MAKING WAY FOR EQUITY:
ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS’ INTERPRETATIONS OF EQUITY

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Treating education as a socially transformative and morally conscious enterprise calls for educators to expose and improve social conditions related to oppression. These beliefs herald a different kind of practice for teachers and administrators in public schools, a practice that deals directly with dilemmas of equity and pluralism. Limited understanding of what happens in the interest of achieving equity in our schools warrants investigation into the experience of the school principals who lead and live this charge.

The purpose of this study was to find out how elementary school principals interpret and address issues of equity in their practices.

Complicated questions related to social mechanisms and human experience call for a framework that accounts for human agency and variability, rather than eliminating them (English, 2006). This investigation sought the idiographic, contingent, and situated knowledge with which elementary school principals make sense of the charge for equity. Grounded theory method was used for this research.

Three categories emerged from the data. Principals used an internal process to build recognition of equity; they made external efforts to educate others and engage them in equity work, and they addressed equity issues across procedural contexts of class placement, discipline, scheduling, and curriculum. Reconceptualizing gaps, witnessing
and *repositioning* played substantive roles in addressing equity at school sites. The educators were aware that crucial breakthroughs in consciousness had as much to do with improving equity as did mandates and policies. They saw that sustaining changes for equity required attention to the operational structures of the school, and to the structures of consciousness by which those operations were conceived.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ...................................................................................................................... iv

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................. 1
   Context of Current Educational Challenges ......................................................................................... 1
   Context for Educational Reform and Equity ......................................................................................... 3
   Purpose Statement ............................................................................................................................... 8
   Significance of the Study ...................................................................................................................... 9
   Description of Related Research .......................................................................................................... 10
   Limitations ........................................................................................................................................... 15

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ................................................................................................................ 17
   Definitions of Equity .............................................................................................................................. 19
   Equity’s Link to Social Justice ............................................................................................................... 24
   What Makes Leading for Equity So Difficult? ...................................................................................... 27
   Transformational Leadership and Leadership Transformation .............................................................. 32
   Social Justice and Equity Leadership in Schools .................................................................................... 36
   Teaching for Social Justice .................................................................................................................. 37
   School Administrators Leading for Social Justice and Equity .............................................................. 41
   Importance of District Role .................................................................................................................. 41
   Perspectives of School Principals Working for Social Justice ............................................................. 43

III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS ............................................................................................ 48
   General Attributes and Rationale of Qualitative Research ................................................................. 48
   Natural Settings and Proximity .............................................................................................................. 49
   Multiple, Humanistic Methods ............................................................................................................ 49
   Emergent Design ................................................................................................................................. 50
   Reflexive and Interpretive Analysis ...................................................................................................... 50
   Theoretical Framework ....................................................................................................................... 51
   Social Constructivism .......................................................................................................................... 52
   Postmodern Paradigm .......................................................................................................................... 52
   Pragmatism .......................................................................................................................................... 53
   Research Questions .............................................................................................................................. 54
   Rationale for Selection of Method ........................................................................................................ 55
   Methods of Data Collection ................................................................................................................ 57
   Sites, Sample, and Participants ........................................................................................................... 58
Using the Constant Comparative Technique to Code and Categorize Data ...... 62
Strategies for Ensuring Quality and Rigor ................................................................. 64

IV. FINDINGS .................................................................................................................. 66
Theme A: Internal Process of Recognizing Equity .................................................. 66
Theme B: External Efforts to Educate Others and Engage Them in Equity Work 77
   Witnessing .............................................................................................................. 77
   Repositioning ........................................................................................................ 82
Theme C: Addressing Equity Issues Across Procedural Contexts ...................... 85
   Class Placement .................................................................................................. 85
   Discipline .............................................................................................................. 89
   Scheduling ........................................................................................................... 95
   Curriculum .......................................................................................................... 97
Summary of Findings ............................................................................................... 100

V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .................................................................... 101
   Critical Awareness as a Scaffold for Reconceptualization ................................. 102
   Transformative Education Is a Radical Undertaking .......................................... 103
   Resisting Smoothing and Decontextualization ..................................................... 109
   Recommendations ............................................................................................... 112
   Further Questions and Conclusion ...................................................................... 115

VI. APPENDICES ........................................................................................................ 118

   APPENDIX A. Initial Probe ................................................................................. 119
   APPENDIX B. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol ............................................ 122

VI. REFERENCES ......................................................................................................... 126
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Context of Current Educational Challenges

Historically, people have debated about the purpose of education and the best way to direct American public schools. Although our nation’s Founding Fathers left many details to the states, they openly recognized the importance of an educated citizenry in developing a democratic society. To this day, determining a clear aim for public schools remains a formidable task. Social and economic classes have become wider and more polarized. Technological advancements expand the realms of knowledge. The increasing cultural diversity of our nation’s populace presents novel challenges in interpreting the promises crafted at our country’s birth. Such circumstances pose a shifting context for developing a robust democracy. They complicate our educational endeavors as we struggle to define what is known and what is worthy of knowing.

