:

Equity is about access of opportunity for everyone to achieve their true potential. So it’s that whole notion of fairness is not sameness. But we have to be able to give people what they need to be able to show their true potential.
This participant recognizes that not every student requires the same conditions in order to be successful. Equity means recognizing the uniqueness of each situation and providing the supports that will allow students to be successful. Ryan (2012) speaks to the importance of distinguishing between equity and equality. He points to the danger of equal treatment extending already existing inequities and suggests that individuals should be treated according to need (p. 9).

Each of the participants speaks about conditions for equity not being limited to interactions with students but also extending to staff and families. Alex comments:

*Obviously, there’s the bigger picture in the way we look at equity in the way we treat and relate to staff members as well as parents. But I would say the definition is that everyone gets what they need based on where they are on their continuum of professional growth or learning or needs.*

For these participants, equity in a school system is broader than merely including students. For true equity to exist, conditions need to be in place to ensure the needs of students, staff and parents are met.

Each participant acknowledges that there are barriers to the success of some people over others in the educational system. Amal points to the challenges faced by people when multiple barriers intersect:

*So if you talk about the barriers as a parent with a child with special needs and then when you intersect that with issues around language, around being a new Canadian, around socio-economic status- whatever layers you’re going to put on, there are more and more barriers.*
The Ministry document, *Realizing the Promise of Diversity* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009), speaks about systemic barriers that impede student success. These barriers are identified as being related to a variety of dimensions of diversity (e.g., ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical ability, intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, socio-economic status). The Ministry speaks about the intersection of these dimensions when individuals fall under more than one category of more than one minoritized group (p. 11). This participant articulates the view that the intersection of several dimensions of minoritized status can result in the individual being confronted with more barriers.

In looking at the barriers that exist for some groups, several participants articulate a sense that barriers are often exacerbated by the power differential between different groups. In speaking about families new to the country, Rory states:

*Sometimes there are barriers that you do come across. That maybe the host society or the host people are not aware of. The things they are saying or doing that may make the immigrant people feel excluded.*

Sam expresses a similar notion saying:

*It’s about not having what you consider to be the correct lens or the upper lens. You know, the upper lens because I’m part of the system. It’s important to see their lens as being equal to mine.*

Both of these participants express the belief that members of the dominant culture often consider their viewpoint the correct one and this can result in the exclusion of differing perspectives.

An understanding of equity entails the ability to perceive exclusionary words and actions, and the willingness to acknowledge that there are multiples lenses through which to view things.
No one person’s lens is absolutely correct. Garcia and Guerra (2004) suggest that “…teachers are well-intentioned and caring but are unaware of the deeper, hidden dimensions of culture which have a significant influence on their own identity, educators’ role definitions and instructional practices” (Garcia and Guerra, p. 154). Ryan (2006) further explains the discrepancy by pointing out that marginalized students lacking cultural capital as a result of not being part of the dominant group are subtly excluded because they are unable to take advantage of the best learning opportunities. A power imbalance is highlighted by Henry and Tator (1994) when they suggest, “While lip service is paid to the need to ensure equality in a pluralistic society, in reality individuals, organizations and institutions are far more committed to the maintenance of the status quo in order to maintain or increase their power” (Henry & Tator, p. 2).

All of the participants speak to their belief in the importance of creating conditions for equity in schools and education systems. Jordan notes:

I always think it goes back to student safety, student well-being, inclusion, student achievement. That’s what we’re about in public education. Making sure that everybody has equitable opportunities and is received in an equitable environment. And when you focus on student achievement and student safety, you can’t really argue that there’s any population that doesn’t deserve that.

This participant voices the belief that each person in a school climate deserves the opportunity to engage and connect within the environment. Working to create conditions for equity levels the playing field for all people and ensures a climate exists in which people can flourish and grow. In summary, the participants articulate a breadth of understanding of equity that is differentiated
from equality, and speak to notions of power differentials and the intersectionality of dimensions of diversity.

**Personal Passion for Equity Work**

A question was included in the interview guide to help gain an understanding of the motivation behind each of the participant’s work in leading for equity. Participants unanimously point to their own backgrounds as a contributing factor to their passion for equity issues. Each participant vividly describes experiences in their formative years that deeply impacted them and shaped their understanding of equity issues. Amal sums it up saying:

*In so many ways, I think we get involved in the work because we carry personal stories that affect how we have known and come to the role... I was exposed to all kinds of things.*

Alex speaks about the feelings of being ostracized at school.

*I came to realize in high school and beyond that I was growing up as a gay person and realized that I wasn’t represented or I didn’t see that. So that was a significant barrier for my inclusion. I always felt like I was on the outside looking in. I was the target of bullying and harassment in later elementary school and in high school. But I root it back to my own experiences in school.*

These participants indicate that they had experienced some form of exclusion in their past that had shaped their views on the importance of equity in schools and inspired them to move into the role of a leader for equity.
Several of the participants speak about the deep imprint their early experiences had left on them and how they had been shaped by events of the past. Jesse speaks of the strength of character that developed through growing up in a marginalized identity:

*The strength that I’ve gained from that experience has helped me when I’ve had to face anti-Semitism - which I have a number of times. But it’s the sensitivity toward other people, feeling shame in who you are, having other people judge you based on your appearance and make assumptions. I’ve lived my whole life that way. That’s what brought me to it I would say.*

This participant speaks about the positive effects that developed as a result of living through intolerance and racism. The participant expresses the belief that the consequence of this experience has been a heightened sense of empathy for the situations of others and a resulting drive for the role of leader for equity.

Conversely, Dakota spoke to the debilitating effects from past experiences:

*When you struggle in school - that also can be a barrier to success and to your own self-concept, self-esteem and self-awareness. Those are aspects of my experience that I’ve had to work with and continue to have to work with now. I still struggle and do that personal work.*

This participant talks about the long lasting effects that can result from exclusion from school. For this participant, the effects are not confined to the past but continue to impact on his personal well-being.
Whatever their personal stories, each participant articulates a belief that their lived experiences contribute to an intimate understanding of equity issues and a deepened sense of empathy for others. Alex shares:

I have a window into that from my upbringing... and that learning has made me compassionate and has given me insight into how I treat people... How I care for them and talk with them. That’s made it richer. I didn’t come from a space of privilege. I’m a white male- to most people that looks very successful. But my invisible makeup has taught me much more.

This participant speaks to how personal past experience has shaped his understanding and actions when dealing with others. He recognizes the privilege that being male and white typically confers, but suggests that underlying invisible diversity resulted in a feeling of marginalization growing up. The participant reports that this past has afforded him with insight and a sense of compassion that assists when interacting with and supporting others in his school.

Each of the participants speaks about how their richly developed passion for equity drives their actions. Taylor is able to pinpoint a critical moment that served as a turning point.

There was one day that was a huge turning point for me. I decided that school was not right for me so I left. I went home and my parents were called. I went back to school and had a meeting with the principal and my parents... I explained that the only way I would go back to school is if I could be in the regular classroom and not be ostracized or sent to the ESL room. So that was the turning point where I became engaged with equity work. I explained to the principal that it wasn’t right that the students needed to sit outside in the hallway and that the ESL program was not working for everyone.
For this participant, her role as equity leader emerged as a result of the segregating practice of withdrawing students who need support as students of a second language. Her sense of frustration and exclusion grew to a point where the participant walked away from the school and made a formal statement about her feelings to the principal and her parents. Not only did she speak up for herself, but she also advocated for other students that were experiencing a similar situation. The participant identifies this as a critical moment in her role as equity leader.

For Rory, the call to action was rooted in the effects of ongoing oppression growing up.

*I was bullied as a child. I was always smaller, darker, had an accent and I was very much teased. I remember saying, “I will not allow any child to experience this. So what am I going to do to make a difference?”*

Avery shares a comment that summarizes the sentiments shared by each of the participants:

*I really felt a bias against me for that. Because I wasn’t of a certain thing... I think that informs where I go... I think it informs how I deal with people and how I look at supporting kids.***

Having experienced some form of marginalization in their past had a deep and lasting impact on each participant. For some, these experiences instilled in them empathy and deep understanding of the impact inequities can have on people. They report that they became stronger as a result. Others describe the detrimental impact of these experiences and share that they continue to battle with the lasting effects to their well-being. Whatever the impact, all of the participants express the belief that their passion is a result of their past experiences and serve to drive their efforts for equity in their schools.
Perception of Ontario’s Equity Climate

In being asked to consider Ontario’s current equity context, participants generally express the belief that, while advancements have been made in recent decades, work still needs to be done in setting conditions for equity in schools. Sam suggests that many of the equity initiatives in schools are of a superficial nature.

In schools- what have we set up? We’ve set up prayer rooms for children to pray. So we’ve done that. Oh- and we’ve created assemblies to display our national costumes and so forth. We’ve also created food tasting festivals for a whole day where all these different cultures bring in their different foods. So- we call these cosmetic movements creating the conditions for equity. For ‘these’ people. Is that so? What’s that telling us? Tolerate, accept? What are we doing with these kinds of conditions that we set?

From the perspective of this participant, many schools have established cosmetic initiatives in the name of creating conditions for equity. Sam points out that the commemoration of food and dress and religious celebrations are merely surface level and can further contribute to marginalization of groups.

Casey speaks to the need for equity work to go beyond superficial strategies and begin to shift the mindsets of educators.

Educators are still in a fixed mindset. They’re very good at saying, “Yes. Equity. We do this, we do that”. We’re very good at rhetoric. But when it comes to the actual belief and genuine commitment to the concept of equity, I think we still have a long way to go.

These participants communicate that strategies for equity need to go beyond the more surface level visual actions that have become more common-place in schools. Establishing an
environment that is visually reflective of a variety of cultures through resources and celebrations is important but is only the beginning of equity work. True equity work needs to include an understanding and belief in the importance of creating an environment that values the lived experience of all and offers equity of opportunity. Portelli, Shields, & Vibert (2007) suggest that schools must develop programs that are framed within the context of a critical democratic practice that take into account issues of power, difference and marginality. Students and community should be involved in the co-construction of knowledge and learn to critically interact with issues that impact upon their personal and social lives.

Kennedy suggests that while there is much work still to do in the area of equity, some promising work is currently being done in pockets throughout the educational system.

_We’ve scratched the surface. We have a long way to go. I think there are a lot of people who are doing amazing work and research in equity, and a lot is being done in individual Boards or individual schools or organizations. In terms of really embedding the equity lens into curriculum or teacher training, I think there’s a lot more work that needs to be done._

This viewpoint is echoed by Amal who remarks on the growth that has been taking place in Ontario over the past couple of decades.

_We’re not there yet, but we’re at a point where we do recognize the idea that we need to reflect a little bit on where we are with equity. When I think about some of the work that’s been happening in education in the 90’s and up to this point, there was the whole idea of anti-racism moving into equity. And that whole piece that influenced educational thinking_
at the time. And I think that’s part of the growth. We may not have been ready in the 90’s to think about equity in the broader sense, so we focused on the visible pieces.

This participant suggests a narrower view of equity existed in the 1990’s. The focus of the PPM 119 in 1993 was on removing systemic conditions of racism and creating more equitable environments for ethnic and racial minorities (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1993). Ontario’s current Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (revised PPM 119) offers a scope that was broadened in response to evidence indicating some groups of students continue to encounter discriminatory barriers to learning. The revised PPM 119 takes into account a broad range of equity factors, as well as all of the prohibited grounds of discrimination under the Ontario Human Rights Code. Its definition of diversity extends beyond race and includes ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Amal proposes that educators’ understanding and views on equity have grown since the 90’s and that they are now in a better position to accept difference and begin to set the stage for more equitable conditions.

In reflecting on the equity journey in Ontario, Jesse questions the concept of an educational system that is truly equitable.

I don’t know if we’ll ever be there. I don’t know where ‘there’ is. I think it will be something that we always need to, as a system and as public education, continue to fight and struggle.

These participants express the belief that progress is steadily being made to equity understanding and efforts in Ontario but that considerable work still needs to take place. They articulate a belief that no system can ever be truly equitable and that leaders will always need to be vigilant in applying an equity lens to school improvement efforts.
Skill Set of Leaders for Equity

The Conceptual Framework (Figure 1) suggests that the foundation to creating conditions for equity entails not only a solid understanding of equity, but is also dependent on having a principal who is willing to assume a leadership role in this area. During the initial segment of the interview, participants were asked to define the leadership style that supports their equity work.

The participants identify a number of skills that they feel serves their role as a leader for equity. Each of the participants speaks in some way of the importance of sharing decision making with others and being open to divergent ideas. Rory states:

My leadership style- I’m very open. I’m not a micro-manager. I put my cards on the table.

This participant articulates a style of leadership that is forth-right. In speaking of being open and putting cards on the table, Rory describes a leadership style in which issues and topics are discussed honestly. In commenting about not micro-managing, Rory is speaking to a leadership style that does not hold tightly to control and affords autonomy to others in dealing with issues.

Jesse articulates a similar attribute saying:

Being a leader doesn’t mean that you do all the talking. You need to be able to listen and give people the opportunity to come to the realization themselves. It’s planting the seeds and having side conversations.

This participant recognizes the value that can be gained from stepping back and giving others the opportunity to develop their own opinions. Jesse speaks to the power of listening, scaffolding
ideas and nurturing emerging thoughts through conversation. Ryan (2012) talks about this being a strategy amongst administrators working in their schools for equity saying, “Most preferred to let others reach their own conclusion about the issues…The least desired means of conveying the messages that promote equity is by preaching” (p. 126). By this, Ryan suggests that more powerful and authentic beliefs are established by giving people the opportunity to form their own opinions rather than having someone tell them how they should be thinking.

Participants suggest that adopting an open stance includes receiving divergent ideas and opinions. Amal comments:

>You need to reflect, dialogue with people, and broaden your perspectives through intentional conversations with folks who will push your thinking.

This participant recognizes the importance of being a reflective practitioner and values the growth to thinking that results from accepting divergent opinions. Several participants take this a step further saying that they go out of their way to welcome conflicting thoughts. In the words of Avery: “I think as administrators we need to be in a zone of discomfort.” Jinan states a similar belief saying: “My belief is that, as a principal, it’s my job to make my life harder. Not easier.” Both of these participants express a sentiment that equity work requires a disposition that is willing to confront uncomfortable issues rather than being complacent and at ease with the status quo. These participants describe a form of leadership that is open, honest and benefits from the acceptance of differing thoughts and perspectives.

Jesse describes the process taken to ensure multiple viewpoints exist and are heard in the school.
I hire people who will challenge me. And who will say, “You’re not thinking about that the right way”. As long as they know it has to be constructive and respectful, just like I will challenge them back. That is to me the most helpful thing you could have.

It can be commonplace and easy for principals to hire staff that think in the same way that they do as this helps to validate their own thoughts and actions and prevent resistance from staff. These participants understand the leverage that differing perspectives can have in unearthing existing inequities and providing insight into different ways of acting.

Each participant speaks to the importance of being a learner and using new knowledge to drive action in the school. Dakota explains:

I think also having that mindset as an administrator that I’m a learner. I don’t house all of the expertise and I’m not the expert to show everybody what the right thing is and what the wrong thing is. I’m just trying to be able to help. Even seeing myself that way I think is a critical piece as I move forward. I don’t know everything. I make mistakes and I need to keep learning.

This participant speaks about continuous learning and professes that she is not an expert. A leader does not need to be an expert on all topics, but needs to be a reflective learner. This stance opens the door for shared learning on staff and allows the leader’s thoughts to continue to evolve and grow.

A dimension of leadership that several participants speak to is the practice of being approachable, visible, and available to serve others. Taylor comments:
I believe a school leader is a service provider. I believe we’re in the business of serving children, families, youth, and communities. So my leadership style is very much around relationships.

Rory states:

“Servant Leader”. I’m about recognizing the needs, being transparent and seeing what I can do to provide... I find that I am resourceful and try and figure out what the pulse is and bring it to the school by reaching out to different people.

These participants describe a form of leadership that is removed from traditional hierarchy. Rather than looking down and steering the efforts of others, they are immersed in the work and see their role as finding and providing the resources needed by others in their equity efforts.

Alex expresses that, while a shared form of leadership is his overall style, he feels that leaders need to be flexible depending on the situation at hand.

I can’t define my leadership style as static- because I would be lying to you. It all depends on the situation you find yourself in. And each situation might dictate a different leadership style. But the overall leadership style I have is the distributive one or the shared one.

This participant recognizes the need for flexibility in leadership style to adapt to the specific context. He indicates that his general leadership style tends not to be autocratic but is a style that gives leadership to others.

As a group, the participants articulate a belief in the importance of a leadership style that is open to divergent opinions, reflective and receptive of new learning. It is this type of leadership that they believe is important to moving forward equity work in schools.
Obstacles/Pressures/Barriers Encountered

The Conceptual Framework (Figure 1) indicates that as leaders for equity carry out their well-intentioned work, they are often met with barriers that impede their progress. Ball (1987) refers to schools as “arenas of struggle”. As participants in this study speak of the work they do in leading for equity in their schools, they are quick to identify a number of barriers that hinder their efforts. The barriers mentioned include system constraints that result from workload issues, standardized testing, funding policies, and frequent transfers of principals. Other barriers identified by participants are the perceived lack of value placed on equity work, resistance encountered from staff, parents and senior administration, ignorance of equity issues, the preponderance of a deficit mindset amongst educators, inequitable hiring practices, collective agreement constraints, the political context surrounding administrators, and the personal toll equity efforts often takes on principals. Left unchecked, these barriers can undermine principals’ efforts toward implementing conditions for equity and can result in principals stepping back from their efforts and allowing conditions to be maintained by the status quo.

System Constraints

Each of the participants speaks in some way about system constraints impeding their equity endeavors at the school level. For ten of the participants, principal workload is referred to as taking up their time. Casey states:

*The workload as an administrator is really heavy. We’ve got so many initiatives and you have to prioritize... When my VP and I sit down to talk, it’s usually at night or long after the day is done or on email. It’s really not as part of the day. Because you’re too busy and interrupted.*
Kennedy touches upon the lack of time for equity work and how it often takes a backseat to operational issues and other curriculum initiatives.

*I would say time can be a barrier. As well, competing initiatives, demands, policies that focus on student achievement, literacy, numeracy, etc. We need to see the initiatives as inter-connected, but I think that some people tend to see them as silos.*

This notion of dissociated initiatives came up several times as an obstacle to equity work. Seven participants note that equity work is often perceived as being an add-on. Jordan states:

*The increasing demands on principals and teachers are a problem. This has become another add on.*

These participants recognize the heavy work toll of principals and raise a concern that this can result in equity initiatives taking a backseat to operational issues and competing initiatives. Principals are seen as having to prioritize their work such that equity work becomes an add-on. Recent research (e.g., Dewa et al, 2009; Ontario Principals’ Council, 2001; Pollock et al, 2014; The Alberta Teachers Association, 2014; The Institute for Educational Leadership, 2008) indicates that principals work long hours, experience significant levels of stress and associated mental health issues, and struggle to maintain healthy work-life balance. In a study focusing on the changing nature of Ontario principals’ work, Pollock et al (2014) found that, on average, principals spend approximately 59 hours per week on their work (p. 14). The study sheds insight on the tasks and activities of principals and highlights the tension faced by principals when trying to balance instructional leadership with management responsibilities (p. 15).

Along the same vein, Avery warns about equity work being seen as something separate to the work being done in schools.
If we’re embracing that as a structure and we don’t weave things together, things will remain very separate. And equity work will look as being separate. But it should be part of what we’re doing.

This participant emphasizes that equity must not be seen as an add-on or something separate if it is to take root in school climates. With the many operational demands that take up the time of principals and their staff, overload can result in the dropping of initiatives. The participant suggests that principals need to embed equity work into everything they do.

Four of the participants speak to the province’s standardized testing (EQAO) as being a systemic pressure to equity work. In Ontario, all students in grades three, six and nine in publically funded schools complete EQAO assessments that measure achievement in reading, writing and mathematics. Results of EQAO assessments are made available to the public and school districts use the data to monitor the impact of instructional strategies across their schools. Sam speaks specifically to the time afforded EQAO preparation as taking up instructional time.

EQAO is coming and I’ve heard already from some teachers: “Don’t take me out of the class for PD. I’ve got EQAO coming and I have to prepare the students.” So, EQAO itself is a barrier. Especially at this time of the year. It’s been a barrier already for 2 months. 2 months in preparation for the EQAO.

This participant expresses frustration that school-based teacher professional learning is deemed by her teachers as being less important than preparing students for the province’s standardized testing of Grade three and six students (EQAO). In many schools, previous years EQAO test booklets are ordered and teachers help students to gain familiarity with the structure of the test in hopes that this will help to raise the scores of students. Teachers coach students on how to read
and answer multiple-choice questions, and provide instruction on how students can articulate thinking in answers so that they can achieve a higher grading in the assessment. Ryan (2012) speaks about this practice often occurring in schools saying, “The pressure to raise scores compels teachers to teach knowledge and skills that will be tested, ignoring more complex aspects of subjects and some subjects altogether” (p. 32). Sam laments the amount of time that is lost to this preparation for the EQAO assessment. The teachers in her school express to her that their time is better spent on this type of preparation than it is on teacher professional learning.

Kennedy articulates that the form of instruction required to prepare students to write the EQAO test departs from more culturally responsive pedagogy.

*Our teachers are spending precious classroom time teaching students how to answer multiple-choice questions and 'show their thinking' so that they can score well on the EQAO test. They're using booklets from previous years as the basis of their instruction. And have you seen some of the EQAO questions? Somehow the Ministry has forgotten that our students come with different lived experiences which don’t always align perfectly with the more traditional Canadian experience. I mean... ‘Write a short piece advertising tourism in Ontario’. I’m a student new to the country...How do I even begin to write this response?*

Preparing for the EQAO assessment takes time and pulls teachers and students away from more valuable learning experiences that can take the form of culturally responsive pedagogy. As well, when students have a different lived experience than that reflected in the test, an achievement gap can be the result. Ryan (2012) suggests that standardized tests are often designed from a
Eurocentric perspective that can be difficult for students who have a different background to understand. He offers the following example:

_On one occasion, a friend told me about the difficulty that his daughter experienced with a particular test question. The test item included a reference to the scouting tradition. To answer the questions, test-takers needed to understand this tradition. Unfortunately, my friend’s daughter, who emigrated from a non-Anglo country some years before, did not know what a boy scout was and was frustrated because she could not answer the questions associated with the passage. But of course, examiners would not take this into account and would have penalized her for not answering the questions that were based on the scouting tradition._ (p. 32)

Two of the participants work in French Immersion (FI) schools. FI schools in this region start in Grade one and students are immersed in French instruction from the start of the school year. English instruction is not introduced until Grade four. Both of these participants express concern that the system set up for these schools is exclusionary. Sam shares:

_I work within a very elitist structure. This is a French immersion school. French immersion is typically elitist. It excludes kids. It excludes boys. It excludes anyone that’s not an A or B student. And so we’re really trying to change that ethos._

This participant is speaking to criticism that is often raised regarding the system involving FI in the district. FI is deemed a special form of education and is entitled to only limited special education support. Within the district, special education resource teachers are available to identify potential learning needs, but there is no allocation of staffing to provide resource support for students with identified learning needs. Additionally, funding has not historically been
provided to equip schools with support staff (educational assistants, child youth workers, assistants for the developmentally handicapped). As a result, when students are flagged as having a learning exceptionality, they have been encouraged by staff to leave the FI school and return to their home school if the parents want them to receive special education support. This results in the perception that a two-tiered system is in place in the region. It leads to the view that regular public schools accommodate all learning styles and disabilities while FI schools accept only students who do not demonstrate learning differences. In Sam’s opinion, this leads to an elitist structure that excludes some groups of students.

