Teachers Responding to In/Equities: Motivations, Understandings and Actions

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy
Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the understanding, experiences and responses that fifteen public elementary school teachers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) had regarding in/equities in their schools. Participants included 15 male and female teachers from three large diverse school boards. The study explores the relationship between conceptions, experiences, and actions, using a multi-paper format, bound by an introductory and concluding chapter which introduces the topics explored and provides a summary of findings. The first article uncovers participants’ reasons for engaging in equity work. The second article describes participants’ understanding, recognition and actions regarding in/equities in their schools. The third article explores the kinds of things that hinder and support their equity work. Findings illustrate that participants exist on a spectrum with regards to the range and depth of their understanding, experiences, and responses to in/equities. Participant reasons for engaging in equity work included having personally experienced inequities, having witnessed others experiencing inequities, or having learned about inequities in school. Each participant described critical incidents which led them to do equity work, and they
addressed the kind of inequity they experienced, witnessed, or learned about in this incident through their equity work. Some participants possessed complex and inherent understanding of in/equities and responded to those they witness in constructive and robust ways. Others had less developed understanding and abilities to recognise in/equity and approached their equity work in less of an in-depth fashion. The most common challenges described by participants were administration and leadership, colleagues, and parents. The most common things participants described as helpful were administration and leadership, resources, and colleagues. Knowledge was a thread which was interwoven through all the findings; knowing one’s self; knowing others and coming to understand their experiences or perspectives; knowing the system, how to navigate it and what needed to be done to achieve their goals or target the inequities with which they were concerned; and knowing where to go for support and resources were all important. Findings suggest a need for research and training that is largely not addressed in Ontario around exploring the connection between experiences, conceptions, and practices of educators doing equity work in diverse schools.
Much like raising children, getting one’s PhD ‘takes a village’. I’m blessed to have a village full of caring and supportive people, all of whom helped me achieve this goal. It is just as much their accomplishment as it is mine. All of the people that I hold dear have helped to change me for the better in one way or another. One of the first people to encourage me along this journey was Katina Pollock. I learned many things from Katina; she has been kind and patient and went out of her way to teach me about education research. It was when working with Katina when I first fell in love with education research. It was Katina that initially suggested I apply for PhD studies. It turns out that the conversation with Katina about my future was one of my most life-changing events, and Katina has also become one of the most influential people in my life. I feel very lucky to say that she continues to be a trusted mentor.

Shortly after I began my PhD studies, I got to know my current supervisor, Jim Ryan. In his quiet way, Jim has taught me a great deal about education research, writing, leadership, and myself. He is extremely passionate about social justice and doing what is right. He not only talks the talk but also walks the walk. He expresses integrity in everything that he does, and obviously cares deeply about making the world a better place. It is said that your friends are a reflection of your true character. This year, when helping Jim and Denise prepare their book manuscript, I was overwhelmed by the kindness that the authors showed to me, Jim, and the author editors, in all of their communications. Jim is obviously deeply respected and cared for by his peers, he is a wonderful educator and mentor.

I am very thankful to have Joe Flessa and Denise Armstrong on my thesis committee. I asked both of them to be on my committee because I respect the rigor and depth of their academic work but mostly because I have great respect for them. They express and enact integrity in their teaching and research and set a wonderful example for current and future scholars.

I hold many other professors in high regard and they have been very helpful in my development as a scholar and otherwise. I am very grateful to have met and been supported by Drs John Portelli, Sue Winton, Coleen Stewart, and Reva Joshee.
Doctoral studies can be a difficult emotional challenge. I would not have been successful without the help of my academic ‘mom’ friends. Before I knew who she was, Amanda Cooper changed the way I was approaching my studies with one insightful conversation. Since that first meeting we have become good friends, and I continue to benefit from her thoughtful and unfailingly supportive advice. Very few people in the world are as selfless and supportive as her. I hope to repay her kindness and generosity in the future. Joelle is very often my sounding board and provider of words of wisdom. We have had many conversations about acting with integrity as graduate students and I know she will continue to be a moral and upstanding researcher as a newly minted PhD. Robyn makes the world a better place every day through her critical reflection on world events and her actions to bring about positive change. She inspires me with her amazing strength and intelligence. Thank you to all three of you for being there for me over the years, this journey would have been very lonely without you.

I am very lucky to have a very full life outside of my academic work, with a huge wonderful family and few cherished friends. Most of all, I am thankful to my parents for giving me the wonderful gift of my siblings. We have had some amazing adventures together, and I feel very lucky to have all of you in my life. I owe Miranda a special mention for being so supportive of me over the years and taking care of Sophie for me so that I was able to return to work. Hopefully someday soon you will know just how great of a gift you gave to me and the gratitude I feel towards you for taking such good care of her. I owe Sarah a similar expression of gratitude for welcoming Sophie into her home and treating Sophie like one of her own. She and I both miss the days she got to spend with you, Sarah. You are a wonderful mother and friend. I hear in your voice and see in your actions how you put your children first every day, and I hope they will understand how rare and special that is when they are older. I am thankful to my friend Trisha for being such a good friend to me over the years. I am lucky to know that you are always there for me when I need you. I truly value our conversations and your thoughtful and caring input in my life and my work. You are an amazing woman and mother. Sarah and Trisha, I look forward to many more years of friendship and raising our kids together.
Thank you to my grandmother, Bama, for being unfailingly supportive of me over the years, even when you did not know what I was doing. And, very importantly, for showing me what it means to be an independent woman. You are a pillar of strength.

Lastly I would like to acknowledge the support of my husband Greg and daughter Sophie. From the moment I met Greg he has helped me to learn and grow. He challenges me intellectually and is unfailingly supportive of me in everything that I do. As challenging as this journey can be for all of us, he never speaks ill of my academic pursuits. I know that my accomplishments are only possible because of the love and encouragement that Greg and Sophie show me every day. I have no words that could possibly describe the love that I have for the two of you so I will borrow some from E.E. Cummings “i carry your heart with me (i carry it in my heart) i am never without it”. Greg and Sophie, you are the very best part of my life and I cannot wait to see what we do next.
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Prologue

It is unfortunately not difficult to find proof that discrimination and oppression are alive and well. A brief scan of news reports paints a bleak picture of race relations, from the recent shootings in South Charleston (Massa, Walker, & Chen, 2015), to the string of fires at predominantly Black churches in the Southern United States following the capture of the shooter (Huntsberry, 2015). Things are slightly less concerning on this side of the border yet half of the police-reported hate crimes in 2013 were motivated by race or ethnicity and 51% of these incidents occurred in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2015). At times I feel overwhelmed by what seems like endless discrimination and negativity. However, I remain hopeful for a better future and do see positive changes happening such as the recent United States Supreme Court ruling that legalized gay marriage in all States. Regardless of my passion for achieving positive changes, I am not always certain about what my role should be.

This study is a reflection of my development as a scholar, critical thinker, and activist. I began my doctoral studies with a lot of questions about my identity and experiences and how they might have influenced who I am becoming in relation to the goals I have as a scholar and researcher of education, and as someone who desires to contribute to the creation of a more equitable and inclusive world. In the beginning, I knew I wanted to make a positive difference in schools, and I knew there were areas of improvement, but I was not sure where to start, or what I could add to what was already happening. I began where many scholars begin, with an examination of myself and my beliefs about education and society at large. During this time of critical self reflection, what I struggled with the most was who I am as an individual and how I fit into the system. I could see that inequities existed in the current system and there were things that could be done to decrease them, but I did not know what
my role could or should be in doing so. I started with an examination of identity and the influence of identity on understanding and practice and settled on this idea that our multiple and ever changing identities and prior experiences influence our understandings, beliefs, and practices in some way. For me, this means that my experiences as a White middle class woman shape the way I approach education and educational research. There are certain foundational understandings and beliefs which inform this study; they shape how I understand and engage with the existing research, and how I designed, conducted, and analyzed the data.

As a White middle class woman I struggle with the idea that I could be complicit in perpetuating the status quo. My interest and motivation to do equity work stems from witnessing people close to me experience discrimination and oppression and seeing how those experiences influenced every facet of their lives. Many of the effects were seriously detrimental, in some cases life threatening. I have personally experienced discrimination based on appearance and gender, which is tempered by the fact that I have enjoyed a life of relative privilege. Mainly, I am repeatedly surrounded by people who are unaware of their power and privileges, who hold strongly to beliefs in things such as meritocracy, and who find it very hard, if not impossible to understand and recognize the systemic nature of inequity and the role they play in reinforcing dominant and discriminatory ways of knowing and being. Regardless of this, I have had, from a very young age, a belief that society and societal institutions are inequitable, that they should not be, and that I have a moral obligation to try to help make society and societal institutions more equitable and inclusive. I choose to push against the inequitable reality by attempting to be conscious of my identity and the ways in which I inequitably benefit from it, but I know this is not how everyone thinks. As
McIntosh (1990) points out, people who experience power and privilege are often oblivious to the ways in which they experience this power and privilege. This is particularly alarming and detrimental in places like Ontario where an overwhelming majority of teachers are White, and middle class (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009). With that in mind, I approached this study with the initial intent of figuring out how and why it is that some people choose to become equitable in their thoughts and actions.

I perceive public education to be a strong vehicle for achieving the creation of more equitable and inclusive society and societal institutions. While there are many possible avenues for pursuing my equity goals, I have chosen to focus my efforts on trying to help those who are currently working as equitable teachers to improve their practice, and trying to encourage those who are not currently, at least consciously, being equitable in their practice to become more equitable and inclusive. I chose teachers as the focus of my efforts because I perceive teachers as playing “a crucial role; one that reflects many complex influences, but which is open to change” (Gillborn, 1992, p. 58). I believe teachers are agents of change (Moore, 2008) with the possibility of making a great contribution to the creation of a more equitable and inclusive society through their interactions with their students and their ability to change the system of education from within and without.

One of the main things that drives this study, and that I continue to grapple with is – why is it that some people believe in equity, are able to understand and recognize it around them, and choose to act on it, and others do not? Further, what kinds of things do people encounter in their attempts to do equity work that help or hinder them in doing this work?
Chapter 1

Introduction Chapter: The Problem, Context, Literature, and Methods

This thesis was written in an integrated article format. This chapter sets the stage for the study, introducing the topics under investigation, the relevant literature, and the research methods chosen to investigate these topics. The next three chapters represent three separate, stand alone articles. The final chapter is a concluding and summative chapter. Discussion of the relevant literature and methods is more in depth in this introductory chapter than the subsequent articles as they are written in the format of a publishable article. Some sections of the articles are fairly similar to one another such as the section of the literature review which explores definitions of equity, and the methods section, as those aspects of the study remain constant in relation to each of the different research questions.

Each of the three articles is organized around a main research question which comprises one of the main components of the conceptual framework. The order of the articles represents the relative position of the concepts within the conceptual framework. Although all of the concepts in the study are closely related, they could be seen as three main research questions which together comprise the conceptual framework. Why some teachers engage in equity work while others do not was the first main research question. Therefore, the first article explores the reasons that participants gave for choosing to engage in equity work. The next main aspect of the study and the conceptual framework concerns how teachers conceptualize and therefore act with regards to equity and inequity; how participants perceive inequities as manifesting in schools and the actions they have chosen to undertake to address them. When teachers decide to engage in equity work they are addressing a perceived problem or need. Participants engage in equity work because, for some reason, they believe
that inequities exist and that they can do something to decrease them. This process remains to be clearly articulated in research literature, specifically what it is they consider to be equitable versus inequitable, what kinds of things are they perceiving as inequitable in their schools, and what kinds of actions are they undertaking to address these inequities. The second article therefore discusses how participants understand, recognize, and act on inequities in their schools. Finally, when people engage in equity work, we know it is not always easy, there are things which have been flagged as helpful or harmful. Yet, although these things are mentioned anecdotally or scantily in research literature, in depth discussions of these things are lacking. The third article therefore uncovers those things which participants described as challenging or supporting them in their attempts to do equity work. The final, concluding chapter revisits the research questions, and summarizes the key findings.

**Purpose of the Study**

Schools are inequitable in their practices and in the outcomes students achieve (Allard & Santoro, 2008; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010; Solomon, Singer, Campbell, Allen, & Portelli, 2011; Tremblay, Ross, & Berthelot, 2001; Zine, 2007). This inequity is systemic and has existed for many years. More recently, researchers have cited pressures to focus on student achievement of core subject matter and increasing accountability as things which compound existing inequities (Apple, 2006; Carr; 2006; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006; Sleeter, 2008, 2011). Even teachers who state a commitment to equity and inclusion find it challenging to achieve their equity goals within the current climate where they feel there are too many things to accomplish and too little time (Lindsay, 2007; Sleeter, 1992).
This study is a response to the continued inequities experienced by students in Ontario schools. Although it can be difficult to pinpoint exactly how and what inequity can look like in schools, and exactly what causes inequitable outcomes for students, patterns do exist in things such as test scores and graduation rates which highlight the fact that some groups of students experience greater educational success than others, for various reasons. For example, students who have recently immigrated to Canada, do not speak English as their first language, or who generally do not conform to the dominant group for many reasons relating to things such as their race, gender expression, sexual orientation, or socio economic status do not experience the same kind of academic success as their peers (Dei, James, Karumachery, James-Wilson & Zine, 2000; Harper, 1997; Kumashiro, 2002; Nieto, 2000; Ryan, 2006; Tremblay, Ross & Berthelot, 2001). Many teachers engage in work to respond to inequity, but there is still more to be learned, particularly regarding teachers’ motivations for doing equity work, their understanding of equity/inequity, how they recognize inequities as playing out in their schools, what they are doing in their schools to address inequities, and the supports and challenges that may help and hinder them in doing this work. All of this information can be used to help inform teacher professional development and support materials, as well as future research regarding equity work.

**Research Questions**

This purpose of this project is to investigate equity work teachers do in their schools. More specifically this study asks the following questions:

1. Why do some elementary teachers engage in equity activities?
2. How do equity-minded educators understand, come to recognize in/equity in their schools, and what actions do they take to address these perceived inequities?

3. What challenges and helps them in doing this work?

**Significance**

This study will contribute to the growing body of literature about practices that support and create more equitable and inclusive schools. There is a substantial amount of research available that looks at individual schools or systems that have been successful at doing equity work (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Theoharis, 2007) and at how educational leaders contribute to the creation and maintenance of equitable schools (Gold, Evans, Early, Halpin, & Collabone, 2003; Ryan, 2006; 2012; Theoharis, 2007; Vibert & Portelli, 2000). However, there is much less information available about why some teachers do equity work, what comprises their equity work, and what they experience while doing this work. Some of the more commonly discussed equity practices teachers undertake include (but are not limited to): differentiating instruction and materials based on students’ ability and background (Delpit, 1998); encouraging participation in schooling from all students and stakeholders (parents, community organizations etc.) (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011), ensuring students can see themselves (their lived experiences, values and beliefs) and that of their communities are reflected in the school environment and materials (Dei, et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rios & Montecinos, 1999); ensuring all students have the resources and opportunities to achieve success (academically and otherwise); respecting the multiple and differing values and beliefs of students and community members (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2004); providing an environment where academic rigor is supported and expected for
all students; supporting students in the development of critical thinking and the ability to recognize and understand discrimination and oppression (Freire, 2000; Jay, 2003; Nieto, 2004). However, there is still more to learn about what kinds of equity work teachers are doing in their classrooms, in particular what exactly they are doing and what helps and hinders them in doing this work. Information about what works, what does not and why with regards to equity work will be required so long as inequities exist and equity workers continue to experience challenges. This is particularly true given the current political and social context and the influence of things such as standardized teaching tactics and assessments (Apple, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006). This study will help contribute to the growth and development of the body of research around teachers’ equity practices by providing useful practical information regarding why some teachers engage in equity work, the kinds of equity strategies that are being used in schools by teachers to achieve greater equity and inclusion, and what helps and hinders them in doing this work.

**Research Setting and Context**

The research setting for this project is Ontario public elementary schools in the greater Toronto area (GTA). Ontario is an increasingly diverse province; it receives around 40% of all immigrants to Canada on a yearly basis with a large portion of those immigrants settling in the GTA (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2011a). It is projected that by 2036 net migration will account for 68% of the population growth in the province (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2011b). Ontario students are largely perceived as being high achievers academically; the five year provincial high school graduation rate was 84% in the 2012-2013 school year (Dubinski, 2015). Although, on average, Ontario students experience high levels of academic success,
some students in Ontario experience greater levels of academic success than others. These differences in achievement often coincide with identity groupings or characteristics of students such as socio-economic status, race or ethnicity. For example, the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) in London Ontario had a five year high school graduation rate of 77% in 2014 while the Halton District School Board (HDSB) had a five year graduation rate of 88% (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). The director of the TVDSB was quick to point out that their students experience great challenges in their academic pursuits, particularly relating to family income. The students in the TVDSB experience higher levels of poverty than students at other school boards such as the HDSB (Dubinski, 2015). Differences in student achievement also often relate to race. For instance, “recent estimates from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) indicate that as many as 40 per cent of Caribbean-born students and 32 per cent of those born in Eastern Africa, and 28 per cent of students from Western Africa dropped out of high school” (Brown, 2006 in Sweet, Anisef, Brown, Walters & Phythian, 2010, p. 10). These statistics help illustrate the fact that systemic inequities exist in Ontario schools that are clearly related to identity characteristics. Ruck and Wortely (2002) present a list of studies which demonstrate that students who are minoritized based on their race or ethnicity are treated unfairly in schools in Canada and the United States and that the consequences of those inequities are grave. Students who do not conform to dominant identity characteristics experience discrimination and oppression in schools leading to what many describe as disengagement. The term disengagement places the blame on the students rather than the system. Dei (2008) provides an alternative way of understanding the experiences of marginalized students. He describes the various ways in which Black students are pushed out of the system through discrimination. Dei calls for education to be re-imagined in various ways including in such a manner that diverse youth
are more effectively taught, and that disadvantages and challenges faced by youth are more
“concretely addressed” as opposed to “glossed over” (p. 346). This study looks at the
different kinds of work elementary teachers are doing in their schools to address inequities
they perceive as occurring in their schools.

The participants involved in this study are elementary school teachers. The kinds of
equity work elementary teachers do and the inequities they are responding to are shaped by
the nature of the larger social, economic, and political systems and also the particular nature
of elementary school environments. There are certain predictable similarities in the nature of
the teaching environments for the participants in this study with regards to things such as the
curriculum that is being taught, resources available, policies and procedures mandated by the
Ministry of Education and school boards for those working in the same school boards, the
organization of the school day, the role teachers and other actors play in school life, the
length and number of classes and recesses, and the operation schedule (Denscombe, 1980;
Warren, 1973). However, participants experience differences in their contexts surrounding
things such as workplace norms, beliefs and values and how they influence teacher practice
in the schools where the teachers work.

Elementary school teachers were chosen because of the nature of the teaching
relationship in the elementary environment. Elementary school teachers teach their students
almost all subject matter with the exception of things such as music, French, library and
physical education (Simmons, 2012). They spend almost all of the school day in the same
room, creating a unique environment and relationship between the student and teacher.
Teachers can come to know their students quite well and develop personal relationships with
them and a sense of security or comfort within their particular classroom. This is in contrast
to the nature of the high school environment where teachers are often subject specialists, teaching multiple groups of students each day, and where students and teachers often change classroom locations multiple times throughout the day (Simmons, 2012). These factors, among many others, shape the nature of the equity work teachers do in each setting.

Teachers learn from and can be influenced by the environments in which they teach. Warren Little (1982) found that what teachers believe and how they act in terms of things like professional learning and development, teaching, assessment, and collaboration, are largely shaped by the norms in their schools regarding these practices. For example, if professional development and collaboration are valued by the majority of practitioners in their school, then teachers are more likely to buy into and participate in professional development and collaboration. Therefore, it could be the case that teachers are more likely to engage in equity work in schools where equity work is the norm or is valued by many, which could lead to lesser experiences of challenges and more supports. However, it could also be the case that teachers may conform to environmental norms verbally and in more public areas of the school, but they may act differently in their own classrooms (behind closed doors), and that the norms of the school context do not heavily influence or shape the actions of all teachers. As Warren (1973) describes:

We have long assumed that the classroom is an arena for significant socializing experiences although empirically we know relatively little about what in the social-emotional growth of children and youth can be attributed to the school experience or more specifically to the socializing influence of teachers. Furthermore, theory and research on socialization processes and institutions in general assume that functional social controls norms, sanctions, and appropriate intervening procedure-operate to
structure and constrain the behavior of socializing agents. This assumption may not hold for schools and particularly for teachers. It may be that the role of the teacher is refractive to social control in ways we do not fully understand. (p. 280)

Whether the norms and values of the school context play a role in shaping the actions and beliefs of teachers or not, it is important to keep these possible influences in mind when conducting research in and about schools.

**Literature Review**

The literature review will begin with an overview of the definition of equity which informs this study, reasons that have been uncovered as to why some teachers feel compelled to do equity work and what it means to understand and recognize in/equities. Next, the kinds of actions teachers undertake on a daily basis are discussed, some of the actions which teachers engage in which are considered to be equitable are explored. Finally, some of the things which have been identified as possible challenges and supports for equity work are uncovered.

**Equity**

Equity is popularly discussed in reference to education, yet it is a complicated term with multiple meanings. Depending on the situation and the goals of those using the term, it can mean very different things. For some, equity means that everyone should receive the same things (Jencks, 1988, p. 519). For others, equity means more should be given to those in need (Jencks, 1988). For others still, equity includes calculations of merit based on fair or meritocratic competition (Jenks, 1988). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2011) equity is “a: justice according to natural law or right; specifically: freedom from bias or
favouritism, *b*: something that is equitable”. Characteristics of equity include: fairness in distribution, justice and fairness, reasonableness, and respecting one another (Unterhalter, 2009; Vasquez, 1998). In reference to education, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (International Institute for Educational Planning, OECD, 2010, p. 4) states:

> Equity: Goes beyond parity, equality and the administration of justice. It embraces the notions of fairness, social justice and the ‘level playing ground’. It addresses the need to right the wrongs, and the fact that there are some severely disadvantaged groups in society, and that equal treatment of all social groups will not bring about equal outcomes. Providing equity will imply providing disadvantaged groups, for example girls, with favourable conditions.

In reference to the complicated nature of terms such as equity (inequity, equality, and inequality), Stone (2012) defines equity as a term which “denote(s) distributions regarded as fair, even though they contain both equalities and inequalities (p. 41). Stone goes on to say that when considering distribution of an asset, and in this case the asset is education, three things are key to the consideration – who is getting the asset, what is being distributed, and how it will be distributed (p. 42).

> Determining who should get what and how is no easy task, and is highly dependent on context and the distribution of political power (Stone, 2012). Those with more voice and political power will have a greater influence over the distribution of all other assets. Broadly speaking, equity in education involves trying to achieve fair and equal opportunities for people but “does not necessarily entail equal treatment” (Solomon et al., 2011, p. 15). Field, Kuczera and Pont (2007, p. 12) state that equity in education has two dimensions:
The first is fairness, which implies ensuring that personal and social circumstances – for example gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin – should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential. The second is inclusion, which implies ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all – for example that everyone should be able to read, write and do simple arithmetic.

What these definitions acknowledge is that some groups of students have been disadvantaged by society and societal institutions because of their membership in identity groups which are marginalized and discriminated against. They have less voice and power, and therefore experience less opportunity and success educationally and otherwise; as a result, work needs to be done to right those wrongs, decrease disadvantages and help students experience greater equity in schools in multiple ways (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ryan 2012). Equity minded educators engage in equity work to address this unfair disadvantage.

For the purpose of this study, equity is about ensuring all students are provided with the education, support and opportunity they need to succeed academically (though not narrowly focused) and otherwise, and is particularly concerned with work that contributes to the provision of equity of opportunities and outcomes for students who experience marginalization and oppression. Although equity is a complicated term which means different things depending on the situation, there are some elements that remain relatively constant, regardless of the source of the definition and the goals of those involved. For instance, equity and inequity are often discussed in reference to group membership or identity, power, the individual and systemic nature of in/equity, and the consequences of experiencing inequity. Sometimes some of those elements are given more or less focus than others. The definition of equity which informs this study includes those four main
components; they are conceptualized for this study as the terrain, mechanism, nature and consequences of in/equity.

*The terrain: identities such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation.*

Although we are socialized to believe that school is a great equalizer, this is not the case (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). School environments are still quite unsupportive of students who do not conform to the dominant group, who are perceived to be minorities based on things such as race or ethnicity, religion, culture, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender, geography, and ability, in many cases these students actually form a majority (Almeida et al., 2009; Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006; Buchmann, DiPrete & McDaniel, 2008; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010; Elgar, Craig, Boyce, Morgan, & Vella-Zarb, 2009; Espelage, Aragon, & Birkett, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pasternak, 1999; Wiltshire, 1995; Zine, 2001, 2007). Schools enforce binary ways of knowing and being and impose stereotypes on the students and faculty (Cooper & White, 2004; Tantekin Erdin, 2009). Schools still operate in a manner that does not support the inclusion of life experiences and possibilities that are different from normalized ways of knowing and being. There are lower expectations, lesser experiences and stiffer disciplinary measures for students who are not part of the dominant group (Banks, 2008; Gittens, Cole, Williams, Sri-Skanda, Tam, & Ratushny, 1995; Smith, 2009; Solomon & Palmer, 2004; Wade, 2000). Policies and practices are still largely based on dated beliefs that do not take different or non dominant life circumstances into consideration. Therefore, students are in many cases not being encouraged to be themselves, but to conform to dominant ways of knowing and being.

*The mechanism: power.*
Equity work is essentially about power; understanding and addressing who has power and access, and who does not and why; where and what this power stems from; and how power is used. In education, equity work is geared towards helping students who do not have power and access to learning and life opportunities to gain that power and access within their educational systems (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Cochran – Smith, 2006; Peters & Reid, 2009). Schools are products and representations of the larger workings of society; they are both produced by and reproduce the systemic norms, values, and practices of those in the dominant groups or those who are positioned as powerful in society and societal institutions (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Nieto, 2004; Ryan & Rottman, 2007). Individuals have power based on their relative position in social environments and institutions. Success or failure within institutions such as education is largely influenced by the roles individuals play within these existing institutions and their associated systems (both perceived and real). In North America, those who operate in positions of power are largely White middle class individuals from European backgrounds (Carr, 2006). Therefore, mainstream schools typically impose Western or European perspectives and values on students by delivering schooling that has been designed by members of the dominant group (Banks, 2008; Zine, 2007). This makes the identification of continued systemic inequalities that much more difficult, as those who have and wield power might be resistant to questioning their own role in the creation of inequitable society and societal institutions. Teachers can hold and use power in certain ways which can re-enforce existing power structures both intentionally and unintentionally, or in ways that break down barriers to access and success for all students. Teachers unfortunately work within institutions that have a history of hierarchical and dominant organization and distribution of power which can greatly hinder their abilities to do equity work (Di Angelo & Sensoy, 2010).
The nature: systemic, taken for granted aspects.

Marginalization, discrimination and oppression are systemic occurrences that are not accidental; there are many things that contribute to their existence (Carr, 2006; Joshee, 2012; Ryan & Rottman, 2007). Society, politics, history and economics are all related in the role they play in identifying and valuing those in power and working together to reinforce and reproduce power relations and therefore systemic marginalization and discrimination (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008, Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Schools are one of the social institutions where existing and systemic inequitable power structures and relations are often taken for granted, and work to shape the experiences of students in inequitable ways through the reinforcement and recreation of inequitable power relations and through the actions of educators and administrators and the general structure and functions of schools. Many researchers in education refer to this as the hidden curriculum. Sambell and McDowell (1998) state that the

The term ‘hidden curriculum’ is widely-known and used but encompasses a broad range of definitions. It is an apposite metaphor to describe the shadowy, ill-defined and amorphous nature of that which is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction. At the macro-level, social theorists describe a hidden curriculum largely in terms of its detrimental effects on the ideals of liberal educational philosophy and the process of schooling as a coercive societal mechanism (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Illich, 1973; Meighan, 1986). (p. 392).
The hidden curriculum works in many ways to reinforce binary, dominant, hierarchical ways of knowing and being: from the design and organization of school buildings, grounds, and classrooms (Gillborn, 1992; Titman, 1994); the design and delivery of curriculum and lessons (Jay, 2003); the way assessments are conceived of, delivered, and results are portrayed and sometimes publicized (Sambell & McDowell, 1998; Wren, 1999); the value placed on different beliefs, values and experiences (Giroux, 1983; Gilborn, 1992; Portelli, 1993); the importance and prominence of certain subject areas and skill sets that will prepare students to be productive actors in the competitive global economy over subjects and skills that are less economically advantageous (Apple, 2006); the nature of relationships between multiple education stakeholders (such as students and teachers, teachers and administrators, administrators/teachers and parents/guardians/community members) (Freire, 2000; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Wren, 1999). For a more in depth discussion of the systemic nature of discrimination and oppression in schools and how it plays out in the hidden and not so hidden curriculum see for example Giroux and Penna, 1979; McLaren, 2007, or Portelli, 1993.

The consequences: inequity, marginalization, oppression, and discrimination.

Systemic discrimination and oppression has grave consequences. Students who do not conform to dominant ways of knowing and being often do not experience the same level of educational success as their peers. Instead they frequently experience racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamaphobia and other forms of discrimination and oppression (Banks, 2008; Espelage et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Zine, 2001, 2007). These incidents of failure and rejection lead youngsters to undergo things such as higher instances of academic disengagement, drug use, risky sexual behaviour, and suicidal ideation (Allard & Santoro, 2008; Almeida et al., 2009). People who have been marginalized begin to view themselves as
less valuable, as that is what society has shown them, which influences every day decision making (Anmol & Wilson, 2011). The effects of discrimination and marginalization are far reaching. Later in life those who do not conform to the dominant group continue to encounter systemic discrimination and oppression in the form of things such joblessness, economic discrimination, poverty, homelessness, higher rates of incarceration and longer prison time, and abuse (Lenon, 2000; Porter, 2004).