These conditions have spurred deepening inquiry regarding the relationship between theory, policy, beliefs, and practices in educational leadership. Within this complex set of dynamics, one could argue that issues of equity and social justice are central to the intent of federal educational policies and school reform initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act, Value-Added Reform, standardized curricula, and accountability schemes. In some form, each of these structures attempts to ensure that student achievement is fairly distributed among various groups. Scheurich and McKenzie
(2006) claimed, “We need to remember that the struggle for social justice is itself the very heart of the dream of an equitable democracy, of the ‘real’ American dream” (p. 12). In the United States, policies and laws underscore the ideals of justice and democracy as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. To a large extent, education continues to be viewed as the vehicle for developing intellect. It enables citizens to take part in their government, make a living, contribute to the common good, and pursue happiness. Many also see our schooling system as a mechanism to sift and sort children into layers of society (Apple, 2004).

Many educational theorists (Adler, 1982; Counts, 1932; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Dewey; 1916; Eisner, 2005; Freire, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1992) argue that our nation’s public schools bear the responsibility of preparing citizens to shape social change toward greater justice. They contend that students should become responsible citizens who contribute to society not only in individual, material ways, but also in collective, structural ways. Educational historians Tyack and Hansot stated, “Public educators had always regarded the schools as an agency for improving the society and for providing greater equality to individuals” (p. 226). In this version of the purpose of education, schooling becomes a reconstructive rather than a reproductive endeavor (also see Barrett & Pedretti, 2006).

The debate over whether schooling should serve mainly a transmissive or a transformative function is long-standing. Grant and Murray (2002) discuss educators’ deliberations over essential questions of conscience. They suggest that every educator confronts the dilemma of deciding whether to “challenge and reshape the child’s outlook
about the received wisdom of his or her society‖ (p. 68), or to only transmit the dominant culture in his or her role. Conceiving of a rationale for education in an “either/or” proposition nevertheless hinders understanding how schools and school leadership may both build shared knowledge necessary for unity and citizenship and provide means for social transformation. In an era of demographic and economic change, static structures and purposes for schooling are discordant with reality. Educational researchers increasingly ask, “How can education build shared understandings that will foster more equitable conditions on the planet?” Indeed, educators themselves frequently express their primary career motivation as the desire to make a difference in the lives of the students and communities they serve (Blackmore, 2004; Fullan, 2002).

Some scholars have asserted that an indifferent posture concerning the moral condition of the world amid demographic and economic shifts that magnify inequity amounts to an endorsement of that condition (Ares, 2006; Ball & Wilson, 1996; Boler, 1999; Egbo, 2005; English, 2006; Fischman & McLaren, 2005; Greene, 1988; Kincheloe, 2005). Kincheloe (2005) claimed, “To refuse to name the forces that produce human suffering and exploitation is to take a position that supports oppression and powers that perpetuate it” (p. 11). A radical, moral obligation is implied in this conception of educators’ duty, reflecting a commitment to enable social reform through schooling. Thus, an existing challenge in educational leadership is to reshape the educative process in ways that advance structural changes (in this case, for equity) rather than reproducing former structures.

Context for Educational Reform and Equity
Given the rhetoric of moral and transformative purposes for schooling, accomplishing a mission of equity in an increasingly diverse populace has been elusive. Massive school reform efforts have brought relatively meager positive change, particularly for minority students and their families. Some researchers assert that reforms actually may be contributing to the problems they propose to solve (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Apple, 2001; Evans, 2007a; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005; Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005).

Daunting realities of work in public schools include escalating high school dropout rates, high teacher attrition rates,\(^1\) intensifying scrutiny through accountability, and devolution of responsibility for administration (Lagemann, 2000; Smyth, 2001; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Despite the intent of policy and tighter governmental control, schools still show students “left behind” in large numbers. For example, *Edweek* reporter Linda Jacobson (2008) pointed out that more than 700 California schools entered restructuring during 2007, but only 33 were granted a positive change in status, even with the federal government’s direct intervention and management at the schools.