Dakota touches upon recent curriculum changes to FI in response to this perceived elitism. Policy and curriculum have been revised so that accommodations and modifications are to be offered to support students with learning exceptionalities. Dakota raises the following concern:

Now with the new French Immersion curriculum which is brilliant, we can provide accommodations and modifications, first time ever in French Immersion- but we are not staffing French Immersion schools as real schools. So put your money where your mouth is and treat us like any other school... We need to make sure we have the people at the Board level who are guiding and leading French Immersion that have an equity lens. And quite frankly we don’t...Some of the older aristocracy in our Board around French Immersion have not evolved. And equity minded people are spending long amounts of time trying to catch them up.

This participant raises two discrete issues. The first issue is that while revisions have been made to the FI curriculum to allow for more equitable attendance to these schools, a corresponding revision to the staffing structure has not been put in place. FI schools are now expected to receive
and educate students with learning exceptionalities, but they are not provided with an adequate amount of special education resource staffing or support staff to support these students. The second issue raised by Dakota involves the perceived lack of equity knowledge held by the curriculum staff that support FI in the district.

Another system constraint mentioned by Dakota is the current funding formula in place in Ontario. The current school funding formula for schools in Ontario provides the same per pupil amount for all students regardless of whether they live in a disadvantaged community. There is also no consideration given to issues of staffing, class size, hiring, transfer and retention policies, or stability of leadership in high needs schools. Dakota relates a situation that arose in his school in relation to the province’s funding formula:

*We need to look at our funding formula. I mean, my school raised $50,000 last year. So I receive this incredible budget and I then I have $50,000. The trouble that I’m finding in trying to give a needy school $1,000 to buy a SmartBoard is ridiculous. So let’s create funding and let’s create the structures. I should be able to share the wealth. I would say we have systemic problems.*

This participant’s school is situated in a more affluent area of the district. Dakota’s School Council had voted to share some of the funds it had raised through fundraising with a school from a less advantaged area in the district to help them in equipping their school with technology to support student learning. The participant encountered resistance from the district and was told that they were not permitted to share this funding. In the participant’s opinion, the province’s rigid funding formula benefits schools in affluent areas that are able to generate additional funds through fundraising initiatives and disadvantages schools whose parents and community cannot supplement the budget. This in turn creates inequitable conditions across schools in the province.
A further system constraint expressed by several of the participants lies in the frequent transfers of principals between schools. Senior Administrative staff in the district are responsible for principal transfers between schools. The participants in the study expressed the view that principals are not kept at the same school for a sufficient length of time and this impacts on the equity work that takes place in schools. Kennedy speaks to the detrimental effects to relationship building.

*I think that’s the hardest part about the many moves that I’ve made. You feel like you’re just getting there and you feel like you are just starting to be able to have relationships with people.*

This participant expresses the difficulty of establishing strong relationships between the principal and the school community because of insufficient time. These changes to administration are also seen as shifting the direction and focus in schools.

Jordan suggests:

*Staff get confused by this. You get this revolving door of administrators and the teachers stay 10, 15, 20 years. And every administrator wants something different or has a different focus. It’s not that anyone’s focus is wrong- it’s different. The teachers are confused about the messaging and about expectations on them and what they’re supposed to do.*

The participant points out that each principal has a different focus. When staff members are faced with frequent changes to administration, they in turn need to shift their priorities to align with the incoming principal’s focus. This can result in confusion about which priorities are important and can interrupt the equity work that has been started in a school.
Rory remarks that staff had become accustomed to frequent transfers of principals and, as a result, were less inclined to buy into new initiatives.

*As a system, we need administrators to stay in the same school for a longer period of time. Because I think people wait you out. I really feel that they wait you out. “This too shall pass”.*

From this participant’s perspective, people on staff understand that a principal’s tenure in a school is finite. When confronted with initiatives that are new and might cause discomfort, there is the danger that staff will wait out the principal and not buy into the new focus knowing that they can revert to their prior practice after the principal departs. To do the equity work that needs to be done in schools requires time to build relationships, plan intervention strategies and begin to move forward with initiatives. The frequent moves of principals serves as a barrier to this work and can result in staff not buying in to the work as they wait out the current principal. All of these system constraints combined serve to restrict the efforts of the participants in leading for equity in their schools.

**Lack of Value Placed on Equity Work**

Each of the participants articulates a perception that equity work is not valued as much as many other educational initiatives and that this lack of importance serves as a pressure in leading for equity. Several of the participants speak to the accountability that is afforded competing initiatives but is often lacking in creating equity conditions in schools. Alex comments:

*Their beliefs about what is important in education. You know- reading and writing and math, the content area in curriculum. We have to focus on Board expectations around planning, assessment, reporting. We’ve got x, y and z policies to follow. There are compliance accountability measures to ensure I meet the expectation of my profession.*
All of which I tend to find as excuses. But the same accountability measures are not present for equity. I don’t see equity as one of those things that you can opt out.

In the experience of this participant, educators are held accountable for demonstrating student achievement in the areas of reading, writing and math but no such accountability is expected for issues of equity. Alex expresses frustration as this is an area that he holds as indispensable.

Avery adds to this sentiment:

If someone sees it as important, it gets done. But if not... Money gets poured into Performance Plus schools if they don’t meet those data targets. But where is the accountability for issues of equity? Those targets will be reached if there is equity of outcome.

Twenty elementary schools in the district have been identified as Performance Plus schools. These schools are located in neighbourhoods where a greater number of children and families are living in poverty. Additional resources are provided to these schools including a Performance Plus teacher, child and youth worker and supply days to be used to enhance school/community relations and engagement. Student achievement in these schools is monitored through analysis of EQAO and report card data. Avery expresses concern that accountability measures are not in place in these schools to ensure conditions for equity are in place. She suggests that improving conditions for equity will impact student achievement.

Amal gives consideration to the structures for professional learning in the Board and notes that consideration for issues of equity is not included in these learning opportunities.
Network work was always focused on a reading, writing or math focus. But it was never connected to equity work. It was very narrow. There wasn’t a lot of discussion about equity of outcome or equity of opportunity for different students... Even in the Rounds Facilitation training there wasn’t any discussion around equity. There was talk about how to facilitate the process of coming up with a Challenge of Practice and how to facilitate looking at what’s happening in the classroom. But there wasn’t a conversation about, when you look in a classroom, who are the learners, and how do you engage and how do you meet the needs of a diverse group.

The district within which these participants are principals devotes significant resources toward staff professional learning. Instructional Rounds and Network learning have been identified as two structures that drive the learning of teachers within the district. In looking at these learning structures, this participant recognizes that the focus of the learning is on reading, writing or math. The participant expresses frustration that equity is not woven into the learning within these professional learning structures. Amal suggests that an integral part of the learning needs to centre on gaining a better understanding of the diverse needs of the students to ensure that instruction is focused in a way that best meets their learning styles. Reading, writing and mathematics are subjects that are held to accountability standards and as a result are seen as being valued at a higher level. Professional learning opportunities tend to focus on these subjects with equity receiving less credence.

Taylor expresses a belief that many senior administrators in the Board do not value equity initiatives. She speaks of an experience in a Supervisory Officer Qualification Program.

When I joined the SO internship this year to be part of the professional learning, we had to meet with a couple of the senior superintendents who are organizing the internship.
Some of the questions asked were around what is the work I’ve been involved in. So I shared the regional experiences that I’ve had and the kind of work that I’ve done... It’s regional work that has to do with equity. The response I got was that’s wonderful but you need to be seen as not only the equity person. (pause) Equity is still seen narrowly and it’s so much more... But I think there is still a stigma or that equity work might not look very important. But it’s, “What else is in your portfolio?” That’s the sense that I got.

This participant came away from a meeting with senior superintendents with the impression that her regional work was not valued because of its focus on equity. She was cautioned about being seen as the ‘equity person’ and was encouraged to gain more experience in areas deemed to be more important. Her frustration resulted from a perceived lack of understanding by senior administration regarding the importance of equity work in the district.

This belief that equity is not afforded weight by senior administration trickles down to the experiences participants have with superintendents of schools. Kennedy remarks:

*Our Board and our province are doing a lot of talk about equity but actions speak louder than words. When my superintendent comes to the table, my superintendent wants to see reading scores or my EQAO scores. Not so much the equity pieces. So it’s- what’s valued?*

Casey echoes this sentiment saying:

*I think the superintendent is too busy even to think of the equity lens right now... I don’t think my superintendent is going to be open to me questioning the belief system and staff spending PD days on that.*
Superintendents of schools in the district schedule formal school improvement planning visits with their assigned schools three times throughout each school year. The purpose of these visits is to meet with school leadership teams to gain a better understanding of data analysis, student achievement, strategies in place in school plans, and monitoring efforts used to measure the efficacy of strategies. These participants share their observations that superintendent visits focus on reading, writing and math achievement and do not include discussion about conditions of equity in the school. The participants express that in addition to the impression that superintendents do not give consideration to equity issues, they are also doubtful that the superintendents would support professional learning in this area. Without the support and pressure of the superintendent around issues of equity, the result can be a lack of urgency for equity work on the part of principals.

**Resistance**

All of the participants speak to resistance from staff as hindering the move forward with equity initiatives in the school. This resistance is attributed to several possible factors: deep seated teaching practices that have historically been in place, a sense of entitlement from teachers who have been at schools for long periods of time, a threat to the status quo, disagreement with the tenets of certain minority groups, and the belief that the principal’s personal makeup results in a ‘personal agenda’.

One source of resistance is attributed to deep-seated practices that have become entrenched in the way business happens at the classroom and school level. Rory points out:
We can’t forget there are a lot of teachers who have been teaching for many years and there are practices that are ingrained. So how do we change people’s thinking and how do we help move people along?

Taylor shares a similar belief saying:

It’s like teachers who plan their whole year in June- they’ve got their long-range plans done but they haven’t even met the students yet. “But this is how I’ve always done it”. To me, that reduces any opportunity for equity.

These participants share a sentiment that, as a result of many years of teaching, teachers can become set in their way of teaching in a predefined manner. The second participant describes a teaching practice where the teacher plans all units in advance of the year. The participant feels that this does not result in equitable teaching practice that is built around the profiles of students and meets their learning needs.

Several of the participants speak about resistance from staff members who have been at a school for a long period of time. The participants express the belief that this often creates a sense of entitlement and leads to staff resisting efforts to move forward with equity initiatives. Rory states:

You find that you have an entitled group that have- for the sheer fact that they’ve been in the building for an extended period of time- that there’s an entitlement. That there’s a feeling that their way or their opinion matters more than others. And so it’s a real struggle to open up those ways of communication and opportunities for all staff.

The participant feels that staff members who have been at schools for long periods of time often feel that their voice and their way of doing things is more important than that of newer staff. This
can result in resistance to different ways of doing things and creates inequity amongst the voices on staff.

Amal expresses concern that having teachers remain at schools for long periods of time is not always healthy for the staff members or for the school climate.

There’s some folk here as teachers that I believe could really benefit the system in a change of context. Where a change in context and change in professional learning community could really advance their practice as a professional and teacher. I think people are really comfortable. And lack of movement is not necessarily conducive to unrooting some of the inequities. And I think the school needs- as much as they need- in order for this school to move forward, it does need some change...Usually there’s very little movement. If anybody is going out, it’s a maternity leave or a medical, so they’re on their way back in 6 months to a year... there’s very little turn over.

This participant raises three distinct issues: the benefits of transfers to another school for the staff member, the benefits that teacher transfers has for the school, and the fact that there is minimal teacher turn over in schools. Amal suggests that by transferring to another school, a teacher who has been at a school for a long period of time will undergo professional growth as a result of experiencing a different school context. This growth avails itself through differing professional learning opportunities and through the exposure to a different school culture. Amal also expresses the opinion that schools benefit when longstanding teachers transfer to other schools. Teachers who have been at schools for long periods of time can become complacent with the equity conditions in their schools and are comfortable with the way things have always been done. The implementation of conditions for equity can be challenging in this type of school context as teachers tend to be more resistant to the change than would newcomers to the school.
Finally, Amal highlights the fact that teacher transfers between schools are not commonplace or easy to secure in the district. Teacher movement tends to be temporary as a result of short or long term leaves of absence.

Another factor that participants believe causes resistance from staff is that they feel threatened by changes to the status quo. Jinan refers to these resistant staff members as ‘gatekeepers’.

*Gatekeepers I’ve found to be the hardest thing. Those are the people who want to maintain their power and maintain the status quo because it works for them. And by changing it, it could mean losing it. Not that they will lose their access- because there’s a place in which white privilege functions and the dominant culture- you never lose that.*

Jordan speaks to this feeling of being threatened:

*They can be threatened by a loss of power. They can be threatened by their way of life or tradition or a fear of loss of that.*

Both of these participants speak of resistance that arises as a result of the dominant group wanting to maintain their position of power. This group can feel that differing traditions or lifestyles threaten their way of life. Jinan refers to these people as gatekeepers meaning that they are protecting their own position. Ryan (2012) refers to this form of struggle saying that people in the dominant group “engage their tactics because they support a status quo that provides them with their privilege and inclusion” (p. 4).

Avery comments on the difficulty of changing the mindset of staff members who come from an area of privilege.
Those are the struggles. Getting people to move beyond the privilege that they have to protect their own biases and to think about how they are applying them. And not to take things personally.

This participant describes the difficulty of moving people who occupy positions of privilege. McIntosh (1990) speaks about people’s unwillingness to grant that they are over-privileged and to be defensive about their positions. She attributes this to conditioning in their upbringing.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. (p. 1)

Given this form of upbringing, it is difficult to make people aware of their own privilege, much less get them to move beyond it. As the Avery states, people can take things personally and become defensive.

This feeling of the threat to status quo is also perceived by one participant as extending to principals in the Board. Dakota shares:

When I first came to this board and wasn’t being so welcomed by status quo- by old school principals who were very uncomfortable with a gay leader for religious or personal reasons.

Dakota reports experiencing resistance from his colleagues because of his sexual orientation. He felt that other principals were uncomfortable with him and as a result did not welcome him into their mix.

In general, the participants do not report resistance as coming from parents. The exception to this came when Casey expressed concern and reservation about what parental reactions might be to the Positive Spaces movement.
The parent group is the one that I’m most concerned about, if you will. I would wonder about the reaction. I would have really no issues sharing it with kids because I think their generation is in a different place than my generation and the generations in between. So it’s more the parent group.

Casey communicates a belief that the current generation is more accepting of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transsexual, Queer) issues than are their parents. Alex speaks specifically to the resistance encountered for Positive Spaces by Board staff.

I think within each domain of the equity work, there are certain areas that people are more comfortable in. And then there are other areas that are more difficult. For example, I think a lot of people are still struggling with Positive Spaces— meeting the needs of students who identify as LGBTQ... I think most administrators are scared of it.

Alex indicates that principals find some forms of diversity easier to accept than others. While race, socio-economic situations, ability and gender have become accepted elements of equity work, the work toward creating conditions for acceptance for differing sexual orientation currently faces resistance from staff and parents. In the words of this participant, some even fear it.

Eight of the participants speak about resistance that they encounter in their equity work as a result of their own personal makeup. Seven of these participants voice that they find their work is hindered or not valued by staff as a result of their own ethnic/cultural background. They perceive that staff feels that it is the principal’s ‘personal agenda’ and do not lend it as much value as if someone from a different background were to present it. Dakota expresses:
Myself, I always take pause because I don’t want to be seen as promoting an agenda. In some ways, I think it might be easier for a straight principal to move the work forward. This participant feels that a straight principal is more effective in moving LGBTQ issues forward because they are not seen as being attached to the issue or having anything to gain from it. As a gay man, he is concerned that others would attribute any initiatives in this area to it being born out of his own personal agenda.

Similarly, Jordan shares an observation regarding the staff reaction to a former principal: We had a black principal at this school before. I think the reason the school staff felt they were going to drop the Black History month is because she was no longer here. So they identified it with her pushing her own agenda. So how does it not become an agenda of the admin team but a collective responsibility? And maybe that’s where people feel they need to separate because if someone else presents it, it doesn’t seem like a hidden agenda.

Jordan shares the same sentiment that a person’s social identity can be seen as driving the equity work they are doing within a school. At her school, staff felt they could drop Black History month initiatives after their Black principal was transferred to another school. The staff perceived that the initiative was tied to the principal’s personal agenda and this resulted in a lack of buy-in from the staff.

Conversely, Casey feels that the fact that she was not part of the LGBTQ community results in her work on the Positive Spaces committee not being respected. She shares:

A person brought up that I did not know the history and I did not live that experience. It’s interesting- when we’re always talking about checking our privilege- it was reverse privilege. I was floored by that.
Casey felt rejected as a leader for the Positive Spaces movement based on the fact that she was not part of the LGBTQ community. Other committee members felt that she could not adequately advocate for the cause because she did not have first-hand experience in the area. Casey felt that in this instance, her privilege worked against her and resulted in her efforts being negatively viewed by others. As leaders for equity work to move initiatives forward, their own personal makeup can be perceived in a negative light by others and serve as a barrier to their efforts. These various forms of resistance at the school and system level combine to serve as a barrier to principals’ efforts for leading for equity.

**Ignorance**

A barrier to equity work cited by seven of the participants centers on the limited understanding or ignorance by staff about equity issues. Jinan breaks down his definition of ignorance:

*Ignorance- people just don’t know so they continue to do what they’ve been doing because it’s always how they’ve been doing it.*

*Sincere ignorance- people who really believe they’re doing good things. Like when they say things like, “I don’t see colour. I just see the child”. And then I’m there saying, “If you don’t recognize colour or ability or sexual orientation, then you’re damaging those children.” Sincere ignorance sometimes can have a much worse effect than if you’re racist. Because if you’re racist, I can take you at that level. And I don’t just mean race- I mean any of the ‘isms’.*

Jinan breaks ignorance into two different forms. In the first form, people do not realize that their attitudes or actions are disadvantaging some groups. Because they do not see this, their beliefs
and actions continue and remain unchanged. In the second form, referred to as sincere ignorance by this participant, people are aware of the talk of equity issues and believe that they are acting in a way that ignores difference. Shields (2004) speaks to the detrimental impact of this type of approach to diversity. She notes, “Educational practices that ignore such inequities, either by essentializing difference or attempting to ignore it, are manifestations of firmly rooted and pervasive attitudes that may best be described as pathologizing the lived experience of students” (p. 112). With this form of outlook, blame is placed for a lack of success on the individual’s diversity and background rather than on the educational system.

Avery echoes these sentiments and points to the effect ignorance can have:

*These kinds of comments come out of teachers’ mouths and they don’t mean it to be disrespectful, but they also don’t realize that they invalidate the experiences that people bring to the table by doing that.*

Avery points out that educators are not necessarily intending to be disrespectful but that the impact of their statements or actions can be detrimental.

In pondering the root cause of this lack of understanding around equity issues, several of the participants point to the lived experience of educators. Amal articulates:

*As educators, we’re all coming from middle class- and I’m generalizing here. It’s not always that way. But for the most part, it’s middle class, educated, able-bodied individuals. That garners a lot of privilege and a lot of entitlement. So the struggle I have is getting people to recognize that. And getting people to understand that that’s not the same for everybody.*

This notion of lived experience and recognizing inequities is also voiced by Kennedy who says:
Teachers in general are successful. They’re educated, they make good money. And unless they’ve had different life experiences, they generally struggle with understanding some of the other pieces... It’s your experiences that help you to have an understanding. But how do you help people to be aware when it’s not their experience? It’s hard to be empathetic if you haven’t got a clue what to be looking for.

Each of these participants recognizes that educators often come from a place of privilege. People who enter into a career in education are required to attain two university degrees. This requires financial backing and an intellectual ability that can withstand the style of university education. Additionally, educators are financially well compensated in their positions. The participants express concern that many educators do not recognize their position of privilege and do not have an understanding or empathy for those who have a different lived experience and who encounter barriers in their education. One of the participants states that it is lived experience that develops knowledge and understanding of equity issues, and wonders how this understanding can be instilled in people in the absence of lived experience.

Participants express that ignorance of equity issues reaches another level when it is the superintendents who seem to lack understanding. Dakota reflects:

*I’m very concerned that certain superintendents don’t have the understanding, the nuances, the delicacies of many exceptionalities. If it’s not on their radar and they don’t truly have an understanding of equity issues, how can they support the work we’re doing?*

Dakota articulates a perception that some superintendents do not have an understanding of equity issues, which results in an inability to support the equity work being done in schools. Amal
speculates that superintendents have limited data sources from which to gain understanding of equity conditions in schools.

I have found that our superintendents supervise more from afar. They’re overseeing the work but, with the exception of a few visits, they’re not in the building regularly to develop a position on the status. Really, they’re looking at quantifiable data—like EQAO scores and ePrincipal reports—to get a glimpse at the nature of assessment at the school. I don’t know how much an area superintendent would know around climate and whether we’re providing an equitable and inclusive learning environment for students. Certainly in terms of anything qualitative, I don’t think they have a lot of data sources to support that—beyond anecdotally—the amount of times the phone rings at the area office.

Amal raises the point that superintendents do not have equity data at their fingertips to allow them to gain an understanding of issues playing out in their schools. This combined with the fact that superintendents are not frequently in schools limits their ability to get a pulse on school climate. Amal speaks about superintendents relying on quantifiable data like EQAO scores and report card data to inform themselves about the efficacy of schools. Amal implies that a chief source of data superintendents receive about school climate results from complaint phone calls from parents.

This view that limited data diminishes an understanding of equity issues and knowledge of student backgrounds is echoed by several participants. Jesse expresses frustration with the lack of data available to school staff to help them with their equity work.

That’s been an issue for us in this Board because our last school climate data was from 5 years ago... At this point, those children aren’t even in our school any more. So we actually put together a survey... it was good data to get. It wasn’t accusatory in any way-
it was just centred around the child’s identity. And we were told no. (pause) So, it’s hard to get accurate data when you can’t ask those questions or when the Board doesn’t have the questions to ask.

In this district, the last school climate survey was conducted five years ago. Jesse recognizes the value of this form of data and decided to put together a climate survey at the school level to inform their equity efforts. Jesse was told by senior superintendents that she was not permitted to administer the survey and to wait for the district survey to be released at a later date. She expresses frustration about not being permitted to ask questions of the students and their families and even more frustration that the district is not asking these questions.

Dakota suggests that even when equipped with relevant data, educators often fail to take action against inequities.

If you really want to look at where we were with equity 5 years ago, Lynette Spence-former equity officer of Toronto, OISE, does a lot of work with OPC and Coleen Stewart. She’s written a book recently. They did an independent audit 5 years ago. I managed to get a copy of it. But did we move from that after spending thousands?

Dakota speaks about research conducted outside the district in which an equity audit took place. Dakota suggests that in spite of the work being done and money being spent to fund the study, no notable follow-up took place.

Several of the participants suggest that, even when well-intentioned regarding equity issues, many administrators lack the skill set to be able to address inequities or launch school initiatives. Alex shares:

I was talking with someone from our equity committee who works in elementary. She said she’s totally ready to support the LGBTQ initiative in elementary but she just doesn’t
know how. She doesn’t know how to answer tough questions from parents. She just needs that support. Who does she call?

Jesse echoes the same sentiments about principals not having the all of the answers saying:

But those are the answers that I don’t know that a lot of administrators have on their tongue yet.

These participants recognize the knowledge and skill needed to move forward with equity initiatives. Even when principals are inspired and motivated to move forward with efforts, they are often ill equipped to do so in an informed manner.

**Deficit Mindset**

A further barrier mentioned by participants to creating conditions for equity in schools revolves around the deficit mindset that is often prevalent amongst educators. Jinan looks at this mindset as it is applied to students.