**Why Equity Minded Educators Engage in Equity Work**

It has long been said that past experiences and beliefs inform teachers’ actions (Irvine, 2003; Villegas, 2007). It is also often stated that it is problematic that the majority of teachers are White when many of their students are of diverse backgrounds (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009). White teachers are described as likely being less capable of understanding the experiences of their students, particularly in comparison to their colleagues who have experienced discrimination and oppression (Howard, 1999; Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004). And comments are made in passing in about how people have different kinds of understandings of things like equity and diversity (Howard, 1999; Sleeter et al., 2004). Yet very few scholars have investigated the understandings and beliefs held by teachers before attempting to change them, it seems as though this step is skipped over (see for example Sleeter et al., 2004). However, research investigating teachers’ dispositions, identities, motivations, and beliefs in general, and investigations into pre service teachers and educational leaders’ understandings and beliefs of equity and inclusion provide a helpful starting point for informing this study.
Delpit (1995) uses the term “involuntary subconscious” to describe her belief that people view things through their own lens, which operates involuntarily (p. 151). This lens acts as the default or the norm to which everything else is compared. She goes on to say that changing this process to one that is voluntary, where people are able to view things from multiple and other perspectives, is challenging but necessary for teaching for equity. Villegas (2007) uses the term disposition to describe the tendencies individuals have to act in particular ways. These dispositions are drawn from prior knowledge and experience and inform teachers’ actions (p. 373). Enterline, Cochran-Smith, Ludlow, and Mitescu (2008) contend that teacher beliefs regarding things like social justice are important because they inform and shape their practice, and that although difficult to do, they can be changed (p. 289). Their work also highlights the fact that, although teacher beliefs regarding things such as social justice are believed to be important for informing practice, little effort is spent in trying to catalogue, assess, and change these beliefs and understanding. Milner (2010) supports the notion that beliefs can be changed, though he uses the term “conceptual repertoires of diversity” to explain his belief that teachers enter education with beliefs, values, and ways of thinking that influence and shape the way they teach, and that these beliefs therefore need to be addressed (p. 118). Milner (2005) used self study to help prospective teachers develop and understanding of things such as race and racism by reflecting on past experiences and unpacking their meaning. He also points out that much of the research regarding teachers’ beliefs and understanding of things such as social justice focuses on prospective teachers and teacher educators (2005). This work has demonstrated that a relationship exists between past experiences and the nature work of the work in which teacher educators choose to engage (Merryfield, 2000; Milner, 2010).
The lens of identity is used another tool for exploring what influences and informs teacher practice. People have multiple identities that influence the way they perceive things and interact in different environments (Varghese et al., 2005), including those associated with family membership, race, ethnicity, gender, socio economic status and religion. Teachers’ identities are at play in the classroom (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 22). They influence what teachers perceive as their role or identity as educators (Lasky, 2005), what they do and say in the classroom (Ryan, 1997), and how they come to understand policies and initiatives. However, studies on identity in education focus largely on the formation or development of a professional identity (Flores & Day, 2006; Lasky, 2005). Few studies address how teachers perceive their own identity, what that might mean for their practice, particularly for those practicing in diverse environments (Howard, 1999; Varghese et al., 2005).

Researchers in the field of developmental psychology refer to the process of understanding how past experiences inform future actions as “sense making”, which involves accessing the known and familiar to understand new information and stimuli (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, p. 394). In reference to equity, Weick (1995) defines sense making as the process of how and why teachers construct their understanding of equity policies and what it means to do equity work (Weick, 1995). Sense making is defined as an active process that involves the interpretation of thoughts or actions based on one’s existing (past) knowledge and experiences and the context of this influence. What sense people make of things is what they come to understand as being the norm, and how people define and act on things. People can go through the same process yet make different sense of things, or go through a different process of sense making to make the same sense of something.
Theories of motivation come closest to articulating the phenomenon under investigation in this article. Motivation has been an increasingly popular topic in educational research, largely with regards to student motivation (Deci et al., 1991; Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque, & Legault, 2002). Motivation is defined as something internal to a person that drives them to engage in actions to achieve a particular outcome (Harmer, 2001; Suslu, 2006). “To be motivated means to be moved to do something. A person who feels no impetus or inspiration to act is thus characterized as unmotivated, whereas someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated” (Ryan, & Deci, 2000, p. 54). Finding out what motivates people is to figure out the “why” behind their actions (Ryan, & Deci, 2000, p. 54). What motivates people to act relates to their underlying attitudes and beliefs regarding what they believe should happen and whether they believe this can be achieved through their actions (Ryan, & Deci, 2000, p. 54). Motivations help to direct and maintain or sustain behaviours and actions (Olulube, 2006; Steers, & Lyman, 1991).

Research regarding teacher motivations and equity work is underdeveloped, yet there are some key findings with regards to what informs the equity work of educational leaders which is helpful for informing this study. Educational leaders who engage in equity work are described as being able to recognize that society and societal institutions marginalize certain groups and work to decrease inequities through their work (Theoharis, 2007). They are portrayed as deriving their motivation to do equity work from previous experiences with marginalization or oppression, what they learned from these experiences and what they would like to see changed as a result (Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Church or religious upbringing is said to be integral to some in the development of this responsibility to help others and community (Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Educational leaders also cite
family and other close relationships such as with mentors as a source of influence; they refer to their parents as having shown them how education can be the route to a better life or a better world and helping to motivate them to contribute to equitable changes (Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Finally, geography or context is also influential. This could include living in an area where marginalization and oppression are commonly experienced, or in a particular time period – having grown up in an era such as the 1960s or 1970s when social justice and activism were common (Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007).

Understanding how one’s background and experiences shape and inform them as educators is clearly an important process for teachers, particularly those who teach in diverse settings and hope to decrease inequities through their work (Howard, 1999; Irvine, 2003; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Teacher education programs have therefore recently begun to include experiential learning components in the hopes of changing and expanding perspective teachers’ knowledge of things such as equity and diversity and encouraging them to engage in equity work (Baldwin, Buchanan, Rudisil, 2007; Whipp, 2013; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007; Wiggins, 2011). Although it is agreed that past experiences and learning inform future practice, prospective teachers’ beliefs regarding things like equity and diversity have changed as a result of experiential learning, the theory behind these programs remains underdeveloped. Further, most of the research in this area focuses on prospective teachers and educational leaders (Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). The experiences of practicing teachers remain understudied. There is therefore much to be learned about the experiences, beliefs and actions of teachers actively practicing equity work, in particular what kinds of things influenced them to engage in this work and how those experiences inform their equity actions.
Recognizing and Understanding In/equity.

Doing equity work involves understanding how and why inequities exist and acting to decrease them (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010; Peters & Reid, 2009; Solomon et al., 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Coming to understand how and why inequities exist does not come naturally to all educators (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010). Some educators recognize inequity because of their lived experiences, by having been subject or witness to discrimination and oppression, just as some are oblivious to them because they have lived a life of relative privilege (Griffiths, 2010; Rios & Montecinos, 1999; Singh, 2010; Sleeter, 2001; Theoharris, 2007). Many teachers’ first experiences with examining inequities and their sources are in teacher preparation programs and “this work is difficult” (Sleeter, 2011, p. 422). It can be a challenge to help people come to understand and recognize inequities as teachers often reject the idea that discrimination and oppression still exist, particularly teachers who are part of the dominant group, and this denial often leads to feelings of resistance and anger (Carr, 2006; Griffiths, 2010; Ryan, 2003). Some teachers have viewed what they perceive as the success of meritocracy because their families were immigrants who were successful at assimilating and creating a good life for themselves (Sleeter, 2011). Others have bought into societal conceptions of things such as the merit of colour blindness, or the belief that minoritized groups are less successful because they are less able; others are simply unaware of reality (Griffiths, 2010; Ryan, 2003; Sleeter, 2011). Whatever the reason, coming to understand how society and societal institutions work together to systematically discriminate and oppress certain groups is challenging work that is required and foundational for doing equity work. Teachers doing equity work need to be socially, politically, and culturally aware; they need to be able to understand how society and societal institutions create and perpetuate inequities.
and able to recognize inequities when they see them (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 2004; Peters & Reid, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

**Teachers Work**

In order to be able to uncover and identify the actions that could be part of a teacher’s attempts to do equity work, a clear understanding, or as much as is possible, of the nature of their work is necessary. This section describes the practices teachers undertake as part of their work and some of the ways teachers can incorporate equity work into their daily practice. This literature review was condensed into a list of teaching practices (Appendix B) which were used to inform the development of the interview protocol (Appendix A).

None of the practices described below are benign; all can function to either enforce and create inequities or decrease inequities. Many of these practices could be done in such a way that perpetuates, rather than challenges or pushes against, the hidden curriculum. All teacher practices are shaped by the larger systemic organizations and constructions of power, the nature of education and the particular contexts teachers are working in, as well as teachers’ beliefs and values and those of their colleagues. For the purpose of organization, for this study, teacher practices have been organized under the categories: planning, professional obligations and duties/administration, relationships, teaching, assessment, and extracurricular involvement. Some of the practices may span more than one category and many of them are related and overlapping.

**Planning**
Teachers begin nearly every task by engaging in some sort of planning which can involve developing and organizing instructional lectures, and preparing materials and classes for activities (Kelly, 2012; Kuther, 2012). Teachers also select, store, order, issue and keep track of equipment, materials, and supplies (ONet, 2010). Finally, teachers must often provide written evidence of preparations that have been made for their work to their administrators and other colleagues (ONet, 2010). This planning can take place in multiple venues and at many different times throughout the day including before and after school, during planning periods, while students are working on individual and group activities and on the spot, while educators are simultaneously teaching or completing other tasks. Teachers can plan to incorporate multiple perspectives and resources in their lessons and think of ways to encourage and help students view things through multiple lenses when teaching lessons (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rios & Montecinos, 1999). However, this is not always the case, as even teachers who state they are committed to being equitable and inclusive in their practice state they do not have enough time to integrate things like multiculturalism and equity into their teaching (Sleeter, 1992).

**Teaching**

Teaching happens in many different ways and places, including the more formal settings where a teacher administers a lesson to a classroom of students on a particular subject, and less formal settings such as on field trips (ONet, 2010; United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009). Many elementary school educators teach several subjects, including but not limited to English, History, Math, Science, Social Science, Gym, and Geography (Simmons, 2012). Teachers doing equity work can focus on making sure students are developed as whole individuals and not just with regard to particular subject matter; they
can encourage students to learn multiple perspectives and topics and develop critical thinking skills (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2004).

Along with teaching subject matter, educators can also act as supports or coaches, using classroom presentations or individual instruction to help students learn and apply concepts in concrete ways (Kuther, 2012; United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009). Teaching can involve using a variety of materials beyond just books and written materials including computers, audio-visual, shop, gym and home equipment such as stoves and sewing machines (ONet, 2010). Teaching for equity and social justice can involve bringing in members of the community to teach students about their passions and abilities, and incorporating community and students’ experiential knowledge into learning experiences in other ways (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rios & Montecinos, 1999). One of the ways in which teachers can be equitable in their practice is by “disrupt(ing) discriminatory discourses” which do not always address the needs of all students (Baglieri Knopf, 2004, p. 527) and delivering instruction in differentiated ways to meet the different learning needs of students learning at multiple levels even within one grade level (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Baglieri Knopf, 2004; ONet, 2010).

Assessment

Educators are continuously assessing their students’ academic performance, behaviour, social development and physical, and emotional health both after and while instructing their students (ONet, 2010). Assessment involves creating and refining assessment materials and then grading the students based on their performance on things such as papers, portfolios, artwork, exams, and oral presentations (Kuther, 2012; ONet, 2010; Simmons, 2012; United
States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009). Teachers write report cards and other formal assessments that are used when talking to students and their parents or guardians about their educational progress (Simmons, 2012). Equitable assessment can involve providing a variety of opportunities for assessment based on students’ strengths and preferences and allowing students to complete assignments and tests in their own vernacular (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ryan & Rottman, 2007).

**Relationships**

Teachers deal with multiple people in different capacities every day, developing and maintaining relationships. Teachers talk with students, parents, guardians, teachers, counsellors, and administrators to let them know how students are doing in class with regards to both educational and personal matters and to determine any priorities for student resource or support needs (Kuther, 2012; ONet, 2010; Simmons, 2012; United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009). Educators act as mentors for students, other teachers, and volunteers (Kuther, 2012; ONet, 2010). They also deal with discipline issues such as creating and enforcing class and school rules and responsibilities and disciplining individuals (Kelly, 2012; ONet, 2010; United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009). Discipline and punishment issues are often discussed as an area of improvement from an equity standpoint as many discipline and character development policies reinforce binary ways of knowing and being at the cost of others (Winton, 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Winton & Tuters, 2014). Minoritized students are much more likely to experience bullying than their peers (Mishna, Pepler, Cook, Craig, & Wiener, 2010), and the consequences of this bullying are grave. For example, LGBTQ students experience extremely high rates of suicide compared to their peers, and bullying is positively correlated to instances of teen suicide amongst LGBTQ
youth (Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003) Regardless of the fact that students who are marginalized and minoritized experience higher levels of bullying (Mishna et al., 2010), research and policy responses to the problem of bullying focus largely on individuals and their behaviour rather than on social or cultural elements and outcomes (Walton, 2005, 2011; Winton & Tuters, 2014).

One way in which educators can become more equitable in their practice is addressing discrimination and oppression and other behavioural concerns in a way that acknowledges the systemic and complex nature of behaviour, rather than focusing on the individual level of interactions (Atlas and Pepler, 1998 as cited in Mishna et al., 2010, p. 44; Walton, 2005, 2011). Educators can also work towards the creation and maintenance of relationships and partnerships in order to achieve their goals of creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments. Teachers can make a concerted effort to get to know their students, incorporate this knowledge into their teaching and create a culture of caring and safety within the school and surrounding community (Dei et al. 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers can build relationships with one another to collaborate and find new and innovative ways to meet the needs of their students (Ciuffetelli Parker, Grenville, & Flessa, 2011; Rios & Montecinos, 1999). Parents and community members can be invited to take an active role in the school (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Smith et al., 2011).

Other Professional Obligations and Duties/Administration

All teacher tasks fall under the broad umbrella of their professional duties and responsibilities. Many of those tasks go above and beyond what they do in their classes on a
daily basis. Teachers attend school meetings and serve on committees (Kuther, 2012; ONet, 2010). They spend time following through on all necessary housekeeping and recordkeeping tasks including maintaining accurate and complete student records as required by laws, district policies, and administrative regulations (Kelly, 2012; ONet, 2010). Teachers supervise, evaluate, and plan assignments for teacher assistants and volunteers (ONet, 2010). Field trips, visits by guest speakers or other experiential activities also need to be planned and guided (ONet, 2010). Teachers attend educational conferences and take part in teacher training workshops to maintain and improve professional competence, remain certified or gain additional certifications (Kelly, 2012; ONet, 2010). They administer standardized ability and achievement tests and interpret results to determine student strengths and areas of need (ONet, 2010). Educators collaborate with other teachers and administrators in the development, evaluation, and revision of elementary school programs (ONet, 2010). Teachers also perform administrative supervision duties such as assisting in school libraries, hall and cafeteria monitoring, and bus loading and unloading. Equity minded educators can use supervision opportunities to ensure students and school staff are acting in an equitable an inclusive manner, ensuring the creation of a safe and inclusive environment (Kelly, 2012; ONet, 2010).

**Extra Curricular Involvement**

Beyond completing those professional duties that are required of teachers, many educators also play a vital role in running and maintaining multiple extracurricular activities at schools. Teachers sponsor, supervise, and run extracurricular activities such as clubs, student organizations, and academic contests (Kelly, 2012; ONet, 2010). Without teachers many of these extracurricular activities would not be available to students. Equity minded educators
can ensure the extracurricular activities available to students address all student needs and interests, they can help form new clubs and programs where needed.

The teacher practices listed above provide the framework for how equity work can be conceived of in schools. Educators who do equity work do so to be more equitable in the way they plan, teach, assess, and engage in their relationship building and professional and extracurricular responsibilities. Educators’ ability to do equity work will be both helped and hindered by the nature of the environment in which they teach. The following section will provide an overview of the challenges of doing equity work.

**Challenges to Doing Equity Work**

Although challenges are often mentioned in passing in studies on equity topics in education, research that specifically investigates the challenges associated with equity work is less common. However, studies regarding equity in education in general and those that focus on the experiences of teacher educators and educational leaders help fill in the gaps that exist in the research regarding teaching and provide useful points for consideration. Possible challenges identified or alluded to in the existing research related to teaching for equity include (but are not limited to) a lack of preparation and information for doing equity work, the inequity that is inherent in education as a system, denial of the existence of inequity, a lack of time and resources, and the nature of the teaching environment.

**Lack of Preparation and Information**

Assisting teaching teacher candidates in coming to understand and teach for diversity has been incorporated into many pre-service education programs, although its integration is relatively recent (Brown, 2004). Moreover, despite some great efforts by a number of
universities “teacher preparation programs have been characterized by a conservative ideology that emphasizes assimilation and the maintenance of the status quo” (Ladson-Billings, 1999 in Nieto, 2000, p. 181). Many teachers therefore enter schools unprepared for dealing with the inequities they see all around them (Poplin & Rivera, 2005). Access to professional development and resources is also limited as there is not a strong equity focus in many ministry and board initiatives.

**Inherent Inequity**

Schools themselves are inherently oppressive institutions, as they inequitably favour the knowledge and experiences of students and teachers who conform to the dominant identity (Banks & Banks, 1995; Campey, 2002; Harper, 1997; Kumashiro, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Service, 2000). “Despite the rhetoric, schools are not well adapted to dealing with issues of diversity. Their history is one of acting as integrating (some might say homogenizing) institutions, designed to reduce difference” (Levin & Riffel, 1994, p. 11). Inequity is evident in curriculum content and subject matter, and overall school organization and delivery. Current educational policies and directives perpetuate inequity through the notion that success in education and society is a result of merit. The idea is that those who work hard achieve and deserve their success. Yet a quick glance at those who have achieved success paints another picture. “One need only look at the undisputed summit of the pyramid of economic, political and legislative power in Canadian and US society to understand that the wealthiest, and most influential, Canadians have traditionally been from White, European families” (Carr, 2006, p. 6). Hayes and Jaurez (2009) point out how, despite their hard work, students of colour are constantly and systematically excluded from educational opportunities that would lead them to success. The notion of a meritocratic system secures and reinforces
the success of White people, to the detriment of members of minority groups. The fallacy of things such as meritocracy are not always easily seen or acknowledged by teachers, particularly because the teaching force in Ontario is predominantly comprised of White middle class women, who (for the most part) tend not to experience discrimination and oppression, at least not as often as many of their students who are members of the global majority.

**Denial of Oppression**

It is common for teachers and other educators to reject the idea that discrimination and oppression still exist, and that society and social systems remain inequitable. This denial is widespread in Canadian schools and other institutions (Carr, 2006; Griffiths, 2010). “We really have not gone as far as we think we have. Instead we put another coat of paint on society and call it something new” (Hayes & Juarez, 2009, p. 733). People have learned to use the language of inclusiveness, and talk about creating a better society, one that is more equitable and inclusive, without often doing the work required to achieve it or making significant changes (Singh, 2010). The denial leads to resistance and other practices amongst educators such as perpetuating supposedly meritocratic programs, racial erasure, colour – blindness, and holding a deficit view of students of colour (Carr, 2006; Bergerson, 2003; Gillborn, 1992; Hayes & Jaurez, 2009; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Theoharis, 2007).

**Lack of Time and Resources**

It is not easy for teachers to find the time and resources they need to do equity work in their schools, particularly given the large focus currently placed on raising test scores (Lindsay, 2007; Singh, 2010). Griffiths (2010) found that the principals in his study had a limited
ability to re-arrange schedules to accommodate for doing equity work, as a result of the top down nature of educational administration in Ontario. Principals reported thinking that the board and ministry should change their focus to allow for more flexibility so they could better address equity issues in their schools; they felt there was too much attention placed on achievement from the Ministry level all the way down to the school level. This struggle to find a balance between mandated policies and initiatives and equity goals is common, causing educators to look for things that will help them in their attempts to do equity work (Theoharis, 2007; Waite, Nelson, & Guajardo, 2008).

The Nature of the Teaching Environment

Beyond experiencing constraints as a result of lack of time and resources, teachers are challenged by other things that relate to the particular nature of the teaching environment such as bureaucracy and control, uncertainty and complexity, and isolation. The nature of teachers work is increasingly bureaucratized. The amount of control teachers have over their own work is also decreasing, particularly given more recent reforms in education that have more closely aligned educational environments and practices with business environments (Hatch, 1999). There is increased pressure to improve student test scores and increased prominence placed on accountability (Loughran, 2007, p. 592). Teaching is complex and ever changing, teachers deal with multiple things and people at once and constantly make on the spot decisions (Hatch, 1999). “Teaching is uncertain because it requires teachers to make a multitude of complex decisions in rapid fire fashion and because teachers get little reliable feedback about the effectiveness of those decisions in accomplishing their goals” (Hatch, 1999, p. 230). Teachers also encounter increasingly diverse populations, requiring them to deal with things like multiculturalism and multiple and sometimes competing beliefs on their
own (Townsend & Bates 2007). Teachers perform most of their work in isolation due to the architecture of schools and the nature of their work (Acker, 1995; Hatch, 1999; Warren Little, 1982). Isolation is a problem because it leaves teachers alone to deal with the problems they regularly face. These challenges have created a less positive environment for teachers to work in, one which is more fast-paced and hectic, pressured and monitored, where low morale, stress and feelings of crisis are common (Day, 2007; Hargreaves, 1990).

**Support for Equity Work**

Research specifically focusing on those things that support educators in their attempts to do equity work is sparse, yet studies on equity in education in general, and educational leadership provide points to areas of support. Things which are described as aiding or supportive to educators in their attempts to do equity work are less commonly cited than the challenges, but they do exist. Supports include individuals or organizations, having knowledge about equity and diversity and associated strategies, and using knowledge of the education system and its actors to their advantage (Banks & Banks, 1995; Griffiths, 2010; Nieto, 2000; Ryan, 2012; Singh, 2010). Supportive individuals and organizations can include (and are not limited to) fellow teachers and principals, students, board members, and ministry policies (Singh, 2010, Griffiths, 2010). Teachers can gain knowledge of diversity, equity and inclusion from experience and education (Singh, 2010; Theoharris, 2007). It can include and is not limited to knowledge about different beliefs and values, learning styles and strategies and equity strategies (Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Knowledge of the system includes understanding the roles that people hold in educational systems, how the system and its actors work and how to successfully navigate the system and relationships within it in order to achieve equity goals. Ryan (2012) calls this kind of knowledge political acumen, and
describes how educational leaders have used political acumen to achieve equity goals. Having political acumen involves looking at the system and its actors critically to figure out how everything and everyone functions.

Theoretical framework

This study employs a critical lens, with the goal of helping to achieve positive change in education. Critical theorists seek to bring greater justice and equality to the world by problem posing, and acting upon their findings to bring about positive change. Critical social theories are based on the writings of theorists such as Herbert Marcus, Heidegger, Jurgen Habermas, Paolo Freire, Peter Mclaren, Henry Giroux and Kevin Kumashrio. In their writings, critical theorists incorporate aspects of Marxism and Humanism, questioning the social order and how it has come about. They look at groups of people who are in positions of privilege and how they have come to attain that privilege by oppressing others. Critical theorists attempt to help people critically examine the world around them and their place within it.

There are many fundamental components of critical theories including the understanding that everything is political, including lack of action. What teachers and administrators choose to do, and choose not to do reflects a political perspective or inclination. Critical theorists also believe that students are unique fountains of knowledge; students are not empty vessels to be filled with information (Freire, 2000, 2001). Along with this comes the importance of incorporating the individual knowledge and experiences of teachers and students into education. A belief in positive change or as Kincheloe (2004) and Freire (2000, 2001) might call it radical love that leads to action and therefore positive change is also important.
Critical theorists understand that the world is ruled by power relationships and those who control the power design societal institutions according to their specific needs (Kumashiro, 2001, 2002). In the Canadian context power distributions play out in such a way that White, middle class citizens often hold and control the power in society and its institutions and those who are marginalized include people who are not considered to be White; immigrants, and people who are not heterosexual or do not conform to binary gender definitions and sexual orientations. By benefiting from this Eurocentric organization of society the dominant groups are able to maintain and enhance their position in society to the detriment of other citizen groups. Further, those who benefit from this organization of institutions often resist change that would make the organization equitable. Therefore, the “other” groups in society are often unable to compete or survive in institutions as well as the dominant groups. The road to oppression, like the road to another hell, can be paved with good intentions. This means that even when people think they are doing equity work they could actually be contributing to the problem, which is one of the many reasons it is important to engage in education research about equity work. A critical approach to educational research: “seeks to emancipate the disempowered, to redress inequality and to promote individual freedoms within a democratic society” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 26). Critical research is described as having the goal of creating more equitable and just educational experiences for all students. A goal of this study is to uncover practices that assist in making education more equitable and inclusive.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework used for this study stems from the literature review and is framed by the research questions. The conceptual framework illustrates the key areas of inquiry or
research questions of this study which are – what teachers describe as comprising their equity work, their motivation for doing it, how they understand it, how they incorporate equity work into their daily practice, what challenges and supports them in doing so? The articles that result from this study explore the findings of these questions and how they interact or inform one another.

Equity is about trying to achieve fair and equal opportunities for people (not necessarily equal treatment) and recognizing that certain groups experience greater inequities related to their race, socio-economic status or class, gender and sexual orientation, or religion (and so on). Teachers doing equity work attempt to decrease inequities. There are multiple motivations for doing equity work which have been proposed in research literature, which vary depending on life experience. They include, but are not limited to, having personally experienced or witnessed inequity, being raised to believe in doing the right thing, having been mentored in understanding in/equities, contextual learning (Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007).
Doing equity work requires **understanding, recognizing** and **acting**. Teachers doing equity work must be able to understand and recognize the terrain (race, gender, ses, sexual orientation, ability, gender, religion etc.), the mechanism (power), the nature (systemic and taken for granted) and the consequences (lack of academic success, discrimination and oppression, suicidal ideation, poverty, homelessness, imprisonment etc.). **Equity work** involves using the understanding and ability to recognize inequity to practice teaching in an equitable manner in terms of things such as planning, teaching, assessment, building and maintaining relationships, professional obligations and duties, and extra-curricular involvement. It can also be in response to inequitable planning, teaching, assessment, relationships or other aspects of their school environment, as inequities can be reinforced or reproduced through those practices just as those practices can be used to create greater equity and inclusion in schools.

**Challenges** to doing equity work include lack of preparation and information, inherent inequity of the system and society, denial of oppression, and lack of time and resources, and the nature of the teaching environment. **Supports for** doing equity work include supportive individuals or organizations, having knowledge about equity and diversity and associated strategies, and using their knowledge of the education system and its actors to their advantage. Information about these phenomena will be gathered using qualitative research methods.

**Methods**

Qualitative research methods were used in this study as they allow for the gathering of rich descriptive data (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative methods are best suited for this study because
they helped in probing deeply and uncovering individual participant’s beliefs and thoughts on a variety of topics, some of which were highlighted through a literature review and most of which emerged during the research process. Although the categories and themes used to inform this study are highlighted in numerous articles or books in a brief nature, there is very little in-depth information about the topics under investigation relating to teachers’ reasons for engaging in equity work; their understandings, recognitions and actions regarding inequity; and what challenged and supported them in their equity work; particularly when considered together. The intention, therefore, was not to gather answers to specific questions from a large controlled sample for the purposes of making generalizations about practices and experiences. This study uncovered descriptive exploratory information regarding motivation or reasons for doing equity work, understanding and recognition of in/equities, strategies for doing equity work, and what challenges and supports educators in doing equity work in their schools. This information can be used to inform further studies and add to the existing body of literature regarding the nature of equity work and those who choose to do this type of work.

**Data Collection**

One-on-one interviews were used to gather responses from teachers. Interviews were chosen because they provide an opportunity for participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide rich descriptive data. People’s individual knowledge and experiences are meaningful components of their social reality (Mason, 2006). One-on-one interviews provide access to this knowledge.
The interviews were conducted in an informal manner, much like a “conversation with a purpose”, where the purpose was to gather a narrative-like account of how the teacher’s do equity work (Mason, 2006, p. 62). The interviews were more structured at the beginning, asking the participants to answer simple questions that provide a context for the discussion such as how they conceive of their own identity, their years of teaching experience, and their current occupation. As the interviews progressed, questions focused on the categories that stemmed from the literature regarding motivation for doing equity work, understanding and recognizing in/equity, and challenges and supports of equity work. The participants were not limited to commenting on the topics initially discovered in the literature, for example they were encouraged to reflect on their past learning and experiences and think of anything that might have led them to decide to do equity work, they were also asked to describe new or unique challenges or supports they encountered when engaging in equity work. Participants were encouraged to elaborate and provide specific examples as part of their answers. This was achieved by probing with phrases such as: can you tell me about a time when; can you think of an example of a time when you remember clearly recognizing something you felt was inequitable; can you think of anything happening or playing out in your school which you think it inequitable; if I asked people in the school about you what would they say about your equity practices; if I came to visit your classroom, what kinds of equity practices would I see you using? Interviews ranged in length from half of an hour to three hours.

Participants

Participants for this project are elementary school teachers who were identified by the researcher or the researcher’s colleagues as teachers who do equity work in their schools.
Participants were identified through their membership in organizations such as the Centre for Leadership and Diversity at OISE or by colleagues who are members of the centre who knew of these teachers in person or by reputation as being teachers who do equity work. During the interviews participants were asked if they know of any other teachers that do equity work. Several of the participants were able to suggest additional participants whom they contacted and sent information about the researcher and the study. This sampling method is referred to as snowball sampling, as the researcher began with a small number of people identified as possible participants and the number of participants snow-balled (or increase) as the initial group of participants was able to identify more possible interviewees (Mertens, 2005; Seiglle, 2008).

People were included in the study based on their employment as public elementary school teachers in the greater Toronto area (GTA). The geographic setting is chosen for convenience but also because the GTA is a very diverse area and has a large population of teachers who engage in equity work. Possible participants were not excluded based on any background or identity characteristics. An effort was be made to interview an equal number of both new and experienced, and male and female teachers, as well as those who have had a variety of life experiences and are from varied backgrounds. The sample size for this study is 15 participants; interviews were conducted until saturation or repetition in the data was achieved. Participants included seven men and eight women. They represent a variety of years of teaching experience, backgrounds, sexual orientations, and lived experiences.