The stubborn presence of an achievement gap, and increasing numbers of disenfranchised citizens indicate what Schwab (1969) called a “crisis of principle.” He

\(^1\) In 2003, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future reported that approximately one third of America’s new teachers leave the profession sometime during their first three years of teaching, and half may leave in the first five years of their careers.
was pointing out the need for attention to the limits of existing theoretic structures in the curriculum field at that time. Schwab had noticed that principles and methods for inquiry in that domain were inadequate for the tasks scholars and researchers set to them. As applied to the subject of this investigation, theoretical structures implicit in educational leadership research have failed to yield solutions for the problem of inequity, presenting a crisis of principle. Scholars are inquiring about the extent to which ontological and epistemological assumptions limit understandings about schooling and education (Henderson & Kesson, 2004; A. Moore, 2006; Sergiovanni, 1992). At the same time, interest in cognitive, sociocultural, moral, spiritual, and political dimensions of school leadership is mounting. Consequently, many researchers believe that the ways choice and equity are currently constructed have significant bearing upon problematic social conditions (Corson, 2002; English, 2006; Giroux & Giroux, 2006; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Smyth, 2001). The myth that school choice will improve equity—through open enrollment policies, vouchers, charter schools, and corporate-sponsored competition—is rightfully questioned in the face of such a crisis. In terms of its true effect, consumer choice as a solution for inequity circumvents the issue of whether parents of schoolchildren have the resources to fund their choices.

In the wake of standardization and accountability reform, Giroux and Schmidt (2004) have argued that “schools are seen less as a public benefit than as a private good, teachers are largely deskilled, knowledge is stripped of its critical functions and matters of equity and funding are given a low priority” (p. 213). The authors described how the marketization of schooling and devolution of management have severed knowledge from
critique in the post-No Child Left Behind Act era. Apple (2004) has added that through a process of labor intensification, professionals most directly responsible for improving equity in schools have been separated from their agency. In this case, Apple takes agency as the capacity to actualize change. In reality, these professionals frequently act as传‐mitters of reforms, even though the language of school reform is one of transformation. Rigid accountability schemes seal this fate. Matters of equity have been pushed to the back burner of teaching and administrative practices, eclipsed by demands of performativity and standardization. (See also Kincheloe, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Taysum & Gunter, 2008). In many ways, these conditions represent a “default setting” of minimal democracy at odds with equity, at least from the perspective of many educators and researchers who take up issues of social justice.

This paradox has inspired deeper study by researchers who believe that administrative, teaching, and research practices aimed at equity may answer the charge that Bourdieu (1977) levied (as cited in Griffiths, 2003):

The action of the school, whose effect is unequal among children from different classes, and whose success varies considerably among those upon whom it has an effect, tends to reinforce and to consecrate by its sanctions the initial inequalities.

(p. 493)

At the same time, these researchers recognize that the rhetoric of fostering human and social development through education has not matched the reality of educational experience for many students. In this vein, C. Marshall (2006) wrote:
[T]he inequities embedded in the economy and larger society (e.g., the growing gap between the rich and the poor, homelessness, prejudice based on sex, race, language, ability, etc.) help to perpetuate dominance for dominant groups.

(p. 312)

In addition, some educational leaders recognize that public schools have unintentionally sanctioned inequity, and they understand the folly of trying to remedy it from within the same structures that produced that inequity. Rorrer (2006) has suggested this knowledge may represent what Festinger (1957) defined as “cognitive dissonance.” The leaders see incompatible belief systems in their organizations. They note inconsistency between their own beliefs and their practices. This intellectual dissonance may subject them to vulnerability in their communities of practice (Blackmore, 2004; Griffiths, 2006; Meyerson, 2003; Theoharis, 2007).

For some school leaders, achievement gap may be conceived not as figment, but as the fallout of a system that imposes unexamined limits and privileges even while it claims to secure equity. Nevertheless, it is from within this system that practicing school principals must negotiate the terrain of reform. They are immersed in school organizations where equity has occupied only peripheral concern, if any. These leaders and their practices can be distinguished from their mainstream peers and from principals in the preparation phase. Yet, Theoharis (2008) contended, scholarly research has provided few “constructive models or real-life examples of principals doing this work” (p. 4). How is it that school leaders make sense of the charge to embody equity in their actions? What does engagement in this work look like and sound like?
One lesson already learned is that consequences of mandated policies fall short of ensuring an equitable education. They cannot build commitment to civic engagement necessary for citizens to carry out social transformation (Goddard & Hart, 2007; Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2006). In this study, I have inquired into the specific practices of principals striving for equity and how particular beliefs and actions may be embodied in those practices as part of the “serious scrutiny” called for by Larson and Murtadha (2002):

The United States is moving toward adopting universal standards and high stakes testing in many states. As a result, the belief that poor children and children of color ought to know and be able to do the same things as their more privileged peers has not received serious scrutiny. The adoption of high stakes testing has silenced discussions of curriculum and closed school doors to the insights, concerns and needs of the children and families served by public schools. (p. 145)

Treating education as a socially transformative and morally conscious enterprise calls for educators to expose and improve social conditions related to oppression. These beliefs herald a different kind of practice for teachers and administrators in public schools, a practice that deals directly with dilemmas of equity and pluralism. Our limited understanding of what happens in the interest of achieving equity in our schools warrants investigation into the experience of the school principals who lead and live this charge.