I had a couple of staff that said things like, “I know kids this age should be able to do blah,blah,blah, but not these kids” or “I didn’t know these kids could do that”.

Avery notes the low expectations held by staff for groups of students. They hold the opinion that some groups of students are successful while others are not expected to succeed. Jinan talks about how we often blame failure on students and don’t look at the educational system’s responsibility for meeting their needs.

Schools use the term drop-outs. They’re not drop-outs. They’re ‘push-outs’. And they’re push-outs because the system has not met their needs and we’ve pushed them. And we don’t want to say that because we would bear responsibility. Well, we do bear responsibility.
Jinan shifts the blame regarding student drop-outs from the student to the school system and suggests a change in language from drop-outs to push-outs helps to focus the responsibility on the system rather than on individual students. Shields (2004) speaks about this phenomenon as pathologizing the lived experience of students. She notes:

I use the term pathologizing to denote a process of treating differences as deficits, a process that locates the responsibility for school success in the lived experiences of children (home life, home culture, SES) rather than situation responsibility in the education system itself.

Jesse speaks of the negative language associated with some of the marginalized groups. Gay is not a dirty word. Black is not a dirty word. Jewish is not an ugly word. We’re still caught on things being considered ugly. We look at a deficit model and the language around discrimination and hatred and we have to acknowledge that. But we have to move ahead.

Jesse suggests that a deficit model continues to exist in education and is reflected in the negative association with some words that reflect different groups of people. A deficit mindset that blames failure on individuals or groups and fails to see their strengths can result in the perseveration of inequitable practices, achievement gaps in schools and students’ own negative perception of their abilities.

**Hiring Practices**

Unfortunately, the Canadian educator workforce displays considerably less racial diversity than the current Canadian and student population...Despite calls for increasing the number of teachers of colour, the proportion of global majority educators in the teacher workforce continues to fall, particularly in the largest cities. (p. 51)

In general, the participants agree upon the importance of having staff in schools that are representative of the student population. Several participants express concern over inequitable representation of staffing within the Board. Amal shares:

> When we hire, we need to make sure we’re not hiring people who look like us, sound like us and who will agree with us. Because that’s not going to help us. But the way the system has developed over time, it’s allowed some people more access than others. And typically, what we do is hire in our own image and likeness. Whether it’s equitable or not.

Amal articulates the need for more representational staffing. According to the participant, this is difficult to achieve because principals tend to hire people that are reflective of their own makeup.

Even when principals are intent on representational hiring, barriers are in place. Jinan talks about the resistance he encountered from staff regarding hiring practices.

> Last year, I put in our school improvement plan that we will engage in hiring qualified teachers who are also reflective of the school population. Because when I came here, that wasn’t the case. And I’ve got a lot of staff very upset. And they’re saying, “What do you mean? Are you saying we can’t be role models?”

Jinan recognizes the importance of hiring teachers that are reflective of the school community, but had push back from staff who took the initiative personally. The teachers perceived this as a slight against their ability to work effectively with the students.
Conversely, Casey struggles internally with the notion of hiring for increased diversity. Then there’s the whole issue of how do you make your school more representative of your community? Because you have to balance that—are you hiring the best person?... But is that equitable? All things equal—there are 2 candidates—who do you hire? And there’s a guilt piece to it. If I take someone who is more reflective of the community, have I just done it ‘because’.

Casey is conflicted when considering equitable hiring. While she recognizes the importance of having teachers that are reflective of the community, she is concerned about the implications of hiring a person because of their racial profile. Casey questions if this type of hiring is equitable for prospective teachers.

Two of the participants express concerns that the district’s central hiring practices are inequitable. Casey discusses the process itself saying:

I did the LTO list hiring and the applicants had to do a written piece. It was interesting for 2 reasons. One—most people don’t write things longhand any more—they type things up. Secondly—we were interviewing a lot of people whose first language is not English. Inherent in someone whose first language is not English is their grammar lags. I went back out to the group and asked, “How do I mark this?” Because to mark spelling and grammar, I feel that is inequitable. And I was told, “You mark everybody’s the same”. And I struggled with that. The rationale was that we have them in front of students and they have to be able to do all of these things. And I got that, but at the same time I felt they were disadvantaged by the process.

In order to be considered for long-term occasional (LTO) positions, applicants are required to go through a central hiring process that involves an interview and the completion of a written
practicum. Casey points out that the written practicum must be completed longhand and further suggests that this practice is antiquated in that most people make use of technology when writing in their daily lives and at work. As well, Casey questions the fact that applicants whose first language is not English are graded in the same way as all other applicants. She expresses an understanding of the rationale but a feeling that the process is inequitable.

Jinan points to the actions of principals during the hiring process.

*I know stories of administrators who say, “Well, I’ll just throw in one or two people who are minoritized in the interview pool to say I have included them. But I’m not going to hire them.” I’ve seen evidence of administrators crossing off the equity question and not asking it during interviews.*

When hiring teachers at the school level, principals complete the recruitment and interviews at their school location by following a recruitment package. The package contains an interview guide and regional processes that are designed to ensure consistent and equitable hiring practices across schools. When hiring for contract positions, principals are required to include candidates that are reflective of diversity in the district. Jinan highlights some of the challenges that arise in spite of these procedures being in place. Examples are shared of principals ‘throwing in’ minoritized individuals and removing equity questions from the interview guide. Such practices suggest that principals do not value equitable hiring practices and they undermine the process laid out by the district.

While these participants recognize the importance of hiring staff members that are reflective of the district’s diverse communities, they acknowledge that a number of inequitable hiring practices and hiring constraints restrict their ability to do so.
Collective Agreement Constraints

Six of the participants identify employee collective agreements as constraining equity efforts in schools. It is noted that the recent several years have been more challenging because of labour unrest in education in Ontario. Sam says:

*I would say another barrier is the structures of the collective agreement— not just to equity work but to a lot of things. You only get 75 minutes in a staff meeting, you can’t do this, you can’t ask this, you can’t do that.*

Sam shares the frustrations experienced by principals as they are subject to rigid expectations outlined in employee collective agreements. In this district, the teacher’s collective agreement outlines the requirement that staff meetings occur once per month and are no longer than 75 minutes in length. Additionally, teachers may choose not to attend staff meetings if they do not feel that the content will meet their needs. The result is limited time to meet with staff and imposed conditions that restrict or control principals’ ability to set direction in their schools.

Casey expresses a similar sentiment that collective agreements often tie the hands of administrators and don’t always work toward the best interests of students.

*I’ve found the collective agreement constrains how we support students and what I can ask a teacher to do. Who runs the schools? Not us. And the unions will tell you that their primary concern is not kids— it’s their members. I struggle with that.*

From Casey’s viewpoint, collective agreements remove principal authority and result in a feeling that principals are powerless to enforce decisions in schools. Casey is troubled with the
perception that unions focus on their members rather than on serving the best interests of students.

Along the same line, two of the participants speak to their thoughts around how the collective agreement sometimes impacts teacher professionalism. Casey shares an example that had recently been encountered:

*So when you talk about accommodating students- I’ve got a student who’s on medical home instruction. Who’s doing the marking? I work it all out and I still have the union branch president in my office. But you need to deal with that layer because they’re running things down there. And I know the collective agreement. I know what had to happen. But the teacher hadn’t even listened to what I said. They had just heard that they had to provide work. But they wanted to make sure it wasn’t more than they needed to provide.*

From this participant’s perspective, she was making efforts to support a student with a medical condition. These efforts were met with resistance from a teacher and the union because of workload issues. Casey is disturbed by the situation because she felt she had been following procedure but that the teacher was more willing to listen to the union than to the principal.

Rory suggests a tension between professional standards and union membership.

*I think we need reminders every so often just as we do with health. Professional standards of practice and how we operate as professionals. And can you really be a unionized member and a professional? I don’t know.*

Rory suggests that teacher behaviour can sometimes be seen as unprofessional. She adds that principals are in a difficult position as they are the only non-unionized member of school staffs.
As an administrator, it’s very difficult—especially in this climate. You have to be the professional but everyone else doesn’t need to be. And that’s been very hard this year.

Rory suggests that principals are held to higher standards because they are nonunionized. In speaking to the current climate and the additional difficulties, she is referring to the tighter adherence of teachers and staff to follow their collective agreements in protest of conditions enforced by the government on their contracts in the last round of negotiations.

Kennedy expresses frustration over the impediments collective agreements often place on equity efforts in Ontario schools.

I often read books and think, “You could not do these things in a school in Ontario”...
Because no- it’s not in the collective agreement. You talk about innovation but we’re really restrained. Especially when you’re reading American stuff- I find it’s just not relevant in our context.

For this participant, strategies outlined in research are deemed not possible in Ontario schools because of the current political climate and a resulting strong union presence in enforcing collective agreement conditions. Equity work takes commitment and effort. From Kennedy’s perspective, collective agreements do not allow for the conditions to be in place to support this.

From the viewpoint of these participants, working in a unionized environment and dealing with collective agreement constraints restrains a principal’s efficacy in creating conditions for equity in schools.

Political Context for Principals

A barrier that is spoken about with much passion by participants is around the political context for principals. Each of the participants states a perception that there is an unwritten
expectation in the district that principals should conform to a certain norm. They note that it is desirable within the district that principals are supportive of district initiatives and conduct themselves in a professional and non-confrontational manner. Several of the participants speak to the superficial image that is considered desirable for principals. Sam states:

*I’ve noticed, the people that are selected, fit a certain category. In terms of how their speech is, how they present themselves, in terms of what it is that their priorities are within their school. I’ve seen that a lot.*

Jordan articulates a similar notion saying:

*You have to put on a cosmetic face and act and speak in a certain way. Because that is what is valued by the system. So conform to that and you have more of a chance to be accepted I suppose- or more suitable. More suitable to what they are looking for.*

Each of these participants expresses a notion that there is a desirable image for principals in the district. This image assumes both a visible dimension in terms of speech, attire and presentation, as well as an attitudinal dimension that encompasses beliefs and priorities.

Jinan expresses a concern that this type of image flies in the face of equity efforts because it stifles dialogue and honesty.

*We seem to promote this obedience. But we’re in a paradox. On the one hand, they tell us “Think critically. Think for yourself. Be an individual”. But then if you look at our system and the way we’re functioning and running things amongst ourselves as administrators, our relationships, even among our staff- their relationships. What’s it based on? Our relationships are not founded on integrity and honesty. We actually in our interactions*
promote the contradictory thing. “You have something private to say? Come on in. Close my door.”

Dakota expresses a similar opinion saying:

*We have a conformist culture. Because equity- the very nature of it demands that you question and that you’re critical and that you point out problems. But every time you start to do that, you get a slap on the wrist.*

Both of these participants speak to the tension that exists between a disposition that is conformist to the system and that of another disposition that is critical and questioning in nature. The latter disposition is seen by these participants as being a vital component to equity work and yet it is the conformist disposition that is seen as coveted by education systems. Ryan (2012) speaks to the preponderance of the conformist disposition or ‘company people’ in education systems.

By the time they take up their administrative positions, most are well socialized into a system that discourages social and cultural difference. Indeed, if these individuals had not been perceived as supporters of their respective organizations, they probably would not have been offered administrative positions. (p. 141)

Emerging as a leader for equity requires principals to move beyond the conformist role and learn to think critically and challenge existing inequities. But this is not easy. As Jinan notes:

*Someone went back to my principal and said “He needs to learn his place. Because if a superintendent is bringing this forward, then we shouldn’t critique it.” There’s a running joke among my friends who do this work- I need to learn my place. Because that’s the thing- when I challenge, it means I don’t know my place. And as an administrator, I*
should know my place. And there are certain people that you don’t ask certain questions of or say things to. And I think there’s a when and there’s a how. But I think that if I ever get to a point where I think I can’t or I shouldn’t, it’s time to go.

This participant relates a concrete example of being told that he should not question authority. The notion that he needs to ‘learn his place’ connotes the idea that questioning authority is not looked upon positively in a hierarchical system.

Several of the participants speak to how these issues of conformity play out politically for administrators. They express the opinion that principals with a conformist nature are more likely to be promoted than those who challenge and question. Sam states:

*Who are in these positions? And who continues to be supported. Let’s look at who’s in that SO internship pool. Who’s related to whom? And who’s done what for whom? Right? Think about it. And those that are in there that truly need to be are not provided an interview or not promoted once they go through the interview process. It’s not like I’m not cognizant on what’s happening. I’m very clear on what’s going on. But at the same time, my opinion can’t be shared because it’s career limiting.*

This participant voices the opinion that it tends to be ‘company people’ who are promoted to the position of superintendent. People that demonstrate a more critical lens around issues tend not to receive interviews or promotions according to this participant. Dakota suggests:

*I would also say people have favourites. Nepotism is alive and well and that’s a shame. I want to get to the place that I aspire to based on my strengths and talents. I don’t want to go to Leadership Development because I’m the Director’s friend.*
This participant suggests that people tend not to be promoted based on their accomplishments but are more likely to succeed if they have aligned themselves with senior administration.

Participants also speak about the possible dangers of speaking up and stating one’s opinion. Dakota shares:

*When you question status quo or you are embracing things that are a little bit different than what your Network tells you to do, or what the conversations are at the admin meetings- legal issues or deconstruction of the collective agreement- you get frustrated. And you’re afraid. You’re afraid to bring out the real topics because you think, “Well- is this going to be career limiting? Will I have the opportunity for a leadership role further than an administrator if I have this opinion?” And you see it. You see people who are sitting in equity roles now that are feeling similar things. And many times are quieted or sedated.*

Avery speaks further about the fear some principals feel in speaking up:

*People are very afraid. People are extremely afraid. Will they be supported? Will they get the dressing down? Will they be disciplined? Will they be taken to task by the superintendent or Board level personnel? Will they be questioned? Will it be career limiting? You make one big mistake and it blows up- just by doing the work.*

Each of these participants speaks to the perception that speaking up about issues of equity can lead to negative reactions and possibly reprimand. They both use the term ‘career limiting’ to address the concern that raising questions can hinder the opportunity for promotion at a later date.
Six of the participants share personal stories of how they had received negative repercussions because of voicing their opinions on equity issues. Dakota shares:

*I would say I got into trouble because I wasn’t backing down on what I felt were my fundamental human rights as a citizen of Ontario and as an educator in Ontario and a member of this Board. I ask deep questions and I wasn’t giving up. People started talking about me. And I got phone calls that I could not understand. I got a phone call from a superintendent.*

This participant shares the negative reaction that ensued as a result of asking questions that were framed as human rights issues. For Dakota, the negative reaction took the form of comments and being addressed by a superintendent. Sam communicates the belief that a promotion had been delayed because of opinions that had been shared.

*It’s cost me a lot. It’s taken me a long time to move from a VP to a principal. I’ve been told by my superintendent that I need to be careful not to rock the boat. That it isn’t seen well. I’m not the first one though. That’s what you need to keep in mind. I’m not a single case.*

This participant experienced what was perceived to be a delay in being promoted to the position of principal. She relates that her superintendent advised against her questioning nature as it was not viewed positively.

Alex shares a personal narrative that exposed an uncertainty regarding the safety of revealing personal information in this climate:
I only started coming out, professionally, a year ago. Until I was promoted to principal, I still perceived that my sexual orientation could be a barrier to success... I know that behind me I have all of the enshrined rights in the charter and the Human Rights code. I know that I have legal protection as a citizen in Ontario. How can we expect kids to have courage and bravery to come forward and share themselves with adults where they may not have that same awareness of everything that’s there to protect them? I’m less afraid now but I’m still very cautious... but I think the point about the Board- is the Board a safe place? I don’t think we’re there yet.

This participant illuminates a couple of important issues. The first issue centers on his own feeling of safety and inclusion within the district based on his sexual orientation. He shares that he felt the necessity to hide his identity for fear it would limit his opportunities for promotion. Alex speaks to the protection afforded through the Human Rights Code but expresses continued reservations based on his perception of the climate in the district. The second issue that Alex raises is the impact this type of climate has on students who are less informed and less able to protect their rights. Alex wonders aloud about how students can be expected to display the courage needed to come forward. He also expresses the sentiment that students are in need of protection and that they are less aware of how to reach out for support.

Several of the participants speak to the power plays and the political nature of trying to move forward with equity issues at a committee level. Jesse speaks to power issues that play out on the Board’s equity committee saying:
There are some power issues. I’m very sensitive to power plays and I don’t like them. When I see them happening, the trust breaks down for me and that’s what causes me angst.

Casey speaks to similar concerns in navigating the political waters.

It’s very political. That’s the part that I struggle with because I’m not a political beast. I just do what I think is right. And I find the need to check in with 16 people and breathe before I send an email. It really floors me. Even when I realized that I’d bitten off more than I could chew, I couldn’t walk away. I was told, “Oh no. That would look very bad”.

It was a colleague who’s been in the committee and has more knowledge about how things work. They said, “Oh no. That would be political suicide”.

Each of these participants expresses wariness in relation to the political nature of committees devoted to equity. They describe power plays amongst committee members that erode trust amongst its members. Casey relates her belief that words need to be chosen very carefully and that decisions must be seriously weighed to determine potential backlash.

The political environment that exists for administrators within this district is one that rewards conformity and disadvantages principals’ who challenge the system. This type of context presents a barrier to the efforts of principals intent on leading for equity in their schools.

**Personal Toll**

Six of the participants in the study report that they have experienced a heavy emotional and sometimes physical toll as a result of assuming the role of a leader for equity. Sam shares an experience where she was compelled by her superior to respond to a situation in a manner that contradicted her belief system:
In my own personal experience, I feel stung by the system because of my honesty. Last year I dealt with a situation where I had the data but was being forced to act in a way that was in conflict within myself. I ended up falling ill for 5 or 6 days. Because I didn’t feel it was the right thing.

Jinan shares the raw emotions that were experienced as the result of inequities encountered.

I couldn’t even talk. I just broke down. I couldn’t even breathe. And it was so horrific- I couldn’t believe that somebody in a school felt that they had the power to do that and to talk and to do what they were suggesting with kids because of who they were and who the kids were. It took me about a week to get over it and every time I would think about it, I would start tearing up.

This participant describes the emotional toll that can result in response to the inequitable actions of others. Jinan expresses shock and dismay at what he believes to be the inappropriate use of power by a staff member over students. He portrays his reaction to the situation as debilitating and reports the overwhelming emotions that lingered for a period of time following the incident.

Dakota speaks to the effect on his personality as he was engaged in equity leadership:

I was becoming angry and bitter and entrenched. It was really affecting me physically and psychologically and mentally.

For this participant, the emotional toll was not the result of a single incident. Dakota describes the detrimental effect that his ongoing equity work had to his personality and well-being. He reports a feeling of negativity and was concerned that his physical and mental health were negatively impacted.
For Rory, the toll had become too great and the participant reports needing to back away from some of the equity work.

_I don’t have the energy anymore. I did once-upon-a-time. I would have given my life to my work before- and I did. Which is bad. I don’t have the energy anymore and I don’t want to. I’ve lost my energy for that._

In response to the exhaustion that resulted from her equity work, this participant’s reaction was to retreat from the work. Avery speaks of almost leaving the profession because of mental anguish experienced:

_It takes a toll. People are taking more leaves. You can go under. I’ve been there. I’ve been there a couple of times. I had a previous experience that was dreadful and I was made the victim in the situation. At that point, I wanted to leave the profession. I was looking for every possible avenue to get out. It was hard._

This participant describes a more extreme impact of the stress and burn out from equity work. She reports that principals are sometimes driven to take a leave of absence to care for themselves or might even leave the profession permanently.

Jinan expresses frustration that there was little to no system support for principals engaged in equity work and who are feeling the heavy toll.

_Part of the challenge of this work is it’s exhausting. And there are no supports in place for those people. So one of my issues with the system is that we put all of these wonderful people in the field to be champions of this work, but what supports have we put in place for those people to decompress? Because you need somewhere to decompress that work. But a lot of people don’t have that. So that when they start to become jaded or bitter or angry, then people say, “Oh- he’s negative or he’s always...”_. Well, we have to own that.
We put them in that situation and we provided nothing for them. So when they're dealing with the crap that hits the fan every day, what do you think will happen? And nobody's looking out for those people.

This participant articulates the opinion that the district is responsible for the burn out experienced by leaders for equity. He suggests that supports are not in place to sustain the well-being of principals and preventing them from becoming negative as a result of the emotional toll often associated with equity work.

For these participants, an emotional and physical toll can result from their equity efforts and decrease their ability to lead for equity in their schools.

**Strategies for Creating Conditions for Equity**

While the participants share their perception of a number of barriers, they are quick to describe strategies that they employ to move equity work forward and to circumvent encountered barriers. It is these strategies that lay the foundation for more equitable conditions in schools and that prevent any existing barriers from undermining equity work. The participants describe the importance of building relationships with staff, parents and students to create an environment where open and honest discourse might take place. They talk about developing an understanding of their unique school community through data gathering, and the creation of explicit strategies within their school improvement plan to target existing inequities. The participants express a belief in the importance of shifting their knowledge of equity to action through their ability to challenge existing inequities, advocate for marginalized groups, and empower others to act. The participants speak to the need to develop and utilize political savvy to navigate the difficult waters that often exist in schools and throughout the district. They also describe coping strategies that they utilize to deal with the emotional toll that can result from their equity work.
Building Relationships

Each of the participants speaks about building relationships as being the foundation that must be established prior to starting equity work. Jesse states:

_You can’t challenge people in the area of equity and ask them to be vulnerable or unpack that invisible knapsack and open themselves up if you don’t have the relationships first._

_You can’t have the difficult conversations with staff or make the tough calls to parents if they don’t trust you and don’t see that you have their child’s best interests at heart._

Casey speaks of building relationships as an investment:

_Stephen Covey and his emotional bank account- you put things into that bank account and then you have to withdraw them at certain times. You have to spend the time developing the relationship and then you can do the work. I don’t think you can come in Day One and plough ahead because you won’t have that credibility. So I think you have to come in and demonstrate that you’re a listener, that you have relationships and then you can start to do some of that work._

Both of these participants speak to the importance of having established a relationship with people prior to moving forward with equity work. Without having established a rapport, the ability to engage in conversations that challenge existing mindsets can be impeded. Casey references Stephen Covey and his work around emotional bank accounts (Covey, 1989). Covey speaks about the building of relationships as a long-term investment. Through interactions that are honest and kind, a person builds up a reserve of trust in their account that can be called upon in times of difficulty. When this trust account is high, communication is easier and more effective. For these participants, the building of relationships is a prerequisite for engaging in the challenging and difficult conversations that are an inherent component of equity work.
The participants overwhelmingly speak to the importance of developing open and honest relationships where people feel safe in bringing forward issues. Jordan expresses:

*You’re creating the relationships that are based on being genuine, being empathetic with your staff and most all, making them feel that they can talk with you about anything. It’s not just the students, it’s not just the school. Any personal crisis they’re encountering in their lives. It’s that comfort level. So my personal relationships are based on making sure that every person that comes in contact with me- it doesn’t matter if it’s staff, caretakers, parents, students- whoever. That they feel comfortable that they can approach me and talk to me about anything.*

This participant shares that one strategy for developing open relationships lies in the principal’s disposition toward being approachable, assuming an empathetic style and taking an interest in all people with whom she comes into contact. Taylor shares her strategy of opening herself up personally with staff.

*I shared my story with staff and I shared with them what would push my buttons. And why those language pieces would push my buttons and why would I react. So people would understand more about my thinking. And it was really interesting what came out when I exposed myself and started those conversations. Other people who felt that they were silenced or would not have the courage to speak up spoke up. It was interesting to see the ripple effect of being able to share something very personal and to start examining the way we speak about kids.*

Taylor took the risk of sharing personal information with staff and being transparent regarding her beliefs and values. In doing so, she wanted to create an understanding of her thinking, and create a culture in the school of sharing information and assuming a reflective stance. Taylor
reports that this willingness to share her personal narrative resulted in staff gaining the courage to speak more openly about issues that impact the students in the school.