Elementary school teachers were chosen as the sample group for this study based on the nature of their work. They shape and deliver educational programming with their students and spend a large portion of their day working with students individually and in groups,
giving them numerous opportunities to engage in equity work. Elementary teachers also interact with students’ families and the larger community through their work, providing even more opportunities for equity work. While not the focus of this study in particular, it is understood and acknowledged in the research questions and design of the study that other teachers, educators, and administrators engage in equity work, and may shape the experiences of elementary teachers, they may both act as both a challenges or supports to those doing equity work.

**Participant Sketches**

In order to help conceal the identity of the participants each participant was given a pseudonym. Many of the participants divulged controversial information in their interviews and it was very important to them that they be written about in the study in such a way that they would not be identifiable. In order to maintain the commitment made to the participants to protect their privacy they will not be described in great detail. But, because of the nature of this study, and the importance that their pasts and their identities play in shaping their understandings, recognitions and actions, a small sketch of each participant is provided. As part of the interview each of the participants was asked to describe their identity based on what they felt were the key aspects of their identity. Participant pseudonyms include Alana, Inta, Joana, Melony, Kurtis, Remi, Sarah, Kent, Sidney, Matt, Lesley, Mitch, Kristen, Bud, and Kelsey. These names were carefully chosen to reflect the origin and feel of the participants’ real names.

Alana described herself as a single woman in her early thirties who was a member of a large family, with many siblings. While she identified race as something that was important
to her students and something which she tried to identify with and affirm for them she never identified with a particular race or ethnicity and did not describe that as an important characteristic of her identity. Alana has been teaching for over six years in many different classrooms ranging from kindergarten to grade six. At the time of the interview she was working as a special education resource teacher in a Catholic elementary school.

Inta said that how she identified herself to people depended on the context. If it was the first time she was meeting someone and she did not know them very well she would tell them she was a teacher and would not go into much more detail. If people got to know her on a deeper level they would eventually learn that she was a feminist, and an immigrant. She had immigrated to Canada from Eastern Europe as a young child and did not speak any English when she and her family first arrived in Canada. Over the years she had become quite fluent in English and even adopted a Canadian accent. She felt being able to use a Canadian accent as opposed to her European accent had given her a lot of power especially as a White woman. Inta had been teaching for three years at the time of the interview. She had taught in grades four, five, and six.

Joana described herself as a married, Black, Christian mother. She also spoke about the strong influence of her mother. Joana had been teaching for over seven years in grades four, five, and seven.

Melony identified herself as a White, middleclassish (her term), single woman, with a lot of education. She lived close to her immediate family and being a sibling and a daughter were important roles in her life. Being an activist was very important to her and she had felt this activist identity from a very young age. Melony had traveled abroad and worked in
various locations and felt those experiences along with her education had been helpful in informing her activism. At the time of the interview she had been teaching for eight years in a range of classrooms and roles including as a Drama, Science, Resource, and Homeroom teacher.

Kurtis, like Inta felt they had an identity as a teacher that differed slightly from their total identity. He described his whole identity as a single, White, male who was very socially conscious, and described this consciousness as being linked to being a person who did not come from a lot of affluence. This had encouraged him to recognize the different needs that students can have and that which exist in the world. Kurtis said that a key aspect of his teacher identity was being someone who works as a mediator and facilitator for students to help them develop free thought as opposed to engrained thought. He intentionally based his teaching around those beliefs, both his actions and his lessons. Kurtis had been teaching for just over one year at the time of the interview.

Remi described himself as a White, Male, Gay, teacher. He had been working as an Elementary teacher for over 20 years in more than one school board, at the time of the interview. He had held a number of different roles during this time both inside and outside of the classroom. For example, he had been working with the teachers’ union for many years.

Sarah identified herself as a mother and a teacher. She said she was a right fighter and had felt this as being a strong part of her identity from a young age. Teaching was just one of the ways in which she said she worked to right wrongs in the world. Sarah had been working as a grade two teacher for four years at the time of the interview.
Kent said his background was Greek. He described himself as coming from a middle class family that he defined as an English Language Learning family because he did not speak English when he started school although he was born in Canada. He also identified as a sibling, a spouse, and a father. Kent had gone to a very diverse high school as a student and said this had a large impact on how he viewed the world and his role as a teacher. Prior to becoming a teacher, he had worked in the private sector and had traveled all over the world for work, which he said had also shaped his perspectives. At the time of the interview Kent had been working as a teacher for four years. He had taught grades one and two combined, grades five and six combined, and grade eight.

Sidney described himself as a White male. He began his discussion of his identity talking about White privilege and how he had not thought enough about how to define or identify himself racially and how that was a privilege because so many other people have to think about how their race defines themselves in relation to White privilege and power. However, Sidney also identified as queer and transgendered. So he had experienced privilege associated with his race and discrimination associated with his gender and sexual orientation. He said that it was this dualistic life experience which encouraged him to think critically about the world around him and to do equity work. Sidney had been working as a technology and computers teacher for five years at the time of the interview.

Matt identified himself as a father, a teacher, a Catholic, and a White male. He spoke about how even though he had grown up in a very diverse, predominantly Black neighbourhood as a child, he had not really questioned or thought about his racial identity in great depth until adulthood. His racial identity became more developed in University, and he was continuing to think more about it as he worked towards his Masters of Education and
was studying and traveling abroad for that. Matt had been working as a teacher for six years at the time of the interview as a grade five teacher. He had also held numerous leadership roles in his school and school board related to equity and other initiatives.

Lesley began her description of herself by talking about her teaching identity. She said she was an equity minded educator who believes in social justice and teaching all grades about respectful education. She was particularly passionate about LGBTQ issues. She saw herself as an innovator who had taken leadership roles in her school and her school board around writing curriculum and developing and leading workshops on different equity issues. When talking more about her identity outside of school, Lesley said she was a White, Lesbian, mother, and partner of many years. At the time of the interview Lesley had been teaching in kindergarten, grades one, and two for thirteen years.

Mitch said he was an agnostic male, who was born Jewish but was now Atheist. He initially said that perhaps being Jewish had inspired him to be concerned with equity issues, and that this was therefore a key aspect of his identity but then he backtracked and said that answer felt too easy and he really was not certain if being Jewish had any influence on the way he viewed the world and his role as a teacher. Mitch was a new teacher; he was in his first year of teaching at the time of the interview but he had previously worked as a supply teacher for a few years.

Kristen identified herself as a White, mom of two with a British background. She said her family was not a particular religion but they learned about all of them and her children could choose to follow one if they wanted. She said she felt very aware of the fact that the area that she and her family lived and taught was not super diverse but she wanted her family
and her students to be aware of diversity so she made a concerted effort to focus on it in her parenting and teaching. At the time of the interview Kristen had been teaching for seven years in a range of classes from kindergarten to grade seven.

Bud described himself as a family man with two kids and a wife at home. He said he was white, with both Scottish and Mohawk in his background. Bud said that he was not religious. When he talked about his commitment to equity work he mentioned his Aboriginal background and how easy it can be for Canadians to forget about their history with Aboriginal peoples. He mentioned that a number of the students in his school were Aboriginal and that acted as a reminder to him to do equity work. He talked about the importance of thinking about who was being served by the school, who was not, and why, and the difficulty of working towards an equitable distribution of rights and privileges. Bud had been working as a teacher for six years at the time of the interview.

Kelsey said she was a mother, a grandmother, and a wife. She described having lived through a traumatic experience which had spurred her to engage in equity work in schools and her community. She held leadership roles in organizations that helped people overcome situations that were similar to what she had lived through but she was also involved in numerous other equity initiatives in her school and described her equity work and perspectives as being very broad. Kelsey had been working as a grade three teacher for three years but prior to that she had 20 years of experience as an educational assistant.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed verbatim at a later date. Once interviews had been transcribed, a copy of the interview transcript was sent to those
participants who had chosen to read their transcripts after the interview. Given the sensitive and personal nature of the interviews, it was anticipated that some participants might choose to redact some of their comments once they read their interviews, however that was not the case. None of the participants chose to redact any of their comments. The goal of inviting participants to read their transcripts was to ensure that participants voices and stories were clearly portrayed in a manner they saw fit, rather than as a portrayal constructed by the researcher. The only feedback provided was from two participants who chose to elaborate on a few of the examples they touched on in their interviews via email. One of the participants also emailed me prior to the interview to introduce some of the material they were hoping to discuss in the interview, and we conversed via email after the interview to discuss more of their examples. Another participant emailed me after our interview because they had been thinking about our discussion and wanted to add some information to their transcript.

Interviews were transcribed into a word document and imported into Nvivo 9 for coding. The initial umbrella themes used for coding were drawn from the interview questions with the four main themes being: why they feel it is important to do equity work, how they understand and recognize it, what kind of equity work they do, what challenges they experience when doing equity work, what supports them in doing equity work? Interview transcripts were read and reviewed for common themes that were and were not included in initial study design. All transcripts were read closely and carefully and each participant response was shortened into a set of summary descriptive statements, each of which were considered to determine if they fell within an existing theme, or if they created a new theme or area of interest to ensure that all possible themes that stemmed from the study were considered (Warren Little, 1982). Once this initial phase of summarizing and identifying new
themes was completed, all themes were entered as nodes in Nvivo 9. Interview transcripts were re-read and quotes were put into the nodes for the appropriate themes they address. Keeping in mind the cyclical nature of research, the researcher remained open to the emergence of new themes throughout the data analysis process and analysed and re-analysed data as multiple times to ensure data was portrayed appropriately and was representative of what was expressed by participants.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study is conducted using a critical lens which means that this study was designed and conducted with the goal of problematizing the current situation and considering ways forward that are more equitable and inclusive. This goal is complicated because of the fact that the study involves real human beings who have expressed their desire to take part in the study and have also expressed a commitment to creating more equitable and inclusive schools through their actions as teachers. Although this study is done from a critical perspective, it was never my intention to engage in any sort of an evaluation of the participants, their thoughts, or their actions. This makes the analysis and discussion of the results a difficult task as there is a thin if not fluid line that exists between evaluative and critical thinking. This study was written in such a way as to respect the participants and their contribution while also making a contribution to the field.

**Conclusion**

Existing research points to the importance of exploring the topics under investigation in this study. There is however very little research available that addresses these topics in concert or in great depth, in relation to teaching for equity. Theorists such as Howard (1999) explore
what it means to be White when teaching a diverse student body, and the necessity of understanding the one’s identity and the relationship between identity and practice. Sleeter has been researching and writing about teaching for equity for over 35 years and approaches her work from a similar lens to my own. However, even she is only recently discovering and coming to understand the link between one’s past and their current equity practices (Sleeter, 2015). Other researchers such as Kumashiro (and Lee – a doctoral student) have been exploring this line of inquiry simultaneously and alongside Sleeter (Lee, Sleeter, Kimashiro, 2015). They argue for example, that “we need to complicate what we know about our past and examine policies and cultural practices that lead to a racialized system of power and privilege, racialized policies, and racialized oppression and progression” (p. 28). Yet this process and relationship is still undiscovered in many ways. Whipp (2013) recently revealed the findings of a long-term study surrounding graduates of a social justice oriented teacher education program and found that students who had rich and diverse experiences before and during their teacher education program, and had good on-the-job supports were more likely to develop structurally oriented understandings of social justice and associated practices.

Whipp suggests that not only do we need to know more about this process, but this information should be used to inform teacher education programs intended for teachers who want to teach from an equity (defined by them as social justice) perspective. The result of the literature review demonstrates that while research highlights the importance of the topics under investigation in this study and they have begun to be uncovered, there is still much more to be discovered, particularly with regards to considerations of the topics all together – how they inform and relate to one another. The purpose of this study is to help gather and uncover descriptive exploratory data about how one’s past can influence and inform a teacher’s equity work, what kinds of things teachers subsequently choose to do as their
“equity work”, and what helps and hinders them in doing this work. The findings of this
study will help inform the work of those currently engaged in equity work, those hoping to
engage in equity work, and those hoping to entice others to engage in equity work –
specifically professors in faculties of education.
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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1) Getting to know you questions.
   a. Role, length in role, previous role?
   b. School context – demographics – how they identify students, number of students?
   c. How they identify themselves, personal identity, race, gender, etc.?
   d. How they ended up in teaching, educational background?

2) Why they feel it is important to do equity work?
   a. Have they always felt it was important?
      i. Did they do equity work before they were a teacher?
      ii. Is being a teacher part of their equity goal/pathway?
   b. Did something happen to highlight the importance of doing this work?
      i. Personal experience?
      ii. Experiences of a friend or loved one?
   Probe for: aspects of personal life/identity that might influence motivation for doing equity work and also shape the work they do.

3) How do they recognize and understand inequity in their situations?
   a. How do they understand equity?
   b. How do they understand inequity?
   c. Did they always recognize/understand inequity?
   d. Did they learn from someone/somewhere?
   e. Is there an experience that shaped their understanding of equity/inequity?
      i. Was this challenging?
   Probe for: how they view and came to view inequities, what was their learning curve like, was it difficult, what helped/hindered them in coming to understand inequity
   f. How do they believe in equity manifest?
      i. Terrain
      ii. Mechanism
      iii. Nature
      iv. Consequences
   Probe for: information regarding how they conceptualize equity, what does it mean to them and how do they think it manifests itself in society and societal institutions, how does it play out in reality?

4) What kinds of things to do they do try to make their schools more equitable and inclusive?
   a. Work in their classrooms?
      i. Planning
ii. Teaching
iii. Assessing
iv. Relationships

b. Work in the school as a whole?
i. Committees
ii. Clubs/activities
iii. Relationships

c. Work with individual students?
i. Mentoring
ii. Mediation

d. Work with others
i. Parents
ii. Community partners

Probe for: the particular actions they undertake in their attempts to decrease inequity and increase equity, are they doing this alone in their classrooms, do they do school wide or joint equity work with other teachers, are they working with others outside the school, which others?

5) What kinds of challenges do they experience when trying to do this work

a. Personal
i. Conflict with personal life
ii. Emotional

b. School wide
i. Resources and time
ii. Inherent inequity
iii. Colleagues (denial of oppression)
iv. Students and parents
v. Superiors

c. Board wide

d. Outside organizations/people

Probe for: what makes their attempts to do equity work difficult or impossible; these could be people, policies, environmental factors etc.

6) What things support their equity work

a. Personal
i. Knowledge and experience (of in/equity and equity strategies)
ii. Knowledge of different life experiences

b. School wide
i. Knowledge of the system and its actors
ii. Likeminded colleagues/students
iii. Policies

c. Board wide
i. Like minded individuals
ii. Policies
d. Outside organizations/people
   i. Like minded individuals
   ii. Polices/programs/resources

Probe for: what helps them to do equity work; these could be people, policies, environmental factors etc.
Appendix B: Teacher Practices

Planning

- Planning, developing, and organizing instruction and lectures (Kelly, 2012; Kuther, 2012)
- Show written evidence of preparation upon request of immediate supervisors (ONet, 2010).
- Adapt teaching methods and instructional materials to meet students' varying needs and interests (ONet, 2010).
- Prepare materials and classrooms for class activities (Kuther, 2012; ONet, 2010).
- Select, store, order, issue, and inventory classroom equipment, materials, and supplies (ONet, 2010).

Professional Obligations and Duties/Administration

- Attend school meetings and serve on committees (Kuther, 2012; ONet, 2010).
- Time has to be spent taking attendance, recording grades, and following through on all necessary housekeeping and recordkeeping tasks (Kelly, 2012). Maintain accurate and complete student records as required by laws, district policies, and administrative regulations (ONet, 2010).
- Supervise, evaluate, and plan assignments for teacher assistants and volunteers (ONet, 2010).
- Plan and supervise class projects, field trips, visits by guest speakers or other experiential activities, and guide students in learning from those activities (ONet, 2010).
- Attend educational conferences (ONet, 2010).
- Take part in teacher training workshops to maintain and improve professional competence, remain certified or gain additional certifications (Kelly, 2012; ONet, 2010).
- Administer standardized ability and achievement tests and interpret results to determine student strengths and areas of need (ONet, 2010).
- Collaborate with other teachers and administrators in the development, evaluation, and revision of elementary school programs (ONet, 2010).
- Perform administrative duties such as assisting in school libraries, hall and cafeteria monitoring, and bus loading and unloading (Kelly, 2012; ONet, 2010).

Relationships

- Talk with students, parents, guardians, teachers, counsellors, and administrators to let them know how students are doing in class with regards to both educational and personal matters and to determine any priorities for student resource or support needs (Kuther, 2012; ONet, 2010; Simmons, 2012; United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009).
- Mentor students (Kuther, 2012; ONet, 2010).
- Dealing with discipline issues such as creating and enforcing class rules and responsibilities (Kelly, 2012; ONet, 2010; United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009).

Teaching

- Teach skills (academic and life skills such as conflict resolution) (Kuther, 2012).
Many elementary school teachers teach several subjects, from language arts to math to science! Middle school, high school and college teachers often teach one area, such as Spanish or social studies (Simmons, 2012).

Teachers act as facilitators or coaches, using classroom presentations or individual instruction to help students learn and apply concepts in subjects such as science, mathematics, and English. (United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009).

Many teachers use a hands-on approach that utilizes props to help children understand abstract concepts, solve problems, and develop critical thinking skills... They also encourage collaboration in solving problems by having students work in groups to discuss and solve the problems together. (United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009)

Instruct students and deliver lessons individually and in groups, using various teaching methods such as lectures, discussions, and demonstrations (ONet, 2010; United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009).

Read books to entire classes or small groups (ONet, 2010).

Provide a variety of materials and resources for children to explore, manipulate, and use, both in learning activities and in imaginative play (ONet, 2010).

Prepare and implement remedial programs for students requiring extra help (ONet, 2010).

Instruct and monitor students in the use and care of equipment and materials to prevent injuries and damage (ONet, 2010).

Assessment

Grade exams and papers (Kuther, 2012; ONet, 2010; Simmons, 2012; United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009).

Creating and refining valid assessments for students (Kelly, 2012).

Writing report cards and talking with their students’ parents to let them know how well their children are doing in class (Simmons, 2012).

Listen to oral presentations (United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009).

Examine portfolios or artwork and writing (United States department of labour, bureau of statistics, 2009).

Establish clear objectives for all lessons, units, and projects and communicate those objectives to students (ONet, 2010).

Observe and evaluate students' performance, behavior, social development, and physical health. (ONet, 2010).

Extra Curricular Involvement

Lead extracurricular activities (Kuther, 2012).

Sponsor extracurricular activities such as clubs, student organizations, and academic contests (Kelly, 2012; ONet, 2010).
Chapter 2

Article 1: What Informs and Inspires the Work of Equity Minded Teachers?

Abstract:
This article explores teachers’ reasons for engaging in equity work. Data was gathered through interviews with 15 teachers from three large school boards in the Greater Toronto Area. Although multiple bodies of literature discuss teaching for equity from different perspectives little empirical data exists about what informs or motivates people to teach for equity. Teachers in this study were motivated to engage in equity work because of personal experiences with inequity, witnessing other people experience inequities, and learning about inequities in school. Three key findings stand out with regards to their utility for professional development and training. All participants spoke of critical incidents which compelled them to do equity work. Emotional struggles were associated with their work, yet they remained hopeful in the possibility of change regardless of what they had experienced. Finally, the nature of the equity work that participants chose to undertake was directly related to the nature of their experience with in/equity.

Keywords: teachers, motivations, equity work, experiences of inequity, witnessing inequity, learning about inequity

This article describes a study exploring teachers’ reasons for engaging in equity work. This study is in response to the growing diversity in the student population in Ontario, and the increasing need for teachers who are able to respond to that diversity in an equitable fashion (Gerin – Lajoie, 2008; Solomon, Singer, Campbell, Allen, & Portelli, 2011). Ontario
is an increasingly diverse province. For example, Ontario receives around 40% of all immigrants to Canada on a yearly basis with a large portion of those immigrants settling in the GTA (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2011a). It is projected that by 2036 net migration will account for 68% of the population growth in the province (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2011b). The province of Ontario is also home to a large proportion of the Indigenous population, according to Statistics Canada (2009); “eight in 10 Aboriginal people live in Ontario” and in the western provinces.

Regrettably, although Ontario is very diverse, schooling is currently not as equitable as could be; it valorises certain ways of knowing and being over others. This has created a situation where certain students have lower levels of academic achievement, and higher levels of disengagement than others. For example, a recent internal document reported on by the CBC (Mas, 2014, November 17) painted a bleak picture of the academic situation for Aboriginal students living on Reserves. It indicated that only 21% of boys and 32% of Aboriginal girls in Ontario met the provincial standard for reading and writing. Math scores were worse with only 18% of boys and 20% of girls meeting provincial standards. Even more troubling is that the results only illustrate the situation for those schools that opted into the First Nation Student Success Program. The office for Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bernard Valcourt would not disclose how many schools participated and how many opted out. Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) test results paint a similar picture with “reading scores show gaps ranging from 5 to 33 percentage points between the numbers of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students and the numbers of English- and French-language students achieving at or above the provincial standard” (Government of Ontario, 2014).
Other groups of marginalized students have similar experiences. For example, “recent estimates from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) indicate that as many as 40 per cent of Caribbean-born students and 32 per cent of those born in Eastern Africa, and 28 per cent of students from Western Africa dropped out of high school” (Brown, 2006 in Sweet, Anisef, Brown, Walters & Phyhtian, 2010, p. 10). These statistics help illustrate that many students who do not conform to dominant gender or sexual orientation roles, religions, or socio-economic groups, experience discrimination and oppression in schools leading to consequences such as lesser academic experiences, disengagement, and sometimes lack of completion of high school altogether (Dei, James, Karumachery, James-Wilson & Zine, 2003; Kumashiro, 2002; Ryan, 2006).

Some teachers choose to engage in equity work in response to these inequities. Teachers who choose to engage in equity work do so because they perceive a need for action and are motivated to engage in that action. But teachers who promote equity generally do so under stress. Equity-minded teachers feel pressure to conform to the demands of the high-stakes accountability movement while at the same time recognize that they should act on the issues of inequity in their schools (Leo & Barton, 2006). Over the last few decades, teachers have experienced increasing pressure from the government to increase standards in education, the nature and structure of teachers’ work is more highly controlled, and there are a seemingly endless and growing number of expectations teachers are supposed to meet (Richardson & Watt, 2010). This stressful environment can have a negative effect on educators who are motivated to do equity work. Research demonstrates that things such as strict controls, pressure and deadlines decrease motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). That type of environment can also lead to high levels of stress, teacher burnout, and an early exit from the
profession (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Farber, 2000; Tatar & Horenczyck, 2003) Even those who believe strongly in the value of equity work and are committed to creating positive change are often ill equipped to deal with the challenges of this work (Tatar, & Horenczyk, 2003, p. 398) and can make an early exit from teaching as a result (Picower, 2007). The current environment also discourages teachers from deciding to engage in equity work in the first place. Even those who are committed to doing equity work feel pressured by tight timelines and unrealistic expectations about workloads, and end up feeling unable to fit equity work into their routine (Lindsay, 2007; Sleeter, 1992). One way of helping to mediate the effects of this environment, to contribute to the sustainment of existing equity work, and to encourage the development of new equity workers, is to learn more about the reasons current educators have for teaching for equity, and what they think attributed to their development as equity minded individuals. This data can be used to inform professional development, education, and further research, with the goal of supporting existing equity minded educators in developing their craft, and encouraging others to engage in work that contributes to the creation of more equitable and inclusive schools.

What is Equity/Inequity?

Equity is popularly discussed in reference to education, yet it is a complicated term with multiple meanings. Depending on the situation and the goals of those using the term, it can mean very different things. For some, equity means that everyone should receive the same things (Jencks, 1988, p. 519). For others, equity means more should be given to those in need (Jencks, 1988). For others still, equity includes calculations of merit based on fair or meritocratic competition (Jenks, 1988). In reference to the complicated nature of terms such as equity (inequity, equality, and inequality), Stone (2012) defines equity as a term which
“denote(s) distributions regarded as fair, even though they contain both equalities and inequalities (p. 41). Stone goes on to say that when considering distribution of an asset, and in this case the asset is education, three things are key to the consideration – who is getting the asset, what is being distributed, and how it will be distributed (p. 42). Determining who should get what and how is not an easy task and it is highly dependent on context and the distribution of political power (Stone, 2012). Those with more voice and political power will have a greater influence over the distribution of all other assets. Broadly speaking, equity in education involves trying to achieve fair and equal opportunities for people but “does not necessarily entail equal treatment” (Solomon et al., 2011, p. 15).

What these definitions acknowledge is that some groups of students have been disadvantaged by society and societal institutions because of their membership in identity groups which are marginalized and discriminated against. They have less voice and power, and therefore experience less opportunity and success educationally and otherwise. As a result, work needs to be done to right those wrongs, decrease those disadvantages and help students experience greater equity in schools in multiple ways (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ryan 2012). Equity minded educators engage in equity work to address this unfair disadvantage. For the purpose of this study, equity is about ensuring all students are provided with the education, support and opportunity they need to succeed academically (though not narrowly focused) and otherwise, and is particularly concerned with work that contributes to the provision of equity of opportunities and outcomes for students who experience marginalization and oppression. Although equity is a complicated term which means different things depending on the situation, there are some elements that remain relatively constant, regardless of the source of the definition and the goals of those involved. For
instance, equity and inequity are often discussed in reference to group membership or identity, power, the individual and systemic nature of in/equity, and the consequences of experiencing inequity. Sometimes some of those elements are given more or less focus than others. The definition of equity which informs this study includes those four main components; they are conceptualized as the terrain, mechanism, nature and consequences of in/equity.

**The Terrain: Race, Gender, Class etc.**

The terrain of in/equity refer to the personal nature of in/equity, the way in which in/equity is related to identity. Although people are socialized to believe that school is a great equalizer and that anyone can be “successful” that is not the case (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). School environments are still quite unsupportive of students who do not conform to the dominant identity groups, those who are perceived to be minorities or outsiders. There are patterns or linkages that are associated with inequity that are based on things such as race or ethnicity, religion, culture, ability, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, geography, and class, in many cases these students actually form a majority (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar & Azrael, 2009; Buchmann, DiPrete & McDaniel, 2008; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010; Elgar, Craig, BoyceC, Morgan, & Vella-Zarb, 2009; Espelage, Aragon & Birkett, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pasternak, 1999; Ryan & Rottman, 2007; Wiltshire, 1995; Zine, 2001, 2007). Schools prioritize some identities over others, enforce binary ways of knowing and being and impose stereotypes on the students and faculty (Cooper & White, 2004; Tantekin Erdin, 2009).

**The Mechanism: Power**
The mechanism of in/equity is power; understanding and addressing who has power and access and who does not and why is a central aspect of equity work. In education, this means helping students achieve power and access to life and learning opportunities who might otherwise go without (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Cochran – Smith, 2006; Peters & Reid, 2009). In North America, those in power are largely White middle class individuals from European backgrounds (Carr, 2006). Therefore, mainstream schools typically impose Eurocentric viewpoints and values on students by delivering schooling that has been designed by members of the dominant group (Banks, 2008; Zine, 2007). Schools are both produced by and reproduce the systemic norms, values, and practices of those in the dominant groups or those who have power in society and societal institutions (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Nieto, 2004; Ryan & Rottman, 2007). Teachers hold and use power in certain ways which can re-enforce existing power structures and also work (intentionally and unintentionally) to re-enforce existing power relations through their actions as teachers.

**The Nature: Systemic, Taken for Granted Aspects**

Inequity, by nature is systemic. Marginalization, discrimination and oppression are not accidental occurrences; there are many things that contribute to their existence (Carr, 2006; Joshee, 2012; Ryan & Rottman, 2007). Society, politics, history and economics are all related in the role they play in identifying and valuing those in power and working together to reinforce and reproduce power relations and therefore systemic discrimination (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008, Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Schools are just one of the many social institutions where existing and systemic inequitable power structures and relations are often taken for granted, and work to shape the experiences of students in inequitable ways through the reinforcement and recreation of inequitable power relations.
The Consequences: Inequity, Marginalization, Oppression, Discrimination

The consequences of systemic discrimination and oppression are grave. Racism, sexism, and homophobia are experienced by students who do not conform to dominant ways of knowing and being which contribute to a lower level of educational success, amongst other things (Banks, 2008; Espelage et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Zine, 2001, 2007). Many students experience failure and rejection which often also lead them to experience higher instances of academic disengagement, drug use, risky sexual behavior, and suicidal ideation (Allard & Santoro, 2008; Almeida et al., 2009). Marginalization can lead people to feel undervalued, having negative consequences on their everyday decision making (Anmol & Wilson, 2011) and influencing their entire lives. People who are discriminated against experience increased rates of joblessness, economic discrimination, poverty, homelessness, abuse, and longer prison time (Lenon, 2000; Porter, 2004).

For the purpose of this study, teaching for equity is about ensuring all students are provided with the education, support and opportunity to succeed academically (though not narrowly focused) and otherwise, and is particularly concerned with work that contributes to the provision of equity of opportunities and outcomes for students who experience marginalization and oppression. Equity minded educators engage in equity work to address this unfair disadvantage.

What is Equity Work?

Those who teach for equity are concerned with ensuring that all students, as opposed to just the dominant group, are provided with the education, opportunities, and supports they need to succeed in their lives both academically and others. They are especially concerned with
doing things that help decrease inequities experienced by students who have been marginalized, excluded, or oppressed in any way as a result of things such as their perceived or real race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or ability issues. Equity work is captured in a large body of research that includes multiple theories and perspectives including but not limited to: teaching for social justice (Sleeter, 2008a; Villegas, 2007); culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002); critical pedagogy, multicultural education (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995); anti-homophobic teaching (Kissen, 2002; Shanahan, 2006); inclusive schooling (Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010), amongst others. Equity work can take many forms including but not limited to: differentiating instruction and materials based on student needs (Delpit, 1998); encouraging participation in schooling from all stakeholders (parents, community organizations etc.) about what education should be like (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin & De Pedro, 2011), ensuring students can see themselves, their backgrounds, and their beliefs reflected in their education (Dei, et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rios & Montecinos, 1999), ensuring all (not just some) students have the resources and opportunities to achieve success broadly defined, respecting the multiple and differing beliefs and values of students and community members (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2004), helping students to develop agency to change their situations if they desire (Picower, 2007), and providing a academically rigorous environment that is supportive of the development of critical thinking (Freire, 2000; Jay, 2003; Nieto, 2004). The question that this study explores is why educators engage in these sorts of activities, what informs their understanding, beliefs, and actions surrounding equity.
Why do Equity Minded Teachers do Equity Work?