A couple of the participants acknowledge that some staff members are easier to develop relationships with and that it is often beneficial to have a small group of people that can be trusted. Amal mentions:

*When you’ve been on a staff, there are always people you’re going to connect with more.*

*You have your people. It’s not that you play favourites. It’s that you have a different level of trust with these people. Usually they’re people that have been on the lead team and we’ve just had more of an opportunity to work in a professional way.*

This participant extends the notion that staff need to be able to trust the principal to include the principal’s need to have a trusted group on staff at his side. He suggests that this connection often results from close involvement on committees or leadership initiatives on staff.

While developing relationships with staff and community, two principals speak about the importance of finding the best side of people. Jesse shares:

*One of the things that’s been critical in building the relationships is approaching staff with an assets based lens as opposed to a deficit lens. I am able to help them see more within themselves than maybe they had seen.*

For this participant, looking for the good in people helps to strengthen relationships and builds the capacity on staff. Jordan speaks more about this concept saying that making use of a positive lens is beneficial to the school climate.

*We underestimate the resources that are in the building... They come from so many different heritages... There are so many resources within the school, but knowing them or making people feel comfortable sharing it, that comfort level has to be there. I think there*
always has to be an invitational feeling within a school. Where people feel like a family and feel safe to bring forward what they have to offer. Whether it's a caretaker who knows how to play cricket and is willing to be a coach of a team. It’s all those people coming together.

From the viewpoint of these participants, finding people’s strengths and developing a level of comfort increases the likelihood that they will share their expertise with others and add to the school culture.

In looking at relationship building, Amal refers to building what he calls a common experience.

*I think the idea of a common experience is powerful. When we see groups of people engaged together in a common experience, it tends to allow folks to get to know one another and understand and develop a broader framework around a particular person or faith group... And that common experience is bonding and gets people connected in certain ways... They’re being exposed to different cultures and different ways of doing things and it’s done in a way that’s embedded within that whole experience. They now have an anchor by which- for different cultural groups or groups within that equity umbrella- to learn about each other and have a better way of engaging with each other when they re-enter into the school environment.*

By ‘common experience’, this participant is referring to school experiences outside the regular curriculum that bring students together. Amal offers examples of overnight trips and whole school DPA as opportunities for students to connect at a different level and learn more about each other. These types of experiences bring together different groups that might not otherwise
choose to associate with each other in a context where they are focusing on common goals rather than each other’s differences.

Jesse speaks about the importance that building relationships with the parents and community has on the school climate.

*When there’s an issue, the door’s always open. We always invite people in. I will call up parents and tell them good things about their kids. I try to partner with parents wherever I can and when it’s done, I say, “How did that go? Make sure you tell people in our community that our door is always open”. It’s really word of mouth that I think makes a bigger impact. Cause they’ll say, “Go talk to the principal. Her door’s open. She’ll listen to you. She’ll talk to you and it’s not a problem”. I think that when people feel that what they say matters and has an effect, it creates a more democratic environment where equity can take place.*

This participant describes an approach that is open and accommodating. She sets a tone in her school where parents know that they can approach her and have their voice heard. Jesse depicts the ripple effect that occurs throughout the community when parents share their experience with others by word of mouth.

The participants recognize the critical importance of developing strong relationships with their school community in order to move equity efforts in their schools. They describe strategies that allow them to connect with people and form open and trusting relationships.
Planning for an Equitable School Environment

Each of the participants speaks to the planning process that takes place in their school as they work with their staff to develop more equitable school cultures. While schools in the Board all have School Improvement Plans in place, the steps school staffs engage in while developing plans can vary from school to school. The information shared by participants in the interviews helps to shed some light on the process they undertake with their staff on this planning process.

Each of the participants speaks about the importance of gathering data to help them to develop an in-depth understanding of the demographics of their student population. Jinan explains the importance of this data:

> If we are able to understand the needs of our students through real powerful data collection, then we’re better able to create learning experiences, regardless of content, that is going to be something that students are going to be able to learn from… I’m looking at my data, I’m understanding that there are certain profiles in my classroom—whether it’s male/female, whether it’s reading levels. We can even move into the cultural backgrounds in terms of what are the limitations at home.

For this participant, data helps to inform the pedagogy being delivered in classrooms. By creating a class profile, teachers have an understanding of the range of diversity in their classes and can tailor learning experiences to which students can connect.

In addition to gathering the information from the Board data-base, Jesse speaks to conducting an entry survey that helped to gather a broader range of information about students and their families.
You really need to root your goals in data and what your data tells you. When I came in as principal, I did an entry survey- with families, students and staff. Basically a school climate survey around what the students felt about the school, what the public’s perception was of the school and how the staff felt about the school... I took the information from the survey to identify where we felt our equity positive climate for learning goal needed to come from... The process for us has been to consult community, consult kids, consult staff to figure out if we have any common perspectives. And then work as a committee in our school planning process to share back to the broader staff for input.

Coming in as a principal new to a school, this participant recognized the need to learn about the unique context from the viewpoint of the students, staff and parents. Through the use of an entry survey, Jesse was able to elicit this information and triangulate the data with the school planning committee. The results of the survey were shared back with the entire staff and an equity goal was generated.

Amal speaks to the data painting a picture of changes to the community so that the staff could effectively shape their practice in accordance.

It’s about understanding what changes are happening around us in society and our world and embracing that within the school in order to make better connections for students and have them relate better to their world. And so that requires making new space for new thinking, making new space for new perspectives and new direction possibly, and building on at the same time the practices that have been in place.
This participant recognizes the changing dynamics in society and the need for schools to align their instruction and practices with this change so that students are better able to connect with their learning. Several other participants discuss this need to evaluate current practices in place at their schools. Kennedy speaks about validating current practices and building upon them:

Looking at what work has already done is important—what’s already happening in the school in order to push the equity agenda and building on that.

This participant speaks to the importance of understanding where the staff are and what is already in place and using this as the starting point for future equity work.

Amal articulates the importance of applying a critical lens when looking at current practice.

We started talking about the changing demographics in the school. We started having conversations about different practices that are current in the school. Who do they give an in to and who do they shut out—in terms of parent involvement and student involvement.

The participant speaks about the value of analyzing current school practices in relation to changing demographics with the goal of unearthing existing inequities.

After gathering data, participants speak about the steps taken to begin to explicitly plan strategies for developing a more equitable school climate. To start this work, the participants talk about setting goals. Two of the participants speak about the desire for equity work to be embedded in all school initiatives but both feel that goals needed to be in place to ensure the work was being done. Avery explains:
Our superintendent of equity says that until we see things that embedded, we need to have specific signposts along the way. Explicit signposts. So what that means essentially is that in school improvement planning, we need to have specific signposts in terms of recognizing student needs and data and having it reflected in tasks. Are we aware of the poverty pieces in our class? Are we aware of the reading levels of the students? Are we aware of the socio-emotional challenges that students have when they go home? So that we create experiences that are inclusive of that. Eventually, we want it to be embedded, but in the meantime, how are we making explicit signposts along the way to make learning relevant to our students.

The participant articulates the ultimate goal in equity work as having equity embedded in all aspects of school planning and instruction. Avery recognizes that this is not currently the case and stresses the need for clear equity statements and goals to be added to school improvement plans. Jinan stresses the importance of explicitly incorporating an equity lens into all planning initiatives.

We’ve got our learning goals and how do we infuse the equity work. It’s making the invisible visible. Because we know it’s equity work. Sometimes you need to say it. “This is what we’re doing. It’s about equity and inclusion”. Because sometimes you think you’re just doing something. We talked about how we would go about it to make it more explicit and intentional.

This participant demonstrates a belief that for equity work to move forward, it is necessary to explicitly state that efforts are in the interest of equity. This type of strategy puts equity on the radar of all staff rather than allowing equity initiatives to take place covertly.

To help staff to do this work, Rory speaks about an activity engaged in by her staff:
We did an activity where we looked at different instructional tasks through an equity lens. As we rotated through different instructional tasks, we had conversations about how does the task meet the needs of all students in the class. Does it meet the needs? Does it not meet the needs? Why or why not?

Jesse did a similar activity but focused instead on current strategies outlined in their School Improvement Plan. She instructed staff:

“I want all of you to look over this and highlight what you think we’re doing. What do you think we’ve started? What do you think we’re not doing? What feedback do you want to give for where we need to go next? Isn’t it really important that you’re involved in this- and whose voices are missing as we try to craft this plan? Who’s going to speak for people who can’t speak English? Who’s going to speak for people where SES weighs in heavily? So, whose voices are missing from the table? Who else do I need to speak with to make sure those things are in there?”

Both of these participants describe intentional activities with staff where current school practices are analyzed with the view of who is afforded voice and who lacks voice.

As staff engage together in this planning work, Amal indicates that it is important to develop shared beliefs and then check their progress as strategies are implemented in their schools.

It’s a sense of are we all comfortable with a common vision, and more than being comfortable, this is a common plan- are we executing it? So building a little bit more accountability and keeping people’s focus. Because it’s one thing to unroll the SIP, however collaborative it is, but then coming back and having checkpoints.
This participant articulates the both the need to have a shared belief on staff and also the ability to act upon the generated goals. He stresses the need to have check-points throughout the year to ensure accountability toward the goals.

The end goal for this School Improvement planning process, according to participants, is to shift instructional programming to develop a more culturally relevant pedagogy that reflects student lived experiences. Amal offers a concrete example:

*I’ll speak specifically about gender. If we’re not aware that we have a 60 or 70% male contingent in our classroom, and we’re not thinking about that in terms of the way we’re designing tasks, that’s not equitable to me. We have to know, how is it that boys learn? Are we penalizing them for learning the way that they learn? Are we recognizing that, allowing for that and supporting that through the design of the classroom?*

Taylor echoes a similar sentiment saying:

*The academic work needs to be the equity work. They’re not separate... The foundational aspect of unit planning is equity and inclusion. So that’s what you think about when you’re planning your academic work. Because it doesn’t make sense to try to drill pioneers down somebody’s throat if you haven’t done the work to make it accessible to them. To make it something that is relevant to them... It’s all about being able to articulate what are the student needs in your class and how are you responding to that and creating tasks. It’s a challenge.*

These participants express the importance of creating learning experiences that are reflective of the diversity of the students in the class. They convey the belief that it is insufficient to have an understanding of the diversity in a class without pairing this knowledge with action. Failing to do so results in inequitable learning opportunities for students.
Overall, the participants articulate a clear process for grounding equity efforts in school improvement plans. They draw upon the data to create a shared belief amongst staff and develop strategies for the implementation and monitoring of equity efforts in the school.

**Advocating for Students**

Eight of the participants discuss their role in advocating for students. Casey talks about the importance of this saying:

*We had some literature that said the students that are most likely to drop out are the ones that are at the margins. We need to bring them in and include them. And that's why it's equity work. I always think, your bright, academic level kid, 2 parent family- generally speaking, they don't need a teacher. They'll survive. They have the resiliency. It's the kids that don't have those pieces that you really need to support and motivate.*

This participant expresses that some students have more barriers to their education than others. She speaks about these students as being ‘at the margins’ and professes a belief that they require the support of staff in order to succeed more than students from dominant groups.

A first step in advocating for students is ensuring that staff members recognize student strengths so that they can build on these in helping to create the conditions for their inclusion and success. Rory shares a personal story:

*You need to know your kids. You need to know what each of them brings. That's all the teacher did when I was little. She took the time to get to know me and understand me as a learner. She understood exactly what I brought to the classroom.*
The participant speaks from personal experience and cites an example of a teacher in her past who had taken the time to get to know her. She emphasizes the importance of knowing each student’s profile.

Sam talks about the need to avoid a deficit mindset when engaging in equity work.

*How does the way we talk about the kids influence the way we treat the kids? I don’t care how much money they have and I don’t care who their parents are. These are children that we serve and how do we meet their needs.*

Jinan echoes this sentiment and suggests a shift in mindset:

*My passion has been to work with the students we identify as being at risk. I have great problems with that framing for them. I call them my at promise children because I believe language plays an important part in how we conceptualize what children can and cannot do.*

Both of these participants caution about the detrimental impact a negative viewpoint by educators can have on student achievement. They suggest that holding a perspective that focuses on students’ disadvantaged backgrounds can influence educators’ beliefs about their chances for success. There is a danger that an educator who believes that students are not likely to succeed because of mitigating factors may be more inclined to give up on them. Both of the participants speak about the need to carefully monitor the language used in describing students and their situations. Jinan suggests the need to shift the current educational term ‘at risk’ to ‘at promise’. This modification of language promotes a positive perspective of the student’s chances for success.

A passion for students leads to personal action on the part of each of the participants. Sam shares the types of efforts made for students who were struggling to fit in.
I try to advocate for those kids who have challenges... I try to take into account all those mitigating circumstances for those kids. Make the allowances. Try to provide all that I can in terms of my assistance in referral to outside agencies and services. I try to give time to those kids that need it- extra time.

This participant recognizes that some students require more support because of their lived experience and she speaks about her willingness to provide additional time and effort when needed. Dakota offers a concrete example of going the extra mile for a student in need.

This young student walking in right now is a Gr. 7 student from another school who was having significant mental health issues- significant bullying... And the principal sent me an email saying the family wanted to transfer to my school. And I was like, “Absolutely not. My plate is full. I can’t do any more”... And then I got an email from the parent. The right thing was to set the parameters in place and create a plan that allows this student to be successful in our school. It was an incredible amount of work... Sadly, I have the same amount of resources and we’ve parachuted in a child with significant needs at one of the busiest times of the year. But I would say we’re being successful because deep down we care about kids. I challenged my own thinking and said, “She has to be here.”

This example demonstrates the power that additional time and effort can have in supporting students. In speaking about a child that was struggling in another school and transferred into his school, he points out that both schools were equipped with the same resources. The difference maker for this child was that Dakota and his staff cared about the child and were willing to expend extra effort to ensure her success.
Jordan expresses the view that one of the strongest ways to advocate for students is to bring their voice to discussions on staff to create a sense of urgency for equity work. She explains:

*One of the things we did to move people along is we brought students to our staff meetings. So whether it was a student that had come as a refugee and how having a teacher advocate had helped him. Or we taped kids’ voices. We did it in different ways. We brought student voice and kids were demonstrating appreciation for teachers who went out of their way to help them in different ways. I think that spoke because you pull on people’s heartstrings. They were saying, “It’s totally worth it because you hear it from the kids”.*

This participant appeals to the emotions of teachers on her staff by giving them concrete evidence of student need and the impact teacher actions can have on student success. When the teachers heard directly from students about their appreciation for extra efforts and support, they were more likely to expend additional time and energy to help them.

Kennedy cautions about advocating ‘for’ students and suggests it is more effective to advocate ‘with’ students.

*I worry that we’re sometimes so driven to make a difference for disadvantaged students that we swoop in like a white knight on a horse and make everything better. The danger is that we won’t always be around to do this. How are we helping students to understand their right to an equitable education? And how are we empowering them to act for themselves? I don’t expect students to be able to do this on their own- but I feel that I am more effective at their side, helping to guide them along the way.*
This participant raises the opinion that equity work should not be done for people. Rather, leaders for equity serve a more purposeful role in lending their support so that people can act for themselves. She points out that at some point, the student will no longer have the support of the principal or teachers and will need to act on their own. It is more effective to equip the student with the knowledge and skillset to act for themselves than it is to fix the problem for them.

Overall, the participants recognize the importance of taking the time to learn about the students and their strengths so that they can advocate for and with students and find ways to bring student voice to their schools.

**Developing a Dialogic Context**

Each of the participants speaks to the power of engaging in rich dialogue with staff. While barriers to engaging in these kinds of conversations has been outlined in the previous section, the participants have developed strategies to ensure these conversations and ensuing learning have an opportunity to take place in their schools.

Each of the participants is able to speak about structures they have put in place to bring staff together to learn. For Casey, the structure came through regularly scheduled staff meetings.

*What we did with Staff meetings is that they’re no longer informational. That means they’re all about professional learning. I tell staff that I trust them as professionals to read items. I don’t need to get up and talk about it.*

This participant speaks to the conviction that formal staff meetings need to be used for professional learning. Typically, these meetings often have a component that deals with operational items that need to be addressed with the whole staff. Casey has transferred these items to memos to free up time at staff meetings for professional learning.
Other participants speak about scheduling professional learning sessions during the school day and providing release time so that teachers can come together to learn and have critical discussions. Sam states:

*Case management meetings*- *I try to hold at least 3 of them in one year. We ask the teachers specifically about the at-risk students. What have we been doing with them in the classroom, what have we tried, what strategies have they tried that were successful in moving them forward and then we look at other possibilities. But that, I've found, is a great opportunity to sit down and challenge the teachers to self reflect on what they are seeing and doing in response.*

This participant speaks to the importance of providing professional learning opportunities several times a year for the purpose of focusing on individual students and their achievement. Case management meetings are an approach where teachers identify 1-2 students on which to focus instructional strategies throughout the school year. The teacher meets several times throughout the year with a team of colleagues to review student work, identify areas of student strength and need, devise strategies for improved student achievement, and reflect on the efficacy of instructional strategies on student achievement. For Casey, these meetings offer the opportunity to engage in reflective dialogue with teachers.

Taylor shares a similar strategy:

*So setting them up through different structures in the building. For example, we do the TLCP pieces every week- we embed that in the timetable.*

This participant is referring to a similar professional learning structure called the Teaching Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP). This professional learning structure is outlined in the Ontario
Ministry of Education’s Capacity Building series. It is a model of teacher collaborative inquiry where “The basic idea of the pathway is that classroom practice can be organized in a practical, precise and highly personalized manner for each student, with the intended outcome being increased achievement for all students” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 1). The TLCP engages teachers in a six week cycle of collaborative inquiry where they gather evidence, determine the student area of need, review current practice, design classroom assessment and a learning block, bring student work to the table and engage in shared/moderated marking, reflect on the effectiveness of instructional strategies, and plan next steps. Taylor has devised a way to incorporate time into teacher timetables so that they have time to engage in this form of professional learning on a weekly basis.

Kennedy speaks about embracing one of the structures created at the Board level and using it to drive the equity work being done at the school level.

*I think that through the Rounds and through the development of a Challenge of Practice in schools, there are ways of weaving that through and making sure that we are using an equity lens.*

This participant recognizes the importance of going beyond reflection on student work during Rounds work. Kennedy speaks to viewing the work through a lens of equity that looks for barriers to student achievement.

Rory talks about partnering with other schools to create an atmosphere of shared learning.

*What our school has done with 2 neighbouring schools, we’ve created a triad of schools. We’ve pooled our funds and we offer sessions for parents. Because our communities are so close, we figure it’s best to join forces. We’ve felt this has been a huge success. We*
found that this dialogue has been wonderful in terms of building relationships and getting to know who we all are.

This participant describes a partnership amongst three neighbouring schools where parents and the community of all three are offered parenting sessions. This type of initiative opens dialogue amongst the schools and their communities.

Whatever the structure in place in schools, participants overwhelmingly speak to the need for a richness in dialogue that allows staff to learn together, and to challenge existing inequities. To do this, participants give consideration to who sits on their lead teams and are involved in decision making for the school. Amal notes:

*The idea is to have perspective at the table. The idea is to ensure that we’re engaging the stakeholders in a way that allows folks to be able to put their opinions on the table. To allow them to have dialogue.*

Jesse speaks to encouraging lead members to bring their opinions and ideas to the table.

*So I say, “If you want to be on the lead team, you have to be ready to question me, to challenge me, to argue it out in a professional way. If you’re here just to say, ‘Yeah. That’s great. That’s great’, then you shouldn’t be on the lead team. I want debate and I want dialogue.” And that gets out. It’s always word of mouth. It’s a snowball effect. Those are the things that make a difference.*

Both of these participants articulate the importance of developing an atmosphere at lead team meetings that is not only open to the perspectives of others but also promotes a form of dialogue that is challenging and questioning. This desire to have staff question and engage in critical dialogue also extends to staff beyond the lead team. Dakota states:
You can’t force anyone to be on board, but we try to create the structure and environment where we honour creativity and questioning. And we have an open learning stance. We’ve been working on that for years.

Participants report that this form of open dialogue results in rich learning taking place on staff. Dakota describes the quality of discussion that takes place on staff:

At this school, we ask tough questions, we believe in academic rigor and intellectual engagement- but our style is a relationship piece that comes first. It’s true questioning and it’s deep questioning.

These participants share a belief in the importance of a school environment where all staff question and reflect on issues. This disposition is achieved by setting the tone in the school, and developing a relationship of trust.

Rory expresses the opinion that learning opportunities should not be confined to only a few on staff and makes deliberate efforts to ensure that professional learning is shared with all staff.

I would say that the biggest paradigm shift was the deprivatization of my learning. I am not the keeper of knowledge. This is our school. Even with the Rounds process which we’ve been involved in, any learning I get or my team gets, we will do our very best to condense the learning and share it with staff.

Rory makes a point of ensuring that, when professional learning opportunities take place, the resulting learning is shared back with the staff. She refers to this as the ‘deprivatization’ of learning because it takes it from sole ownership by one person to shared ownership with others.
One of the barriers identified by participants in the previous section to engaging in dialogue and learning opportunities is that it is difficult to find the time or space for this discussion to occur. Each of the participants speaks to strategies they employ to ensure time for discussion and learning. Jesse sums up her belief by saying:

\begin{quote}
When I hear other administrators say we only have 75 minutes a month- we don’t. We have every minute of every day and every opportunity that we take to make that difference. So, I’ll get an email from a teacher. They’re working around our Challenge of Practice around documentation for inquiry based learning. And she’ll send me this quote. “I read this quote and it’s amazing”. And then I write her back. And then she writes me back. And then you start that loop. So there’s every opportunity. I believe that.
\end{quote}

This participant refutes the comment by other administrators that the only opportunity to dialogue with staff is during monthly staff meetings (75 minutes as agreed upon in the Board/ETFO Collective Agreement). She speaks to the importance of taking advantage of informal opportunities that arise each day to have conversations about issues of equity.

Other participants speak to the opportunities that avail themselves through classroom visits. Taylor explains:

\begin{quote}
We go into classrooms on a daily basis. Being in classrooms and having conversations with kids and asking the questions of teachers. We really focus on the instructional task. So yes it is questions about equity but it isn’t strictly about equity.
\end{quote}

This participant describes the practice of daily visits to classrooms to get a finger on the pulse of instructional practices taking place in the school. These visits are paired with dialogue with students and teachers about the learning that is taking place.
Each of the participants speaks about the importance of having dialogue with staff in more informal settings. They speak of conversations in hallways and stress that it is important to capitalize on these opportunities for dialogue. Jordan talks about these more casual conversations:

*We also have all the support of our colleagues and the collective experience of people in the building. You collect that through conversations and your daily work. You know, “I saw this video and I saw that” and it starts conversation. So I find that a lot of our stuff comes- I don’t want to say by accident- because it is intentional.*

While the setting in which these conversations take place is informal, there is an intentionality to the dialogue that takes place. Informal conversation is used as a vehicle for sharing ideas and shifting thinking.

For the participants, dialogue with staff members is seen as being an integral part of their equity work. They make use of already existing structures within their district to discuss equity issues. The participants also recognize the importance of making space for dialogue through informal communication channels. By creating opportunities to discuss equity issues relevant to the school context, the participants are able to move forward with school wide equity efforts.

**Challenging Existing Beliefs and Inequities**

Each of the participants speaks about the importance of confronting inequities and engaging in courageous conversations with staff. Rory brings to light the importance of doing so by saying:

*People are looking to how you will respond to different practices. And whatever you let go, silence speaks mountains.*
By not speaking up when confronted by inequitable practices, the practice is validated and permitted to continue.

Participants admit that engaging in head on conversations about inequities do not come easily to them. Jinan shares:

*I will ask and I will question and I will have hard conversations. That wasn’t easy to do initially. Because I’m a people pleaser and I wanted everybody to be happy. I didn’t want to ruffle feathers or make waves. But I learned that in order to be able to serve all of our kids, then we need to be able to do it.*

This participant shares that his natural disposition is one of conciliator and that he is uncomfortable taking a stand on issues. He recognizes the importance of doing this for students and states that he engages in challenging dialogue despite the discomfort this raises within himself.

Dakota talks about his concern about how he might be perceived by others when speaking up about inequities.

*I raise my voice and I speak. And I try to do it in a kind and respectful way and most people see that. For me, I’m always worried that I’m too strong or too militant or political, but people assure me I’m very gentle and kind. But in my mind, I’m not. In my mind, I am raising the flag or I’m challenging these huge inequities.*

In speaking out against inequities, this participant fluctuates between the desire to be perceived as being kind and respectful and the need to be strong and politically minded. It seems to be important to him to demonstrate the strength in a way that is not offensive to others.
The participants all express the notion that it is important to be transparent with beliefs and intentions. Avery states, ‘They know what I’m about. They know that I’m about inclusion and helping kids to succeed.’ Dakota articulates a similar sentiment about being explicit and firm with a vision saying, ‘My messaging with staff- this is the most important work that we do and it’s not optional.’ Both of these participants express the need to be up front with their convictions and expectations around equity.

Participants also speak about the need to confront inequities head on and with honesty. Sam explains:

I’m up front and honest about things. I don’t like going around problems and curtailing what the actual issue is. I like going straight to it, putting it on the table and- let’s talk. And people have come up to me and said it’s refreshing because even if they don’t like what I’m going to say, I still tell them.

This participant expresses the conviction that it is more effective to deal with issues directly than it is to skirt around them. The response from her staff has been positive because they report that they know where they stand and don’t need to guess about ulterior motives.

To hold these types of honest conversations, Jordan goes back to the importance of having established a relationship of trust with staff members.

The staff are much more accepting of you making a point. No matter how frank it’s going to be. I feel a great weight is lifted off me that I don’t have to sit and think about “How am I going to say this?” I’m able to just get to the point, come out with it, say this is the way it is and this is what we need to do. And they seem to be very open because they feel so comfortable with me.
The relationship building work described earlier in this section pays great dividends when principals need to engage in challenging conversations. Because of the level of comfort and trust already established with staff, they feel more able to speak frankly without fear of damaging their relationships.

Having these types of courageous conversations is seen by participants as sometimes causing discomfort for staff. Several of the participants speak about this discomfort in a positive sense. Kennedy states:

*As we worked through things and started the conversations, it started to bubble. And people were getting uncomfortable. I remember my SERT (special education resource teacher) and VP (vice principal) saying, “Oh- it’s getting really uncomfortable”. And I said, “Great! I’m glad it’s uncomfortable. Because I’ve been uncomfortable with the feeling of it”. You can’t move if everyone’s comfortable.*

This participant voices the importance of moving people beyond their comfort zone when doing equity work. Jinan shares advice that he had received from a colleague regarding discomfort:

*It upsets some people when you use an equity lens as it discomforts them. My mentor always taught me that you comfort the agitated and you agitate the comfortable.*

The words of advice previously offered to this participant verbalize the discomfort that needs to result from an interruption to the status quo. Jinan suggests that some people need to be challenged to move forward while others require support for their position.

Participants report being more diligent in having difficult conversations when they meet with resistance or feel that staff members need the push in their learning about equity. Amal states:
For those folks whose decisions I see as being inequitable, who are marginalizing students, who may be not necessarily creating experiences that are inclusive, then I become much more engaged with them... sometimes I have to be forceful and that’s when they feel I’m not aware of what they’re needing. Because there’s that time where you have to work more closely with somebody. And communicating that is always the challenge. How do I let people understand that this why you and I are going to be doing some partnering on things and this is how you’re going to be successful at the end of it.

This participant shares his intentionality in engaging in dialogue with some people. When he perceives inequitable actions or practice, he works closely with the person to challenge and change the behavior and attitude. Amal reports that his actions are often met with resistance however he continues to push forward toward an intended outcome.

Jesse speaks about her use of memos for staff when issues are more widespread or need a broader audience. In sending out the memos, she checks with other staff to ensure that the message will not cause undue discomfort for people.

My memos are something that I use. They deal with exactly the issues that we’re dealing with in our learning. If something’s a little controversial, I’ll ask a trusted teacher on staff, “Would you mind reading this over. Do you think this is out of their zone of proximal development? Is it going to send people into hijack if I send this out?”

The participant recognizes that some messages need to target a wider audience and uses memos to do this. While she wants the communication to be clear and direct, she expresses an understanding that it is sometimes necessary to temper the message to meet people where they are and avoid creating an even wider rift.
The participants articulate the need to be clear and explicit about their equity agenda. They rely on the trust they have built with staff so that they can engage in courageous conversations that push people out of their comfort zones and challenge existing inequities.

**Empowering Others to Act**

To implement conditions for equity and dismantle oppressive structures in schools, participants express an understanding that this must not be the work of a sole person but rather the collective effort of the staff, parents and students. Alex sums this up by saying:

*If every decision you make is in the best interest of kids, I don’t think you can go wrong. There’s other criteria that we meet in making a good decision, but I think that’s where the work resides. I don’t think it resides in the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. I don’t think it resides at the Board committee. I think it resides in individual schools, principals, teachers, whoever interacts with kids and families.*

For this participant, the power of equity work does not exist in the provincial policy or within the district’s Equity Committee. He voices the conviction that equity work is a collective responsibility of all stakeholders in a school community.

To begin to empower people, participants comment on the need to build upon existing strengths. Jesse states:

*It’s like going on a treasure hunt. You’re looking for the good in every single person. Because that’s the piece that you’re going to access. To build on to what’s going to be the next step for them.*
Rory shares a similar notion saying, ‘By leveraging assets, I always think that I’ve been able to get the best out of people.’ Both of these participants recognize the talent that resides within school communities. They suggest that principals need to harness the capacity on staff and use it to move equity initiatives forward.

Jesse relates that, in dealing with resistant people, it helps to determine where resistance is rooted.

As I’ve grown in this role, I see that we need to look at them as we would our students—and not in a condescending way. As a teacher with empathy and caring and patience and openness. And if they are being resistant, to understand that as fear of something. And to understand what that something is and then to break it down for them. Give them the scaffold. Make it smaller. And I always say to them, “I don’t care where you are on the path, just be on the path. What do you need from me to be on that path”

The participant suggests that resistance is a result of fear. Rather than focusing on a person’s resistance, Jesse recommends finding the cause of the person’s discomfort. She compares the actions of a principal dealing with resistant staff to the actions of a teacher dealing with a resistant student. By understanding the discomfort, the principal can shape intervention in a manner that validates their concerns but still moves them forward in a supportive manner.

Rory shares this notion of needing to move people out of their comfort zone in a manner that is respectful and understanding.

There’s also the need to be able to push people out of their safe place. Sometimes you’re afraid to do this. Because you know there are some people working really hard and there’s some people barely working. And it’s knowing how hard and when to push in a
way that won’t discourage the hard working but is enough to get the others out of their complacency.

The participant voices the delicate balance required by principals in recognizing the differing mindsets on staff and shifting attitudes in a way that is not deflating or discouraging.

Other staff who are working to implement conditions for equity sometimes require support in dealing with the resistance they encounter in their work. Rory shares how she supports and nurtures the efforts of staff engaged in equity work.

I had a lot of conversations with them because they’re very knowledgeable. We had conversations about people feeling threatened and what happens when people feel threatened. Because there is the core group who has done things the way that things have always been done and how are you going to move people’s thinking. And we talked about the importance of those interpersonal pieces- of sitting and listening, and small baby steps, and earning peoples trust, and earning the credibility in this setting. Change doesn’t happen overnight.

Rory shares her knowledge of the importance of building relationships and dealing with resistance to equip them with the skills needed to move the work forward.

Each of the participants speaks about the importance of providing opportunities for all staff to engage in equity work. Taylor notes that it is often a privileged few who are given opportunities:

We have literacy coaches that are usually the same people that take on those roles that get the same opportunities for professional development. So one approach was to provide coverage to anyone interested- there was no tapping of shoulders. I don’t operate that
way. Opening it up and then rotating through. Having a different person join the Network meetings to get the information. People have felt that has really opened their eyes in terms of what information we’re getting and how it’s used at the school level... In terms of that equity of opportunity piece, I’ve heard from many staff that’s something they appreciate. People can take on whatever pieces.

Rather than investing solely in a chosen few people, this participant advises involving as many people in learning opportunities as possible. By offering more people the chance to engage in learning through a variety of different avenues, it exposes more people to equity thinking and begins to shift the mindset in the school.

The result of this type of approach is shared by Dakota who states:

> I have an incredibly dynamic staff. I give them freedom to learn and take chances and it’s a very distributive leadership style. We’re co-leaders, co-learners. I’m there with them.

For this participant, the act of sharing learning and leadership with staff has resulted in an atmosphere of co-learning in the school.

Empowering people to act is not limited to staff. Several participants speak to the importance of ensuring that parents and students have voice in school decisions and equity issues. Dakota shares:

> We’ve done a fascinating thing about reaching out to the community and asking them what religious celebrations they’d like to promote in the school. And we’ve given them the forum to make a display in our hallway. It’s amazing.... You can walk into our front
foyer and learn about Dia del Morte- the day of the death. Or you can learn about Kwanzaa. Or we had baby Jesus in a manger in our hallway.

This participant recognizes the value in giving parents a voice in the different religious celebrations that are recognized at the school. Jordan shares work being done to give students an understanding and voice for equity issues.

I harness student leadership really well. We’ve had an amazing Gr. 7 leadership team where we talk about deep issues. We have a TED educational club which is one of the few in Ontario. We’re the only one in the district.

Students in this school are given the opportunity to engage in discourse about issues of social justice. Building capacity amongst students on this leadership team is necessary to promoting change throughout the school.

The participants recognize that equity work is not an individual enterprise and must be the work of the collective. They describe strategies that allow them to find people’s strength and leverage their assets to drive equity efforts forward in their schools.

Utilizing Political Savvy

In doing the difficult equity work in a climate that can sometimes be hostile or politically charged, many of the participants share strategies they have developed over time that help them to work around obstacles.

While participants have been forthright in their opinion that equity issues need to be confronted head on, they express the need to be strategic in doing so. Jinan shares:
I don’t actually open my mouth and say whatever I think because if I did, it would be a lot more colourful than what I do say. So I actually pick what I say and there’s a lot of thought that goes into when I say, what I say and who I say it to.

This participant recognizes the need to be strategic about the expression of opinion. He shares that he thinks carefully about his messages and is deliberate in their timing and audience. Jesse speaks about the importance of wording challenging opinion in a way that is respectful yet probing.

I think it’s always about being respectful to the superintendent and system and trustees, but asking respectfully. And always being focused on children—not my need to be right.

“For this family, this makes sense. Can you help me understand why it can’t happen?”

Rather than communicating opinions in an outwardly challenging manner, this participant recognizes the importance of wording them in a way that does not offend and that drives the initiative forward. In particular, Jesse acknowledges that deference is needed when dealing with senior administration or trustees.

Avery notes that it isn’t only knowing the tone with which to raise issues but also taking the time and being prepared.

I don’t shy away from barriers, but I don’t rush toward them either. I think about them, I talk with people when I’m confused, and I try to be open in a really humble way with people who are superior to me in their role.

The participant recognizes that actions do not need to be immediate and that it is often prudent to give further thought to issues prior to acting. Doing so allows a person to seek advice from others and determine the most effective delivery mode depending on the variables of the situation.
Jesse speaks about anticipating barriers and being proactive in setting the conditions to minimize them. She offers an example of the messaging she used with staff upon being transferred to a school.

*What I learned from my first experience is that in some schools they can blame you for the change that is happening that you don’t even know is change. So I said to my new staff, there are two kinds of change. There’s a kind of change that will happen just cause I’m not the last principal. Even if you loved the last principal, I can’t be that person. I can’t know what was going on because I wasn’t here. So there’s the change that will happen that’s completely unintentional. It’s just because I am not him. Then there’s the kind of change that’s intentional and that’s what we’re going to do together. And then I showed them the information I got back from the people who gave me feedback from those interviews. And that’s what set the foundation.*

This participant recognizes the resistance that principals often encounter when they join a new school and she describes the steps she took to minimize staff anxiety around the change of administration. Jesse addressed the tension around change directly with staff by defining the types of change that were inherent in the situation. She acknowledged the unintentional change that would result from a different person being in the role, and she highlighted the intentional changes that would come about to move school initiatives forward. By being up front about these two forms of change, Jesse sought to remove the perception of a hidden agenda. She anticipated possible barriers to her equity work and was proactive in setting the conditions to minimize their impact.

Participants also indicate that a key strategy lies in knowing whose voice will have the greatest impact in different situations. Jesse shares:
I will get texts during admin meetings saying, “Can you say this. Can you say that”... My colleague knew in that moment that it was better to have me do it as a white face... It’s knowing who should voice the issue so that it can be heard.

This participant suggests that a person’s identity can sometimes be seen by others as influencing their beliefs and actions. In these situations, it is more effective to have the points raised by someone else who is not seen as benefiting from the issue. The participant offers an example of a principal colleague not wanting to speak up about an issue because of her ethnicity. The colleague was concerned that her points would not be taken seriously because others would believe she had a hidden agenda. Having someone who is white raise the issue was determined to be strategically more impactful and less open to resistance.

Each of the participants verbalizes the importance of knowing the system and using it to their advantage. Avery states:

You learn to navigate and negotiate. Which means, you learn the dominant culture and use it to be able to navigate to try and bring light to those issues.

For this participant, the strategy lies not in fighting the system but in recognizing the existing power dynamics and using them to move forward equity initiatives. Jesse shares an analogy that helps her in finding the spaces in the system when barriers present themselves.

Instead of “Well, the system doesn’t work”, it’s finding the space and possibility. I remember hearing our former Director speak and he talked about when things crack, that really what it does is it lets in the light... And that little thing stuck with me. And then I saw this picture of this Japanese pottery. That when the pottery breaks, they seal it with gold. And it reminded me of what he had said. And I think that when we do get a barrier,
we have to learn something. And that’s it. I don’t have to get angry. I don’t have to fight.

I have to think, and I have to learn and I have to really understand what the barrier is.

This participant flips barriers from being seen as an impediment to being viewed as an opportunity to learn and move forward. She advocates for finding the space in situations for recognizing barriers, moving around them and doing equity work.

Jesse also reflects on the different role a principal plays as a leader for equity. Without the autonomy of the classroom, she stresses this need to find the spaces in doing equity work.

As a teacher, I felt no boundary. Because I had autonomy in my classroom. But as a leader, it’s very different... “As a leader, what does equity look like?” It’s different than in a classroom. And I think it’s about creating a space of possibility for things that happen. And to listen and to consider multiple perspectives. And provide them with like the memos. You know, the little provocations. But not the big soap box speech about “This is the way it needs to happen”. Because it shuts people down. It’s a dance.

The participant suggests that teachers are able to direct instruction and infuse conditions for equity as they see fit. Principals do not possess the same degree of control within their schools. Principals do not direct equity work first hand and rely on others to set the conditions within the school. Principals create an environment for equity work but need to do this with tact and skill.

Four of the participants disclose that they have broken rules as necessary when it serves the best interests of students. Dakota shares:

I feel like it’s a duty and responsibility now to help all children and people that I work with to succeed. So I do things differently. I break rules when it’s good for children and families.
This participant voices the opinion that serving the best interests of students is most important and that he is willing to break the rules if it is needed for student success. Prompted for an example of this, the participant goes on to describe a situation where rules had been broken:

*I break the French Immersion procedure for entry because I recognize this is a brilliant child who’s going to catch up. And they do. So that’s one example of how we bend the rules. We’re a publically funded educational system. How could I deny this child? I could deny this child. I could say, “This is the policy”. But I take the time, and it is time.*

Alex speaks about knowing when to keep quiet about actions that might be perceived as breaking the rules.

*I told the School Council but I did not tell my superintendent. I didn’t tell my superintendent because I was worried that he would say, “You can’t do that”... I didn’t ask my superintendent. Is it taking a risk? I don’t know.*

This participant has learned not to seek permission from his superintendent in some cases. He recognizes that there is a chance he will be blocked from completing his actions.

The participants recognize that effectively leading for equity requires a principal to possess political skills that help to navigate issues. They convey the importance of knowing the system and understanding the importance of timing and voice in challenging inequities in a respectful manner.

**Developing Coping Strategies**

Over the course of the interviews, participants share the often grueling nature of equity leadership and the heavy toll it can sometimes take on their well-being. Participants were probed about coping strategies that help them when things become overwhelming. One strategy mentioned by several of the participants is the benefit of having a sense of humour:
The other coping mechanism that many of us use has been humour. And there’s a lot of research around it—about how minoritized people or allies make light of the stereotypes of which they encounter... So humour has been a large part of how I deal with it. I was talking with another friend recently and I was explaining a situation and she started laughing. And I said to her, “How can you laugh?” and she said, “It’s either I laugh or I cry- and I’m tired of crying”.

Jinan echoes this tendency to use laughter to break the tension caused by situations.

One of my friends says, “If you ever saw our emails, you’d never know we did equity work.” It’s not just the questions, it’s the jokes we say to each other. It keeps it light.

Both of these participants articulate the need to keep things light and infuse humour into their interactions with like-minded equity leaders. In their words, without humour, the work can become overwhelming.

Several of the participants talk about the need to intentionally think about and care for their personal wellness. In Dakota’s words:

It’s about maintaining your wellness... you have to watch your level of wellness. And you need to celebrate joy. You need to be aware of how you want yourself to be defined. I want to be defined as somebody who loves life and loves my family first. Put them first.

This participant describes intentionality in maintaining his wellness. He speaks about carefully monitoring his wellbeing, and keeping his priorities in check. For some participants, this pursuit of wellness is through a hobby that helps them to escape their daily work. Jinan shares:

Gardening. So I go home and I go in my garden and I get lost in there. People always comment on my garden because it’s amazing and the way it looks. And I always say to
them that my gardening is my therapy and if you look at how intense it is, you understand how much therapy I need! (laughs)

This participant uses his hobby of gardening as a means to break away from the pressures of his work. He laughs that the extravagance of his garden indicates his tremendous need for escape.

Three of the participants comment that there have been times when their equity work has become too much for them to shoulder and they have needed to pull away. Dakota shares an example from a difficult time in his life:

I was just a really dark person. I was worried. And my partner was worried. So I pulled away from the committee and life got a lot better. I was glad I got out. And I’ve had a much better year... I’ve stepped away... I’d say I’ve been able to do more things because I’ve been happier and more focused.

For this participant, stepping away from the equity work offered relief and allowed him to better focus on other aspects of his job.

Each of the participants acknowledges the personal toll that equity work can take on their well-being. They describe the importance of developing strategies to maintain their wellness and recognize that it is sometimes necessary to take a step away from their efforts in the interest of self-preservation.

**Supports to Principals’ Equity Leadership**

The Conceptual Framework (Figure 1) outlines the importance of providing support for principals who are leading equity work. Principals who carry out their well-intentioned work are met with barriers that impede their progress. Upon being confronted by barriers, principals can either revert to previous efforts and conditions or can work strategically to circumvent these
barriers, drawing upon supports that accommodate their efforts. It is the supports that principals access that are the focus of this section. During the interviews, participants speak about supports they currently draw upon to sustain and drive their equity work as well as desired support that they feel would be beneficial to their efforts in the future.

Current Supports

A number of supports are identified by participants as currently helping to move and sustain their equity leadership efforts. These supports include the use of the provincial and district policy to validate their efforts and lend urgency to equity work, professional development around equity, and both formal and informal network support.

Policy

Education policy can serve to lend a climate of accountability to issues in education as well as provide a roadmap to assist educators in achieving desired outcomes. While each of the participants touch upon the Ministry’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (PPM 119) as a possible support to their equity leadership, reaction to the policy’s usefulness is mixed. On a positive note, Amal expresses an opinion that the policy is a step in the right direction and has helped equity initiatives to grow.

Are we farther along? Have we moved the bar? Are we more cognisant and aware?
Absolutely. And I think the Equity and Inclusivity Strategy has something to do with that.

In a policy context from the Ministry- it was an important precursor to the work that needs to happen in schools.
This participant indicates that the introduction of the current Equity Strategy set the context for doing equity work within the province. He shares his belief that the result has been an increased awareness regarding equity issues.

Jordan speaks to using the policy to create a sense of urgency around equity issues with his staff saying, ‘I find that because of the Equity Strategy being presented to the staff as what we must do- we can use it as leverage.’ The very existence of the policy lends credence to equity initiatives and can be portrayed to staff as mandatory work to be done in schools. Alex cautions about using the policy in this manner, saying:

*Policies are in place. But you can’t sound self-righteous when you address these policies. You have to appeal to people where they are.*

This participant does not dispute the strategy of quoting policy and using it to enforce action, but advises of the need to be sensitive and delicate in doing so. He stresses the concern of coming across as superior to staff and advocates for meeting people where they currently are with equity issues.

All of the participants agree that having an equity policy lends some importance to equity issues but that the policy lacks accountability. Avery explains:

*I think Ontario did a good thing with the Strategy. The problem with the Strategy is that it’s not legislation so it doesn’t have teeth.*

The current policy has infused a stipulation that equity be woven into all board and school improvement strategies. The rationale is that this will ensure that equity be embedded in all school improvement strategies and that equity be the lens for developing initiatives (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). While this makes sense in theory, there is no accountability structure in place that will monitor school plans in relation to overall board plans. The policy
falls short in this aspect with the only mentioned measures being the results of EQAO assessments, provision of Board plans on websites, and articulation of strategies in each Board’s yearly Director’s Address (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).

Alex suggests that educators shouldn’t expect the mere implementation of policy to make things happen and that the work needs to be done at the ground level.

_I don’t know that you can blame the lack of advancement of the work on the policy. I think it resides at that local level and people having commitment to the work. Policy is the big picture and it’s meant to apply to the province. I know there are goals and various strategies need to be in place by certain years of the implementation and certain benchmarks that school boards needed to meet... It’s up to individual administrators and teachers and communities to implement it._

This participant stresses that the wording of the policy and its components should not be blamed for the failure to advance equity work. He suggests that the policy is only as good as the people that are working to implement it. Without commitment and effort on the part of school stakeholders, conditions for equity will remain elusive.

Two of the participants admit to the policy being largely unknown by educators. Taylor states:

_I venture to ask and to challenge- of the 6,000 educators we have in our district, how many of those educators are actually aware of our Equity Policy? So I ask, how aware and versant are we of what the content is of that. And what it entails and means when you unpack it._
Even as a self-defined leader for equity, Alex acknowledges the lack of impact the policy has on his practice.

“I don’t remember the last time I read the policy— I’m just being transparent. I interact with the policy because of my work on the regional equity committee and we talk a lot about policy context. But I think the most important work I’ve done in the area of equity is just in the school. It’s in daily decision making frameworks... So where the policy is concerned- if I can’t recall it, it’s not in my schema of things.”

Each of these participants expresses the perception that educators are largely unaware of the Ministry Equity Strategy. Given this lack of awareness, they would seem to argue that the wording of the policy does not having an impact on the equity work that is taking place in the district.