It has long been said that past experiences and beliefs inform teachers’ actions (Irvine, 2003; Villegas, 2007). It is also often stated that it is problematic that the majority of teachers are White when many of their students are of diverse backgrounds (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009). White teachers are described as likely being less capable of understanding the experiences of their students, particularly in comparison to their colleagues who have experienced discrimination and oppression (Howard, 1999; Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004). And comments are made in passing in about how people have different kinds of understandings of things like equity and diversity (Howard, 1999; Sleeter et al., 2004). Yet very few scholars have investigated the understandings and beliefs held by teachers before attempting to change them, it seems as though this step is skipped over (see for example Sleeter et al, 2004). However, research investigating teachers’ dispositions, identities, motivations, and beliefs in general, and investigations into pre service teachers and educational leaders understandings and beliefs of equity and inclusion provide a helpful starting point for informing this study.

Delpit (1995) uses the term “involuntary subconscious” to describe her belief that people view things through their own lens, which operates involuntarily (p. 151). This lens acts as the default or the norm to which everything else is compared. She goes on to say that changing this process from one that is involuntary to voluntary, where people are able to view things from multiple and other perspectives, is challenging but necessary for teaching for equity. Villegas (2007) uses the term disposition to describe the tendencies individuals have to act in particular ways. These dispositions are drawn from prior knowledge and experience and inform teachers’ actions (p. 373). Enterline et al. (2008) contend that teacher
beliefs regarding things like social justice are important because they inform and shape their practice, and that although difficult to do, they can be changed (p. 289). They also highlight the fact that, although teacher beliefs regarding things such as social justice are believed to be important for informing practice, little effort is spent in trying to catalogue, assess, and change these beliefs and understanding. Milner (2010) supports the notion that beliefs can be changed, though he uses the term “conceptual repertoires of diversity” to explain his belief that teachers enter education with beliefs, values, and ways of thinking that influence and shape the way they teach, and that these beliefs therefore need to be addressed (p. 118). He also points out that much of the research regarding teachers’ beliefs and understanding of things such as social justice focuses on prospective teachers (2005). Research exists that demonstrates a relationship between past experiences and the work of teacher educators (Merryfield, 2000; Milner, 2010). The voices of practicing educators are less commonly heard.

Other researchers in education have used theories of identity to explore what influences and informs teacher practice. People have multiple identities that influence the way they perceive things and interact in different environments (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnston, 2005), including those associated with family membership, race, ethnicity, gender, socio economic status and religion. Teachers’ identities are at play in the classroom (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 22). They influence what teachers perceive as their role or identity as educators (Lasky, 2005), what they do and say in the classroom (Ryan, 1997), and how they come to understand policies and initiatives. Studies on identity in education focus largely on the formation or development of a professional identity (Flores & Day, 2006; Lasky, 2005). However, few studies address how teachers perceive their own identity,
what that might mean for their practice, particularly for those practicing in diverse environments (Howard, 1999; Varghese et al., 2005).

Researchers in the field of developmental psychology refer to the process of understanding how past experiences inform future actions as “sense making”, which involves accessing the known and familiar to understand new information and stimuli (Spillane, Reiser, Reimer, 2002, p. 394). In reference to equity, Weick (1995) defines sense making as the process of how and why teachers construct their understanding of equity policies and what it means to do equity work (Weick, 1995). Sense making is defined an active process that involves the interpretation of thoughts or actions based on one’s existing (past) knowledge and experiences and the context of this influence. What sense people make of things is what they come to understand as being the norm, and how people define and act on things. Importantly, people can go through the same process yet make different sense of things, or go through a different process of sense making to make the same sense of something.

The body of literature using the lens of motivation comes closest to articulating the phenomenon under investigation in this article. Motivation has been an increasingly popular topic in educational research, largely with regards to student motivation (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque, & Legault, 2002). Motivation is defined as something internal to a person that drives them to engage in actions to achieve a particular outcome (Harmer, 2001; Suslu, 2006). “To be motivated means to be moved to do something. A person who feels no impetus or inspiration to act is thus characterized as unmotivated, whereas someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated” (Ryan, & Deci, 2000, p. 54). Finding out what motivates people is to figure out the “why”
behind their actions (Ryan, & Deci, 2000, p. 54). What motivates people to act relates to their underlying attitudes and beliefs regarding what they believe should happen and whether they believe this can be achieved through their actions (Ryan, & Deci, 2000, p. 54). Motivations help to direct and maintain or sustain behaviours and actions (Olulube, 2006; Steers, & Lyman, 1991).

The research regarding teacher motivations and equity work is underdeveloped, yet there are some key findings with regards to what informs the equity work of educational leaders which is helpful for informing this study. Educational leaders who engage in equity work are described as being able to recognize that society and societal institutions marginalize certain groups and work to decrease inequities through their work (Theoharis, 2007). They are portrayed as deriving their motivation to do equity work from previous experiences with marginalization or oppression, what they learned from these experiences and what they would like to see changed as a result (Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Church or religious upbringing is often integral to the development of this responsibility to help others and community (Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Administrators often cite family and other close relationships such as with mentors as a source of influence; they refer to their parents as having shown them how education can be the route to a better life or a better world and helping to motivate them to contribute to equitable changes (Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Finally, geography or context is often influential. This could include living in an area where marginalization and oppression are commonly experienced, or in a particular time period – having grown up in an era such as the 1960s or 1970s when social justice and activism were common (Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007).
Teacher education programs have recently begun to include experiential learning components in the hopes of changing and expanding perspective teachers’ knowledge of things such as equity and diversity and encouraging them to engage in equity work (Baldwin, Buchanan, Rudisil, 2007; Whipp, 2013; Wiggins, 2011; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007). Although researchers agree that past experiences and learning inform future practice, and researchers have been successful at changing prospective teachers’ beliefs regarding things like equity and diversity through experiential learning, the theory behind these programs remains underdeveloped. Most of the research in this area focuses on prospective teachers and educational leaders (Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). The experiences of practicing teachers remain understudied. There is therefore much to be learned about the experiences, beliefs and actions of teachers actively practicing equity work, in particular what kinds of things influenced them to engage in this work and how those experiences inform their equity actions.

Methods

This study employs qualitative research methods (Merriam, 1998). These methods were employed because they are uniquely equipped to explore topics of which little is known. A broad lens was used during data collection and analysis and data were organized thematically based on what the participants described as encouraging them to do equity work and how they influenced or informed their practice. Designed to gather baseline information regarding teacher motivations, this study is primarily descriptive and exploratory. One on one, face to face interviews with teachers were used to gather data. Interviews were chosen for their capacity to gather rich in depth information about a previously understudied topic. They also allow for flexibility in questioning (Merriam, 1998).
The style of the interview was relatively informal, much like a “conversation with a purpose”, where the purpose was to get a narrative like account of teachers’ viewpoints (Mason, 2006, p. 62). All of the interviews started with a general discussion to familiarize the participants with the purpose of the study and help relax them before any of the questions were asked. The interview was more structured at the beginning, asking the participants to answer simple questions about age, gender, years of teaching experience, and current occupation, that provide a context for the discussion. As the interview progressed questions were less specific, providing greater opportunities for the participant to share narrative like accounts of experiences and thoughts on the topics. The goal was to have the interview be co-constructed by the interviewer and interviewee, rather than a static process with a power imbalance which favouring the interviewer (Rapley, 2001). As the interviews covered very personal subject matter, creating a relationship of co-construction of the interview was an attempt to empower the interviewee and make them feel more comfortable and in control of the conversation. Interviews varied in length, from half an hour to three hours. At the end of the interview each of the participants was given the option of reviewing the transcripts and making and changes or additions.

Teachers who self-identified as actively engaging in equity work in their schools were invited to participate in the study. Existing networks and contacts garnered through work with the Centre for Leadership and Diversity at OISE/UT and a personal network were used as a starting point for attracting participants. An email was sent out through those networks with the study information. Three people responded to this initial email indicating their willingness to participate and their belief that their colleagues (whom they felt were equitable in thought and practice) might also be interested in participating. The initial respondents then
forwarded the study information on to their colleagues. The rest of the participants were gathered through these first three respondents, resulting in a snowball sampling and the attainment of fifteen participants. As the initial respondents worked in three different school boards from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the participant group ended up being comprised of teachers from these three boards. The three school boards represent large diverse urban areas.

An effort was also made to include a diverse participant group. Eight of the participants were female, seven were male. Many of the participants self-identified as being part of a marginalized group: one of the participants was a lesbian, one was gay, one was transgendered, two were black, two were immigrants, and two of them mentioned being second generation Canadian and having witnessed their parents being marginalized for not being considered to be Canadian. Participants were given pseudonyms that were similar in style to their original names but provided them with anonymity. The pseudonyms used were: Alana, Inta, Joana, Melony, Kurtis, Remi, Sarah, Kent, Sidney, Matt, Lesley, Mitch, Kristen, Bud, and Kelsey. An effort was made to exclude any information from the results that would allow the participants to be identified by a reader as much of the information that was shared by participants was of a deeply personal and sensitive nature.

Interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed at a later date. Notes were taken in a journal during and after the interviews and during the data analysis process. Interviews were transcribed into a word document. These word files were read to uncover initial themes that were informed by the literature review and then uploaded into Nvivo and coded using these themes while still remaining open to new themes that emerged through repeated re-reading of the transcripts. Data was initially derived from the questions relating
to participants’ reasons for engaging in equity work. In particular, the first round of coding surrounded the questions: why do you feel it is important to do equity work? And, what motivates you to engage in equity work? However, after the initial coding was complete it became apparent that depth and contextualization of the data was lost using such a narrow focus. For some of the participants, it was not until the end of the interview when they were asked to talk about whether they had witnessed inequities in schools and why they thought they occurred that they provided some insight into why they were compelled to do equity work. For example, near the beginning of her interview one of the participants gave a generic answer about why they were motivated to do equity work. As the interview progressed, the participant described feeling like a member of a group that was often treated as outsiders and that those feelings informed their teaching and equity work. It became apparent that the questions initially included in the analysis occurred at the beginning of the interview and participants often did not open up about their personal experiences and witnesses of discrimination and oppression and how they had therefore been motivated to engage in equity work until closer to the end of the interviews. Therefore, transcripts were re-coded casting a wider net, including the consideration of the answers to all questions. The main themes that were uncovered using this broader lens of analysis included: having personally experienced inequity, having witnessed other people experiencing inequity, having learned about inequity through their education.

Participants Reasons for Engaging in Equity Work

The central question guiding the data analysis was – what informed, influenced, or motivated educators to attempt to decrease inequities through their actions as teachers and how did these experiences influence their practice? At the outset of the data collection process I
falsely assumed that all of the participants would naturally know and be able to articulate why they engaged in equity work. This could have resulted in having a lack of data on the topic. Thankfully, all but two of the participants were able to describe their reasons for engaging inequity work. They identified three main sources of motivation that included personally experiencing inequities, witnessing others experience marginalization, and being exposed to education about inequities and diversity either through their upbringing or their formal schooling.

**Personally Experiencing Inequities**

The most common reason participants gave for why they do equity work was having personally experienced inequities. Six participants described their personal experiences with inequities, how they were influenced by them. These participants spoke of experiences they had in school settings, times when they had felt powerless, without a voice, and treated like an outsider or other and lacking agency. Inta described her experience as an immigrant and how it instilled in her a passion to teach for equity. She and her family immigrated to Canada from Eastern Europe when she was a young girl. She had many wonderful memories of her childhood home that were not reflected in the education she received in Canada.

Misinformation and misinterpretation led to her home country and her people being vilified during the class lessons regarding World War 1. Inta said:

> When I was in high school there was a textbook written about the war in XXXX, which is the country that I immigrated from. It talked about how the XXXX people were these evil people that started the First World War, and that wasn’t my reality. And that was my first experience with that, it was a jarring experience and I
remember shutting down in that class whenever conversation around that happened and it wasn’t an environment where I felt comfortable to challenge that and say to my teacher – I don’t agree with that. There was also a time in high school, the first year I started high school, NATO and Canada as part of NATO was bombing Serbia as part of a three month bombing campaign. That year, every day that I stood up for the national anthem I did a little silent protest because I was angry with the government for bombing my home country. I would put my foot on the side of my chair, I wouldn’t stand fully, I would be standing on one foot and that was my silent way of protesting this.... That was another thing that stayed with me, there was no anger or resentment, but it was a seed. Then when I became a teacher, when I started thinking of becoming a teacher, I just really wanted to make sure that I was as welcoming as possible and I didn’t presume to tell kids how to be if I didn’t know their whole story. It is unavoidable, but I really keep that in mind.

Inta’s educational experiences in Canada began with her being marginalized and misunderstood by her peers because of the way her teachers taught them about world events involving her home country. She felt ashamed about the way her home country was portrayed and like she wanted to make a change. These experiences were powerful in shaping who how she perceives others and how she believes others perceive her. She does not trust people easily; it took her a long time to open up during the interview and begin to share her experiences freely.

Inta’s experiences fundamentally shaped the creation of her identity as an adult and a Canadian, and influenced how she thought about teaching and the kind of teacher she wanted to become. Inta described how, as a result of her experiences, she always often like an
outsider. The portrayal of the bombing of Serbia, when she was just beginning high school and coming of age, intensified these feelings of marginalization which had begun when she moved to Canada, in elementary school. Inta identified high school as the time during which the seed of activism was planted in her. She began to feel as though she needed to take a stand against the injustices she was experiencing, and the false manner in which her home country was being depicted. She described how it was not until she became a teacher, was given a position of power, and accepted by “the system”, that she began to feel accepted and Canadian. With this acceptance came an even greater desire to change things for the better.

Inta was encouraged by her experiences to try to engage in equity work in her school. She identified two goals of her equity work, to help her students develop critical literacy skills and to help create an educated electorate, with the overarching goal of contributing to the creation of a more fair and equitable society. She stated her belief that doing equity work is a “moral imperative”. She concentrates her efforts around helping her students to be smart consumers of knowledge and learning the tools they need to think understand and think critically about the world, their place in it, and to make their own contribution to the creation of a more equitable world.

Witnessing Inequities

For five of the participants it was witnessing other people experience inequities or seeing their families and friends participating in inequitable behaviours that influenced and informed their equity work. Participant Melony’s experiences travelling and living abroad as a child, for her fathers’ job, had initiated her development as an activist and critical thinker. A few
events really stood out to her as critical moments. One was a trip to a local market with her parents:

For me, the image in my mind is always this little girl that I saw in Thailand, she had had her feet slashed for begging. We were at this market, so my parents were looking at fake alligator shirts, the Lacoste shirts, and they were haggling over how much for a dozen. And this girl was sitting right there and she was about the same age as I was. And because she was sitting there she wasn’t learning how to develop a water filtration system that would help her own village. Or she wasn’t able to get excited about painting or whatever it was that would be her thing to do. And all around her people were not seeing her, they were walking around and engaging in the superficial commerce.

One of the things that stood out to her the most about this situation was that her parents seemed oblivious to what was happening. When Melony looked around in astonishment, assuming someone would assist this girl, she was struck by that fact that this inequitable situation was somehow normalized and acceptable to those around her. She felt her parents and the other shoppers at the market were more concerned with their purchases than they were about the feelings and situations of others. Melony described her parents as nice people, of whom she was quite fond. However, she also described them as unaware and possibly disinterested in the fact that inequities existed and the fact that they might be contributing to the inequitable situations of others through their actions and inactions.

In spite of the beliefs of her parents, Melony said she felt it was obvious to her, even at a young age, that she was experiencing power and privilege that other children were not,
that she might be contributing to their experiences of inequity through her enjoyment of power and privilege. She felt something should be done to make things more equitable. She said:

So, what I saw was the poverty and the disparity between especially other kids and the life I was having. Without that filter, by the time I was a teenager I was almost obsessed with thinking about – why was I in my life and they in their lives. There was nothing I had done to deserve it; it was just a random act that they were there and I was here. That characterized me in a really really big way throughout my teen years and throughout university and really in everything. Even in part of why I am a teacher, it is that I really do believe that we can transform the world and the way to do it is by reaching other people and inspiring them to do it.

She innately felt that this inequitable situation was unfair and should be changed. She questioned how people got to the point that they were able to recognize the reality around them and became interested in making positive changes.

These feelings and questions resulting from Melony’s experiences inspired her work as an educator and her beliefs about what people could and should learn. Melony had learned through her travels that people who enjoyed powers and privileges such as herself could choose to acknowledge the reality of their existence and the roles they played in contributing to inequitable situations, and they could become aware and interested in making positive changes. As a result of her experiences Melony had decided to insight and develop critical consciousness in her students and colleagues, to incorporate multiple and global perspectives in her classroom, and to be transparent and educative of the different power relationships
existing in schools: where students they fit in the hierarchy, and how they can express agency to create changes. Melony was also influenced to do this work in an affluent school as a result of her experiences. She felt it was very important to try to reach students who currently occupied positions of relative power, and would likely occupy positions of even more power in their adulthood. She described her work as being met by constant challenges and resistance by those that experienced power and privilege, including her colleagues and the parents of her students. For instance, when trying to explain to a parent that their child had been acting in a racist manner towards a supply teacher, and that it was an ongoing problem, Melony was told by the parent that she was wrong, and her child would never behave in such a way. Even though Melony had evidence of their child’s behaviour, the parent would not acknowledge that there was a problem. She described another situation where a student in her school was homophobic towards a teacher using social media. When the school tried to reprimand the student, the parent threatened a lawsuit saying the school was infringing on their child’s right to freedom of speech. Nonetheless, Melony persisted because she felt her colleagues and students were capable of being taught to become more aware and more equitable and that she was capable of helping them achieve those goals. But these struggles she engaged in left her in a tenuous position, she was often ostracised by colleagues and parents for being an activist.

Learning about Inequity through Education

The final reason participants gave for doing equity work was their education. Participants described how they had learned about equity and inequity, and felt compelled to teach for equity, as a result of formal or informal learning. Participant Matt described his motivation for engaging in equity work as beginning in University. He said:
I did health sciences, and one of the courses I did was talking about what equity in the health care professionals role actually is, and what do you see that as, and how do you interact with the public, so public action health research...Then definitely again in my masters work I have really had to think about it actually think about how I approach it as a teacher. Because when I think about my own identities and the bias that I bring and the various things that I carry with me and the various things that I portray to others just because of who I am, it carries different weights, different stigmas, and I need to be aware of that to be able to access and reach every single student on a human level.

He credited his formal schooling as helping him develop an awareness and desire to be more equitable. Matt described himself as a middle class White man. Although he had grown up in a very diverse area of Toronto, he did not feel like he had really been “forced” to challenge himself and think about who he was in relation to others until he went to University. As a result of what he learned in University, initially in his undergraduate degree, and again during his Masters of Education program, he developed a desire to know more and to make changes. He began to understand that he had a particular identity that shaped how he perceived things and how other people perceived him. His identity also influenced the kinds of access and experiences he had. He therefore desired to learn more about people in general, what they had experienced, what personal biases people might have that could influence how they viewed one another, and the different ways he could get involved in equity work. His thirst for knowledge continued beyond his formal education as he described his interest in continuing to travel and take courses locally and abroad.
Matt’s experiences of having once been oblivious to the power and privilege he enjoyed in comparison to the inequities experienced by others encouraged him to help others similar to him to recognize their reality and help instil in them a desire to change. He described his equity work as being just as much about his work with students as it was with his colleagues. In the classroom he described working with his students to help them develop an understanding of multiple identities and experiences through diverse texts and lessons. However, he expressed more passion about his work with his colleagues. He described himself as:

Doing a lot of work with staff, helping them to be able to look at where they are identifying with themselves, being able to see that equity is actually a major portion of what they do inside the classroom, so how do you actually reach students, how do you create that student engagement, how do you actually bring an equity lens to what you are doing and what you are teaching.

It was very important for Matt to help his colleagues to understand who they were and how they approached their work as teachers. He described many of his colleagues as unaware of how their identities might shape their work, how they might be complicit in perpetuating inequities, and that they might be unaware of what it meant to teach for equity. Many of Matt’s colleagues were resistant to his attempts to engage them in equity work because of their positions of relative privilege and their inability to see the need for equity work. However, Matt remained hopeful that he could make positive changes especially because he had a few colleagues that supported him in his work He identified a few of his colleagues who were actively engaged in equity work with him and helped him achieve his goals.
Discussion

Personally experiencing marginalization or exclusion can influence people to believe equity work is important (see for example: Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Why those experiences are important, and how they might relate to or inform equity practice is unclear. Whether participants had personally experienced inequities or learned about them in school, commonalities emerged with regards to the kinds of things participants learned as a result of their experience, and how they influenced their equity practice. Three key findings stand out with regards to their utility for professional development and training. All participants spoke of critical incidents which compelled them to do equity work. Emotional struggles were associated with their work, yet they remained hopeful in the possibility of change regardless of what they had experienced. Finally, the nature of the equity work that participants chose to undertake was directly related to the nature of their experience with in/equity.

All of the participants spoke of critical incidents that ignited their interest in doing equity work. For Inta, the critical incident was when she decided to silently protest the depiction of her home country by her high school teacher by refusing to conform to the protocol for the national anthem. For Melony, it was when she witnessed the child being slashed for begging while she was travelling in Thailand with her family. Matt’s incident was his undergraduate course on equity in health care. These critical incidents inspired educators to engage in equity work regardless of their background or identity. It did not matter whether or not participants were members of marginalized groups, the significance resulted from the incidents ability to force the participants to see things from multiple perspectives and understand the reality and complexity of what they were experiencing.
Studies involving prospective teachers that investigate the effect of service learning on their beliefs regarding things such as equity and diversity demonstrate similar findings. For example, Baldwin, Buchanan, and Rudisil (2007) found that for many of their participants, their service learning experiences were the first time they had experienced student diversity (p. 321) and their experiences were found to be successful at helping them to see things from alternate perspectives (p. 323). This suggests that programs designed with the purpose of enticing educators to become equity minded in their practice could be successful if they incorporated either in service components or educational components that encourage participants to develop the ability to see things from multiple perspectives as well as the impetus for equity work. Things such as critical reflection could be used with educators working in diverse communities to help unpack their experiences, and the experiences of their students and surrounding communities and how educators could change their thinking and practice to become more equitable. Merryfield (2000) uses the term “retrospective meaning making” to describe a process through which she asked teacher educators reflect on their past experiences and make meaning out of them for their current practice. Her findings were similar; many of her participants experienced inequities or engaged in travel or other educative experiences that allowed them to develop an understanding of multiple perspectives and identities. Merryfield’s findings also illustrate the power of critical reflection in changing people’s beliefs regarding things like equity and diversity. Milner (2007) endorses the power of reflecting on past experiences for expanding one’s knowledge and understanding of how and why to teach for equity, and for improving future teaching practice. Milner also argues that this reflection can be particularly useful for people who might be resistant to this kind of work such as those who occupy positions of power and privilege and have a hard time seeing things from other people’s perspectives.
The second key finding is that participants spoke about experiencing challenges associated with their equity work which they described as taking a personal toll on them. Being resistant to engaging in equity work or thinking critically about identity and power are commonly researched phenomena (see for example Lipsitz, 2006; McIntosh, 1990). Much less frequently discussed are the emotional challenges experienced by those who willingly engage in equity work. The role of emotions in engaging in equity work is scarcely discussed, and when it is, it is largely in relation to the emotional discomfort involved in shifting ones worldviews (Bell, Love, Washington, & Weinstein, 2007; Boler & Zembylas, 2003). Ryan and Tuters (in Press) explore the emotional work of educational leaders in Ontario who choose to lead for social justice. They found that there are serious emotional burdens associated with leading for social justice, and that for some, the bulk of their social justice work involves managing (or attempting to manage) the emotions of others (Ryan & Tuters, in press). Left unaddressed is the emotional cost associated with engaging in equity work, particularly with regards to the emotional turmoil teachers experience resulting from their students and colleagues resisting work about which teachers feel so passionately.

Teaching for equity is often challenging. Picower (2011) sates that “teachers who enter the field specifically with the hopes of working toward social change are often the first quickly to leave the profession as they find themselves alienated and alone while trying to navigate highly political terrain” (p. 1). Picower started a support group for new teachers who intended to engage in equity work. Even though her participants were committed to doing the work, they found it very challenging and in some ways resisted their own participation in the support group. Her participants made a commitment to engage in shared educational activities and group discussions to assist them in their work, but often showed up unprepared.
and seemingly unwilling to participate, leaving Picower to carry much of the weight of the workload. In the end, Picower confronted her participants about their resistance and they were able to move forward in a constructive manner. However, her experiences act as a cautionary tale about the support and emotional fortitude required for equity work. If it had not been for their support group, perhaps Picowers participants would have given up on their equity goals. This study lends support to the notion of creating mentorship and support groups for those who choose to engage in equity work, and for those who might be convinced of its value. The participants in this study who mentioned feeling challenged in their attempts to do this work, also often mentioned the support they received from like minded colleagues, and how much they valued this camaraderie in their attempts to do equity work. The development of support networks for those engaging in equity work is particularly important for new teachers, as they “need protection from hostile environments, practice developing curriculum, and a community of like minded people who are going through what they are going through” (Picower, 2011, p. 1). Communities of support seem to be a requirement for sustaining equity work in education (Katsarou, Picower and Stovall, 2010). Findings from this study could be used to help inform support groups intended to assist teachers actively engaged in equity work in dealing with the stress they encounter in their work and encouraging those who are not actively engaged in equity work in gaining the knowledge and desire to engage in equity work through the support of their peers.

Participants also expressed their belief in positive change regardless of how awful the things were that they had experienced, witnessed, and learned about. Many of the participants mentioned horrible experiences in their past which had fundamentally shaped who they became as adults. Yet regardless of their experiences, they remained hopeful that things
could and should change for the better. More than this, participants believed that they could and should play a role in achieving greater equity and inclusion through their work as educators. This belief in finding and achieving “good” in society is often discussed in equity related literature. Merryfield’s (2000) participants espoused similar beliefs about being able to find the good in bad people and situations and enhancing this good through their work as educators. Freire describes this feeling as “radical love”. In their work on social justice leadership, Miller, Brown, and Hopson, (2011) suggest that beliefs in radical love and positive change, are more than just niceties, they could represent a complete reframing of educational leadership. With regards to supporting and sustaining teachers’ equity work, conceptualizing equity work as coming from a place of love and positivity could be helpful for supporting those currently engaged in equity work and encouraging new teachers to engage in equity work.

Finally, the nature of the equity work which participants chose to undertake in their teaching careers was directly related to the descriptions participants gave of their experiences with in/equity. For example, Inta described how she had experienced marginalization and discrimination related to immigrating to Canada from a country which was in conflict and negatively perceived by society as a result. These experiences led her to develop a critical perspective, especially regarding sources of authority that are often taken for granted such as the government. Later in her interview she went on to describe how one of her fundamental goals as an equitable educator is to teach her children to be critical thinkers. She wanted to teach them to constantly question the world around them and their role. Findings such as these suggest that targeted placements or educational experiences could be used that relate
directly to the experiences of in/equity of the students with which prospective teachers will be working, or for teachers who are currently practicing.

**Conclusion**

Teachers are in the unique position of being able to make positive changes in the lives of diverse students (Irvine, 2003). Each teacher enters the classroom with a particular set of life experiences, ways of knowing, being, and understanding that inform their work as educators. Every day, teachers make decisions about how and what to teach their students, which are influenced by their past experiences (Irvine, 1997; Mitchell, 2009; Simpson & Erickson, 1983). Both consciously and unconsciously, teachers use their personal experiences and knowledge to make value judgments about their students that can greatly influence students’ lives. The goal of this study was to uncover the ways in which past experiences and learning influenced the development of the teachers involved in this study, what made them decide to become people who teach for equity, and how they incorporate this knowledge into their practice. Participants in this study identified personal experiences with inequities, having witnessed others experiencing inequities, and having learned about inequities in school as encouraging and influencing them to teach for equity.

Participants identified critical incidents as igniting their passion to do equity work. They expressed their feelings of distress about experiencing challenges and resistance in their efforts to do equity work. Yet they remained hopeful that positive change was possible and believed they had a role to play in achieving greater equity in society. Findings such as this help fill the gap in the small but growing body of research regarding what influences and informs the work of those teaching for equity, and have important implications for
professional development. Findings also provide baseline information for more in depth investigations into why teachers choose to engage in equity work, for the purpose of supporting those who choose to engage in equity work and encouraging other educators to follow suit.
References


Chapter 3

Article 2: Teachers’ Equity Strategies: Understanding, Recognizing, and Acting

Abstract:
This article explores teachers’ understandings, recognitions of, and actions regarding in/equities in their schools. Data was derived from interviews with fifteen elementary school teachers in the Greater Toronto Area. While researchers acknowledge that understanding equity and diversity plays a key role in preparing teachers to tackle inequities in their schools, relatively little is known about this process. Findings illustrate that although all of the participants share a common commitment to equity and teaching for equity, they held differing ideas about the meaning of equity (understanding), what equity looked like (recognition), and what their role should be for redressing inequity (action). Participants understanding of in/equity where found to exist on a spectrum from less to more developed, as were their actions. Findings also illustrated inconsistencies with regards to where participants existed on the continuum of understanding in relation to their actions. The nature of participants’ level of understanding, how they described their recognitions of in/equity, and the actions they took to address inequities are described thematically to illustrate their general nature as there is little information available in particular regarding teachers’ understandings and recognitions of inequity. Following this thematic data, a vignette is used to highlight the connection between participants' understandings recognitions and actions and some of the inconsistencies that existed.