**Professional Development**

Each of the participants expresses dissatisfaction with the professional development that preceded the roll out of the policy and the training they have received since, citing it as being superficial. Kennedy asserts:

*As far as building common understanding- I don’t think the roll out of this policy was effective in our Board. It was so narrow the focus.*

Sam describes her opinion of the training she has received:

*When the policy first came out, they provided strategies for promoting equity in schools. I remember- it was mostly putting up posters, prayer rooms, announcements, acknowledging different faiths. When there is a different faith day, there are e-mail*
announcements recognizing it and wishing people well. But what are we doing with that? What is the impact? Where is the change? What are we doing in terms of the application?

These participants describe professional learning opportunities that are narrow in focus and centre on visible and concrete expressions of race and faith accommodations. They indicate that professional learning did not focus on building a common understanding of the complexities of equity work.

Resources

When asked about specific resources that support their work, the study participants had a difficult time citing specific examples. When pressed, a couple of resources were identified as being used to support their equity work in schools. Two resources that were developed by the district were described. Rory described one resource:

What I like right now is the Equity Scan that our Board has— that I know right now is being refined. It allows for different workgroups to view the school according to an equity lens. And really identify the things they’re doing great in terms of building an inclusive community and what they need to focus on next. As well, the Faith Day calendar. Looking at Faith Days and how we plan activities.

The Equity Scan is a tool that was developed by the district to enable students, school staff, support staff, administrators, and community to review a school and/or workplace for equitable and inclusive practices. The Equity Scan includes a number of statements that align with the guiding principles within the Ministry Equity Strategy and district policy, and incorporates indicators and strategies that support each statement. Rory reports that the tool has been effective
in helping school teams to evaluate their current environment through an equity lens, and plan next steps. The other district resource referenced by the participant is the district’s Faith Day calendar. This calendar is a selected representation of special days and holy days of the major faith communities within the district. Rory reports using this calendar to plan equity activities within the school.

Another resource mentioned by Jordan is one which was developed by the teacher’s union:

*The Social Justice kit from ETFO was a good resource that some of the teachers used this year.*

Dakota points to different readings which expand his knowledge.

*I love ‘The Equity Continuum’. It’s a really great book. It’s quite rich and progressive. The media- the news- is such an incredible forum of information and knowledge... I read a lot.*

This participant talks about the value of reading in helping to develop an understanding of equity issues. From books to news reports, Dakota expresses a belief that rich learning takes place that furthers his thinking.

For the most part, the participants are less impressed with concrete resources and instead place their belief in the importance of an equity-based mindset. Amal states:

*I think it’s not about a resource- although there are amazing resources out there. It’s about opening mindsets.*

Casey shares a similar opinion and expands upon the need to educate students as critical consumers:
I don’t know if it’s about specific resources. It’s more about how we work through existing things with an outlook that is more equity minded. Whatever you have in the school, even if you have some resources that are not great and are not reflective of the population in the school—if you know how to speak to it and get kids to critically examine resources and biases that are present in texts, that’s powerful in itself.

Both of these participants speak to the power of equity-based mindsets. The impact of even excellent concrete resources will be minimal in the absence of people who make use of a critical lens. Casey also suggests that concrete resources do not necessarily align with each school’s context and specific needs.

Network Support:

Participants are most passionate about the support they experience from networks: formal or informal. Formal networks are those that are created within the district to support the professional learning that takes place across schools. These networks are formed either by virtue of geographic location or a common learning focus. Informal networks are those formed when educators come together on their own accord with like-minded people for the purpose of furthering their learning or offering each other support.

Several of the participants speak to the support they receive through formal Board networks. For Amal, this support is found in his family of schools Learning Network:

*The Learning Network is an incredible tool because there’s an opportunity for bringing things to the Network, crunching that with others, having the perspectives on certain things, working with your staff that’s there and then bringing it back and working with the staff here. I think that’s a very powerful learning tool.*
This participant finds the district’s Learning Networks to be a valuable tool in allowing educators to engage in reflective learning and support the learning that is taking place across schools.

For Alex, his work on the Board’s equity committee offers the opportunity to dialogue and learn with colleagues.

*I find that being on those regional equity committees helps frame, inform and support direction. You have conversations that help deepen your thinking, deepen your learning. People asking questions- all people very committed to equity with a baseline understanding of what equity looks like, what we’re striving for, a common goal and a common vision. That helps extend my learning and my growth. It helps advance the work I want to do in the school.*

This form of committee involvement that is specifically focused on the area of equity allows the participant to enhance his understanding of equity issues. The close involvement with leaders for equity and dialogue about issues deepens understanding and contributes to the work Alex is doing at his own school.

Even more powerful is the support participants receive through informal networks of like-minded colleagues. Each of them speaks with passion about the learning that takes place and the emotional support they receive from these interactions. For some participants, these networks are casual and low key. Amal shares:

*My own personal network of colleagues that we’ll go out and have lunches and dinners and things- and just talk about the difficulties that we’re having at our school. And when you surround yourself with forward thinking people, I find that there is real reward in*
having those conversations. I mean- yeah, we laugh- but we also push each other’s thinking in certain ways.

This notion of having one’s thinking challenged is expressed by Rory:

*My biggest support though has been in the couple of people who engage in this work- who are the allies and champions of this work. Sometimes you need those spaces where you can decompress and you need someone to help you see it differently. Or you need someone to challenge you. Those are the people that I go to and those networks have been much, much better.*

Both of these participants share experiences where they socialize with like-minded people in a casual setting. They indicate that these informal networks provide them with an opportunity to unwind and also to have their thinking pushed and challenged. The key element to the dialogue that ensues from this type of informal network lies in the trust amongst colleagues. Jesse shares:

*So knowing that you have someone you can trust. Colleagues where you can say, “I’m angry about this. I’m confused about this. I think that I don’t know what I’m talking about with this. Is this ignorant of me?” You know, being able to ask those questions and know that it’s not going to come back to haunt you. It’s what I think makes the biggest difference.*

This participant shares a feeling of comfort knowing that she can talk about her uncertainties in an atmosphere that is safe and where the disclosures will not be used against her.

Casey states a similar notion:
I call it the personal rolodex... It’s who you know. Because it’s not that straightforward.
It’s knowing who to call and who are your friends... having the right circle of friends to call on for different things. I think it would be hard without a network of people.

This participant speaks to informal networks as being a powerful resource. She talks about the strategy of developing working relationships with people who can serve as a resource in times of need.

Rory shares the profound impact one colleague had in supporting during a time of crisis:

*Without my mentor, I think I would have left the profession... My mentor- I call her my guardian angel- she worked through issues with me, guided me about how to respond to the different pieces that were emerging. It was very hard.*

This participant articulates the support that is sometimes provided through informal networks of colleagues. In this instance, Rory found herself in a situation where she did not know how to respond. She was able to find support through a colleague that provided advice and emotional support.

In general, the participants report various supports that help to sustain their equity leadership efforts. While their comfort level with the support generated through the Equity Strategy, professional development and resources differs, each participant conveys the clear notion that the strongest support is gained through participation in formal and informal networks of colleagues.
Desired Supports

In addition to the supports currently available to them, participants articulate a number of supports that they feel would be beneficial in assisting with the efforts of leaders for equity. They indicate that improved human resources, more designated time for professional learning, system and union support, and changes to the system would be beneficial in supporting their equity work.

Human Resource Support:

Participants speak to the need for increased human resource support in the area of equity. It is suggested that this support could be utilized in several ways. Sam points to the need for the current staffing allocation in schools to be increased to meet student needs.

*I could do with 2 EA’s that we need so badly here. I need the special ed to be full time to truly be able to go into classes and help the at risk students. I would love a CYW where she could hold some of those groups to teach social interaction skills. So that's in terms of human power to do what we need to do.*

This participant indicates that increased staffing in the form of Special Education Resource teachers, Educational Assistants, and Child and Youth Workers are required in order for her to be able to undertake the equity work that needs to take place in her school.

Other participants speak to building capacity through increased support from consultants in the area of equity. Rory suggests:
Looking at our Board’s team of Inclusive Schools and Community Services—doubling everyone. Having more supports put there would be excellent because they are there to support administrators, teachers, and community. That’s their work. To build capacity.

The Inclusive Schools and Community Services team in this district is a group that is comprised of consultants that have an understanding and familiarity with different cultural groups represented throughout the district. The team is available upon referral to work with school teams and connect with parents and community agencies in an effort to remove barriers and improve relationships between the school and home/community. Rory recognizes the importance of this group in building capacity throughout the district but indicates that the size of this team needs to be doubled in order to meet the needs emerging across the district.

Jinan suggests expanding upon current human resources to include consultants who could build educators’ knowledge of sound instructional practice in the area of equity.

We need the community liaison teachers for example, but we also need equity instructional leaders that can go into schools and demonstrate how to do really rich lessons using culturally relevant pedagogy so that teachers can understand that.

Casey expands on this saying:

As a science teacher, I had a science consultant that I could call when we ran into challenges and could offer support to teachers or come to a science department meeting. There’s a literacy consultant. There’s a numeracy consultant. If there can be a call-a-friend…but call-a-specialist. I think we need that. It’s so simple but I think we need something as basic as that.
Both of these participants express the need for a position to be created within the district for equity consultants. The school district currently has consultants who specialize in the areas of literacy, math, science, physical education, music and the Arts. These equity consultants are seen by the participants as being able to demonstrate instructional programs that connect with students’ lived experiences and are reflective of the cultures that are represented in the school. It is stressed by Jinan that the Board needs to provide some form of counseling support for leaders who are engaged in the work and are feeling the emotional toll.

*I think there also needs to be support put in place for the mental, emotional toll it takes on people who are doing the work. Things like compassion fatigue training. Having people come in so people can debrief from time to time- not just when there’s major trauma. Because what they don’t realize, is that those people are going through trauma on a day to day basis... My background before I came to education was in social work. One of the rules was that every counselor needs a counselor.*

This participant speaks about the importance of supporting the emotional needs of staff engaged in equity leadership work prior to their well-being becoming affected. He indicates that other professions are proactive in providing counseling support through debriefs and dialogue. Jinan points to the often grueling nature of equity work and asserts that this form of support is needed to allow people to do their work and maintain their well-being. For the participants, increased human resource support is seen as being a key to improved equity efforts in schools.

*Designated Time for Professional Development:*

In the previous section, the participants express an opinion that professional learning in the district has been surface level and has not focused on building a common understanding and
gone deep into equity issues. Their desire for future learning can be summarized by the following quotes. Taylor states:

I think there’s a real need for professional learning. I don’t think there are common understandings of equity.

Jordan adds:

I think there needs to be mandatory training for administrators.

Alex suggests:

Training for teachers on culturally relevant pedagogy and what that looks like in practice to build inclusive classrooms.

In order to conduct this professional learning in a manner where people will engage in the learning, Amal points out the need for designated time for this learning to take place and for staff members to have opportunities for rich dialogue.

I think having the time or opportunity to have dialogues to me is important. So if I were to ask for support, it would be “How am I able to create time to have dialogues and have various perspectives influencing those dialogues”...People come to a horizon and when they start rubbing up against their personal horizon, that sandpaper rub, that’s when you start to get resistance. Because they’re at their capacity in terms of whatever concept you’re talking about. So when you have time to dialogue and you have other perspectives at the table, the goal is to expand that horizon just a little bit. And if we can expand people’s horizon’s just a little bit then we’ve increased capacity. And that person may or may not be resistant anymore because their capacity has been increased by that process. So that would be the piece that would help a lot.
This participant recognizes that having the time to engage in dialogue is necessary to broaden people’s understanding of equity issues and move beyond their resistance. In schools, there are limited times for staff to come together and engage in focused dialogue. In this district, teachers are attached to their classes in elementary schools for all but 240 minutes of a 1500 minute school week. The 240 minutes constitutes prep time that is teacher directed and cannot be influenced or planned by principals. From Amal’s perspective, the provision of time for staff to come together for the purpose of engaging in dialogue about equity issues would help to move the work in schools forward.

System Support:

In looking at the system structures currently in place in the district, each participant recommends revisions to better support equity initiatives in schools.

Several participants speak to the need to embed equity language in all aspects of the system. Avery states:

*I also think it’s important that we explicitly embed the language of equity in everything that we’re doing in the system. From the moment that we hire to the moment we retire. All sorts of pieces around having that conversation.*

Several participants speak to doing this through the structures already in place in the Board. Amal suggests:

*I think that if we’re valuing Rounds and Networks right now, equity has to be embedded in this work. Whatever structure we have in place, it has to become part of it... there needs to be more alignment. If we’re embracing these as structures and we don’t weave*
things together, things will remain very separate. And equity work will look as being separate. But it should be part of what we’re doing.

For this participant, equity needs to be used as a lens for all work and structures taking place within the district. He stresses that equity work should not be a separate entity but should instead be a consideration in all initiatives.

Each participant speaks with conviction about the influence of superintendents in the Board. For Alex, it is the accountability that the superintendent could enforce in getting principals to move on equity issues:

And the superintendents- because if they hold us accountable- even if we don’t believe in it, there’s a CYA piece. I’ll cover my butt and do whatever it is, right?

This participant expresses the conviction that principals respond to explicit directions from their superintendents in order to avoid disapproval or reprimand. He suggests that superintendents could support the implementation of initiatives for conditions of equity in schools by communicating expectations to principals and holding them accountable for equity initiatives.

For Jinan, desired support is seen as having a superintendent who understands equity issues, places value on them and asks critical questions.

I have a superintendent here, that when we had our last SIP (school improvement planning) meeting asked very critical questions and good questions. She asked us about our hiring practices. She asked us to look at our staff lists and think about how the staff represented our population- however you wanted to look at it. And explain it. That’s the first time I’ve ever been asked that. I thought, “Wow! Way to go!”... I wonder could that
opportunity be given to all schools to critically think about their SIP? Are all schools being held accountable for their equity goal? Because otherwise, it’s willy-nilly.

Having previously heard from participants that the lack of value placed on equity work serves as a barrier to creating conditions for equity in schools, it is encouraging to hear Jinan mention a superintendent who asks challenging questions during the school improvement planning meetings. Jinan speaks enthusiastically about the positive pressure these questions have on equity goals and staff actions.

Similarly, superintendents are seen as having the ability to offer support in having principals dialogue with each other on equity issues. Dakota states:

*The crux is going to come when the focus of admin meetings is not on “How to deal with an unsatisfactory TPA (teacher performance appraisal)” for 45 minutes but rather “How are you infusing equitable practice within your school? What does that look like in different schools? Let’s talk about it. How are you setting up your SIP goals?” When we have those conversations, that’s when it’s going to happen.*

For both of these participants, having a superintendent that asks critical questions about equity in relation to school improvement planning, and provides opportunity for dialogue at the school and regional level is a powerful reinforcer and driver of equity work.

Jesse suggests that the simple act of recognition from superintendents would lend support to leaders working for equity in their schools.

*Principals need recognition too... Every principal needs a pat on the back sometimes— which not all of us get. And recognition for the efforts that we put in every day. It would be nice to get even that. So starting with that little piece.*
The efforts of principals in leading for equity requires validation and system support. The participants recognize that this support can be found through the embedding of equity language in system policies as well as through intentional questioning and accountability expectations from superintendents of schools.

*Union Support:*

Alex suggests that the support of teaching unions would help to spur on equity work in schools. He states:

*I know the Federations have done a lot of work in the area of equity and of social justice. I think I’d like to see the Board and the Federation working more closely. Bringing the resources of the Federation in. They hold a lot of power, and I think to move the work forward, we need to bring them on board. Because the teachers will be doing the work. They’re at the individual classroom level and they have a lot of autonomy as a teacher. I think that is critical.*

This participant acknowledges the equity work that the elementary teacher’s union has already done. He points out that the district and union currently work separately from each other, and expresses his belief that they should partner with each other in regards to equity work. Alex acknowledges the power that the union holds with its members and suggests that a show of solidarity between the district and the union would serve to more effectively drive initiatives for creating conditions for equity in schools.
Changes to the System:

Two of the participants talk about rethinking the current system and making changes to the organizational structure. Such changes, they suggest, would allow for different departments in the district to work laterally with one another. Jinan suggests:

*I think there needs to be a bit of a flattening of the organization to move away from that sense of hierarchy to lateral capacity. And that’s not a clean thing to do. It’s a messy process... I see the structures needing to work so that they feed into each other in a parallel way as opposed to everybody doing everything on their own. It’s not working.*

This participant points to the hierarchical structure in place in the district and suggests that it would be beneficial to move to a structure that provides more alignment and cohesion across the system.

Ensuring transparency in the system is mentioned as being critical to accessibility. Rory suggests:

*There needs to be transparency in processes- and there isn’t. There’s a lot of behind the scenes kinds of pieces that happen. And in any kind of organization it exists. But the more transparency that exists, the better you make it. Because then it becomes accessible.*

This participant advocates for a clearer communication of the rationale behind decisions so that staff are better able to understand and buy into decisions.

Jinan suggests that the system would benefit from an independent regulatory body to ensure conditions for human rights were upheld for all stakeholders. The participant suggests:
All systems need to have a human rights component established. We need to have an ombuds-person so that people can feel whether they’re a teacher, EA, caretaker, administrator—when they feel that things are not being done in a way—then that ombuds-person needs to be given the power to do things in an independent manner so they’re not mired by the system to do something.

This participant recommends the insertion of an independent body in each district to ensure that human rights issues are followed through in a timely manner.

Working within large educational systems often presents challenges to the implementation of initiatives. The participants recognize the need to consider structural changes that are supportive of transparency and dialogue amongst departments.

**Concluding Comments:**

The data gathered from the participants through interviews reveals a group of educators that have given considerable thought to the many facets of leading for equity. This data sheds light on participant understanding of equity, barriers that they identify as impeding their equity work, strategies they use to lead for equity in their schools, and current and desired supports that they feel would be conducive to conditions for equity. Chapter Five will further analyze and discuss these results.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In the preceding chapter, the results of qualitative interviews were shared and provide rich narrative detail that reveals insights into principals’ strategies for promoting equity in their schools. This overall goal was broken down into the following research questions:

1. How do principals define and understand equity?
2. What pressures/obstacles/barriers do principals identify as impeding their equity work?
3. What strategies do principals employ to create conditions for equity in their schools?
4. What supports do principals identify as assisting in their equity work?

Using the research questions to frame the data from school principals, an overall picture of strategies for equity in one school district is presented in Chapter Six.

This chapter undertakes a discussion of the themes that emerged in light of the research questions and conceptual framework.

Main Findings

The findings present an interesting narrative of the context and experiences of principals working to implement conditions for equity within their schools. They capture the complex challenges facing principals in their daily work and their corresponding reactions to these challenges. In working toward implementation of any policy initiative, educators invariably find themselves confronted by barriers. This study has been instrumental in uncovering the barriers encountered by principals in their equity work. The strength of the study rests not in the identification of these barriers but in the response by principals to these obstacles in effectively moving their equity work forward. This chapter begins with a summary of the barriers voiced by principal participants, and moves to a discussion of four themes of principals’ strategies that emerged. Discussion will focus on principals’ understanding of equity, the mindset and skill set
of leaders for equity, the value of establishing a dialogic context, and the empowerment of advocates for equity.

**Barriers**

As outlined in Chapter Two’s literature review, researchers identify a number of barriers often encountered by leaders who seek to lay the conditions for an equitable environment in their schools. These barriers are identified in the chapter as taking the form of managerial demands, neoliberal pressures, system statutes, lack of internal support, the nature of principals as company people, and the lack of understanding of principals. The results of the current study support these categories of barriers and participant comments help to further illuminate the challenges faced by principals leading for equity.

In the current study, the participants identify system constraints that arise in the form of operational demands, standardized testing, restrictions posed by Ontario’s funding formula, and frequent changes to administrators in schools. The participants express the sense that the structure in place for administrators in Ontario reduces the efficacy of principals for engaging in equity leadership and often delegates them to a managerial role. Ryan (2012) describes this as a market practice that has currently infiltrated education. He asserts that “…neoliberal advocates of all political stripes have sought to restrict the activities of professional educators. They believe that tying the hands of these educators will provide the space for more efficient and effective market principles to take hold in schools” (p. 28) Anderson (2009) also speaks to the “vast array of rules, procedures and accountability measures” that takes up the time of administrators. Grace (2008) further alludes to the detrimental impact increasing managerial demands have on the ability of administrators to serve as instructional leaders. Ryan (2012) summarizes this saying “At one time, school administrators led the profession as creative innovators of curriculum,
pedagogy, and human relations. Now they are expected to be executive, financial and human resource managers” (p. 28). These increased operational demands take away from the time administrators could be devoting to equity leadership efforts. The participants speak to their belief that standardized testing often diverts curricular efforts from culturally responsive pedagogy and takes time away from such instruction for test preparation efforts. Researchers (Hursh, 2007; Lipman, 2004; McNeil, 2001; Ryan, 2012) speak to the detrimental impact of standardized tests on equity efforts because of their exclusive nature, the amount of time taken up for test preparation and the fact that they shift the focus of instruction away from student culture and lived experience to test preparation. The participants in the current study convey the opinion that frequent changes to administrators in schools often result in teachers waiting out the current administration and hinder buy-in to efforts to shift the school climate and conditions for equity. Added to these system constraints are restrictions posed by employee collective agreements. Participants report that their efforts for creating an equitable climate need to fit into the prescribed meeting times and fall between the school bells. Participants are cognizant of needing to honour the working conditions of staff and not placing demands that do not fit defined job descriptions. Taken together, these system and collective agreement constraints tie the hands of administrators and minimize their ability to devote time, energy and resources to equity work.

A lack of value for equity work is also cited by participants as being an obstacle. Working in a climate where equity work is not valued by senior administration can result in efforts being put on a back burner. Principals are more likely to focus their efforts on initiatives that have accountability measures attached to them and that are discussed in school improvement planning meetings with superintendents. The urgency and immediacy of achieving results in reading, writing and mathematics result in school efforts being focused in these areas.
Participants report that equity initiatives rarely factor into school improvement discussions with superintendents, and principals do not feel pressure in moving these forward in their schools. Ryan (2012) suggests that when faced with situations where other priorities supersede inclusive ideals and practices, administrators often struggle within themselves and devote their attention to the matters that must be responded to at the time.

The participants also suggest that the mindset of principals around notions of equity serves as a deterrent to creating conditions for equity in schools. They suggest that many principals lack an understanding of the breadth of equity and the power dynamics that are at play. This is attributed to a lack of lived experience of many principals as well as the limited climate data sources available to school teams. Principals tend to default to a deficit mindset and blame failure on the students rather than analyzing the hegemonic structures in place in schools that impact student achievement. Ryan (2012) speaks further about lack of administrator knowledge serving as a barrier to equity efforts, particularly in the area of racism. He states, “Administrators’ ambivalence toward racism and their tendency to see it in only prejudicial and individualistic terms limit the actions that they will inevitably take to resist or combat it…also limits the kinds of changes that they will be willing to make to the system in which they work” (p. 160). The lack of awareness regarding systemic racism results in a lack of effort or strategies to combat racism and work towards more equitable conditions in schools.

Participants cite the very nature of the type of people that are promoted to principal positions as a barrier. Their testimony supports the research (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; Marshall, 2004; Mullen, 2008; Ryan, 2003) that a culture exists in which principals tend to be conformist, complacent and supportive of current conditions. They are often ‘company people’ who do not question authority for fear that they might jeopardize advancements to their careers. The difficult
work of unearthing systemic barriers and shifting existing mindsets depends on people that are critically reflective and able to challenge assumptions (Brookfield, 1995; Brown, 2004; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Cranton, 1992; Dantley et al, 2008; Friere, 1994; Grogan, 2004; McMahon, 2007). Failure to do so results in reinforcement of the status quo in schools where marginalized groups continue to face barriers. Ryan (2012) speaks to the tendency of administrators to favour harmony and overlook the potentially positive effects of conflict: “Administrators felt more comfortable stifling conflict at the point of origin than they did linking it to more pervasive conflict, injustice, or exclusion, particularly if it meant identifying such practices in their own institutions” (Ryan, 2012, p. 143). This propensity towards stifling conflict impedes the unearthing of inequities and impedes the development of inclusive practices. The participants also suggest that where principals do find the courage to speak up about systemic inequities, they are often subjected to push back or reprimand. They offer several examples of how they personally have been stung as a result of their efforts to speak out against inequitable practices. Ryan (2003) suggests that future ambitions of administrators may be reliant on their allegiance to the system (p. 142). As well, some researchers (e.g., Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; Mullen et al, 2008) suggest that administrators can face the possibility of reprimand or termination if they openly criticize district policy, even when advocating for the welfare of children.

Resistance to the implementation of conditions for equity is another barrier mentioned by each of the participants. Principals are faced with deep seated practices entrenched in school functioning, the entitlement of those that have been at schools for long periods of time and have a sense of power, staff that are threatened by a potential change to the status quo, and those who strive to protect their own privilege. Ryan (2012) finds a similar trend regarding resistance from
staff in schools that have an entrenched culture, but adds that introducing inclusive practice can also be a challenge in schools where there is no established culture to overcome (p. 116). Several participants express the perception that their own identity is often seen as resulting in them promoting an agenda. Each of these factors can lead to overt resistance from staff to efforts meant to improve conditions for equity in schools.

The pressure that results from dealing with each of these barriers often takes a personal toll on leaders for equity. The participants share several heartfelt examples of the physical and emotional damage that leaders experience as they combat the barriers mentioned above on a daily basis. Faced with this form of hardship, principals can retreat from their efforts into a self-preservation mode. Theoharis (2007) describes two consequences of resistance to equity efforts being a great personal toll (both emotional and physical well-being) and a persistent sense of discouragement (p. 242). Ryan (2012) further speaks to the burn out and stress that result from the “higher levels of emotional labour than other struggles” (p. 5).

**Strategies for Equity**

The participants interviewed for this study emerge as an optimistic group of leaders for equity. While they articulate a number of barriers that they encounter in their equity work, each participant describes in detail the strategies they employ in moving understanding and conditions for equity forward in their schools. It is not surprising that the participants are able to clearly communicate the steps they take in gathering data and formulating goals, strategies and monitoring measures in school improvement plans. School improvement planning in Ontario school districts has been a focus over the past decade and a half and principals are generally adept at creating plans with their school staff (Education Improvement Commission, 2000). What emerges as being most remarkable from this study is the passion expressed by each
participant about their leadership for equity and the strategies they employ in circumventing barriers that arise. This is a group of principals that think deeply about equity issues and are cunning tacticians that are able to navigate murky waters. Four themes emerge in the study that give insight into the interdependent elements that are critical to implementing and pushing forward an equity agenda in schools: principals’ understanding of equity; the mindset and skillset of leaders for equity; the importance of establishing a dialogic context, and; the empowerment of advocates for equity.

**Principals’ Understanding of Equity**

Entering into this study, I made an assumption that the knowledge and understanding of equity issues would be solid amongst the participants. I made use of a purposeful sampling technique to select participants who are self-described leaders for equity. This technique allowed me to gain insight into the thoughts and actions of participants. Indeed, the participants in the study define equity in ways that demonstrate breadth of understanding. They speak of equity as everyone getting what they need and emphasize the notion that equity is not sameness. Ryan (2012) cautions that “Equal or same treatment will simply extend already existing inequities” (p. 9). Each of the participants raises the issue of power differentials in which dominant groups are afforded a voice in decision-making and the creation of conditions in schools while minoritized groups are marginalized and expected to fit into the status quo. Ryan (2012) speaks to a definition of equity that includes social structures associated with gender, race, class, ability, and sexual orientation and states that “Complicating issues of privilege and disadvantage is the fact that these structures work in multiple, intersecting and contradictory ways” (p. 139). In addition to a well-developed comprehension of equity issues, each participant demonstrates a clear passion for equity leadership that they attribute unanimously to their own lived experiences. It is
to this prior experience and resulting passion that they attribute their drive and perseverance when leading for equity.

In looking at the status of equity initiatives in Ontario, the participants express an opinion that progress has been made in recent years. They speak to the visible nature of current equity efforts as having ‘scratched the surface’ and suggest that educators need to begin to think of equity in a broader sense. To truly move schools forward in creating conditions for equity, they speak to the need to embed an equity lens into curriculum and educational planning efforts. The district Superintendent of Equity is referred to by two of the participants regarding his thoughts about the need for equity work to be initiated by starting with explicit efforts and ‘signposts’ with the goal of becoming entrenched in all aspects of education in the future.

Some participants are concerned that not all principals and senior administration have a comprehensive understanding of equity. They wonder how to shift the mindset of principals and suggest that future professional learning needs to be focused on raising consciousness. All of the participants agree that without a thorough principal understanding of equity issues and urgency for creating conditions in their schools, efforts made by staff are at risk of failure. Ryan (2003) goes deeper into the understanding of equity issues by suggesting that the nature of understanding is not straight-forward and involves more than simple recognition and understanding of different values and practices (p. 141). He names four obstacles that can get in the way of understanding:

1. Difficulty in understanding different perspectives.
2. Recognizing that understanding will not always lead people to embrace what they have understood (in fact, the opposite might occur).
3. Conflicting inclusive priorities might lead to the exclusion of each other.
4. Appeasing conflict may mean inclusive practices take a back seat.

(Ryan, 2003, p. 141)

By this, he suggests that the process of relaying information about equity to administrators is in itself insufficient. Attention must be paid to whether information is truly understood and accepted, as well as administrators’ actions in using this knowledge to drive forward initiatives.

*Mindset and Skill Set of Leaders for Equity*

In addition to possessing a comprehensive understanding of equity issues, the study participants speak strongly about the requirement for leaders to develop a mindset and skill set that will be conducive in driving forward their efforts. In particular, they articulate the need for leaders to be critically reflective, strategic, and possess strategies for dealing with personal toll. Ball (1987) describes schools as “arenas of struggle” because of the power dynamics that exist between individuals and groups that are working to achieve their own interest-motivated goals. Ryan (2012) suggests that in such a climate, administrators working toward inclusive practices “will have to acknowledge the political nature of the organizations in which they work and act accordingly” (p. 117).

The participants describe a number of personal attributes that indicate their disposition as being critically reflective. Many researchers (e.g., Brookfield, 1995; Brown, 2004; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Cranton, 1992; Dantley et al, 2008; Friere, 1994; Grogan, 2004; McMahon, 2007) suggest that equity leaders need to be self-reflective and able to challenge their own assumptions. The participants in the current study describe themselves as learners who do not have all the answers. They welcome different perspectives at the table that will challenge their ideas and push them into a zone of discomfort. MacBeath (2007) describes this as leadership that is “a constant irritant, not allowing a slide into intellectual complacency” (p. 247).
The participants voice the need to employ a critical lens in unearthing existing biases and inequities.

The participants share a number of examples that indicate their recognition of the importance of being strategic in their work. Research into the politics of education has been rare and has tended to focus on the power of principals and their tactics in “bending parents and teachers to their wills” (Ryan, 2012, p. 119) rather than on the positive side of the politics of educational leadership. Research around political acumen draws on the work of Machiavelli (1952) that outlines three necessary actions of leaders:

1. Leaders acquire knowledge of the system in which they work.
2. Leaders apply the knowledge they have acquired in the strategies that they employ.
3. Leaders strategically monitor their own actions.

(Ryan, 2012)

The participants in the present study articulate a number of strategies that fall into these three categories. They overwhelmingly communicate a positive strategic approach rather than one in which they wield their power over others to force submission to initiatives. To the contrary, the participants voice the perception that subversive or authoritative stances tend to be counterintuitive. The participants speak about the importance of knowing the school community and staff. They articulate the need to anticipate barriers and be proactive in setting conditions to minimize or counteract obstacles that might arise. As well, the ability to speak up is deemed as essential in the work of equity leaders. Ignoring inequities amounts to validating them. The participants say that speaking up is a skill that requires a careful approach and a keen sense of timing. Resistance must be met head on, but in a manner that is open and meets people where they are. Several of the participants also advise that it is important to make themselves aware of
the system constraints and use the system to their advantage. This aligns with May’s (1994) work that outlines leaders’ abilities to know the rules and play to the edge of them. Day et al (2000) describe this as the action of a values-driven leader who mediates the policy environment to align with their personal vision. This is an important skill that reduces the risk of leaders for equity being stung in enacting their work.

All of the participants acknowledge the personal toll that can result when forging ahead with equity work. The time, resistance, and effort required as leaders for equity can result in emotional and physical harm. In order to manage the pressures and load of their work, principals must develop coping strategies that work for them. A study by Theoharis (2007) investigates the personal toll experienced by leaders for equity and the strategies they use to counterbalance these negative effects. Theoharis outlines two different kinds of strategies: proactive and coping strategies. The participants in the current study mention strategies that fit into both of these categories that they find effective in helping themselves to deal with the ongoing demands. The proactive strategies range from adopting a sense of humour, feeding their wellness through exercise, rest and play, and carving out time to engage in hobbies. Each of the participants outlines coping strategies. Several mention the need at times to pull back from their equity efforts. For some, this feels like defeat and for others, it results in additional time that allows them to redouble their efforts in other areas. Whatever the viewpoint, the participants recognize that self-preservation is important in allowing them to carry on with the work that they deem to be worthwhile and important.

Establishing a Dialogic Context

Having a comprehensive understanding of equity and a strategic mindset are in themselves ineffective without being accompanied by action. Some researchers (e.g., Brown,
2004; Foster, 1986; Freire, 1994; Lipman, 1991) refer to the praxis of leadership as “action working with theory” (p. 189). Freire emphasizes dialogue as a social process with the goal of “dismantling oppressive structures and mechanisms prevalent both in education and society” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 383). Brown (2004) describes the benefits of rational discourse that takes place over time and through repeated conversations. Such dialogue is characterized by an openness to differing perspectives and serves to enrich the understanding of personal biases and systemic oppression. Ryan (2012) speaks to the connection and exchange of meaning that occurs through dialogue and distinguishes it from debate pointing out that “Participants work together in contexts of equality, respect, and openness to explore and create new possibilities, as opposed to doing their best to convince others of the value of their positions in adversarial contexts” (p. 56).

The importance and value of establishing a dialogic context in schools through which such dialogues may occur is raised and discussed by each of the participants. They express the belief that the first step in establishing such a culture is building a strong relationship with staff, parents and students. Strong relationships are the key not only to building a common understanding and vision for conditions for equity in schools but also in minimizing resistance and paving the way for courageous conversations as needed. Shields (2004) sees dialogue as “a key to developing relationships and spaces for members of the school community to address crucial issues of difference…she envisions dialogue as a vehicle for eliminating what she refers to as ‘pathologies of silence’” (Ryan, 2012, p. 59). The participants all describe their approach to building relationships as being open, honest and approachable. They speak of how opening up personally with staff helps to build trust. Several use the term ‘servant leader’ in speaking to their style of leadership. The term ‘servant leadership’ was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf (1970). Greenleaf defines servant leadership:
The servant-leader *is* servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions.

(p. 6)

This approach to leadership sees the leader as sharing power, putting the needs of others first and helping people develop and perform to their maximum capacity.

Participants previously identified finding the time for dialogue as being a barrier to equity work. The increasing number of operational and managerial demands being delegated to principals results in reduced time for dialogue. The participants share various strategies for creatively finding the space for dialogue in their day and state that time cannot be used as an excuse. Finding time and space for dialogue is described by participants as taking place through both formal and informal channels. Looking to more formal avenues, participants speak about using structures that already exist to engage in dialogue about issues of equity. They point to staff meetings, lead team meetings, network meetings, rounds visits, case management meetings and partnerships with other school teams as opportunities to dialogue with staff about equity. They make a deliberate point of infusing equity dialogue into meetings so that this lens eventually might become a norm in meetings. It is through more informal opportunities for dialogue, however, that participants express having the most valuable conversations. They talk about the importance of scheduling time into their days where they make themselves available to chat with staff, parents and students. These discussions occur through conversations in halls, during class visits, outside on the yard and through email exchanges.
The participants emphasize the importance of the quality of the dialogue. They stress that
discussion must not be one dimensional or ‘polite’ in nature. They welcome honest dialogue that
challenges their own beliefs and works to uncover existing inequities. Several of the participants
speak about the need to be explicit about this being the preferred form of discussion. They
openly welcome discussion and encourage staff to voice differing opinions. In Rory’s school,
staff is reminded of adopting a RIBS approach: Raise Issues Bring Solutions. This philosophy
encourages people to initiate discussion while also taking a productive stance. Participants also
recognize that dialogue is a powerful tool in initiating thinking and that there does not always
need to be a resolution to every discussion.

Burbules (1993) speaks about the purpose of dialogue as providing the means to improve
the insight or knowledge of people so they can “gain a fuller appreciation of the world,
themselves, and one another”. The participants in the current study share that there are times
when they need to have what they call difficult conversations with members of the staff that
confront words or actions that are deemed inequitable. Singleton and Linton (2006) speak to this
form of dialogue as courageous conversations. Courageous conversations step beyond the more
open and collegial conversations that normally occur and are intended to directly address issues
of race. They serve to push people out of their comfort zone to address actions and attitudes that
result in inequitable conditions. Singleton advises that educators that engage in courageous
conversations need to be persistent and stay engaged in ongoing dialogue, expect to experience
discomfort, speak their truth through honest and open dialogue, and expect and accept a lack of
closure. (p. 19). These types of discussions are dependent on formerly established trusting
relationships that are grounded in honesty. Without this type of rapport, the result is that efforts
are at risk of swinging from a positive shifting of mindset to overt resistance. Robinson, Hohepa
and Lloyd (2009) speak to the importance of this form of conversation saying, “leaders who engage in constructive problem talk are better able to help teachers make changes that benefit their students rather than those who avoid problem talk or who blame and invite defensive reactions”

**Empowerment of Advocates for Equity**

Empowerment of Advocates for Equity cannot be the work of only one person and requires a whole-school approach if it is to take root and be sustainable (Neito, 1992; May, 1994; Gillborn, 1995). The participants in this study express the need to involve student, parent and staff voice in decisions made in the school. They indicate that it is imperative to start where people are and understand where they are coming from. This forms a starting point for school efforts and helps principals to understand resistance when it arises. The participants speak about finding the best side of people and leveraging their assets to drive initiatives. Some suggest the advantages to be gained from knowing whose voice has impact and using this to strategically move initiatives forward. They suggest that the impact can be lessened if people perceive that a person is speaking out of their own self-interest instead of for the good of an entire group. Examples were offered of a white person speaking for Black History month and straight people advocating for LGBTQ rights. They also suggest that, at times, it can be beneficial to involve a voice from outside the school so that the message is heard in a way that does not come across as personal or threatening.

The participants point to the importance of giving learning and leadership opportunities to all who want it. This ‘deprivatization of knowledge’ increases capacity in the school community and helps to develop a shared vision of the elements of an equitable climate. They point to the importance of nurturing and cultivating leadership and resisting the urge to micromanage people in their efforts.
In addition to supporting and developing the skills of students, parents and staff, participants mention the importance of tending to their own needs as an equity leader. The power of professional and personal networks of like-minded people is credited for providing comfort, inspiration and courage for principals who strive to improve conditions for equity in their schools and across the district. Participants also speak to having a greater impact on instilling equity in the district by strategically share their knowledge and equity lens through involvement on district committees other than the equity committee. Serving on the Regional Equity committee allows for voice in steering efforts across the system. As well, a different but equally powerful voice can be lent through participation on other committees that would benefit from the addition of an equity lens to their efforts.

An element present in only one participant response was the idea of serving as an ally or empowering people in marginalized groups. Ryan (2012) states that administrators are in a unique position because their formal position within the educational hierarchy affords them power (p. 185). He advocates for administrators relinquishing some of their power in order to empower others in marginalized positions. The study participants focused more on the efforts of leaders and staff as they ‘do for’ others. The risk of this form of support is that there will not always be someone available to advocate for marginalized individuals. It is more beneficial to lend power and opportunity so that they may begin to help themselves.

Supports

The participants describe a number of current supports to their equity work and articulate their desire for future supports to better sustain their efforts and create conditions more conducive to conditions for equity in schools. These identified supports will be discussed in this section and expanded upon in a later section for implications to future practice.
In terms of current supports, the participants speak to their use of Ontario’s Equity Strategy, professional development that had been rolled out in their district, specific resources and network support as having an impact on their equity leadership efforts. Reaction to the efficacy of Ontario’s Equity Strategy is mixed among the participants. Some feel that the mere fact that the Ministry of Education has created this Strategy has lent a sense of urgency for the implementation of equity efforts in schools. Their feeling is that the Strategy has helped to better define equity and set the direction for equity initiatives across the province. The participants are in agreement that, while the Strategy provides backing for their efforts, the work must be done at the school level and must be sensitive to the unique context of each school community. Concern is raised by the participants regarding the ‘lack of teeth’ of the Strategy. Alex explains that the Equity Strategy is not provincial legislation and has minimal accountability measures tied to it. He notes that, while Directors of Education must report upon system planning regarding equity and schools are expected to have equity goals in their school improvement plans, there are no repercussions for districts or schools that fail to comply. As a result, he feels that equity initiatives are left to the discretion of school teams.

There is consensus amongst the participants that professional development opportunities for administrators offered by the district have been narrow in focus. Workshops have tended to centre on visible and concrete expressions of race and faith accommodations. The participants express the belief that professional learning needs to create a deeper conceptual understanding of equity issues and help to establish an equity-based mindset amongst administrators. While they acknowledge that a number of excellent Ministry, district, union and researcher created resources exist, they remark that these resources are only as good as the mindset of the consumer.
The greatest support to the participants can be found in formal and informal networks. Involvement in equity committee’s and learning networks affords equity leaders the opportunity to dialogue about equity issues and broaden their understanding and perspective. Bolman and Deal (2008) identify the ability to build networks and coalitions as an important skill that supports leaders in achieving their goals. Informal networks with like-minded colleagues offer the same benefits with the added advantage of offering problem-solving support for challenges confronted within their own schools. These informal networks are characterized by trust amongst the members. They feel safe in challenging each other’s thinking and provide each other with a forum to vent about the issues and de-stress about mounting pressures.

In looking to desired supports for their equity work, the participants speak about improved human resources, and suggested changes at a system level. They see improved human resource support taking the form of more support staff in schools to support students and the work being done. They also envision consultant support that would work directly with school staff to build knowledge of equity issues and expertise in implementing equitable conditions in schools and culturally relevant pedagogy. The participants recognize the need to validate this work by designating time for professional learning. This could take the form of professional activity days or release time for teams to come together for this work.

The participants express the strong belief that changes need to be made at a system level to better support equity efforts. If work is to be done in schools to create conditions for equity, the district needs to support the work. It is suggested by the participants that this can be done by embedding equity language in all Board policy and procedures and ensuring transparency in processes. One participant further suggests that a restructuring of the district’s organizational structure is needed if equity is to take root at a system level. He proposes a flattening of the
district’s structure that would allow departments to work laterally with one another. As well, superintendents of schools are viewed as being a potential resource in creating urgency for equity work. By asking critical questions during school improvement planning visits, and holding school teams accountable for creating equity goals and implementing strategies to create conditions for equity, superintendents can create an urgency for the work and provide the ‘teeth’ that the Equity Strategy is lacking.

The thoughts and suggestions of these participants regarding current and desired supports will be useful when looking at implications for future practice. Their practical, first-hand knowledge and experience lend themselves to providing school principals with the tools they need to support their equity efforts.

Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

In Chapter One, I shared a conceptual framework that presents a linear depiction of the principal’s role in creating conditions for equity in schools. This framework depicted the principal’s understanding of equity issues as serving as a foundation. Strategies were implemented and were invariably met with barriers that impeded their progress. Principals could either revert to previous efforts and conditions or could work strategically to circumvent these barriers, drawing upon supports that accommodated their efforts.

In light of the findings of this study, I feel it is important to revisit the conceptual framework in order to better reflect the results and analysis. The revised conceptual framework is outlined in Figure 2.

At the heart of the revised conceptual framework lies the principal’s understanding for equity. I recognize that a thorough understanding of equity issues continues to be at the centre of equity work that takes place in schools. The black arrows represent strategies that are driven by
the principal and are dependent on the principal possessing a mindset and skill set that help him/her to direct and implement initiatives. These strategies are implemented within a dialogic context in which discussion of equity issues takes place amongst all stakeholders. This context can take the form of formal or informal structures. Within the dialogic context are a number of barriers that are represented as stars in the revised conceptual framework. Upon encountering the barriers, the strategies are strategically redirected so that they might accomplish their goal in establishing conditions of equity.

*Figure 2: Revised Conceptual Framework*

While the major components (i.e., the principal’s understanding of equity, strategies for equity, barriers, and the goal of conditions for equity) remain the same, the revised conceptual framework departs from the linear format previously adopted. The information shared by participants in the current study helps to illuminate the fact that leading for equity is not a tidy or
linear process. As principals implement strategies for equity, their success is dependent upon a mindset and skill set that serve to navigate and move things forward. Conditions for equity in the revised framework are not depicted as an end result but instead encompass all that takes place in a school. Most importantly, the strategies and barriers exist within a dialogic context. The principal is not enacting the strategies independently but is thinking, dialoguing and working, with staff, students and parents in tandem to find the space to create conditions in which all people may be empowered and have a voice.
CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the study and conclusions to be drawn from it. The chapter outlines the research questions, the methodology, and provides a brief review of the findings in response to the study’s research questions. The chapter continues with a discussion of limitations of the study, proposed areas that may be considered for future research, and concludes with implications for practice in school districts.

Summary of the Study

This study examined the strategies principals employ to create conditions for equity in their schools. In 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education developed Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy to ensure that school Boards and staff develop strategies that provide students with an equitable education in which they may see themselves reflected in their learning and realize their full potential, unobstructed by systemic barriers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). It was the purpose of this study to gain a better understanding of the thoughts and actions regarding equity initiatives of principals who define themselves as leaders for equity. The primary research question was:

*How do principals promote equity in their schools?*

In order to address this question, the following four sub-questions were addressed:

1. How do principals define and understand equity?
2. What pressures/obstacles/barriers do principals identify as impeding their equity work?
3. What strategies do principals employ to create conditions for equity in their schools?
4. What supports do principals identify as assisting in their equity work?

The research design for the study was a qualitative approach which consisted of semi-structured interviews with twelve experienced principals who self-described themselves as
leaders for equity. The interview guide questions (Appendix A) were aligned with the research questions and the conceptual framework developed for this study. All of the participants took part enthusiastically in the interviews. The interviews provided rich and detailed data and provided a deep and broad understanding of the strategies principals employ when leading for equity in their schools. The interview responses provided the following answers to the research questions.

**How do principals define and understand equity?**

The principals interviewed for the study emerged as an optimistic group of leaders for equity. Their definition of equity demonstrated a breadth of understanding of the wide range of groups that are often marginalized as well as the shared belief that equity is not sameness. The participants spoke to the issues of power differentials in which dominant groups are afforded a voice while marginalized groups are expected to fit into the status quo. Each participant expressed a passion for equity which was credited to their own lived experiences. Participants expressed the opinion that progress has been made in Ontario in recent years but that there continues to be the need for educators to think of equity in a broader sense and to embed equity initiatives into curriculum and planning efforts. Some concern was expressed by participants that not all principals and senior administration have a comprehensive understanding of equity and that this lack of understanding impedes conditions for equity across all schools.