Keywords: teachers, equity strategies, understanding equity, recognizing equity, equity actions
Teachers deal with issues of equity and inequity on a daily basis whether they know it or not. However, acting on inequities is not an easy task, even for those who are committed to equity; it is far from a straightforward issue. In order for teachers who are committed to doing equity work to engage in practices that actually address inequities, they need to first understand equity issues. They also need to be able to recognize equity and inequity as they occur in their classrooms, schools and communities, and finally, they need to act in ways that are consistent with the principles of equity. This is not always an easy thing to do. Teachers may understand equity in many different or superficial ways (Howard, 1999), and some of these may inhibit proper action. Even if teachers understand equity and all of its different aspects, they may not recognize them as they play out in schools. Further, teachers may not follow through with meaningful action even if they do understand and recognize instances of inequities. Their understanding, recognition and subsequent action also might not be consistent with the way in which inequity manifests itself and plays out in schools (Gomez, 1994; Howard, 1999; Whipp, 2013). This study explores the ways in which this process of understanding, recognition, and action, plays out with equity minded teachers who work in public elementary schools in the greater Toronto area (GTA). The conceptual framework is provided below in diagrammatic form. It illustrates the cyclical relationship among understanding, recognizing, and acting upon in/equities. Each aspect of the conceptual framework informs one another.
As teachers travel along this path, their understanding, recognition, and action inform one another. They gradually, though not necessarily linearly, adopt, recognize, and act in ways that address more of the aspects of in/equity.

While researchers acknowledge that understanding equity and diversity plays a key role in preparing teachers to tackle inequities (see for example: O’Sullivan, 2008; and Villegas & Lucas, 2002), relatively little is known about this process (Dantley, Beachum, & McCray, 2008). Further, even when teachers acknowledge that they understand a situation, think it is problematic, and describe a desire to take action in response to it, they do not always follow through. For example, Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, and Charach (1994) found that while 85% of teachers in Toronto schools reported intervening ‘always’ or ‘often’ to stop bullying incidents as they were occurring, only 35% of students reported that teachers had actually intervened in bullying incident. Findings such as this highlight that purporting that one is supportive of a certain initiative or idea, and that they are willing to act does not always translate into action, leaving questions as to why this happens.
The article begins with a description of the problem addressed in this study: how teachers understand, recognize, and respond to in/equities. This is followed by a review of the literature addressing in/equity – what it means to understand, recognize, and act on in/equities. Next is a description of the methods used. This is followed by thematic data that demonstrates the general way in which participants understand recognize and act on inequities and. Findings from all participants were used to create a composite participant and associated vignette which illustrates the kinds of equity actions undertaken by the participants, their experiences, and the decisions they made along the way. Finally, the implications of these findings for professional development and practice are explored.

**The Impetus for Teachers who ‘Teach for Equity’: Diversity and Inequities**

Schools in North America in general and the GTA are becoming increasingly diverse. According to the most recent Statistics Canada National Household Survey (2012), almost half (46%) of all Ontario residents whose first language is something other than English or French live in Toronto. Almost 50% of all Toronto residents are recent immigrants, and 37% of all citizens who recently immigrated to Canada reside in Toronto (Statistics Canada, 2012). There are also over 242,000 Aboriginal people living in Ontario (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2012). In diverse contexts not everyone is treated equitably (Mclaren, 2007). The evidence is “clear and alarming that various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Scheurich & Laible, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999)” (in Brown, 2004, p. 79). Students of low socioeconomic status, who have recently immigrated to, or do not speak English as their first language, and many other marginalized students do not experience the same kind of academic success as their fellow students (Brown, 2004; Nieto, 2000; Tremblay, Ross, & Berthelot, 2001). Students whose life experiences and learning abilities
are not acknowledged and accommodated by schools disengage and experience lower levels of educational success (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2003; Kumashiro, 2002; Ryan, 2006). This means that some schools and schooling practices are inequitable and exclusive (Harper, 1997; Ryan, 2012).

This situation calls for teachers who are able to understand and respond to diversity in an equitable and inclusive manner (Gerin-Lajoie, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). Unfortunately, regardless of the fact the Ontario Ministry of Education has committed to reducing achievement gaps and teaching for equity and diversity through policies such as The Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008), inequities continue to exist in Ontario public schools. For example, in 2006 only 62% of Aboriginal adults in Ontario graduated from high school, compared to the general population, which had a graduation rate of 78%. Even more shocking is that only 39% of Aboriginal students aged 20-24 residing on reserves graduated and they represent almost half of the total Ontario population of Aboriginal peoples (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2012, p. 129). Aboriginal students also report experiencing “prejudice and discrimination” from their teachers (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, 2010). Other students in Ontario also face considerable inequities. Students in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) who descend from the English speaking Caribbean have a graduation rate of 50.8% (The Toronto District School Board, 2012). The TDSB reported that Black students were “three times more likely to be suspended than White students in the 2006-2007 school year” (Rankin, Rushowy, & Brown, 2013). Black students only make up 12% of the total student population in the TDSB, yet they receive 31% of all suspensions (Rankin et al., 2013). Information illustrating such inequitable occurrences is only recently being brought to light, and is not altogether easy to find. For instance, TDSB only
started collecting data around things such as race and suspension after the Ontario Human Rights Commission initiated a complaint that it should be done “in the public interest and on behalf of racialized students and students with disabilities” (Rankin et al., 2013). The Ontario Ministry of Education promised to make a concerted effort to tackle inequities such as those experienced by Aboriginal students, yet five years after making this specific promise they still have not established any protocols for measuring the effectiveness of the programs in place and the strategies being used by educators, and whether any real gains have been made in the last five years (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2012).

**Issues of Diversity and Inequity Addressed in the Literature**

Coinciding with the growing diversity of the student population in most parts of the world is an increasing interest in what it means to teach to this diversity, to teach for equity. Advocates of teaching for equity believe that inequitable conditions exist both inside and outside of schools and that they be addressed through their actions. There are many beliefs regarding what it means to teach for equity and the attributes one must have to do so. Brown (2004) believes “they are committed to an agenda in which past practices anchored in open and residual racism, gender exclusivity, homophobia, class discrimination, and religious intolerance are confronted and changed over time” (p. 333). Along with this commitment to redressing inequities, teachers doing equity work also need to have a thorough understanding of in/equities and how they are created and perpetuated, and they need to be able to recognize inequities when they see them (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Di Angelo & Sensoy, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 2004; Peters & Reid, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Finally, many also believe that true or robust equity work involves not just understanding and recognizing inequities but also acting to
eliminate them (Di Angelo & Sensoy, 2010; Peters & Reid, 2009; Solomon, Singer, Campbell, Allen, & Portelli, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Multiple bodies of research and literature exist which outline different aspects and issues surrounding teaching for equity, including but not limited to those that address the aims of teaching for equity (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007), the kinds of actions educators undertake in their attempts to teach for equity (Solomon et al., 2011), educators’ feelings and beliefs about their students and teaching for equity (Brown, 2004; Love & Kruger, 2005; Pohan, 1996; Sleeter, 2004). There has been considerable recent focus on what it means to prepare educators for teaching in diverse settings and how this should be done (Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010; Sleeter, 2008; Solomon et al., 2011; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007), including evaluations of the effect of preservice programs on educators’ beliefs about things like equity and diversity (Brown, 2004). It is also commonly stated that understanding and beliefs regarding equity and diversity are related to action; some even say these beliefs are reliable predictors of action (see for example Brown, 2004). However, relatively few scholars explore and consider beliefs and actions at once and in relation to one another. Exceptions to this include people such as Whipp (2013) and Cochran-Smith et al. (2009). Both studies explored the effect of pre service education programs with a specific focus on social justice on students and recent graduates. While studies such as these are able to demonstrate a relationship between thought and action with regards to the way thoughts changed as a result of people’s experiences in the programs, there is still much to be learned about the relationship between educators’ understanding, their ability to recognize in/equity, and actions they take on the basis of these perceptions.
What is Equity/Inequity?

Equity is popularly discussed in reference to education, yet it is a complicated term with multiple meanings. Depending on the situation, and the goals of those using the term, it can mean very different things. For some, equity means that everyone should receive the same things (Jenks, 1988, p. 519). For others, equity means more should be given to those in need (Jencks, 1988). For others still, equity includes calculations of merit based on fair or meritocratic competition (Jenks, 1988). In reference to the complicated nature of terms such as equity (inequity, equality, and inequality), Stone (2012) defines equity as a term which “denote(s) distributions regarded as fair, even though they contain both equalities and inequalities (p. 41). Stone goes on to say that when considering distribution of an asset, and in this case the asset is education, three things are key to the consideration – who is getting the asset, what is being distributed, and how it will be distributed (p. 42). Determining who should get what and how is not an easy task and it is highly dependent on context and the distribution of political power (Stone, 2012). Those with more voice and political power will have a greater influence over the distribution of all other assets. Broadly speaking, equity in education involves trying to achieve fair and equal opportunities for people but “does not necessarily entail equal treatment” (Solomon et al., 2011, p. 15).

What these definitions acknowledge is that some groups of students have been disadvantaged by society and societal institutions because of their membership in identity groups which are marginalized and discriminated against. They have less voice and power, and therefore experience less opportunity and success educationally and otherwise; as a result, work needs to be done to right those wrongs, decrease those disadvantages and help students experience greater equity in schools in multiple ways (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ryan 2012). Equity minded educators engage in equity work to address this unfair disadvantage. For the purpose of this study, equity is
about ensuring all students are provided with the education, support and opportunity they need to succeed academically (though not narrowly focused) and otherwise, and is particularly concerned with work that contributes to the provision of equity of opportunities and outcomes for students who experience marginalization and oppression. Although equity is a complicated term which means different things depending on the situation, there are some elements that remain relatively constant, regardless of the source of the definition and the goals of those involved. For instance, equity and inequity are often discussed in reference to group membership or identity, power, the individual and systemic nature of in/equity, and the consequences of experiencing inequity. Sometimes some of those elements are given more or less focus than others. The definition of equity which informs this study includes those four main components; they are conceptualized as the terrain, mechanism, nature and consequences of in/equity.

**The Terrain: Race, Gender, Class etc**

Although people are socialized to believe that school is a great equalizer that is not the case (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). School environments are still quite unsupportive of students who do not conform to the dominant group, who are perceived to be minorities. There are patterns or linkages that are associated with this oppression that are based on things such as race or ethnicity, religion, culture, ability, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, geography, and class (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008; Di Angelo & Sensoy, 2010; Elgar, Craig, Boyce, Morgan, & Vella-Zarb, 2009; Espelage, Aragon, & Birkett, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pasternak, 1999; Ryan & Rottman, 2007). Schools enforce binary ways of knowing and being and impose stereotypes on the students and faculty (Cooper & White, 2004; Tantekin Erdin, 2009). Schools and students are still conceptualized in a manner that does not facilitate the inclusion of life experiences and
possibilities that are different from normalized ways of knowing and being. Policies and practices are based on dated and ineffective frameworks and beliefs. There are lower expectations, lesser experiences and stiffer disciplinary measures for students who are not part of the dominant group (Banks et al., 2007; Gittens et al., 1995; Smith, 2009; Wade, 2000).

**The Mechanism: Power**

Equity work is essentially about power: understanding and addressing where power comes from, who has power and access and who does not and why. In education, equity work is geared towards helping students who are disempowered by oppressive systems and situations to become empowered and gain access to opportunities for success (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Peters & Reid, 2009). In North America, those in power are largely White middle class individuals from European backgrounds; they work for institutions, within a system that values their identities and ways of being over others (Carr, 2006). Therefore, mainstream schools in North America typically impose Western viewpoints and values on students by delivering schooling that has been designed, managed, and largely delivered by members of the dominant group (Banks et al., 2007; Zine, 2007). Schools are both produced by and reproduce the systemic norms, values, and practices that are valued by the systems within which they exist (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Nieto, 2004; Ryan & Rottman, 2007). This makes the identification of continued systemic inequalities that much more difficult, as those who are in power would be forced to question their own role in the perpetuation of inequity (Sleeter, 2011). Teachers hold and use power in certain ways which can re-enforce existing power structures and also work (intentionally and unintentionally) to re-enforce existing power relations. Teachers also work within institutions that have a history of hierarchical and dominant distributions of power that can hinder abilities to do equity work (Di Angelo & Sensoy, 2010).
The Nature: Systemic, Taken for Granted Aspects

Marginalization, discrimination and oppression are systemic occurrences that are not accidental; there are many things that contribute to their existence (Carr, 2006; Joshee, 2012) Ryan & Rottman, 2007). Society, politics, history and economics are all related in the role they play in identifying and valuing those in power and working together to reinforce and reproduce power relations and therefore systemic discrimination (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008, Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Schools are one of the social institutions where existing and systemic inequitable power structures and relations are often taken for granted, and work to shape the experiences of students in inequitable ways through the reinforcement and recreation of inequitable power relations (and therefore experiences of inequity) through the actions of educators and administrators and the general structure and functions of schools. Many researchers in education refer to this as the hidden curriculum (for example see Portelli, 1993; Sambell & McDowell, 1998), which works in many ways to reinforce binary, dominant, hierarchical ways of knowing and being, from the design and organization of school buildings, grounds, and classrooms (Gillborn, 1992; Titman, 1994), the design and delivery of curriculum and lessons (Jay, 2003), the way assessments are conceived of, delivered to the way in which results are portrayed and sometimes publicized (Sambell & McDowell, 1998; Wren, 1999).

The Consequences: Inequity, Marginalization, Oppression, Discrimination

Systemic discrimination and oppression have grave consequences. Students who do not conform to dominant ways of knowing and being often do not experience the same level of educational success as their peers; they often experience racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamaphobia and other forms of discrimination and oppression (Banks et al., 2007; Espelage et al., 2008; Zine,
2001, 2007). These experiences of failure and rejection lead youngsters to experience things such as higher instances of academic disengagement, drug use, risky sexual behaviour, and suicidal ideation (Allard & Santoro, 2008; Almeida et al., 2009). People who have been marginalized begin to view themselves as less valuable (Anmol & Wilson, 2011). Later in life, the consequences for those who are marginalized and oppressed can be recognized in things like increased rates of joblessness, economic disparity, homelessness, abuse, and longer and more frequent prison time (Lenon, 2000; Porter, 2004).

For the purpose of this study, teaching for equity is about ensuring all students are provided with the education, support and opportunity to succeed academically (though not narrowly focused) and otherwise, and is particularly concerned with work that contributes to the provision of equity of opportunities and outcomes for students who experience marginalization and oppression. For this study, doing equity work is understood as a process of understanding in/equity, recognizing it, and taking action.

**Understanding, Recognizing and Acting**

Equity work involves an evolving and cyclical process of understanding, recognizing, and acting. This process does not necessarily begin nor end at any one particular part of this process, nor do all people begin with the same level of understanding and recognition or robustness of action. The cycle could begin with a very basic or complex understanding that could spur any form of action, with action that provides insight and understanding, or it begins with a sudden recognition of inequity that spurs further understanding or action. Regardless, once this cyclical relationship is set into motion, the three processes can support one another in moving the person involved along a continuum of understanding, recognizing, and acting in relation to equity from
a less in depth and robust to more in depth and truly robust and equitable practice. As people make their journey along this continuum they would hopefully become more effective in all three things – understanding, recognizing, and acting in response to or in the name of equity.

Therefore, further uncovering this process is in the best interest of those concerned with the pursuit of equity and inclusion. The purpose of this study is to uncover more information about how teachers who self-identify as being concerned with issues of equity/inequity in schools understand, recognize and act on equity/inequities in their schools.

**Understanding In/equity**

This idea of a continuum or different levels of understanding is not new. Much of the research in the area of understandings of in/equity is informed by Freires’ work on critical consciousness (1973, 1992). Freire suggested that critical consciousness, which he said was required for a critical relationship with the world where one was aware and acting upon reality to empower and liberate, developed along vertical and horizontal planes (Heaney, 1995). The horizontal plane represented the positionality of the individual and how that influenced the way they observed and engaged with the world around them. The vertical plane was made up of three basic stages of development beginning with semi intransitive consciousness and ending with critical transitivity. Banks also has a continuum of multicultural education, with four main stages (Banks & Banks, 1995; Banks, 1999). People begin using superficial approaches to address diversity in their schools by having celebrations for things such as black history month. The second stage involves incorporating different perspectives and approaches into the existing curriculum without making any substantive changes or using critical thinking. In the third stage, changes are made to the curriculum that encourage students to understand and critically question diverse perspectives. The social action approach is the final stage on the continuum at which point educators teach in a
transformative way using activities and materials that encourage students to be social actors (Banks, 1999). Although researchers such as Freire and Banks have outlined their perspectives regarding the existence of different levels of understanding with regards to things such as critical consciousness and multiculturalism, and researchers explored things such as teachers conceptions of teaching for diversity (Brown, 2004; Sleeter, 2004), in depth explorations of teachers understandings of in/equity remain to be uncovered, particularly in relation to their recognitions and actions regarding in/equity. A team of researchers at Boston College explored how they defined and understood social justice to help inform their efforts to tackle that same task with the students in their teacher education program (Zollers, Albert, & Cochran-Smith, 2000). They focused on developing a better understanding of how faculty members conceive of social justice and found a “continuum of positions” (p. 2). They argue that uncovering their understanding of social justice was a key first step in making changes to teacher education, policy, and curriculum (p. 2), before they moved on to gathering a better understanding of the conceptions held by their students. They stated that a key first step that is often ignored in research is figuring out how and what participants think about the topics being explored.

**Recognizing In/equity**

Understanding and beliefs are not only related to behaviour but can also serve as predictors of future behaviour (Brown, 2004). When people are interpreting new information they try to fit it into a pre-existing frame, related to past knowledge and experience (Anderson & Macri, 2009; Coburn, 2006; Lenon, 2000). Schools have their own language, cues and processes that influence how teachers make sense of things they come across in their schools (Weick, 1995). When teachers decide how they feel about what they witness in their schools and what action to take, their past experiences and understanding are highly influential, as are their colleagues and the
institutions in which they work. Gomez (1994) and Grant and Sleeter (2011) found that changing educators’ perspectives and practices regarding things such as equity and diversity is very difficult work and is highly influenced by the understanding of and ability to recognize inequity that students and teachers bring with them to their practice and further education.

Investigations into recognition of inequities in school settings provide cause for concern. In Ryan’s (2003) study regarding administrator perceptions of racism in their schools he found that administrators were reluctant to admit that racism existed within their schools. Even participants who did recognize that racism existed in their schools and could pin point specific racist incidents preferred to think of those incidents as not truly racist but expressions of general frustration and anger (p.150). Ryan (2003) also highlighted a few possible causes for this reluctance or inability of principals to recognize and acknowledge racism in their schools, such as a lack of understanding of systemic causes of racism or the desire to paint their schools in a more positive light. Aveling (2007) conducted a similar study in Australia and found many of the same things. Aveling like many others, (e.g. Nieto, 2004; Ryan, 2003) contends that lack of understanding, recognition and acknowledgement of forms of inequity such as racism are highly problematic and pose multiple challenges for people attempting to do equity work in their schools. For example, a lack of understanding of the often systemic and institutional nature of forms of inequity such as racism can lead to the use of strategies to address racism in schools that are relatively ineffective such as celebratory multicultural events, as they are not designed to target what is truly playing out in schools.

**Acting for Equity**
There are many different words used to describe equity work in schools. Teaching for equity is part of a family of theories and research topics that include multicultural education (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995), culturally responsive pedagogy and teaching (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995), anti oppressive education (Kumashiro, Baber, Richardson, Ricker-Wilson, & Wong, 2004; Villegas, 2007), teaching for social justice (Sleeter, 2008; Villegas, 2007), multicultural education (Sleeter, 1992), anti homophobic teaching (Kissen, 2002; Shanahan, 2006), anti racist education (Gillborn, 1992; Troyna, 1987), and inclusive schooling (Florian et al., 2010), amongst others. Numerous actions are undertaken by educators to address inequities in their schools and school districts, many of which have been found to be effective at tackling equity issues (Gandara, 2002; Reynolds, Walberg, & Weissberg, 1999). The conception of what constitutes equity work that is used for this study is informed by the work of all of these fields and is quite broad, much like Sleeters’ (1992) conception of multicultural education being “broadly defined as any set of processes by which schools work with rather than against oppressed groups” (p. 141). The definition of equity work which informs this study is any actions that are undertaken in an attempt to decrease inequity in schools. These actions are conceived of as existing on a spectrum from more or less robust in terms of their ability to address all four aspects of the definition of in/equity which informs this study. Actions undertaken by equity minded educators range from those that are targeted to address very basic equity needs such as charity work to help people attain basic life necessities, to those actions that address systemic injustices. Positive attitudes, in depth understanding and ability to recognition equity and a desire for greater equity are not always related to actions that appropriately address in/equities (see for example Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003). Wenglinsky (2002) found that achievement is greater for students who have a teacher that is certified to teach in their subject
area and had training for teaching a diverse student body. It stands to reason then that the greater the understanding and ability to recognize equity and inequity, the greater the chances are that their actions will have an impact on equity practices.

Some of the less robust, or more basic actions undertaken to decrease inequities that may not necessarily require a complex or comprehensive understanding of equity and inequity include creating safe classroom environments that are free from blatant discriminatory and oppressive words and actions, celebrating different cultures and backgrounds through shared storytelling, and discussing different ways of knowing and being in classrooms (Florian et al., 2010; Gillborn, 1992). A more comprehensive way of addressing inequities involves looking at ways to decrease inequities in schools by focusing on the achievement of individual students, ensuring that the academic needs of all students are met and that all students succeed (Poplin & Rivera, 2005; Theoharis, 2007). More comprehensive or robust actions can also include affirming and incorporating students knowledge, backgrounds, and experiences into teaching, advocating for student rights (Dewey, 1966; Kumashiro, 2002; Kumashiro et al., 2004), helping students develop critical thinking, empowering students, and helping students acquire the knowledge and experiences to help them become active participants in democratic society and institutions in general (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995; Noddings, 2005; Whipp, 2013). Doing equity work can involve different levels of social, political, and cultural awareness, and different levels of understanding regarding how society and societal institutions create and perpetuate inequities (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). It is likely that a comprehensive knowledge of equity and inequity and the ability to recognize them in action would help improve the quality and possible impact of the actions and decrease the likelihood that they will unknowingly increase inequities (Banks et al., 2007).
Methods

Data for this study were collected through interviews with elementary school teachers in Ontario who self-identify as equity minded teachers. This approach was chosen because it allows for the collection of rich descriptive information at the micro level (Merriam, 1998). Participants were chosen as the sample group for this study based on the nature and context of their work.

Elementary teachers feel they can have a significant impact on their students as a result of their unique circumstances and relationships with students (Moore, 2008). Elementary school teachers in Ontario spend a large amount of time with their students every day and shape and deliver their programming in such a way that allows for numerous opportunities to engage in equity work. Elementary school teachers also interact with students’ families and the larger community through their work. However, equity work that happens in the classroom will be the focus of this study.

Study participants were selected using a purposeful snowball sampling (Mertens, 2005). They were chosen from an existing network of educators who identified their interests and belief in engaging in equity work through their participation in the Centre for Leadership and Diversity (CLD) at OISE/University of Toronto, and by colleagues of members of the CLD who were known to CLD members as valuing and at least attempting to engage in equity work at their schools. Participants were recruited via an email that was sent out to CLD members with study information and consent forms that members were encouraged to read and share with colleagues. Because many of the members of the CLD hold leadership roles within their board, many of the study participants worked in the same schools or school boards. Participants, therefore, work in three large diverse school boards in the greater Toronto area (GTA). Fifteen participants were recruited. Many of the participants self-identified as being part of a marginalized group: one of
the participants was a lesbian, one was gay, one was transgendered, two were black, two were immigrants, and two of them mentioned being second generation Canadian and having witnessed their parents being marginalized for not being considered to be Canadian. Participants were given pseudonyms that were similar in style to their original names but provided them with anonymity. The pseudonyms used were: Alana, Inta, Joana, Melony, Kurtis, Remi, Sarah, Kent, Sidney, Matt, Lesley, Mitch, Kristen, Bud, and Kelsey. An effort was made to exclude any information from the results that would allow the participants to be identified by a reader as much of the information that was shared by participants was of a deeply personal and sensitive nature.

Participants engaged in semi structured interviews that lasted between 35 and 150 minutes. Interviews consisted of open ended questions the inquired into participants’ understanding of equity and inequity. Participants were interviewed using a variety of methods. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person. Five of the interviews were conducted on the phone, and one interview was conducted via Skype using video and audio. The audio from all of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Interviews were conducted until saturation or repetition in the data was achieved. Patterns became obvious after three interviews, and saturation seemed apparent after 6. However, 15 interviews were conducted to ensure saturation had been achieved and to explore additional lines of inquiry that arose in the first few interviews as preliminary data analysis was conducted following each interview. Fifteen interviews were also conducted to attempt to capture a variety of perceptions on study topics.

Preliminary analysis and interview notes were recorded in a computer journal. The journal served as a tool for analysis to document new questions as they arose, to do preliminary analysis, and to make connections between the different topics of the study. Each interview was
printed and read multiple times with the purpose of identifying new themes and those selected
during the literature review. The list of themes that was developed from these readings was
entered into Nvivo and the interview transcripts were coded accordingly. The nodes were then
exported by individual node and re-read to determine the sub themes for each node. The most
commonly described sub themes under the parent themes of understanding of equity and
inequity, and experiences of equity were chosen as the focus of analysis and discussion for this
article.

Understanding, Recognizing, and Acting for Equity in their Schools
When considered together, the findings illustrate that although all of the participants share a
common commitment to equity and teaching for equity, they held differing ideas about the
meaning of equity (understanding), what equity looked like (recognition), and what their role
should be for redressing inequity (action). Participants understanding of in/equity where found to
exist on a relative spectrum from less developed to more developed, as were their actions.
However, the nature of the research questions did not allow it to be appropriately determined
whether or not participant recognitions exist on this same spectrum. It is also possible that some
of the participants may have more comprehensive understanding, ability to recognize, and
actions for in/equity than they were able to convey in the interview. Therefore, while it is
believed that teachers ability to recognize in/equities in their schools likely exist on a spectrum to
more or less developed, that is a question that remains for future research. The findings did,
however, illustrate some inconsistencies with regards to where participants existed on the
continuum with regards to their understandings of and actions taken with regards to in/equities.
Two kinds of inconsistencies existed. The first inconsistency related to participants descriptions
of their understandings and actions regarding in/equities in relation to their descriptions of how
they recognized in/equities as playing out in schools. Three of the participants appeared to have less of a comprehensive ability to recognize inequities in action in relation to their understandings of and reactions to inequities. The second inconsistency related to participants' actions. In this case, three of the participant’s descriptions of the actions they took in relation to inequities in their schools were less robust than the descriptions they gave of their understandings of in/equities. The nature of participants’ level of understanding, how they described their recognitions of in/equity, and the actions they took to address inequities are described thematically to illustrate their general nature as there is little information available in particular regarding teachers’ understandings and recognitions of inequity. Following this thematic data, a vignette is used to highlight the connection between participants’ understandings recognitions and actions and some of the consistencies that existed.

Understanding In/equity

The majority of the findings for this section were gathered from the descriptions the participants gave regarding how they understood the terms equity and inequity. Understanding of in/equity ranged from basic to more complex. Some participants were able to articulate an understanding of all of the four key aspects of in/equity highlighted in the literature (terrain, mechanism, nature, and consequences) whereas some participants were only able to recognize one or a few of these aspects. Of the fifteen participants, all of them were able identify at least one aspects of in/equity, seven of them identified two key aspects of in/equity, four of them identified three key aspects, and three of them articulated an understanding of all four key aspects of in/equity.

Half of the participants understood in/equity as involving two key aspects of the definition of in/equity derived from the literature. These participants primarily talked about the
systemic nature of race, class, gender etc. They described how people from a variety of backgrounds experienced challenges or barriers, such as individual discrimination or systemic oppression that denied them access to appropriate education. Kent described this when he said “inequity is when people do not perceive each other as being equals and when there are barriers put forth in front of people and it hinders them from progressing”. Evident in this description is an understanding that certain people are discriminated more than others and that there are particular challenges that are associated with this discrimination.

Four participants were able to articulate an understanding of three of the aspects of in/equity referred to the terrain, mechanism, and nature of in/equity. None of those four participants mentioned the consequences of experiencing inequities. Joana described equity as recognizing people as individuals and treating them as such when she described what she perceived equity to be:

I have an older brother, and my mom didn’t parent us the same when we were very young. She did for us each what we needed, and that is how I see it – being able to recognize what people need, and addressing their needs, supporting them in that area of need, understanding that we all have different needs and are different in some ways.

Although participants in this group described equity and inequity from multiple perspectives and in a relatively in depth manner, they did not seem to perceive inequity as resulting in many of the consequences highlighted in the literature such as lack of academic and social success and problems later in life. The main difference between this group of participants and those who articulated an understanding of all four categories of in/equity was that this group did not articulate a clear connection between all of the categories. For example, some of them alluded to
the possible consequences by using language such as “providing students with chances for success”, but they did not elaborate on what that might mean. It was unclear whether participants in this group (who identified 3 categories of in/equity) perceived students who experienced discrimination and oppression as being entirely in charge of their fates or largely at the mercy of individuals and a system which are predisposed to prefer certain students and denigrate others.

Participants in the final group, who articulated an understanding of all four categories of in/equity articulated a clear relationship between all four of these categories. The most striking thing about this group was their clear descriptions of a cause and effect relationship between the different categories of the definition. They articulated how they or their students who did not conform to dominant ways of knowing and being had less power and opportunities than those who did; they experienced greater individual and systemic discrimination; and that these experiences led many of them to have very different outcomes than their dominant peers. Sidney described this when he explained that equity and inequity were inextricably linked; he could not think of one, without the other, and therefore could not think of equity without thinking of the consequences of inequity. Sidney stated:

Equity has two dimensions to it; the first is fairness. Fairness implies that we ensure that personal and social circumstances like socioeconomic status, gender, ethnic origin, ability, disability, can’t be an obstacle to achieving educational potential. Secondly, equity is inclusion, the implication there being that there is a basic minimum standard of education for all; legally there is. So, everyone needs to be able to read and write and do simple arithmetic. So these two definitions are really closely connected because tackling school failure helps to overcome the effects of social deprivation that causes school failure; so they are totally connected.
Here Sidney used the term social deprivation not to refer to those who diverge from dominant ways of knowing and being as lesser than or at a deficit in comparison to their peers who do conform, but to illustrate that their living is deprived in nature. Sidney and the others in this final group recognized that the greater hardship experienced by marginalized students affects their current and future lives in detrimental ways.