**What pressures/obstacles/resistance do principals encounter in their work to create conditions for equity in their schools?**

A number of barriers were identified by participants as impeding the efforts of leaders for equity. The barriers mentioned include system constraints that result from workload issues, standardized testing, funding policies, and frequent transfers of principals. Other barriers
identified by participants were the perceived lack of value placed on equity work, resistance encountered from staff, parents and senior administration, ignorance of equity issues, the preponderance of a deficit mindset amongst educators, inequitable hiring practices, collective agreement constraints, the political context surrounding administrators, and the personal toll equity efforts often takes on principals. If left unchecked, these barriers could serve to undermine principals’ efforts toward implementing conditions for equity and result in principals stepping back from their efforts and allowing conditions to be maintained by the status quo.

What strategies do principals employ to create conditions for equity in their schools?

The principals interviewed for this study described in detail the strategies they employ in moving understanding and conditions for equity forward in their schools. They articulated a strong ability to gather data and formulate goals, strategies and monitoring measures in school improvement plans. The principals described the importance of building relationships with staff, parents and students to create an environment where open and honest discourse might take place. They expressed a belief in the importance of shifting their knowledge of equity to action through their ability to challenge existing inequities, advocate for marginalized groups, and empower others to act. The principals spoke to the need to develop and utilize political savvy to navigate the difficult waters that often exist in schools and throughout the district. They also described coping strategies that they utilize to deal with the emotional toll that can result from their equity work.

What supports do principals identify as assisting in their equity work?

During the interviews, principals spoke about supports they drew upon to sustain and drive their equity work as well as desired support that they felt would be beneficial to their efforts in the future. Supports drawn upon included the use of policy to lend urgency to equity
efforts. Principals expressed disappointment in the quality and depth of professional learning they had received during and since the roll out of the Equity Strategy. Their feeling was the learning often focused on superficial strategies and failed to develop a shared understanding of equity amongst administrators. Some mention was made to effective resources but principals expressed the notion that resources were ineffective in the absence of an equity-based mindset. The most effective support mentioned by principals was gained through their involvement in formal and informal networks with colleagues. These opportunities offered a chance to learn with and from like-minded individuals and gave them a chance to receive emotional support. Desired support mentioned by principals included improved human resource support, designated time for professional development, improved system support, support from unions, structural changes to the system. Each of these will receive elaboration in the Implications for Future Practice section.

*Emerging Patterns amongst the Research Question Data*

In looking at the responses of participants to each of the research questions, a pattern emerges between principals’ definitions of equity, their identification of the most prevalent barriers, and the strategies they identify as effectively moving their equity work forward. The participants’ definitions of equity can be distilled into three different themes: the notion of equity being about fairness, not sameness; educators possessing a personal lens (values and beliefs), and; the existence of barriers for marginalized groups.

Four of the participants speak of the notion that equity is about fairness, not sameness. This understanding of equity stresses the importance of all people getting what they need to succeed, the existence of equitable opportunities, and the existence of an inclusive environment. Participants that define equity in this way seem to think that the adoption of a ‘one size fits all’
approach to education is an important obstacle to be overcome in schools. Strategies that these participants identify as being effective include establishing trust, building relationships with all stakeholders, making use of an open door policy, listening to understand emerging issues, and adopting an empathetic approach. The term ‘servant leadership’ was used by two of these participants to describe their leadership style.

Five of the participants talk about conditions for equity being impacted by the lens that educators bring to their work. They speak about this lens being based upon the values and beliefs that people have developed through life experience. These participants stress the importance of acknowledging this lens and accepting the lens of others as equal to their own. For these participants, the largest obstacle is staff members/senior administration that are ignorant to equity issues and who do not understand the importance of equity work. These participants make use of strategies that include open, honest and challenging dialogue (putting their cards on the table), the leveraging of assets within the school, and empowering others to become leaders for equity.

Three of the participants define equity as the existence of barriers for marginalized groups that serve to oppress them, and the importance of working to remove these barriers in schools. Participants who define equity in this way feel that status quo and the power of privilege are the most important obstacles to be overcome. These participants make use of strategies that include the use of courageous conversations and direct action to challenge existing inequities and reject the structures that support status quo. One of the participants speaks about the strategy of serving as an ally by lending his own privilege to people in marginalized groups.

Common to all of these understandings of equity is the belief that equity work is critically important and the need for a call to action to combat existing inequities. Dakota says:
It’s a non-negotiable for me and I always say, “It’s the hill I will die on”. Having an equitable environment— it’s what is most important to me.

All of the participants describe dialogue as being critical to the success of equity work and speak about strategies that find the space for such dialogue to occur. Additionally, the participants all talk about the importance of developing political skills that allow them to read circumstances and choose the actions that will have an optimal impact on the situation.

Limitations

Typically in research studies, there are limitations that are important to note. Several limitations of this study exist. One of the limitations in conducting qualitative research is that the researcher’s own biases and interpretations can influence the data selected for analysis. It was important to be cognizant of this throughout the sorting of data and subsequent analysis.

Another limitation rested in my own position as a principal in the board of education from which the participants were drawn. Being aware of this position could result in participants being reserved or holding back information in answering questions for fear of it incriminating them or threatening their position. I did not have authority for evaluation of performance of any of the participants. As well, it was made clear that my role in the study was as a doctoral student and not in the capacity as an employee of the district.

One clear challenge was the use of self-reported data without observing practice or obtaining validation from others. While the participants were asked to share their thoughts and strategies, there is no data to clarify if the participants were in fact able to move their schools forward in creating conditions for equity. This limits the interpretation of the data to espoused theory. While no objective sources were used in the study, triangulation of data took place.
through comparison of the views of other participants. The benefit of this form of data, however, lies in the richly descriptive information shared by participants. It offers the opportunity to get inside the heads of principals and find out their thoughts and motivations in leading for equity.

Implications for Future Research

A number of future research projects emerge from this study that would be useful in further delving into the findings. The current study focuses exclusively on qualitative interviews with principals who self-identify as leaders for equity. It would be beneficial to conduct the same type of interviews with different stakeholders in educational settings. Each school in the district has an equity designate that is the main point of contact for professional learning and sharing of equity resources with staff. It would be valuable to conduct interviews around a similar interview guide to gain insight into their perspectives. Would these equity designates hold similar understandings of equity? What do they perceive as the barriers to equity work in their schools? What forms of leadership and support do they find effective in their roles? Does a dialogic context exist in which they have autonomy in moving equity initiatives forward or do they perceive a power differential with their principal that restrains their efforts?

The same type of qualitative study could also be conducted with superintendents. Having heard the uncertainty of participants in the current study regarding the understanding of equity on the part of superintendents and the perceived lack of value attributed to equity efforts, this form of study would offer insight into their understanding and motivations. As superintendents strive to implement conditions for equity in their assigned schools and at a district level, what are the pressures they encounter? Are there currently strategies or questions they ask of principals to begin to create a sense of urgency for equity work in schools?
One of the limitations of the current study is that there are no other stakeholders in the schools that were interviewed to corroborate the testimony given by the participants. To interview teachers, parents or students to authenticate the validity of the participant statements would have undermined the participants and proven unethical. It would be an interesting study to select several schools that are known for their efforts around equity. A group of people occupying different roles could be interviewed using a similar interview toolkit. The interviews could include the principal, equity designate, teachers, support staff, parents and students. This would offer multiple perspectives and the data could be triangulated to pull out common themes or differing points of view.

In planning the current qualitative research, a second component to the research had originally been considered in which the school improvement plans for the participant’s schools would be analyzed with regards to equity goals and language that is reflective of equity efforts. The district from which the participants were selected was in the process of revising their Board and school improvement plan templates, and school teams had taken a pause on updating their school improvement plans. For this reason, the analysis of school improvement plans was not feasible. As schools roll out the new school improvement planning template, it would be valuable to conduct an analysis of equity goals in schools across the district to get a pulse on how school teams are moving forward in creating conditions for equity. A similar analysis could be undertaken in reviewing the language of Board policies. This would help to determine whether an equity lens is being applied to decision-making and procedures at a district level.

Finally, further qualitative research would be beneficial in probing two interrelated themes that emerged from the study. The importance of establishing a dialogic context in schools and empowering advocates for equity were illuminated by participants as being critically
important in the success of equity initiatives. How do principals build a dialogic culture in schools in which staff, parents and students feel safe in their efforts? Is it more effective to advocate for marginalized groups or to build the skills so that people can speak up for themselves?

**Implications for Future Practice**

A number of implications for future practice can be identified based on the results of this study. It should be noted that the data has been drawn from qualitative interviews with twelve principals within a single district within Ontario. The data is not intended to be generalized to all principals. Rather, it gives insight into some of the thoughts and considerations of individuals who self-define as leaders for equity. It illuminates the challenges that they have encountered, and the strategies and supports they have found helpful in moving forward with equity efforts. It is hoped that some of these reflections will be a helpful contribution to the challenging work that principals undertake in their schools when working to establish equitable environments for all stakeholders.

In speaking about the types of supports that would be helpful in creating conditions for equity and for their equity leadership, the participants articulate a roadmap for future practice at both the district and Ministry levels. They raise the point that current resources being provided by the Ministry and Board are good but, without a sense of urgency or critical awareness, they are insufficient for the work that needs to take place across the province. Taylor speaks about the critical awareness of school staff as being more important than the actual resources themselves:

*I don’t know if it’s about specific resources. It’s more about how we work through existing things with an outlook that is more equity minded... if you know how to speak to*
It and get kids to critically examine resources and biases that are present in texts. That’s powerful in itself.

This need to raise critical awareness of equity issues can be addressed through professional learning. Each of the participants refers to the professional learning that accompanied the roll out of the Equity Strategy and has taken place since as merely touching the surface. Casey explains:

That’s the thing about professional learning- I feel like it’s often just surface stuff. Somebody once used the analogy of a river. A lot of things are floating on top, but it’s that still water at the bottom that doesn’t really move. Doesn’t really change. And we’re always peppering things at the top and not getting deep.

In order for change to occur in the equity conditions in schools, learning needs to take place to create a broader and shared understanding of equity. This professional learning needs to go beyond surface level learning and address the impact of power and privilege on the school experiences of marginalized groups. Equity learning should be incorporated into pre-service education so that new teachers begin their teaching careers with an understanding of the issues and learn about the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy. Given the complex nature of leading for equity, newly aspiring leaders entering into principals’ qualification courses would benefit from learning targeted at developing a critical awareness of equity issues and sharing strategies for creating conditions with their school staff. A component of this learning could include the mindset and skill set that are conducive to implementing policy and overcoming resistance. Currently, the guidelines that shape principal preparation through the Principal Qualification Program do not explicitly state that aspiring principals should learn political skills (Ontario College of Teachers, 2009). Failing to include this form of learning results in principals
being left to acquire political skills on the job through trial and error (Crow and Weindling, 2010; Ryan, 2010). As well, principals’ preparation training should include a component on critical reflection to help administrators to better understand the lens they carry based on personal lived experience, and the impact this lens has on the school environment and their interactions with others. Also, learning centred on the importance of developing a dialogic context and strategies for building relationships and trust would help to establish conditions in schools for the essential dialogue needed to unearth existing equities and move equity work forward.

Similarly, equity learning should be incorporated into supervisory officer qualification programs. Having heard from participants that their superintendents are often ignorant about equity issues and are perceived as having a low regard as to the value of equity efforts, professional learning would help to equip these leaders with a comprehensive understanding of equity and the political challenges that exist for school teams striving to create conditions for equity.

Several forms of human resource support would be of benefit to equity leaders. In the board from which participants were drawn in the current study, a number of concrete resources are made available to school teams to assist in understanding how to support students from a variety of racial, ability, socio-economic, gender and sexual identity groups. It can be challenging to sift through the resources to find the information needed to support a school’s individual context. While there are district staff members that have expertise in each of these areas, these human resources are limited. An expansion of existing inclusive schools, special education, First Nation Meti Inuit (FNMI), and Positive Spaces staff would provide additional support in helping school teams to improve their understanding of issues that impact their school
environment and develop plans to move forward. As well, such staff could form valuable links between schools and community organizations. Creating equity consultant positions would allow teachers to connect with teachers who could provide concrete examples of culturally responsive pedagogy. The Elementary Teacher’s Federation of Ontario (ETFO) has already generated several resources to support teachers with equity and social justice initiatives. Establishing a partnership between the Board and ETFO around equity would lend support and power.

Valuable support could be directed from the district senior team of administrators in the form of increased accountability for equity initiatives. Currently, superintendents visit schools several times each year to discuss school improvement planning with principals and leadership teams. These discussions are typically driven by focus questions posed by superintendents and centre on reading, writing and mathematics achievement. Common data sets to support these discussions are report card marks and provincial EQAO results. These visits offer a combination of support and pressure to create urgency around moving forward school team efforts for improving student achievement in these areas. It would be beneficial for superintendents to add an equity lens to these discussions. Questions could be added to shift the focus to include learning about the demographics of the school community, how the composition of the staff reflects the student demographics, and how current practices support or marginalize portions of the student body. This type of equity lens should be used every time superintendents have discussions with school teams and also at Network meetings. Additionally, consideration should be given to keeping principals in schools for a longer period of time. It takes time to develop a relationship with staff and establish a dialogic context in which school teams have a voice and can work together to drive forward initiatives. Keeping principals in the same school for a minimum of five to seven years would increase the sustainability of efforts and reduce the
practice of teachers ‘waiting principals out’. Teacher evaluations take place every five years and keeping principals in the same school for this period of time would mean that criteria for teacher evaluations could include evidence that teachers are moving forward with school equity initiatives in their own classrooms and professional roles.

Validation and support for leaders committed to equity need to be considered. It takes time and effort for principals to work with their school teams to dialogue and unearth existing inequities. There is currently little to no time built into the structure of a school day to afford staff the opportunity to engage in professional dialogue. School staff presently needs to find the space through staff meetings, recess and lunch breaks, after hours discussions and through focused release time provided by paying for occasional teacher coverage. It is unreasonable to expect that this important work can be done on the fly. Designated time for discussion should be provided to school teams by the district with the explicit expectation that school staff engage in equity learning and dialogue relevant to their particular school culture.

Beyond the scope of school districts, a couple of Ministry supports are recommended. The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy would benefit from a couple of revisions. One change would be to enforce the collection of demographic and achievement data for marginalized groups. While the 1993 PPM 119 lacked substantial data backing, inequities for marginalized students have been well analyzed and documented in recent years by educational scholars and researchers (Apple, 1993; Ball 1993; Dei, 2001; Dehli, 1996; Whitty; 2001). School boards continue to move cautiously in collecting data based on the achievements of marginalized groups. This type of data will be important in providing a baseline so that the results of efforts can be measured over time.
Consideration should also be given to increasing autonomy of school boards within the Equity Strategy. Alex points out that the unique makeup of every school demands a different approach to equity:

*I don’t know if you could set conditions for equity consistently across every school. Every community, every school has its own culture- its own community that it’s serving. Its own dynamics. And so it’s very difficult to be homogeneous in terms of equity and what you do. I don’t think there could be a document that would say, “To be an equitable school, thou shall do this.” And on a bigger level, I don’t think the same resources necessarily meet the needs of every school. Where is the flexibility in funding or staffing for schools that really need it?*

In looking at policy development, McDonnell and Elmore (1987) identify four generic types of policy instruments that are typically used to ensure implementation and sustainability:

*Mandates* are rules governing the action of individuals and agencies and are intended to produce compliance;

*Inducements* transfer money to individuals or agencies in return for specified actions;

*Capacity-building* is the transfer of money for the purpose of investment in material, intellectual or human resources; and

*System-changing* transfers official authority among individuals and agencies in order to alter the system by which public goods and services are delivered.

(McDonnell & Elmore, p. 134)

The current equity policy makes use of a capacity-building instrument. Financial and professional resources have been given to boards with the purpose of developing their system and human resources in a manner that is conducive to their unique contexts and circumstances. While school boards have been afforded the latitude of shaping their responses to the policy in a manner that makes sense within their context, it falls short of a system-changing policy in that
they have not been given the authority to change the authority structure that currently exists. School boards continue to be allotted money based on a prescribed funding formula and are required to work within the pre-existing educational structures outlined by the ministry. There is no consideration given to issues of staffing, class size, hiring, transfer and retention policies, or stability of leadership in high needs schools. These forms of support would better enable schools to provide consistent and informed teaching in a manner that would benefit their students and communities.

The current policy has infused a stipulation that equity be woven into all board and school improvement strategies. The rationale is that this will ensure that equity be embedded in all school improvement strategies and that equity be the lens for developing initiatives. While this makes sense in theory, there is no accountability structure in place that will monitor school plans in relation to overall board plans. Sam speaks to the result of a lack of accountability:

Accountability in terms of equity? In all honesty, I don’t feel it. I don’t feel the accountability where there’s a sense of urgency... I’ve seen Boards that just fluff the language around to say that they’re doing it but they’re really not. So I think it really comes down to the administrators. I think the Strategy was a good place to start but it needed to have teeth.

The policy falls short in terms of accountability with the only mentioned measures being the results of EQAO assessments, provision of Board plans on websites, and articulation of strategies in each Board’s yearly Director’s Address. Sam points out that this ‘lack of teeth’ can result in Boards saying that they are working on equity initiatives because they know there are no
formal measures that measure their efforts. Accountability could take the form of mandating that each school submit a yearly equity goal and report back regarding the efficacy of their efforts.

An interesting contradiction emerges with respect to the participants' views on policy and accountability. On the one hand, the participants complain about 'bureaucratic pressures' and the focus on EQAO scores standing in the way of equity and stifling their efforts. On the other hand, they express a desire for increased accountability and tighter policy to ensure school staffs are engaging in authentic equity work. This discrepancy is likely attributed to the participants' understanding of the policy system within which they must work. Ball (1994) states that people that encounter policy remake it through their beliefs, goals and histories. The participants recognize that educational systems are driven by policy and that policy can be used to further their own equity objectives. A question that might be asked is, in terms of autonomy and accountability, under what conditions do principals want more control and under what conditions do they want less? Also, can this desire to use policy to further their equity agenda end up backfiring on them and resulting in their hands being tied regarding the strategies that are available to them?

With the four year implementation of Ontario’s Equity Strategy complete, the results of this study provide a glimpse into the experiences of principals who self-identify as leaders for equity and their successes and challenges moving forward with equity work in their schools. Careful consideration of improvements to professional learning models, human resource support and accountability measures as outlined in the Equity Strategy will serve to bolster the efforts of these individuals and all leaders who strive to improve conditions of equity for students within their schools.
References

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Appendix A:

Interview Guide

Research Question:

How do principals promote equity in their schools?

Sub-questions:

- How do principals define and understand equity?
- What pressures/obstacles/barriers do principals identify as impeding their equity work?
- What strategies do principals employ to create conditions for equity in their schools?
- What supports do principals identify as assisting in their equity work?

Interview Questions:

1. What is your definition of equity as it pertains to the school environment?
2. Where does your interest in leading for equity originate from?
3. Some people would say that Ontario schools have already set the conditions for equity. What would you say to them?
4. Can you give me an example of a strategy that you’ve found successful in creating the conditions for equity in your school?
5. How do you apply an equity lens in school improvement planning? Are there questions you ask? How do you unearth existing inequities?
6. How do you help your staff move from an awareness of inequities to action against them?
7. What type of relationship have you established with your staff? How does this relationship help with your equity work?
8. How would you define your leadership style? What traits serve your equity work? Do you consider your leadership style to be subversive?
9. What are some of the pressures or obstacles you’ve encountered to your equity work? Within your school? Externally?
10. What strategies do you use to help get around these barriers?

11. Are there currently supports that you find helpful in your equity work? Within your school? Externally?

12. What supports could be offered to help with your equity work? From your Board? The Ministry?
Date:

Thank you for considering participating in my research study. The study is part of the thesis requirements for an Ed.D. at OIST/UT. The purpose of the research study is to learn more about principals’ strategies for leading for equity in their schools. Invited participants are principals who consider themselves leaders for equity in the York Region District School Board. In total, 15 principals will participate in the study. Potential benefits you might derive from participating are that you will be afforded an opportunity to reflect on your own views and practices. As well, you may come to understand more about how other principals implement conditions for equity in their schools. The research will contribute to the knowledge of the scholarly community. The study is will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. James Ryan, from the Theory and Policy Studies Department at OISE/UT.

As a participant in the study, you will take part in a face-to-face interview of approximately 60 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your understanding of equity, strategies you employ to create conditions for equity in your school, obstacles you encounter in your equity work and supports you identify as assisting your equity work. As the interview proceeds, I may ask questions for clarification or further understanding, but my part will be mainly to listen to you speak about your views and experiences with equity. After the interview, I will write brief notes that will be used to assist me in remembering the surroundings of the interview (i.e., characteristics of the site).

It is the intention that each interview will be audio taped and later transcribed to paper; you have the choice of declining to have the interview taped. You will be assigned a number that will correspond to your interview and transcription. Your transcript will be sent to you via email within one week after the interview for you to read in order for you to add any further information or to correct any misinterpretations that could result. If you have information to add or correct, please return to me within one week of receiving the transcript. The information obtained in the interview will be kept in strict confidence. All information will be reported in such a way that individual persons, schools, school districts, and communities cannot be identified. Only the researcher will have access to the raw data. The raw data will be stored in a secure location in my home (in a locked cabinet). The audio tapes will be erased after they have been transcribed. All remaining raw data (i.e., transcripts, field notes) will be destroyed one year after the completion and defense of the study.

You may at any time refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the interview process. You may request that any information, whether in written form or audiotape, be eliminated from the project. At no time will value judgments be placed on your responses nor will you be judged or evaluated as a result of participating in this study. Finally, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it and may request a summary of the findings of the study. It is my intent to publish an executive summary of the results of the study and make presentations of the findings to the Board. Presentations may include to the participant group, the Research and Evaluation Services Department, and Directors’ Council. As well, the thesis will be submitted to OISE/UT. The identity of all participants will remain confidential in the original study and subsequent summaries and presentations. The Board name will not be used in the thesis, but will be used in presentations/reports to the Board.

Please note that although the research application has been approved by the External Research Review Committee of YRDSB, participation in this study is voluntary.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 416-407-1019 or at jane.macpherson@yrdsb.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. James Ryan at 416-978-1152. Finally, you may also contact the U of T Office of Research Ethics for questions about your rights as a research participant at ethics.review@untoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Thank you in advance for your participation.
By signing below, you are indicating that you are willing to participate in the study, you have received a copy of this letter, and you are fully aware of the conditions above.

Name: ________________________________ Date: ________________________________
Signed: ________________________________ Email: ________________________________

Please initial if you would like a summary of the findings of the study upon completion: ______

Please initial if you agree to have your interview audiotaped: ______

Please print and keep a copy of this form for your records.
Appendix C: Initial Email to Participants

Dear __________, 

I am a doctoral student at OISE/UT and am currently conducting research around principals’ strategies for leading for equity. The study is part of the thesis requirements for an Ed.D. at OIST/UT. The purpose of the research is to learn more about principals’ strategies for leading for equity. Sub-questions to the research include:

- How do principals define and understand equity?
- What pressures/obstacles/resistance do principals identify as impeding their equity work?
- What strategies do principals employ in their equity work?
- What supports do principals identify as assisting in their equity work?

I intend to recruit 15 principals in your Board for this study. Please find attached a Letter of Invitation to explain the purpose further. Participation would take the form of an interview lasting approximately one hour to support qualitative research. I am hoping to learn more about equity leadership through the thoughts you have to share. The information gathered through these interviews will be used toward a doctorate dissertation to inform equity leadership in our school Board and internationally. After you have read the attached letter, you can contact me for more information or to set up an interview.

Thank you in advance for your time,

Jane Macpherson