**Recognizing In/equities**

Data for this research question was generated from the answers participants gave to the interview question that asked what kinds of inequities existed in their schools. Unlike participants’ descriptions of their understandings of in/equity, it was less clear with participant descriptions of their recognitions of in/equity whether they recognized in/equity happening in their schools in simple or more complex ways. When describing the inequities that they have witnessed in their schools, participants most commonly referred to situations where people were discriminated at an individual level or systemic level, based on a personal characteristic such as ethnicity, culture, or religion. Participants therefore most commonly referred to the terrain and nature of equity and inequity in descriptions of how they recognized inequities playing out in their schools. The three most commonly described kinds of incidents were: 1) children discriminating against one another, 2) parents not having cultural capital to advocate for their children and schools, 3) teachers having deficit views of children in historically marginalized groups.

The most common inequity that participants described was children discriminating against one another. Alana described these actions as students perpetuating stereotypes against one another about the values that society places on different identities. Derek witnessed this kind of experience on a daily basis, “between individuals, especially between the kids where you have
a child that brings attitudes from home to school and tests the water by applying it to other kids”. Participants expressed their desire to step in and stop these kinds of interactions. They did not put sole responsibility for these actions on students; however, most participants expressed the belief that students had learned these behaviours from someone else and were merely emulating them.

Participants commonly described their belief that many parents, particularly those who were new to Canada, of lower SES, and/or who did not speak English lacked the knowledge and power required to advocate and act for their children in ways that would positively influence their school experience. These participants saw a clear relationship between the background of the students and their parents, power, the nature of education as a system and its actors, and educational and social consequences. They believed that lacking knowledge and power functioned as an umbrella, affecting multiple aspects of schooling including the resources students would be provided with, the interactions they had with other students, teachers, and administrators, and the resources, equipment, and support they may receive. In relation to language barriers, Meloney stated:

Parents who don’t speak the language; they are completely left out of the culture of the school in some cases, and those families are being undermined in some cases because people don’t understand the culture. Or people who have lived here their whole lives don’t understand the challenges of moving to a new place when you don’t know how the system works or how to navigate it.

Melony was frustrated that parents and children who were new to Canada, and even those who had lived in Canada their whole lives, experienced inequities as a result of language barriers. She
expressed the belief that those experiences were “unfair”. Other participants described how this lack of knowledge and power could result in a fundamental misunderstanding or miscommunication of how the system of education, and larger governmental programming worked. They felt this negatively influenced the parents’ abilities to navigate and negotiate the education of their children. Other participants, such as Sidney, described how this misunderstanding could go both ways: parents misunderstanding the system, and the system misunderstanding the parents and the students, which resulted in a cyclical occurrence of inequitable situations and inequitable solutions.

**Acting on Inequities**

All of the participants in this study self-identified as teaching for equity. Therefore, they were all able to describe ways in which they taught or acted for equity in their schools. As a group, participants’ actions varied greatly in terms of how many of the categories of equity and inequity they dealt with. Some of them addressed more of the aspects while others addressed less. For the most part, participants’ actions regarding equity and inequity seemed to be related to their level of understanding of equity and inequity in terms of how many of the categories they addressed. However, this was not always the case.

When asked to describe their equity work many of the participants began by saying they attempted to create a safe and inclusive classroom; they believed a safe and inclusive classroom was a prerequisite for doing equity work. For example, the first thing Alana said when asked to describe her equity work was “I tried to create a very inclusive classroom where everyone feels safe”. As they went on to describe their equity work in more detail, most of the participants described the terrain, nature, and mechanism of equity in terms of what they addressed in their
classes. The main way participants described addressing these aspects of equity and inequity was through incorporating a diverse range of lived experiences and viewpoints in the classroom resources and making a concerted effort to teach students about diversity. Sarah said:

That is mostly what we do (creating lesson plans that address equity issues), we have also planned a few assemblies. Last year we got sick of assemblies so we did almost a gallery walk. . . All the primaries worked on a similar lesson or unit and then displayed either artistically or graphically something in the hallways, so we were able to walk around and see what all the other classes have displayed. . . I try to be very careful about the literature I pick for the read aloud and that kind of thing.

Sarah went on to describe how, although this may not appear on the surface to be really important equity work, it was a foundational step for the students. By teaching them about multiple perspectives and encouraging them to be critical thinkers, they would hopefully become engaged critical citizens as adults, which eventually would lead to a more equitable society. Sarah said – “I really try to get them to question everything. . . Because I think as they grow up, that ability to question society and government and what they are doing is going to lead us to a more equitable society.” Teaching students to be critical thinkers and active participants in a democratic space was something multiple participants described as being foundational to their equity work. Inta described this when she said “so, if I want my children to grow up and become active democratic citizens then I need to model a democratic society in that classroom as much as I can. . . And I don’t just mean that in a superficial sense”.

Many of the participants articulated the ways in which their work addressed the nature of inequity, in terms of addressing individual and systemic discrimination and oppression, yet very
few of them spoke about their attempts to address the consequences of inequity. Those participants who did address all aspects of in/equity in their equity work were often conscious that there were different kinds of equity work. For example, Inta was very explicit that her work was comprehensive, she made an attempt to really dig down into the issues in a concrete fashion, she said “I don’t do the additive approach at all, like its black history month, so let’s watch a movie on Rosa Parks, but it is just another lesson that we did around the “isms””. Inta went on to describe a project she had done with her grade 6 class which explored the issues around residential schooling in Canada:

So, we read about one woman’s’ experience with residential schooling in Canada and the kids really gravitated to that story because they already knew what racism was and they recognized racism in the residential schooling experience (from previous lessons Inta had done). Then we talked about present day Aboriginal life and we talked about life on reserves. I have a friend who is working on a reserve right now in Northern Ontario, so I connected with him and his kids wrote us post cards about their community, and we wrote back. So, we learned that they don’t have very many school supplies, and my kids said – why not? So, we researched this issue and we found out that Aboriginal funding, federally for education, on average, Aboriginal kids receive 40% less funding than public school students do. So, my kids were outraged by this. So we researched the whole history behind it. So, it is all being driven by what the kids are telling me. They tell me this is not fair – why is this happening? So we went back into history, we looked at treaties. We looked at the fact that the Federal government promised to educate Aboriginal children. I asked if they think they are fulfilling their promise, and the kids were outraged and said no. They said, what can we do – this is so not fair. I said – well,
last year you learned about government, this is the government, what can you do? They said – we can write letters. So, for persuasive writing, that is what we did. We wrote letters to the prime minister asking him to change this and to fix this … The kids weren’t happy enough to leave it to the government, they said – you know what, while the government is humming and hawing about what they want to do about the issues, why don’t we organize a fundraiser and send up some school supplies to the kids that need it. Let’s fix this problem for at least this year for this class. So, that’s what they did, they organized a fundraiser at the school, they raised over $400, we went to Staples and bought all these school supplies, we went and mailed them. So, they are becoming social actors too, and they are seeing that they can have an influence and have an impact.

This example highlights Inta’s comprehensive understanding of equity and inequity, her ability to recognize it in society, and her attempts to help her students develop the same level of understanding and recognition and also become change agents in society. The language she uses when she tells her story also indicates that although it was not easy, she was able to meet the expectations of the curriculum and the standardized tests her students would have to take, through her equity teaching. She describes how when the students wrote the letter to the government about the issue they were investigating they were also learning about persuasive writing, how to write persuasively and the different purposes persuasive writing can serve, such as social change. She had also spoken earlier in the interview about acknowledging the differences of experience that exist within her own classroom, equity issues were something she saw as existing in every aspect of society.

For those participants like Inta who were aware of the different kinds of equity work that could be done, and who attempted to address all aspects of in/equity, the main consequences they
described were disengagement, disproportionate rates of punishment and exclusion from the classroom for certain groups of students. For example, Melony described a program she started in one of her schools for a group of boys that were commonly getting referred to the office. She and her colleague initiated a leadership program for the students where they invited the students to provide their feedback on teaching practices. At the end of the year Melony, her partner, and the students presented the results of the project to the whole staff. While the exercise was valuable for the students, it was not without its conflicts. She described how many of her colleagues felt that Melony and her colleague had overstepped the boundaries of professionalism; a few of them felt their practice was being attacked. However, even those who were upset about what they heard were still hearing that there were better practices that could be used when dealing with students that were more equitable than others, and even the students could name them.

Melony went on to explain how the majority of the students in this group that had been identified by her colleagues as problematic were Black. During the first half of the year, before they started the leadership program, there were 16 office referrals for the group of students involved. During the second half of the year, when they ran the leadership program, there were two office referrals. Melony said “And, whatever the dynamic was between them and the teacher (previously), somehow it began to calm down”. Melony hypothesized that this decrease was partially because her colleagues were now aware they were tracking office referrals and partially because the students were feeling more engaged in school because of the leadership program. Other participants also discussed a how a disproportionate amount of their minoritized students experienced suspensions and disciplinary action related to their behaviours. Black students in particular were mentioned as being perceived by their colleagues as problematic. Alana
described how when she was on the equity committee at her school they looked at the suspension data and found that “somehow that year the only kids that had been suspended that year were black”. Participants who had a comprehensive understanding of equity issues such as this described their belief that if teachers did not try to understand and address the different backgrounds, interests, and learning needs of their students that they might be more likely to perceive their behaviour as more problematic than their peers, the students might not remain engaged and excited to learn, and their parents also might not see value in engaging with the school.

**Composite Vignette: Janet and the Transphobia team**

Janet was a white, middle class woman who taught 7th grade in a large, diverse, urban school that served students from kindergarten to grade 8. Janet self-identified as living a life of privilege and not feeling as though she had experienced discrimination. She acknowledged that she had only relatively recently learned about in/equity in an in depth way through her university courses when completing recent courses during a masters of education class, and travelling and working abroad through an internship that was a part of the masters’ program. In conversation, she articulated a very in depth understanding of in/equity, what identity characteristics are often associated with experiences inequity, how these experiences relate to their identities and social positioning, the lack of power and access often associated with marginalization and discrimination, and the long term effects and consequences of experiencing marginalization and oppression.

Janet spoke at length about the ways in which she worked towards making her school and society more equitable through actions in her classroom and beyond. However, the equity work
Janet spoke about in most depth was a project she had recently worked on with one of her colleagues that was intended to raise awareness about transphobia and what it means to be transgendered. She described how she and the team had decided on this particular focus because of the recent increase in awareness of the transgendered experience. It was a topic that had been in the media a lot recently. She mentioned a television show which focused on the experiences of people transitioning, and some popular media articles that portrayed both support and opposition to people who are transgendered, and some prominent social figures who had recently come out and shared their transition experiences that were being spoken about in her school. Janet described how students had been talking about issues surrounding the transgendered experience often, and many had begun using transphobic language at their school. She and her colleagues felt this was a pressing issue which needed to be addressed.

The purpose of the initiative Janet described was to raise awareness about what it means to be transgendered, and to decrease discrimination directed towards people who are transgendered and about transgendered ways of life in general. She spoke at length about how the project was co-lead by a group of students and teachers; it was a truly collaborative effort. She described themselves as an anti-transphobia action team; they would be taking the lead in decreasing transphobia in their school. Janet and her team had done a group research project and created a number of educational resources that they shared with the school that were intended to help educate the students, and to let students know that they would be making a concerted effort to decrease transphobia in their school and their community and that they were allies to members of the transgendered community.

Janet described how the initiative had initially been well received by the rest of the staff when she and the other teachers presented their idea to the teachers at a staff meeting. However,
months later, when the resources were ready to be presented and they tried to set up a schedule for class visits, a number of the teachers expressed concerns. They had expressed their beliefs that the topic was too adult for the students in those grades, and although the principal was not entirely in agreement with their protests they had conceded and given teachers the option of having the action team in to present to their class, even though the original intent was for it to be mandatory for all classes to hear the presentation. So, with the exception of all classes from grades four and below, the team had gone from class to class presenting their resources and introducing themselves to the students and the teachers. She described how some additional members of the school community expressed opposition to the efforts of their team. Most of the opposition came from parents who were unhappy that their children were being educated about being transgendered because they thought it was inappropriate for children to learn about, and some objected because they did not believe in being transgendered for religious or other reasons. However, Janet stated they were doing their best to engage with the parents and other school community members who were opposed to the project to help come to an understanding that was equitable and inclusive of everyone.

Janet felt that it was very important that all students received the message of their anti-transphobia team. She pointed out that while the school was not currently aware of any of their students being transgendered that did not mean that they did not exist in their school or in their school community as parents, friends or care-givers. They were aware of students at neighbouring schools who were transitioning and had experienced discrimination and marginalization especially relating to washroom facilities. Janet was hoping their school board would be initiating a policy in the near future in support of transgendered students but so far nothing had been done. She had raised these concerns to the principal and some of the teachers
that were resistant to having the team visit their class, but had not been successful at changing their minds. Janet felt she had done as much as she could to try to convince them without completely destroying her relationships with her colleagues. She admitted that she was already perceived as an activist by her colleagues, and many of them made it clear that they were not happy about how she constantly brought up equity issues during staff meetings and in the staff room. Jane acknowledged that enacting their project in a way that was truly equitable would be a significant challenge, and she felt it should be done, but she did not know what else to do at this point. While Janet was very proud of the work that the action team had completed so far, she worried about the impact the project could have in truly decreasing transphobia in their school without engaging the entire school in the conversation.

**Discussion**

For the participants in this study, context seemed to play a relatively large role in influencing the kinds of inequities participants witnessed as well as the actions they took to address inequities in their schools. Each teacher had different experiences depending on the nature of their teaching environment, what their colleagues were like, the kinds of students they taught, and the nature of the community surrounding the school. The inequities they reported on seemed to be largely conceived of by participants as being individual in nature; students bullying and discriminating against one another, and teachers holding deficit views of their students. Most of the participants in this study spoke therefore spoke about one on one interactions with students and peers, and though they did sometimes make connections between those interactions and their systemic causes, this was not always the case. They did not talk in depth about things such as systematic under performance of certain groups of students on standardized tests. However, some participants spoke about systematic discrimination against students of certain minoritized groups,
such as Black males, for their behaviours not conforming to dominant norms around good behaviour and conformity in Western institutions. Most of the actions the participants undertook to address inequities therefore revolved around information and resources, incorporating a variety of views into classroom lessons and materials and encouraging critical thinking with their students and colleagues. Few of the participants mentioned attempts to make school or system wide changes through their actions, and all of those that did highlighted how challenging it was to engage in that kind of work because of the resistance of colleagues, leadership, and parents. Findings were likely influenced by the fact that all of the participants of this study were elementary school teachers. Elementary teachers spend more time with their students, in one classroom, than high school or middle school teachers which might encourage them to focus most of their equity efforts within that room, and systematic issues around academic performance and behaviour might be more prominently evident in high school settings.

For all participants, resources and critical thinking seemed to be key aspects of their equity work. Empowering students to be change agents in the world was less commonly described and was usually mentioned by those participants that understood the consequences associated with experiences of inequity. This could also be related to the age and therefore the different kinds of activities that are available or appropriate for use and engage in with younger students. Educational activities conducted in classroom settings that talk about issues in general or broad ways might be more appropriate in many cases than those involving activist actions on the part of the students that happen outside the classroom, such as protests or marches targeting specific controversial issues. For example, two of the participants spoke about their work engaging their elementary students of all ages in discussions surrounding homophobia, and they spoke at length about the push back from parents and their colleagues and parents’ fears in
particular regarding whether or not it is appropriate to discuss things like sexuality with young students. Finally, when discussing consequences, many those most commonly described by participants were disengagement and office referrals related to behavioural concerns. These would be more common than other consequences such as suspension and being pushed out of school for multiple reasons including that suspensions become a more likely form of punishment in the higher grades (Arcia, 2006). Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) described similar findings, but they attested to the lack of attention to systemic forms of discrimination to the fact that their participants were novice educators. They postulated the educators might adopt a more systemic understanding and response to issues of inequity as they matured in their practice. Participants in this study who were able to recognize the consequences of in/equity had between three and 20 years of experience as educators, with the average years of experience being eight and a half, lending support to the idea that with experience comes a more in-depth understanding of systemic forms of discrimination and the consequences.

The findings that educators differ in terms of their level of understanding, and actions, regarding equity are not altogether new. Of greatest importance in this study is the consideration of all three phenomena at once, as understanding, recognition, and actions are primarily researched and considered separately. Further, differences between the ways in which individual educators understand, recognize, and act for equity are not always given much more than a mention. The findings with regards to the relationship between the level of understanding, recognition, and action regarding in/equities when considered separately replicate much of what has already been reported regarding the experiences of students in schools. It is commonly reported that students bully and discriminate against one another (Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2008), that cultural capital plays an important role in the educational experiences and
achievement of students (Brown, 2006; Sullivan, 2001), and that teachers hold deficit views of their students (García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 2002). Important this study highlights inconsistencies between participants’ understanding, recognition, and action. Few of the participants articulated how their actions would address systemic discrimination and oppression, beyond the concept of creating students who could eventually become agents of change, even if they were able to articulate a comprehensive understanding of in/equity. This is obviously of value but will be a very lengthy and time consuming process and many students will continue to be discriminated against and oppressed while these new leaders are developing if more concrete actions are not taken in the mean time to address the discrimination and oppression currently being experienced by students. Overall, the findings raise questions about the relationship between understanding, recognition, and action and suggest that an even more in depth analysis may be required regarding the relationship between the three, particularly regarding what kinds of education, training, and experiences might help foster this connection.

The differences and relationships between understanding, recognition, and action are also not often considered in existing research in light of their value for informing professional development and training. For example, when examining White educators’ perceptions of their White privilege and their relationship to practice, Mitchell (2009) found that participant understanding was relatively similar, with the exception of the one novice educator (p. 90). Mitchell (2009) even went on to highlight how other researchers (e.g. Helms, 1997) have suggested a continuum of understanding regarding things like race and ethnicity, but after making a passing reference to this occurrence Mitchell (2009) goes back to considering the value of the findings in a summative fashion. Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) considered the findings of their study investigating the understanding and actions around equity of masters’ level teacher
candidates in relation to common critiques of social justice work such as that it lacks coherence and ignores learning for the sake of focusing on feelings. In the study described in this article, participant understanding, recognition, and actions were not always related in terms of where participants existed in each continuum. This means that where people exist on one continuum may not be related to where people exist on another. The existence of different levels of understanding, recognition, and different kinds of actions is a key piece of the puzzle for designing and executing professional development and training for educators. It is commonly espoused that learning about equity and diversity is the cornerstone of action (Brown, 2004), as though the key to becoming equitable in ones actions is being able to understand and recognize in/equity. However, in this study, even those who had comprehensive understanding of in/equity did not necessarily act on the inequities they witnessed in their schools in a comprehensive way. This suggests that a more nuanced approach should be taken with regards to preparing educators for teaching for equity.

Rather than assuming that learning about in/equity will lead to equitable actions, and relying almost completely on theoretical and practical learning experiences that will give educators a comprehensive understanding and ability to recognize inequities in their classrooms and schools, programs should also address the discontinuity that can exist between understanding and action by critically reflecting on the relationship between these three phenomenon. Whipp (2013) investigated how the perceptions of graduates of a social justice oriented program changed over time based on their experiences. Whipp found that things like cross cultural experiences and support from mentors positively influenced understanding and that understanding positively influenced practice. Yet little is known about why this relationship occurs as their study was also exploratory in nature. Merryfield (2000) investigated the lived
experiences of professors who teach in teacher preparation programs that have an equity focus and found that professors who had personally experienced discrimination and oppression were more likely to have more profound impact on the development of a critical consciousness. They also found that people who had not personally experienced inequities could learn about them through university or experiential learning. Yet, Merryfield cautions that learning about inequity is challenging work and it might be easier to enrol people in teacher education programs that identify as having experienced diversity prior to their enrolment in the program. Whipp's and Merryfield's studies illustrate the value in continuing to examine the relationship between thought and action, particularly in relation to teacher education and professional development and critically questioning the equity actions of educator and educational leaders. They both called for further research on the topic, stating that their studies and others only begin to uncover this complicated topic.

Opportunity is lost by treating each educator as though they all hold the same level of understanding or making assumptions about people’s level of understanding based on identity characteristics, and failing to acknowledge that even professors of education programs will hold varying and competing notions of equity. Researchers such as Whipp (2013) and Milner (2010) have highlighted a lack of program direction and coherence as possible source of lost opportunity for supporting educators in the development of their understanding and action for social justice. One contributing factor to this loss of opportunity is that educators could be taught in such a way that addresses and acknowledges the different levels of understanding and incorporates it into the lessons. But this would require a coherent teacher education program which clearly outlined the varied levels of understanding, recognition, and actions. Few initial teacher programs offer such coherence and guidance for their professors and their students (Brown, 2004).
Conclusion

In summary, the elementary teachers in this study expressed a desire to understand, recognize, and act on inequities in their schools. They believe school could be inequitable and feel a sense of responsibility to redress inequities and remove obstacles and barriers impeding the development and success of their students. Regardless of this commitment the findings represent a range of different levels of understanding, recognition, and actions, which were not necessarily related. Findings from this study raise questions about historic assumptions that increased levels of understanding and recognition will lead to equity actions that address inequities in a comprehensive manner, laying the foundation for subsequent studies that investigate the ways in which teachers’ beliefs relate to their equity practices or lack thereof and raising questions for informing teacher education for equity.
References


doi:10.1177/0022487109347670


Chapter 4

Article 3: Elementary School Teachers Doing Equity Work: Challenges and Supports

Abstract:

This article explores teachers’ experiences engaging in equity work, what challenged and supported them in this process. Although teachers’ equity work is often discussed little empirical evidence exists about the nature of the challenges and supports experienced by teachers engaged in equity work. Teachers in this study described colleagues, parents, and administration and leadership as the biggest challenges to their equity work. Resources, administration and leadership, and colleagues were highlighted as the largest sources of support for participants. The systemic nature of inequity played a large role in the experiences of the teachers in this study, and that the individuals and resources that were most helpful and harmful played a particular role in the systemic perpetuation of inequity depending on their role and therefore the nature of the power they held within this system. This was illustrated by what participants found most helpful and harmful. For example, parents were described as often posing a significant challenge to doing equity work; they were rarely described as being helpful. The exception to this was one participant who described having a very active parent council that spent a lot of time, energy, and money supporting equity work in their school, particularly by purchasing resources for teaching for equity. Knowledge was therefore found to be a thread which was interwoven through all the findings; knowing the system, where to go (and sometimes where not to go) for support and resources was key to the experiences of the teachers in this study.

Keywords: teachers’ equity work, challenges to equity work, supports of equity work
People face many challenges when engaging in equity work. These trials occur even in the face of increasing levels of diversity and the prevalence of policies and practices that supposedly favour equity (e.g. Government of Ontario, 2008). People continue to reject the idea that discrimination and oppression still exist, and that society and social systems remain inequitable. This denial is common in Canadian schools and other institutions (Carr, 2006); many educators embrace practices associated with meritocratic programs, racial erasure, colour blindness, and deficits view of particular students (Carr, 2006; Bergerson, 2003; Hayes & Jaurez, 2009; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). People have learned to use the language of inclusiveness, and talk about creating a better society, one that is more equitable and inclusive, often without doing the work required to achieve it or making meaningful changes (Hayes & Juarez, 2009; Singh 2010;). Educators working for equity must push against these forces while dealing with a variety of other challenges related to teaching for equity.

There is a substantial amount of research available that articulates the desired qualities and actions of teachers working for equity (Banks et al. 2007; Grant & Sleeter 2011), schools or systems that have been successful at doing equity work (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Theoharris, 2007) and how educational leaders can contribute to the creation and maintenance of equitable schools (Gold, Evans, Early, Halpin, & Collabone, 2003; Ryan, 2006, 2012; Theoharis, 2007; Vibert & Portelli, 2000). There is however much less research available that catalogues what teachers experience when doing their equity work. The research that does exist largely catalogues how and what individual educators did and spends little time, if any, documenting what helped and hindered their work (see for example Lund, 2011; Milner, 2005), although it is often stated that equity work is contentious in nature (Kumashiro, Baber, Richardson, Ricker-Wilson, & Wong, 2004; Stevenson, 2007). This study offers “real answers to real practical
problems” (Apple, 2001, p. 227) by helping to fill the gap in the existing literature regarding what helps and hinders elementary school teachers in doing equity work.

The context of this study, Ontario and the greater Toronto area (GTA), is becoming increasingly diverse (Ontario Ministry of Finance, 2011b). Ontario is often praised worldwide for having high levels of academic achievement and being a leader in the field of educational equity for the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2008). Even so, this social and political environment provides many challenges to teachers who wish to engage in equity work. To begin with, there is a large push locally and internationally for increased standardization in teaching and assessment and greater accountability in education (Solomon et al., 2011; Sleeter, 2008a; Winton & Tuters, 2014). More than this though students in Ontario who do not conform to dominant, racial and ethnic, gender or sexual orientation roles, religions, or socioeconomic groups continue to experience discrimination and oppression and lower levels of academic achievement. For example, “recent estimates from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) indicate that as many as 40 per cent of Caribbean born students and 32 per cent of those born in Eastern Africa, and 28 per cent of students from Western Africa dropped out of high school” (Brown, 2006 in Sweet, Anisef, Brown, Walters & Phythian, 2010, p. 10). This high number of drop outs is representative of the systemic inequity at play in Ontario schools.

Students disengage for many reasons. They disengage or are pushed out when they do not see themselves, their beliefs and values reflected in their schooling, and when they are discriminated against (Dei et al., 2000; Kumashiro, 2002; Ryan, 2006). There are many causes for this disengagement, including leaders in the field of educational policy such as the Ontario Minister of Education lacking awareness of the need for greater awareness and equity work (see for example The Canadian Press, 2014), and policies and programs that promote standardization
and accountability above all else (Apple, 2006; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006; Ryan, 2012; Solomon, Singer, Campbell, Allen & Portelli, 2011; Winton & Tuters, 2014). As long as these inequities persist and those attempting to decrease them experience challenges, up to date information about what helps and hinders equity workers will be required. There is therefore great value in investigating what helps and hinders teachers in doing equity work.

**Equity/Inequity**

Equity is popularly discussed in reference to education, yet it is a complicated term with multiple meanings. Depending on the situation and the goals of those using the term, it can mean very different things. For some, equity means that everyone should receive the same things (Jencks, 1988, p. 519). For others, equity means more should be given to those in need (Jencks, 1988). For others still, equity includes calculations of merit based on fair or meritocratic competition (Jenks, 1988). In reference to the complicated nature of terms such as equity (inequity, equality, and inequality), Stone (2012) defines equity as a term which “denote(s) distributions regarded as fair, even though they contain both equalities and inequalities (p. 41). Stone goes on to say that when considering distribution of an asset, and in this case the asset is education, three things are key to the consideration – who is getting the asset, what is being distributed, and how it will be distributed (p. 42). Determining who should get what and how is no easy task and it is highly dependent on context and the distribution of political power (Stone, 2012). Those with more voice and political power will have a greater influence over the distribution of all other assets. Broadly speaking, equity in education involves trying to achieve fair and equal opportunities for people but “does not necessarily entail equal treatment” (Solomon et al., 2011, p. 15).
What these definitions acknowledge is that some groups of students have been disadvantaged by society and societal institutions because of their membership in identity groups which are marginalized and discriminated against. They have less voice and power, and therefore experience less opportunity and success educationally and otherwise; as a result work needs to be done to right those wrongs, decrease those disadvantages and help students experience greater equity in schools in multiple ways (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ryan 2012). Equity minded educators engage in equity work to address this unfair disadvantage. For the purpose of this study, equity is about ensuring all students are provided with the education, support and opportunity they need to succeed academically (though not narrowly focused) and otherwise, and is particularly concerned with work that contributes to the provision of equity of opportunities and outcomes for students who experience marginalization and oppression. Although equity is a complicated term which means different things depending on the situation, there are some elements that remain relatively constant, regardless of the source of the definition and the goals of those involved. For instance, equity and inequity are often discussed in reference to group membership or identity, power, the individual and systemic nature of in/equity, and the consequences of experiencing inequity. Sometimes some of those elements are given more or less focus than others. The definition of equity which informs this study includes those four main components; they are conceptualized as the terrain, mechanism, nature and consequences of in/equity.

**The Terrain: Race, Gender, Class etc.**

The terrain of in/equity refers to the relationship between different identities or aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and so on, that are often associated with experiences of inequity. Although schools are often described as being great equalizers, they are actually often unsupportive of people who do not conform to dominant
or preferred identity groups (i.e. White, middle class, heteronormative) (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010; Elgar, Craig, Boyce, Morgan, & Vella-Zarb, 2009; Espelage, Aragon, & Birkett, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pasternak, 1999; Ryan & Rottman, 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Wiltshire, 1995; Zine, 2001, 2007). Schools express preferential treatment for certain identities and impose stereotypes on the students and faculty (Cooper & White, 2004; Tantekin Erdin, 2009). Those that do not conform to these dominant and preferred identities are marginalized and excluded. There are lower expectations, lesser experiences and stiffer disciplinary measures for students who are not part of the dominant group (Banks, 2008; Gittens, Cole, Williams, Sri-Skanda, Tam, & Ratushny, 1995; Smith, 2009; Solomon & Palmer, 2004; Wade, 2000).

The Mechanism: Power

Power is the mechanism of equity. Understanding patterns of equity and inequity involves understanding who has power, who does not, and why. Equity work in education is therefore about helping students achieve power and access to life and learning opportunities who might otherwise go without (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Cochran – Smith, 2006; Peters & Reid, 2009). The identification of continued systemic inequalities is very difficult because those who are in power are very often members of dominant identity groups. For example, in North America, and North American schools there is a disproportionate amount of White, middle class men in positions of power (Carr, 2006) which leads to the imposition of White, heteronormative values on students in those schools (Banks, 2008; Zine, 2007). Existing power structures are enforced and re-created through the intentional and unintentional work of educational leaders and teachers. Even those who choose to do equity work are hindered by the historical
hierarchical and dominant organizations and distributions of power existing within educational institutions (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010).

**The Nature: Systemic, Taken for Granted Aspects**

Inequity is systemic. Marginalization, discrimination and oppression are not accidental; many things contribute to their existence (Carr, 2006; Joshee, 2012; Ryan & Rottman, 2007). Society, politics, history and economics are all related in the role they play in identifying and valuing those in power and working together to reinforce and reproduce power relations and therefore systemic discrimination (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008, Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Schools shape the experiences of students in inequitable ways through the reinforcement and recreation of inequitable power relations (and therefore experiences of inequity) through the actions of educators and administrators and their general structure and functions of school. These systemic inequitable power structures and relations are often taken for granted (Portelli, 1993, Sambell & McDowell, 1998).

**The Consequences: Inequity, Marginalization, Oppression, Discrimination**

Systemic discrimination and oppression has grave consequences. Students who do not conform to dominant ways of knowing and being often do not experience the same level of educational success as their peers. They also often experience racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamaphobia and other forms of discrimination and oppression (Banks, 2008; Espelage, Aragon, & Birkett, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Zine, 2001, 2007). These experiences marginalization and oppression which can masquerade as meritocratic failure and rejection led youngsters to experience higher instances of academic disengagement, drug use, risky sexual behaviour, and suicidal ideation (Allard & Santoro, 2008; Almeida et al., 2009). The consequences of
marginalization and oppression that are experienced early in life, in schools, have far reaching effects. Experiences of inequity lead to increased rates of joblessness, lifelong economic discrimination, poverty, homelessness, abuse, and longer and more frequent incarceration rates (Lenon, 2000; Porter, 2004).

For the purpose of this study, teaching for equity is about ensuring all students are provided with the education, support and opportunity to succeed academically (though not narrowly focused) and otherwise, and is particularly concerned with work that contributes to the provision of equity of opportunities and outcomes for students who experience marginalization and oppression. Equity minded educators engage in equity work to address this unfair disadvantage.

**Equity and Education**

Within the current context of simultaneously increasing diversity and the pre-eminence of standardization and accountability movements in education is an increasing interest in what it means to teach to teach for equity and how greater equity can be achieved. Multiple bodies of literature exist that outline different aspects and issues surrounding teaching for equity, including but not limited to those that address the aims of teaching for equity (Adams, Bell, & Giffin, 2007), the kinds of actions educators undertake in their attempts to teach for equity (Solomon et al., 2011), educators’ feelings and beliefs about their students and teaching for equity (Brown, 2004; Love & Kruger, 2005; Pohan, 1996; Sleeter, 2004), what it means to prepare educators for teaching in diverse settings and how this should be done (Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010; Sleeter, 2008b; Solomon et al., 2011; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007) and evaluations of the effect of preservice programs on educators beliefs about equity and diversity (Brown, 2004).
Views on what it means to teach for equity and the attributes one must have to do so vary. Broadly speaking, equity in education involves trying to achieve fair and equal opportunities for people but “does not necessarily entail equal treatment” (Solomon et al., 2011, p. 15). Brown (2004) believes teaching for equity is about being “committed to an agenda in which past practices anchored in open and residual racism, gender exclusivity, homophobia, class discrimination, and religious intolerance are confronted and changed over time” (p. 333). Equity minded educators engage in equity work to address this unfair disadvantage. Actions taken by teachers to decrease inequities can include, but are not limited to: differentiating instruction and materials based on students ability and background (Delpit, 1998); encouraging participation in schooling from all students and stakeholders (parents, community organizations etc.) so that they can shape education and the educational environment (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin & De Pedro, 2011); ensuring students can see themselves (their lived experiences, values and beliefs) and that of their communities in the school environment and materials (Dei, et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rios & Montecinos, 1999); ensuring all students have the resources and opportunities to achieve success (academically and otherwise); respecting the multiple and differing values and beliefs of students and community members (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2004); providing an environment where academic rigor is supported and expected for all students; supporting students in the development of critical thinking and the ability to recognize and understand discrimination and oppression (Freire, 2000; Jay, 2003; Nieto, 2004). However, there is still much to be learned about what teachers encounter when they are doing this work.
Challenges to Doing Equity Work

Although challenges are often mentioned in passing in studies on equity topics in education, research that specifically investigates the challenges associated with equity work is less common. However, studies regarding equity in education in general and those that focus on the experiences of teacher educators and educational leaders help fill in the gaps that exist in the research regarding teaching and provide useful points for consideration. Possible challenges identified or alluded to in the existing research related to teaching for equity include (but are not limited to) a lack of preparation and information for doing equity work, the inequity that is inherent in education as a system, denial of the existence of inequity, a lack of time and resources, and the nature of the teaching environment.

Lack of Preparation and Information

Researchers highlight the need for pre and inservice education on issues of diversity and equity. Some programs have begun to adopt equity and diversity mandates, although this integration is relatively recent and often inconsistent or lacking useful components (Brown, 2004; Lopez, 2011, 2013). Many teacher education programs continue to be “characterized by a conservative ideology that emphasizes assimilation and the maintenance of the status quo” (Ladson-Billings, 1999 in Nieto, 2000, p. 181). This means many teachers enter schools unprepared for dealing with the inequities they encounter (Poplin & Rivera, 2005). Once they are in the profession, access to professional development and resources such as mentorship is also limited (Lopez, 2013). In many cases then, teachers interested in doing equity work find that they have educate themselves and find their own resources.

Denial of oppression
Related to this occurrence of a lack of access to education around issues of diversity is the reality that many people come into the teaching profession with a lack of information and misconceptions about the students they will be teaching and their communities. This occurs for many reasons, including that the majority of teachers in Ontario are White, and middle class (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009), and White teachers have been found to have less knowledge and experience with diversity and marginalization than people who have lived experience as members of minoritized or oppressed identity groups (Avery & Walker, 1993; King, 1991; Su, 1996; as cited in Sleeter, 2001, p. 95). Milner therefore (2010) identifies five main kinds of thinking that he believes should be addressed in teacher preparation programs in order to prepare teachers for the diverse student populations they will inevitably be teaching. These conceptions include: color blindness, cultural conflicts, myths of meritocracy, deficit conceptions, and expectations. Conceptions such as these lead educators to reject the fact that discrimination and oppression exist and aspects of students’ identities such as their race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation have much to do with their experiences and perceptions, and ideals. Teachers doing equity work are left largely on their own to push against these kinds of conceptions. Currently, many people use the language of inclusion and portray themselves as doing equity work, while really reinforcing the status quo,compounding the challenges associated with struggling against those lines of thinking (Carr, 2009; Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010). Denials of oppression are thoroughly engrained in society and societal institutions.

**Inherent Inequity**

Schools are inherently oppressive institutions, as they inequitably favour the knowledge and experiences of students and teachers who conform to the dominant identity (Banks & Banks, 1995; Harper, 1997; Kumashiro, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Service, 2000). “Despite the
rhetoric, schools are not well adapted to dealing with issues of diversity. Their history is one of acting as integrating (some might say homogenizing) institutions, designed to reduce difference” (Levin & Riffel, 1994, p. 11). Inequity is evident in curriculum content and subject matter, and overall school organization and delivery (Jay, 2003). Current educational policies and directives perpetuate inequity through the notion that success in education and society is a result of merit. The idea is that those who work hard achieve and deserve their success. Yet a quick glance at those who have achieved success paints another picture. “One need only look at the undisputed summit of the pyramid of economic, political and legislative power in Canadian and US society to understand that the wealthiest, and most influential, Canadians have traditionally been from White, European families” (Carr, 2006, p. 6). Hayes and Jaurez (2009) point out how, despite their hard work, students of colour are constantly and systematically excluded from educational opportunities that would lead them to success. The notion of a meritocratic system secures and reinforces the success of White people to the detriment of members of minority groups. The fallacy of things such as meritocracy are not always easily seen or acknowledged by teachers, particularly because the teaching force in Ontario is predominantly comprised of White middle class women (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009), who (for the most part) tend not to experience discrimination and oppression, at least not in the same way as many of their students who are members of the global majority, and who have little knowledge of the identities of their students.

**Lack of Time and Resources**

It is not easy for teachers to find the time and resources they need to do equity work in their schools, particularly given the current preoccupation on raising test scores (Kumashiro et al., 2004: Lindsay, 2007; Singh, 2010). Griffiths (2010) found that the principals in his study had a limited ability to re-arrange schedules to accommodate equity work, as a result of the top down
nature of educational administration in Ontario. Principals reported thinking that the board and Ministry should change their focus to allow for more flexibility so they could better address equity issues in their schools; they felt there was too much attention being paid on achievement from the Ministry level all the way down to the school level. In Sleeters’ (1992) school change study involving 30 teachers, 20 of them described lack of time as an impediment to doing the equity work they “believed they should do” (p. 143). They were struggling enough to keep up with the demands of their jobs before their attempts to incorporate more multicultural education into their programming. The struggle to find a balance between mandated policies and initiatives and equity goals is common and prompts educators to look for things that will help them in their attempts to do equity work (Theoharis, 2007; Waite, Nelson, & Guajardo, 2007).

**Nature of the Teaching Environment**

Beyond experiencing constraints that result from the lack of time and resources, teachers are challenged by other things that relate to the particular nature of the teaching environment, such as bureaucracy and control, uncertainty and complexity, and isolation. The nature of teachers work is increasingly bureaucratized. The amount of control teachers have over their own work is also decreasing, particularly given more recent reforms in education that have more closely aligned educational environments and practices with business environments (Hatch, 1999). There is increased pressure to improve student test scores and increased prominence placed on accountability (Loughran, 2007, p. 592). Teaching is complex and ever changing; teachers deal with multiple things and people at once and constantly make on the spot decisions (Hatch, 1999). “Teaching is uncertain because it requires teachers to make a multitude of complex decisions in rapid fire fashion and because teachers get little reliable feedback about the effectiveness of those decisions in accomplishing their goals” (Hatch, 1999, p. 230). Teachers also deal with an
increasingly diverse population, requiring teachers to deal with things like multiculturalism and multiple and sometimes competing beliefs on their own (Townsend and Bates, 2007). Teachers perform most of their work in isolation (Acker, 1995; Warren Little, 1982).

The egg-crate architecture of most schools and the way school schedules are set make it difficult for teachers to really know what goes on in other teachers’ classrooms. Teachers are cut off from their colleagues and spend a large portion of their work lives isolated from other adults. (Hatch, 1999, p. 231).

Isolation is a problem because it leaves teachers alone to deal with the problems they regularly face. These challenges have created a less than positive environment for teachers to work in, one which is more fast paced and hectic, pressured and monitored, where low morale, stress and feelings of crisis are common (Day, 2007; Hargreaves, 1990).

Supports of Equity Work

Researchers have been able to identify some things that aid or support educators in general in their work over the years, however not all of the research cited here focuses specifically on the experiences of teachers; it also includes the experiences of administrators. This research, however, is not as prevalent as studies into the challenges of equity work. Supports include: supportive individuals or organizations, having knowledge about equity and diversity and associated strategies, and using knowledge of the education system and its actors to advantage (Banks & Banks, 1995; Griffiths, 2010; Nieto, 2000; Ryan, 2012; Singh, 2010). Supportive individuals and organizations can include (but are not limited to) fellow teachers and principals, students, board members, and Ministry policies (Griffiths, 2010; Singh, 2010). Teachers can gain knowledge of diversity, equity and inclusion from experience and education (Singh, 2010;
Theoharis, 2007). It can include knowledge about different beliefs and values, learning styles and strategies and equity strategies (Singh, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Knowledge of the system includes understanding the roles that people hold in educational systems, how the system and its actors work and how to successfully navigate the system and relationships within it in order to achieve equity goals. Ryan (2012) calls this kind of knowledge political acumen, and describes how educational leaders have used political acumen to achieve equity goals. Having political acumen involves looking at the system and its actors critically to figure out how everything and everyone functions.

Unfortunately teachers who attempt to do equity work are faced with many barriers to this work and very few supports. Known barriers include (but are not limited to); a lack of preparation and information for doing equity work, the inequity that is inherent in education as a system, denial of the existence of inequity, lack of time and resources, and the nature of the teaching environment. Supports include things such as supportive individuals or organizations, having knowledge about equity and diversity and associated strategies, and using knowledge of the education system and its actors to advantage. Other possible challenges and supports of equity work are explored in this study.

Methods
Elementary public school teachers from Ontario who self-identify as actively engaging in equity work in their schools were invited to participate in this study through email. Online and personal networks and contacts that were established though work at the Centre for Leadership and Diversity (CLD) at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto OISE/UT, which included many educators and educational leaders who self-identify as engaging
in equity work, were used as a starting point for contacting participants. Snow ball sampling was used to gather 15 participants (Merriam, 1998). An initial email was sent out to personal contacts and through the CLD listserv and the participant group snowballed from there. All participants worked in one of three major school boards in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) which together comprise 24% (472,000 students) of the total Ontario student population. The total number of students in Ontario is above 2000,000 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The school boards in which the participants work are in central Ontario, in Toronto, West of Toronto in Peel, and East of Toronto in Durham. Seven of the participants were male, eight were female. Many self-identified as members of marginalized groups; one way gay, one was a lesbian, another was transgendered, two were immigrants, two were black, and two were second generation Canadian and mentioned having witnessed their parents experiencing marginalization and oppression for not being “Canadian” enough. Pseudonyms were given to participants that were similar in nature to those of the participants, they included: Alana, Inta, Joana, Melony, Kurtis, Remi, Sarah, Kent, Sidney, Matt, Lesley, Mitch, Kristen, Bud, and Kelsey. Participant identity was protected by not describing participants’ identities or descriptions of experiences to such a degree that might allow them to be identified.

**Data Collection**

Qualitative research methods (Merrian, 1998) were used in this study, as they focus on “discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied” (p. 1). This study is descriptive and exploratory in nature (Merrian, 1998) as little is known of the topics explored. Descriptions of the kinds of things that challenge and support participants in their attempts to do equity work were gathered through one on one, face to face interviews. The interviews allowed flexibility with in the flow and direction of the interview and how and what
participants discussed. A key belief engrained in the study is that people’s individual knowledge and experiences are meaningful components of their social reality (Mason, 2006) and one on one interviews provide the unique opportunity of probing this reality in an in depth fashion. In this case, the interviews were relatively informal, more like a “conversation with a purpose”. The intent was to gather a narrative like account of participants’ experiences. All interviews began with dialogue intended to familiarize the participants with the purpose of the study and the interviewee and participant with one another. As the interview progressed, it became less specific and provided the opportunity to share narrative like accounts of the experiences and thoughts regarding what helped them and hindered them in doing their equity work, and why. The interview was intended to be co constructed by the participant and the interviewer rather than being a static experience with a power imbalance favouring the interviewer (Rapley, 2001). This was particularly important because the interview covered personal subject matter. The attempt to create a relationship of co construction was intended to empower the interview and make them feel comfortable and in control of the conversation. Interviews were as short as almost an hour and as long as almost three hours. Following the interview, participants were given the option of reviewing the transcripts and making changes they felt were required.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and transcribed to a word document at a later time. Hand written notes were taken in a journal during and after the interviews and during the analysis process. The word files of the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to uncover initial themes that were informed by the literature review. These interview transcripts were then uploaded into Nvivo 9 and coded using these themes but all the while remaining open to new themes that may emerge through repeating this process.
Challenges Faced by Participants when Doing Equity Work

Participants in this study identified ten main challenges to engaging in equity work. They included: colleagues, parents, administration and leadership, curriculum, students, hiring practices, lack of time, lack of money, lack of resources in general, union regulations, training, and paperwork or other activities related to more recent accountability measures. The three most commonly mentioned challenges were colleagues, parents, and administration and leadership. The three top challenges were mentioned by ten, nine, and six participants respectively, whereas the rest of the challenges were mentioned by between one and three participants. This section of the findings focuses on how colleagues, parents, and administration and leadership challenged the participants in their attempts to do equity work in their schools. While many of the categories used to describe the supports have the potential to overlap, they are described as discrete categories to aid in discussion and exploration.

Colleagues

Other teachers were most often described by participants as challenging them in their attempts to do equity work. Participants felt their colleagues were more often adversarial than helpful, held deficit views of students who did not conform to dominant student identities, and were unprepared or disinterested in engaging in equity work. When describing the adversarial relationship many of the participants felt they had with their colleagues, they described feeling alone and unsupported. They responded by doing their equity work in the privacy of their classrooms, away from the eyes and interference of others. Melony described how the relationship with her peers had evolved over the years as a result. Initially she had been more outgoing about her beliefs, which had led to some heated exchanges with her colleagues. This encouraged her to voice her opinions less frequently. She said
Where I am now, I have gotten to a place where they are just sort of like “Oh that is who she is” (an activist). It is ok, it is comfortable. But, my first three years in particular, I would cry after my staff meetings because it could become really ugly screaming matches. Or, I would say something and somebody would interpret it and the next thing is that I would get a phone call from the union that I had to have a meeting with so and so because I was criticising their teaching. And I wasn’t criticising their teaching; I was raising an issue in a positive way. ...I hate feeling like my colleagues are adversaries, and that piece of it is so challenging and so life sucking.

This feeling of defeat and discomfort when engaging with colleagues around issues of equity resulted not just from their exchanges with one another, but also from how their colleagues spoke about and interacted with the students. Participants like Inta described working in an emotionally toxic environment because of the level of deficit mentality expressed by some of her colleagues regarding the students. She said:

The biggest challenge is that not every teacher thinks like you, there is a lot of deficit thinking out there. Like teachers who think that kids who speak, who are English language learners are stupid. Sometimes when you hear them talking about kids in the staffroom and in the hallway you actually get a sense that they think that these kids are dumb. That is annoying to me, but besides being annoying I also find it challenging to work in that type of environment . . . when teachers have no idea of the lived reality of the kids in their classroom and they make blanket statements about their kids that are just atrocious and ridiculous, like they talk about: “Why do these families live in these high rise buildings that are dirty and filthy and cockroach infested”, kind of thing. And I am like, “because they just got here and they can’t afford any better because they were
doctors or lawyers in their home country and now they are working as night time security guards and don’t you think that if they didn’t have to live in cockroach infested buildings that they wouldn’t”. But it is that attitude, and if that is how you are perceiving the family that your child comes from then that is how you are perceiving this child, and if that is how you are perceiving this child, how are you going to believe in this child and how are you going to teach them.

Not only did these teachers feel their colleagues held deficit views of certain students, participants also felt that there was very little interest on the part of their colleagues to learn more about equity issues. Bud described this when he said “once you get your teaching certificate and you are in a classroom you are good to go until retirement if you would like. There is very little mandatory training in any field in education and there are teachers like that, 20 years in who have never been to a workshop and have never had any professional development”. Participants such as Kelsey went on to describe how it is also very hard to teach students about and for equity if the teachers do not understand what they doing. It is, therefore, a complicated situation where many people are not interested in equity, or push against equity efforts, and there is very little training or education around teaching for and about equity, to the point that even those interested in making positive changes often felt ill prepared.

Parents

Participants mentioned a few ways in which they felt challenged by parents in doing equity work, including parent lack of willingness to recognize when their children were being prejudiced towards others and a lack of interest in being involved in anything beyond charity work with their children or the school. However, the most commonly referenced challenge
relating to parents was push back or disagreement with the participants regarding how and what they were teaching their children regarding equity issues, particularly with regards to issues surrounding same sex relationships and sexual orientation.

Parents were described by participants as very often being opposed to their children learning about different kinds of relationships and ways of life in general, regardless of whether the teachers themselves were perceived as being gay or straight. Matt described this when he said “when I was in the library. They would bring home the book “Two Mommies” or “Two Daddies” or “Daddy and his Roommate” and parents would object saying – this is horrible, this is terrible, my children shouldn’t be exposed to that”. Some of the participants felt these reactions from parents were related to their religious beliefs. Participants had also experienced problems with parents because the teachers were perceived as being gay by parents or students. One of the participants had received negative feedback from parents when they found out the participant had taken over from a teacher who was a lesbian. Kelsey described this when they said:

They were very angry that they found out the teacher I had taken over for was a lesbian, and they didn’t like that I was teaching about different families and I made them aware that to me they were very fortunate because they had someone who could speak on their experiences and teach the children properly.

One of the participants (Lesley) had even been outed by parents of in her school community in a very tumultuous fashion, and at a great cost to her. Lesley and her partner had been together for many years, and were out with some of their friends and family. However, they chose to keep their relationship private in certain circles, including with their work colleagues. They felt they
might be penalized personally and professionally for being gay. Their fears were realized when Lesley was outed by some of the parents in her school community. Lesley stated “My second year of teaching, parents found out that I was gay and I wasn’t out at the time, and they wanted me out of the school. They went to the superintendent. They went to the principal and caused my life complete havoc”. The parents acted very negatively towards Lesley, causing her great difficulty in many ways, professionally, socially, and emotionally. Lesley received very little support from her administration. Melony described how her colleague had a similar experience. One of the students in her school had written a very defaming blog post regarding one of her colleagues, claiming they were gay and discriminating against them as a result. The student was initially suspended by the principal, but the parents protested stating their child was merely expressing an opinion and should be allowed to speak freely. The administration eventually gave in to parent pressure and revoked the suspension.

**Administration and Leadership**

Participants often described leadership as a key piece of the puzzle regarding their equity work. They felt they were much less likely to be successful at achieving their equity goals if their administrators were unsupportive of their equity work or equity work in general. Like many of the participants, Joana felt administrators chose whether or not to see issues of inequity in their schools and school boards. She said “There have been times where I have gone to my administrator with issues and literally, they would go on the defence, they would say: I don’t see what you are seeing”. Joana felt it was easier for the administrators to pretend ignorance rather than deal with the issues happening around them. Participants such as Lesley felt this lack of acknowledgement or ignorance went further. She stated “I have been through four different principals. I find that principals are the ones who run the school and if it is not on their agenda to
honour equity and social justice work than they don’t acknowledge me”. She described administrators as being very calculated in how they chose to expend their energy. If they were not interested in doing equity work they would not only ignore inequities occurring in the school but they would also ignore those teachers engaging in equity work to decrease their chances of having to get tied up with equity concerns.

Participants also expressed the belief that many administrators shied away from dealing with equity issues because they were controversial or unpopular and might negatively influence the way the school board perceived their leadership and therefore decrease their chances of getting a promotion. Lesley described a situation where she and her colleagues had worked very hard on a campaign to address homophobia that was actually in response to a poster sent around by their school board about the day of pink that did not address homophobia at all. Lesley and her colleagues worked on a video that addressed a variety of ways of engaging with one another appropriately and inappropriately but also addressed homophobia. However, in the end the administration only allowed students in grades seven and eight to view the part of the video that addressed homophobia. In cases such as this participants felt administrators took such stances because it still looked like their school was doing “good work” from the outside, but it was not controversial and would not draw and negative attention to the school. In the case of Lesley, she continued to work hard to spread the message regarding homophobia to the whole school, but she felt very tired and defeated as a result of the continued challenges she faced. She even said she was beginning to think “what was the point” of this work? Although she was continuing to try to do work with her whole school at the time of the interview, she felt it was much easier for her to do work in her own class than try to engage her colleagues and the rest of the school. Administrators then had a lot of sway regarding what participants were able to accomplish
regarding equity in their schools. It seemed that whether or not they had the support of the administrators had a great influence in whether or not they were able to engage in equity work that went beyond the four walls of their classroom. The cost of doing equity work outside their classrooms could be too great. Participants feared being ostracised or shunned by their administrators and other members of the board if their administrator disagreed with their equity work.

**Supports of Doing Equity Work**

Although not mentioned as often as the challenges to engaging in equity work, participants mentioned a variety of things that were helpful to their equity work. Many of the things mentioned as challenges were also mentioned as possible supports. These things included: administration and leadership, colleagues, resources, policies, the union, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), professional development, and parents. The three most commonly mentioned supports were administration and leadership, resources, and colleagues. The three top supports were mentioned by ten, seven, and six participants respectively, whereas the rest of the supports were mentioned by between one and two participants. This section of the findings therefore focuses on how administration and leadership, resources, and colleagues supported participants in their attempts to do equity work in their schools. While many of the categories used to describe the supports have the potential to overlap, they are described as discrete categories to aid in discussion and exploration.

**Administration and Leadership**

Much like when describing administration and leadership as perhaps the greatest challenge to engaging in equity work, participants described their administration and leadership as having the
possibility of being the greatest supporters of their equity work. For example, Inta said “The biggest help is definitely having the administrator that is 100% supportive”. Matt made a similar comment describing how he knew the support of his administration and school board was “100%” and this was very valuable to him because he felt he could always depend on them should any issues arise or should he require any resources or support. While the participants who had supportive administration and leadership were quick to praise them, they were also quick to caution that not all administration and leadership in the province expressed the same level of support. Bud stated:

At the board level, some boards don’t appoint education officers, an education officer is someone who works at the board and leads in a certain area. They have appointed a few equity officers. So, some boards don’t, some boards are experiencing cuts from the government and are cutting those jobs first just because, although it creates a nice inclusive environment, the bottom line of standardized, EQAO test scores are really what gets measured. So, I find our school board does a good job of making sure we have a few really qualified, highly skilled educational officers who will lead equity and inclusiveness and then it is top down, they will throw a workshop together, they will throw events and invited teachers or other people that work in the education sector, and then we bring it back and give it to the kids.

Kelsey similarly described the belief that high levels of support for equity were not the norm in the province when she described her past experiences with other leadership as feeling as though she was “calling into the wind” with no response and no support. Because of the fact that not all administrators and leaders at the board level were supportive of equity work, Sidney said you
needed to know where to look for support, and if you did not know where to look, you might have to operate on your own, or at the very least, without any help from above.

Resources

Although they might not always be easy to locate or acquire, participants were adamant that resources were helpful for their equity work, and there were many different sources of resources mentioned. When talking about a variety of resources that they find helpful, Kristen said:

> The board does send out a monthly newsletter that does tell you all the holidays to observe and they have resources for all of them. The media library has great resources, even things like having books with different languages in them for students who need them, that is all available through the board, so they are obviously equity minded in that respect, and then like I said before, being in the school and being surrounded by it just makes you want to address it and teach the students about it.

Kristen found things like her colleagues, board newsletters and materials, the media library, books, and the diversity of her student population to be particularly helpful. Remi felt his union chapter, ETFO, and his school board were all good sources of resources, he said:

> What I find helpful are the great resources through the union, through ETFO, there are teaching resources that deal with allot of issues from poverty to racism and all kinds of things, also through the board, there is an equity department in the board, a great website in the board, there are equity reps at different schools, I sometimes go to them. So, there are a lot of resources and a lot of support. A lot of great literature too, childrens’ literature, I read a lot of stories relating to these kinds of things that are available on the market now a lot more so than they were a couple of generations ago.
Much like with administration and leadership, participants such as Matt and Sidney described their feeling that not all teachers knew how to access resources, or were interested in doing work to find what they needed to teach in an equitable manner. They went on to say that resources were of no use to teachers if they did not want to, or did not know how to find them.

**Colleagues**

Although many participants mentioned colleagues as supportive of their equity work, they did not go into as much depth in their explanations as those who mentioned colleagues as a challenge to their equity work. However, participants did describe colleagues as having a key role to play in their ability to do equity work. Mitch described his colleagues as integral to their equity work when he said

> I always talk with colleagues about various approaches to teaching; it is a very supportive environment. I am very thankful about that because we can talk about these sorts of issues open and honestly and that in itself is one of the biggest strong points about where I am working right now. But I have been in other places where there have been equity issues where issues of race and sexual orientation and religion have come to a conflict between staff. It didn’t involve me directly but it made for a very unpleasant environment to work in.

Mitch greatly valued being able to talk things through with his colleagues and feel supported in doing equity work in particular because he had previously worked in schools where he said his colleagues were unsupportive of equity work and unsupportive of people who were doing equity work. In his previous school, attempts to do equity work were challenged and members of minoritized groups were oppressed. He went on to say that out of all the things that supported his
equity work their colleagues were “the most helpful” he included his administration in this description as well. Kelsey described her belief that having a diverse teaching staff was helpful to her equity work, because it “helped with the students”. She said “it helps when you work at a school where there are different ethnicities and sexual orientations and you can use each other to help teach”. While Matt described similar feelings regarding his colleagues as being helpful to his work, he cautioned people against only engaging in equity work with supportive colleagues because in that case he felt people were “preaching to the converted”. He went on to say:

Yes, it is great to have those allies and friends and support around you when you are doing the work, but that is not necessarily why I am doing the work. I am there to work with those that don’t care... That is what I am here to do, because the more I can work with my peers, the more they will be able to better work with their students.

So, while it was important for Matt to have a group of supportive colleagues it was just as important, if not more so, to constantly try to engage with those teachers who did not see a value in equity work.

Discussion

At first glance, the challenges and supports of the equity work of the participants in this study appear to be individual in nature, as opposed to systemic. Participants largely mentioned individuals or individual things as being most helpful or harmful in their attempts to achieve equity in their schools. However, given a closer examination, it becomes clear that the systemic nature of inequity plays a large role in the experiences of the teachers in this study, and that the individuals and resources that were most helpful and harmful played a key role in the systemic perpetuation of inequity depending on their role and therefore the nature of the power they held
within this system. This was illustrated by what participants found most helpful and harmful. For example, parents were described as often posing a significant challenge to doing equity work; they were rarely described as being helpful. The exception to this was one participant who described having a very active parent council that spent a lot of time, energy, and money supporting equity work in their school, particularly by purchasing resources for teaching for equity. When participants spoke of the challenges of parents, they often spoke of the parents’ ability to do harm to their career and family lives through their political actions both inside and outside of the school. If parents so chose, they could draw negative attention to the actions of teachers by alerting members of the board or the media, making the teachers lives very difficult.

Administrators and leadership were therefore also often cited as both a challenge and support for teaching for equity in many ways. Based on the descriptions of the participants it seems as though administrators in particular could be the difference between whether or not equity work happened at the school, individual, or class level because of their power within their schools and boards. Further, depending on the other challenges experienced by teachers in their attempts to do equity work at the classroom level, administrators could be the determining factor in whether or not teachers had ability to continue even their classroom level equity work. Sleeter (1992) conducted a school change study with 30 teachers with the aim of helping the teachers become more equitable and inclusive in their teaching practice through professional development sessions. Although her participants said they felt their principals were largely in favour of equity and inclusivity, only one of the 30 participants described being able to work collaboratively with their administrator in their equity pursuits (p. 145). Most of her participants described how they had resorted to doing most of their equity work inside their classrooms to avoid possible challenges (p. 145). Administrators in this study were described as either having equity on their
leadership agenda or not, and if equity was not on their agenda, things became very challenging. For example, when Lesley was outed by the community she received no support from her administration or the board. In fact, the trustee played a key role in this case in ostracizing and criticizing her for being gay and for engaging in equity work. In this instance, because of the lack of support for her and her work she was forced to stop what she was doing and her entire life was changed as she had not previously been “out” as a gay woman. Experiences such as this highlight the systemic nature of inequity existing in schools and the power of administration within this system. Unfortunately, with so many administrators and other people in power being part of dominant identity groups (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009), teachers often experience denial of inequities and subsequent opposition to their equity work as those who belong to dominant groups often do not perceive the inequities that exist around them or an impetus for change (Carr, 2009; Milner, 2010).

Findings relating to administration and leadership also highlight a relationship between teacher autonomy and teacher principal relationships which is largely undocumented. Teachers have historically been identified as street level bureaucrats who enjoy relative autonomy (i.e. Lipsky, 1983). More recently, Neoliberal ideologies and associated education policies and programs such as standardized testing have been highlighted as interfering with the level of autonomy which teachers are able to express in their work (Bascia, 2008; Lundstrom, 2015). Findings from this study highlight that the nature of the relationship between teachers and their administration and leadership, and that whether or not administration and leadership have equity on their agenda, may play a contributing role in the level of autonomy which they are able to express in their work. Teachers’ ability to engage in equity work was found to be limited to the classroom level if administration and other leaders at the board level did not have equity on their
agenda, suggesting that they have a great effect on the level of autonomy which teachers are able to express, at least with respect to equity work. This raises questions for future research regarding the effects of administration and leadership on teacher autonomy, and the nature of autonomy which teachers possess in their profession.

For people such as Remi, the local unions and ETFO were described as being very helpful when issues arose with colleagues, administrators or parents, they felt protected and supported because of the power of their union and their teaching federation and their belief that their union and teaching federation would use this power to support and protect them if needed. But, participants only expressed this feeling of protection if they also expressed knowledge of who to go to and how to access this help. In this case, knowledge of the system, and its actors played a key role in the teachers’ perceptions of what kinds of supports were available to them. Participants that mentioned having support systems they felt they could turn to if needed had learned of them through their lengthy experiences as members of marginalized groups and or as people engaging in equity work. Much like what was uncovered in the literature regarding administrators’ experiences when engaging in equity work, supportive individuals, organizations, and other resources are not always readily available or apparent without prior knowledge or experience (Singh, 2010; Theoharris, 2007). This poses a particular challenge especially if people work in environments where they feel alone in their attempts to do equity work and are not supported by like minded colleagues or administration.

Participant experiences with administration and leadership were similar to what they experienced with their colleagues in terms of whether or not equity was on their agenda. However, participants described their experiences with their colleagues in greater depth and as being more complex. While administrators were described largely as unsupportive or supportive,
and as being largely passive regardless of their stance, colleagues were described as being more actively adversarial or supportive. For example, participants described colleagues as outwardly expressing deficit views of students. Despite the longstanding efforts of researchers and practitioners to tackle deficit views of students (Bergerson, 2003; Carr, 2009; Gillborn, 1992; Hayes & Jaurez, 2009; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Theoharis, 2007; Valencia, 1999), it appears that the call for education and training for educators and administrative leaders regarding the diverse student populations they will be teaching is still relevant and required. This could be related to the fact that education for teaching for equity is often short lived, within the length of teacher education programs, as opposed to long term education that extends into the beginning years of practice, which leaves teachers largely unprepared to teach for diversity (Lopez, 2013). It could also be because much of the education future teachers receive is theory based as opposed to in field learning (Whipp, 2013; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007).

Based on the findings of this study, there is a continued demand for education and support for pre and in service teachers regarding equity and diversity. The findings from this study lend support for the collaborative mentorship designed and proposed by Lopez (2013). Lopez (2013) highlights how most teachers in Ontario and North America in general are ill prepared to teach for equity and diversity for numerous reasons, including that the teaching population is largely White, middle classed women (p. 293). Lopez therefore advocates for a collaborative mentorship which she says is:

Theorized as a mentoring approach that focuses on supporting and sustaining teachers in diversity and equity education. It is grounded in the notion that mentoring for diversity and equity is a dialogical mentoring relationship between mentor and mentee that creates
space to wrestle with tensions (Lopez, 2005) and digresses from conventional mentoring relationships that center protégé and expert. (p. 294).

Through mentorship such as this, teachers could share their experiences with their mentor, develop strategies with them, and possibly most importantly, as experiencing challenges seem inevitable when engaging in equity work, teachers would know they had support in their equity work and have a critical friend to turn to when they experienced challenges.

Teachers could also benefit from professional development and training for dealing with adversarial colleagues. Many of the participants in this study discussed negative experiences with colleagues, but none of them described any strategies for effectively dealing with these conflicts. Instead participants described how they had been forced into silence, discouraged from collaborating with their peers, and actively sought out other employment to avoid their adversaries. Many of them, like Melony, Lesley, and Kelsey in particular described feeling tired, stressed out, and overwhelmed by the challenges they had faced from their colleagues in their attempts to do equity work. An equal amount of participants described supportive colleagues, and often described them as being integral to their equity work and highly influential. Supportive colleagues were described as particularly meaningful and helpful to those participants who had experienced negative treatment from other colleagues. However, Matt raised a caution against only engaging in equity work with those colleagues that were supportive. He said that supportive colleagues are very important, but it is just as important to work with those colleagues that are unsupportive, because otherwise you would be “preaching to the choir”. He went on to say that the goal of equity work is to create change and improve the situation of students who are discriminated against and oppressed, but if you are only working with supportive colleagues, what happens to the students of those colleagues that do not do equity work? His statements
highlight the importance of finding strategies for working with adversarial colleagues and continuing efforts to do school wide equity work as opposed to that which is largely class specific.

Participant discussions of resources were particularly helpful for demonstrating the common link between all of the challenges and supports of equity work. Many participants described the various resources they found helpful such as books, policies, and websites. They also described various sources for these resources such as the library, their union, colleagues, ETFO, websites, and the ministry of education. Importantly, very few of the participants mentioned the Equity strategy. However, those who did mention it spoke of it as being very helpful, especially in instances where people were challenging their attempts to engage in equity work. In these cases, participants described how they had successfully used the Equity Strategy to support their work and get those who were in opposition to their equity work to back down. This raises important questions about the nature of the implementation of this policy, and it highlights an area which school boards could target if they are interested in increasing the knowledge and capacity of teachers to engage in equity work. While it is important to document and highlight these resources for other practitioners, it is also important to note what participant Sidney said about resources. He said “there is tons of help because I know where to find it. If I did not know where to find it I would be totally totally lost”. He raises an important point about all the supports mentioned in this study: they are useless if you do not know how and where to find them and if you do not understand the nature of the system within which you work.

Knowledge of the policies, programs, and individuals that exist in support of equity work was important in helping participants figure out how to engage in their equity work in a constructive and supported fashion. It is therefore just as important teaching educators about
what resources and supports are currently available and how to find them as there is to creating new information and resources. School boards, faculties of education, and teachers’ unions all have roles to play in helping educators to develop the subject knowledge and knowledge of the system and its policies to facilitate them in their attempts to do equity work. Researchers such as Ryan (2012) and Armstrong (2009) highlight the challenging nature of equity work and call for the development of micropolitical knowledge and strategies to help educational leaders in pursuits of social justice and equity. In his study of the micropolitical knowledge and strategies used by educational leaders when doing social justice work Ryan (2012) found that educational leaders had learned over the years how to do things like develop alliances and relationships; persuade others to do what they wanted; act reflectively and consciously; being more or less visible; and take steps to understand the particular political environment in which one works in order to help them in their pursuits. While Ryans’ (2012) work focuses on educational leaders (though broadly defined to include students and teachers expressing leadership in their roles) these findings can also be applied to the work of elementary school teachers who both do and do not express leadership in their work.

There is obviously overlap in the findings and discussion between teaching and leadership and therefore value in them not just for teacher research and practice but also for research and practice for educational leaders, particularly given the systemic nature of inequity and the different roles each actor within this system can play in attempts to achieve greater equity. As Stein and Spillane (2005, p. 28) point out, there has “for too long” been a gap between these two bodies of research, and it is time to bridge that gap. It is quite possible that administrators are unaware of the situation of those teaching for equity and how they might be
more supportive of their efforts going forward. Findings from studies such as this should therefore be shared with educational leaders, particularly those interested in leading for equity.

Finally, there was an undercurrent of frustration and despair interwoven into the findings. Many of the participants used language throughout the interviews that demonstrated that the challenges they had experienced had taken a large toll on them personally. They described how certain incidents had negatively impacted their personal lives in fundamental ways. They often felt great despair and frustration, questioned the impact of their work in comparison to the personal cost and wondered if it was worth continuing. These findings raise questions about the cost of doing social justice work and the kind of supports in place for dealing with them. Although many of the participants mentioned feeling supported by colleagues or administration and how that had helped them continue to do equity work, none of the participants mentioned resources for dealing with the personal or internal toll of doing this work. And many of the participants questioned how long they would be able to continue to do equity work as a result of the toll the challenges were taking on them personally. This is a very important aspect of equity work that remains largely untouched in research and literature, particularly with regards to providing information that would help teachers with these challenges. The research in this area is only slightly more developed for leadership (i.e. Theoharis, 2007; Zembylas, 2010). A major question resulting from this study surrounds the longevity of equity work considering the challenges the participants of this study faced, the way they described their feelings, and whether they will be encouraged to quit doing equity work because of the social and emotional cost of doing this work.

Findings of this study confirm much of what was uncovered in the literature review with the exception of a few key things. Lack of time was not commonly discussed by participants as
being a challenge, whereas it was commonly cited in the literature (Kumashiro et al. 2004; Lindsay, 2007). The nature of the teaching environment, as being isolating, was commonly described as a challenge to equity work (Hatch, 1999; Townsend & Bates, 2007), whereas participants in this study did not describe it as such. What was relatively unique to this study was the manner in which participants described the things that challenged and supported them in their attempts to do equity work. Although many of the things they discussed could be considered in isolation, they were connected by overarching conceptions that informed this study, mainly with regards to conceptions of in/equity, and how it plays out in education and society. Common threads were interwoven amongst the things that participants described as helping or hindering them which are related to how in/equity plays out. These key things are knowledge and power within the system. Participants’ knowledge of their colleagues, superiors, and the system within which they worked, including the policies, services, and organizations that they worked with played a key role in their equity work were key. Some participants worked with supportive colleagues, and within supportive systems, whereas others did not. However, it is unclear if all participants had the same level of awareness of the challenges and supports that existed within their system, and the possible options available for them for support. Secondly, participants’ descriptions of what was helpful and harmful to them in their attempts to do equity work uncovered the importance of the nature of the power of each of the actors with which they engaged. Students, parents, colleagues, administration and other leaders all held different kinds of power and could be challenging or supportive of their equity work in different ways depending on their role, the power they held, and whether or not they were supportive of equity work. In the end, these findings raise questions for future research about the role of knowledge
and individuals within systems, and how, with further research, they can both be used to achieve greater equity and inclusion in schools.

**Conclusion**

Elementary teachers in this study experienced multiple things that both challenged and supported their attempts to do equity work. The most common phenomena that challenged them were administration and leadership, colleagues, and parents. The most common things they found supportive were administration and leadership, resources, and colleagues. Knowledge was found to be a thread which was interwoven through all the findings; knowing the system, where to go (and sometimes where not to go) for support and resources was key to the experiences of the teachers in this study. Findings from this study highlight the need for further education and training for teaching for equity and diversity. In particular, there is a need for sustained education and support through a relationship such as collaborative mentorship as described by Lopez (2013) and regarding the micropolitics (Ryan, 2012) of engaging in equity work. Finally, findings regarding the emotional aspects of doing equity work could be used to lay the foundation for subsequent studies that investigate the way teachers experience equity practice.
References


Chapter 5

Conclusion Chapter: Revisiting the Questions, Implications for Research and Practice

Revisiting the Research Questions

This chapter revisits the research questions and discusses the implications of the study as a whole for professional development, research and practice. The first research question was:

Why do teachers engage in equity activities? This research question was addressed in the first article. At the beginning of this study, it was assumed that this question could be answered by investigating what motivated the teachers in this study to engage in equity work. Upon further exploration, motivation was found to be too small of a lens to capture all of the different kinds of things that influenced and informed the equity work of the teachers in this study. Research informing this study ended up coming from a range of fields and subjects including teacher beliefs (Enterline, Cochran-Smith, Ludlow, & Mitescu, 2008), teacher identity (Milner, 2010; Varghese et al., 2005), sense making (Spillane, Reiser, Reimer, 2002), and motivation (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque, & Legault, 2002). Motivation was found to come closest to capturing the phenomenon under investigation, though aspects of the other bodies of literature were used to augment and support what was prescribed by the motivation literature and the terms such as “reasons for doing equity work” were used to describe the findings.

Teachers’ reasons for engaging in equity work included having personally experienced inequities, witnessing others experiencing inequities, or having learned about equity and inequities in their formal or experiential education. These experiences incited the participants to engage in equity work, and although this equity work often posed great
challenges to them personally and professionally, they remained hopeful that positive change could be achieved. I initially assumed that the teachers’ racialized identities would play a much larger role in motivating them to engage in equity work and influencing them in terms of the nature of the work they chose to do. I initially started down the line of inquiry about why people do equity work because I was considering what my role could be in equity work as a middle class White woman. However, race ended up being discussed a lot less by participants than I had anticipated. There could be multiple reasons for this occurrence. Many of the participants were White, however many of them had experienced marginalization. All participants mentioned a critical incident which had spurred them or incited them to become interested in equity work. For many of the participants this was related to a personal experience. For some of the White participants the experiences that lead them to be interested in equity work were related to experiences of discrimination relating to things such as gender, sexual orientation, immigration, and having English as a second language. Yet, all of the White participants who had experienced discrimination were also quick to point out that they understood that they basically had two identities, one which was privileged that related to being White and one that was not privileged which related to their identity characteristic for which they were discriminated against. Some of the White participants even talked about how they could choose to be perceived in an idealized White way by hiding the aspect of their identity which was perceived as a weakness by others, they discussed how projecting this particular image of their identity gave them more power and sometimes safety in certain situations.

The second research question was: How do equity minded educators recognize and understand in/equity in their respective situations? In the end, I considered this to be two
different questions. These two research questions were very closely related to the next research question: What strategies do teachers employ to try to make their schools and classrooms more equitable and inclusive? In fact, a cyclical relationship was found to exist between participants’ understanding, recognition, and actions regarding in/equity. Therefore, article 2 addresses all three of these research questions.

Participants understanding of in/equity were found to exist on a continuum from basic to more complex. Some participants were able to articulate an understanding of all of the four key aspects of in/equity highlighted in the literature (terrain, mechanism, nature, and consequences), whereas others were only able to recognize one or a few of these aspects. Of the fifteen participants, all of them were able identify at least two aspects of in/equity, seven identified two key aspects of in/equity, five identified three key aspects, and three articulated an understanding of all four key aspects of in/equity. Almost half of the participants understood in/equity as involving two key aspects of the definition of in/equity derived from the literature. These participants primarily referred to the systemic nature of race, class, gender etc., and their systemic nature. They described how people from a variety of backgrounds experienced challenges or barriers, such as individual discrimination or systemic oppression that denied them access to appropriate education.

The data that revealed how participants recognized in/equity was gathered from the answers participants gave to the interview question asking if they felt that inequities existed in their schools, and if so, what kinds of inequities existed. I initially thought that I had found that participants also exist on a continuum with regards to their level of recognition of inequities in their schools. However, upon further examination it was determined that while I was able to gather descriptive information about the kinds of things teachers are able to
recognize as inequitable, I did not ask enough probing questions to determine their level of recognition of inequities. Therefore, this research question was not altogether appropriate for the data I was hoping to gather, and needs to be refined for future studies. In general, when describing the inequities they have witnessed in their schools, participants most commonly referred to situations where people were discriminated at an individual level or systemic level, based on a personal characteristic such as race, ethnicity, or religion. They commonly discussed how their students bullied one another, parents lacked cultural capital to advocate for their students, and teachers held deficit views of their students. The data gathered can be used to inform the design and development of future studies to hopefully gather a more clear description of the nature of teachers’ ability to recognize inequities in their schools, particularly in relation to their level of understanding of inequity, and the actions they choose to undertake in addressing these inequities.

Each of the participants in this study were able to discuss the actions they took to address inequities in their schools, which was not altogether surprising because it was a purposeful sample of people who identify or were identified by colleagues as doing equity work in their schools. As a group, participants’ actions varied greatly in terms of how many of the categories of equity and inequity they dealt with. Some of them addressed more of the aspects while others addressed less. For the most part, participants’ actions regarding equity and inequity were related to their level of understanding and recognition of equity and inequity in terms of how many of the categories they addressed. However, this was not always the case, sometimes participants were at different places on the continuum of recognition and action with regards to where they were on the continuum of action. The main way participants described addressing these aspects of equity and inequity was through
incorporating a diverse range of lived experiences and viewpoints in the classroom resources
and making a concerted effort to teach students about diversity. In general, findings from
this section of the study raise questions about historic assumptions that increased levels of
understanding and recognition will lead to equity actions that address inequities in a
comprehensive manner, laying the foundation for subsequent studies that investigate the
ways in which teachers’ beliefs relate to their equity practices or lack thereof and raising
questions for informing teacher education for equity.

The final major research question was: What challenges and helps teachers in doing
this (equity) work? Participants in this study identified ten main challenges to engaging in
equity work. They included: colleagues, parents, administration and leadership, curriculum,
students, hiring practices, lack of time, lack of money, lack of resources in general, union
regulations, training, and paperwork or other activities related to more recent accountability
measures. The three most commonly mentioned challenges were colleagues, parents, and
administration and leadership. Findings of this study confirm much of what was uncovered in
the literature review with the exception of a few key things. Lack of time was not
commonly discussed by participants as being a challenge, whereas it was commonly cited in the
literature (Kumashiro, Baber, Richardson, Ricker-Wilson, & Wong, 2004; Lindsay, 2007).
The nature of the teaching environment, as being isolating, was commonly described as a
challenge to equity work (Hatch, 1999; Townsend & Bates, 2007), whereas participants in
this study did not describe it as such. What was relatively unique to this study was the
manner in which participants described the things that challenged and supported them in their
attempts to do equity work. Although many of the things they discussed could be considered
in isolation, they were connected by overarching conceptions that informed this study,
mainly with regards to conceptions of in/equity, and how it plays out in education and society. Common threads were interwoven amongst the things that participants described as helping or hindering them which are related to how in/equity plays out. These key things are knowledge and power within the system. Participants’ knowledge of their colleagues, superiors, and the system within which they worked, including the policies, services, and organizations that they worked with played a key role in their equity work were key. Some participants worked with supportive colleagues, and within supportive systems, whereas others did not. However, it is unclear if all participants had the same level of awareness of the challenges and supports that existed within their system, and the possible options available for them for support. Secondly, participant descriptions of what was helpful and harmful to them in their attempts to do equity work uncovered the importance of the nature of the power of each of the actors with which they engaged. Students, parents, colleagues, administration and other leaders all held different kinds of power and could be challenging or supportive of their equity work in different ways depending on their role, the power they held, and whether or not they were supportive of equity work. In the end, these findings raise questions for future research about the role of knowledge and individuals within systems, and how, with further research, they can both be used to achieve greater equity and inclusion in schools.

**Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development**

This study stemmed from broader questions and concerns regarding the increasingly diverse student population in North America, the relatively homogenous teacher population, and what is required to ensure or encourage that teaching for equity continues to happen and increases. Given my own background, as a White, middle class woman, these broad questions and concerns lead me to wonder – why do some people decide to do equity work,
and others do not? In particular, how are people that decide to engage in equity work conceiving of themselves, the world around them, and deciding to act in their chosen way to address the inequities they perceive as existing in society. In this study, when describing their reasons for engaging in equity work, all participants mentioned a critical incident of some kind that led them to engage in equity work, and also appeared to influence the nature of this equity work. Studies involving prospective teachers that investigate the effect of service learning on prospective teachers’ beliefs regarding things such as equity and diversity demonstrate similar findings. For example, Baldwin, Buchanan, and Rudisil (2007) found that for many of their participants, their service learning experiences were the first time they had experienced student diversity (p. 321) and their experiences were successful at helping them to see things from alternate perspectives (p. 323). This suggests that programs designed with the purpose of enticing educators to become equity minded in their practice could be successful if they incorporated either in service components or educational components that encourage participants to develop the ability to see things from multiple perspectives.

But engaging with in service or educational components does not seem to be enough. There needs to be a process through which teachers can unpack what they have experienced and learned, and figure out what it means for them, and what they want to do about it. Essentially, what was asked of participants in this study was to critically reflect on their past experiences and learning and try to figure out what kinds of things influenced and informed their equity work. Critical reflection has also been found to be successful as a developmental tool for equity workers (Merryfield, 2000; Milner, 2005). It can help educators working in diverse communities unpack their experiences, and the experiences of their students and surrounding communities and assist them change their thinking and practice to become more equitable. Merryfield (2000) uses the term “retrospective meaning making” to describe a
process through which she asked teacher educators reflect on their past experiences and make 
meaning out of them for their current practice. Many of her participants experienced 
inequities or engaged in travel or other educative experiences that allowed them to develop 
an understanding of multiple perspectives and identities. Merryfield’s findings also illustrate 
the power of critical reflection in changing people’s beliefs regarding things like equity and 
diversity. Milner (2005) acknowledges that reflecting on past experiences can expand one’s 
knowledge, help educators understanding how and why they should teach for equity, and 
 improve future teaching practice. Milner also argues that this reflection can be particularly 
useful for people who might resist this kind of work, such as those who occupy positions of 
power and privilege and have a hard time seeing things from other people’s perspectives.

Importantly, teachers in this study differed based on where they existed on the 
continuum of understanding, and action regarding in/equity. The differences and 
relationships between understanding, recognition, and action are also not often considered in 
light of their value for informing professional development and training. For example, when 
examining White educators’ perceptions of their White privilege and their relationship to 
practice, Mitchell (2009) found that participants’ understanding was relatively similar, with 
the exception of the one novice educator (p. 90). Mitchell (2009) even went on to highlight 
how other researchers (see for example: Helms, 1997) have suggested a continuum of 
understanding regarding things like race and ethnicity, but after making a passing reference 
to this occurrence Mitchell (2009) goes back to considering the value of the findings in a 
summative fashion, without unpacking the differences in levels of understanding and what 
they might mean or imply. Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) considered the findings of their study 
investigating the understanding and actions around equity of masters’ level teacher 
candidates in relation to common critiques of social justice work such as that it lacks
coherence and ignores learning for the sake of focusing on feelings. In the study described in this article, participant understanding, recognition, and action were not always consistent with where participants existed in each continuum. Learning about equity and diversity is obviously a cornerstone of action (Brown, 2004); the key to becoming equitable in one’s actions is being able to understand and recognize in/equity. However, in this study even those who had comprehensive understanding of in/equity did not necessarily act on the inequities they witnessed in their schools in a meaningful way. This means that where people exist on one continuum may not be related to where people exist on another. In particular, just because someone has a comprehensive understanding of inequity, does not necessarily mean that they will take a comprehensive approach to addressing inequities in their schools. This seems like a key piece of the puzzle for designing and executing professional development and training for educators. This suggests that a more nuanced approach should be taken with regards to preparing educators for teaching for equity, perhaps one that is more long term, and involves mentorship such as the initiatives described by Lopez (2005) and Picower (2011).

The findings of this study indicate a continued demand for more sustained and lengthy education and support than what is usually prescribed and enacted for pre and in service teachers in the area of equity and diversity. The findings from this study lend support for the collaborative mentorship adopted and proposed by Lopez (2013). Lopez (2013) highlights how most teachers in Ontario and North America are poorly prepared to teach for equity and diversity for numerous reasons, including that the teaching population is largely White, middle classed women (p. 293). Lopez therefore advocates for a collaborative mentorship which she says is:
Theorized as a mentoring approach that focuses on supporting and sustaining teachers in diversity and equity education. It is grounded in the notion that mentoring for diversity and equity is a dialogical mentoring relationship between mentor and mentee that creates space to wrestle with tensions (Lopez, 2005) and digresses from conventional mentoring relationships that center protégé and expert. (p. 294).

Mentorship of this sort will allow teachers to share their experiences with their mentors, develop strategies with them, and most importantly, know they had support in their challenging ongoing equity work.

Teachers can also benefit from professional development and training for dealing with adversarial colleagues. Many of the participants in this study discussed negative experiences with colleagues, but none of them described any strategies for effectively dealing with these conflicts. Instead participants related how they had been forced into silence, discouraged from collaborating with their peers, and actively sought out other employment to avoid their adversaries. Many of them, like Melony, Lesley, and Kelsey in particular, described feeling tired, stressed out, and overwhelmed by the challenges they had faced from their colleagues in their attempts to do equity work. A similar number of participants described supportive colleagues, and often described them as being integral to their equity work and highly influential. Supportive colleagues were described as particularly helpful to those participants who had experienced negative treatment from other colleagues. However, Matt raised a caution against only engaging in equity work with those colleagues that were supportive. He said that supportive colleagues are very important, but it is just as important to work with those colleagues that are unsupportive, because otherwise you would be “preaching to the choir”. He went on to say that if you are only working with supportive colleagues, what happens to the students of those colleagues that do not do equity work? His
statements highlight the importance of finding strategies for working with adversarial colleagues and continuing efforts to do school wide equity work as opposed to that which is largely classroom specific.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

Participants’ descriptions of engaging in equity work were frequently described as quite challenging, often involving a personal or professional cost. Therefore, along with a suggestion of teacher education that involves in depth learning regarding inequities, this study also highlights the important of implementing and maintaining support systems for those who engage in equity work. Picower (2011) states that “teachers who enter the field specifically with the hopes of working toward social change are often the first quickly to leave the profession as they find themselves alienated and alone while trying to navigate highly political terrain” (p.1). Picower started a support group for new teachers who intended to engage in equity work, and even though her participants were committed to doing the work, they found it very challenging and in some ways resisted their own participation in the support group. Her participants made a commitment to engage in shared educational activities and group discussions to assist them in their work, but often showed up unprepared and seemingly unwilling to participate, leaving Picower to carry much of the weight of the workload. In the end, Picower confronted her participants about their resistance and they were able to move forward in a constructive manner. However, her experiences are a cautionary tale about the support and emotional fortitude required for equity work. If it had not been for their support group, perhaps Picower’s participants would have given up on their equity goals.
This study lends support to the notion of creating mentorship and support groups for those who choose to engage in equity work, and for those who might be convinced of its value. The participants in this study who mentioned feeling challenged in their attempts to do this work, also often mentioned the support they received from like minded colleagues, and how important this camaraderie was in their attempts to do equity work. The development of support networks for those engaging in equity work is particularly important for new teachers, as they “need protection from hostile environments, practice developing curriculum, and a community of like minded people who are going through what they are going through” (Picower, 2011, p. 1). Communities of support are required for sustaining equity work in education (Katsarou, Picower and Stovall, 2010). Findings from this study can be used to help inform support groups intended to assist teachers in dealing with the stress they encounter in their work and encouraging those who currently lack the knowledge and desire to engage in equity work through the support of their peers.

**Implications for Future Research**

Although this study helped address the gaps addressed in the literature regarding teachers’ reasons for engaging in equity work, how they understand, experience, and respond to inequities, and the kinds of things that help and hinder them in doing this work, there is still much to be learned. The revised conceptual framework of this study provides a solid starting point for a more in depth future investigation. The findings explored in each article can be used to inform both qualitative and quantitative research instruments to gather more in depth information about how a larger proportion of the teachers in Ontario and elsewhere understand, experience, and respond to inequities in their schools, what informs this work, and what helps and hinders them in doing this work. This study revealed that many of the
participants were encouraged to engage in equity work by personally experiencing inequity, having witnessed someone experiencing inequity, or learning about inequities. These findings can be used to help structure a survey or interview questions that probe more deeply into exactly what kinds of experiences provide insight and inform equity work.

This study disclosed that teachers often differed in terms of their level of understanding, recognition, and action, regarding equity. Yet, the relationship among the ways in which individual educators understand, recognize, and act for equity are not always given much more than a mention in education research. The findings of this study are valuable because they point to a discontinuity in the understanding, recognition, and action of some of the participants that is often assumed not to exist and is not considered for the importance it may have with regards to the kinds of equity work teachers end up doing in schools. Although most of the participants in this study were able to describe equity and inequity as being both individual and systemic in nature, the inequities that they described were largely individual. These findings raise questions about the relationship between understanding, recognition, and action, and suggest that a more in depth analysis may be required regarding the relationship among them, particularly regarding what kinds of education and experiences help foster this connection.

Findings regarding elements that challenged and supported participants when engaging in equity work uncovered useful descriptive information that can be used to inform future studies looking at what helps and hinders educators in doing equity work. However, possibly more valuable are the findings regarding the importance of knowledge and power. Participant descriptions of what helped and hindered them in their attempts to do equity work revealed that people and resources could be more or less helpful or harmful to their attempts
to do equity work depending on their role within the organization of schools as a system. And, knowledge of the power of different individuals or things (such as policies and organizations) was particularly helpful in informing how participants would navigate the systems in which they worked in order to do their equity work. These findings suggest a more in depth analysis of teachers’ knowledge of their systems with regards to how they go about engaging in equity work might be beneficial for informing future equity work and professional development and training for those engaged or hoping to engage in equity work.

Participant descriptions of the power that administration and leadership could have with regards to the level of their autonomy to engage in equity work suggest the value of further exploration into the role and or influence of leadership on teacher autonomy. Finally, participants lack of discussion of the equity strategy highlight the important role that school boards still have to play in implementing the Equity Strategy and educating teachers and leaders about how they can use it to achieve their equity goals. All of the findings of this study point to the importance of a more in depth and long term analysis of the concepts under investigation in this study, particularly in relation to the capability of influencing positive changes in teachers’ understandings, recognitions, and actions regarding inequities in their schools.
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