Purpose Statement

This study investigated how elementary school principals interpret and address equity issues in their practices. Supporting sub-questions were:
• What interpretations of equity surface as these elementary school principals talk about their practices?

• How do school principals perceive they are addressing equity?

• How are elementary school principals’ understandings of inequity related to their actions to achieve equity?

Significance of the Study

Literature on the topic of organizational change and school leadership is plentiful. This body of research has generated knowledge about the extent to which beliefs shape and are shaped by reform initiatives (Evans, 2007b; Keys, 2007; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005), but we know less about the pursuit of equity and how it is manifested in practices in various school settings. How is it that educational leaders walk the talk of equity in ways that embody equity and at the same time invite other educators to do the same?

In revisiting the RAND Change Agent Study 10 years later, McLaughlin (1990) pointed out the pitfalls of overestimating the significance of policy to daily practice in schools. It contributed, she maintained, to misrepresentation of reality. She noted, “Policy cannot mandate what matters—change continues to be a problem of the smallest unit” (p. 12). McLaughlin advised that successful change requires a frame of reference beyond the formal policy structure. By focusing on the perceptions and experience of school principals who create a frame of reference for equity in their buildings, this study builds understanding about the complexity of site leadership within a landscape of increasing diversity and strident calls for change.
Traditional conceptions of educational leadership and of practice have obscured profound aspects of school leaders’ work. Examining the surface of leadership as a decontextualized skill set possessed by an individual leader has not sufficiently informed understandings of what goes on in practice (see Deal & Peterson, 2000; J. Marshall & Theoharis, 2007; Schlechty, 2000). A widely informed knowledge dynamic (English, 2006, p. 466) may better account for the know-how with which school principals enact equity and social justice. Berkhout (2007) asserted that educational leadership’s exceptional demands shape “not only the enactment of education leadership and management in school settings, but also its conceptualization as a discipline and the concomitant enactment in schools and other education settings” (p. 409).

There is no doubt that management skill has its place in school principals’ daily practice. Yet, recent research indicates other important conditions and dispositions distinguish the leadership of those who are able to generate change toward improved equity in their learning communities (Corson, 2000; Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2008; Rorrer, 2006; Theoharis, 2007, 2009; Zaretzky, 2007). Researchers claim that some school leaders are qualified by their sense of moral purpose, and their mindfulness about issues of equity. These leaders create new meaning of their roles as situated within complex practice. Understanding the realities of school principals’ challenging work, as well as the meaning they make of it holds promise in fortifying efforts toward equity and social justice.

Description of Related Research
The goal of building stronger understandings about the relationships between theory, perceptions, and practice represents a changed focus for inquiry. Studies in social justice leadership are undertaken in part because they permit researchers to grapple with social issues such as democracy, equity, and justice in ways that open prospects for human agency. Ryan and Rottman (2007) propose that the phenomenon of social justice discourse may have arisen from the need for collective identity and action. They claim social justice provides the space for various critical scholars, educators, and community members to position themselves to contest oppressive policies and practices.

Educational research in social justice has contributed to new constructions of educational leadership that counter the application of private-sector management concepts. Altered meanings of leadership help mend the artificial separation of practice from theory. They work against acceptance of decontextualized and simplistic notions of what constitutes leadership. In Honig and Louis’s (2007) discussion of emerging directions in educational leadership research, the authors noted, “Emphasis on participation in communities of learners moves away from some traditional views that leadership is an individual trait or that leadership is a body of knowledge to be acquired by individuals” (p. 141). Participation in a community of learners who build collective capacity for social justice is one way to conceptualize the practice of school leaders who are mindful of equity.

In an effort to account not only for the intent of research, but also for its results, postmodern research has opened new perspectives about judging the value of research findings. For example, trustworthiness of results can be determined by the extent to
which findings accurately reflect the lived experience of participants. Research is meant to unlock avenues for human agency in creating a just society. Mining the perceptions of principals as they are making sense of their work can help to establish a more comprehensive model for improved student learning and social transformation. The studies cited below instill hope that schools can become spaces for developing intellect and compassion while promoting meaningful and just social change.

In the social justice field, one branch of the literature focuses on preparation of future administrators and the scholarly training that could be undertaken in order to advance social justice (K. Brown, 2006; Hafner, 2006; Marshall & Theoharis, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2008). Other researchers have attempted to define specific principles of socially just leadership practices and policies (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006) or to provide theories and models of leadership based on social justice (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Freire, 1970). Still others have offered practical tools for educational leaders who seek to disrupt the patterns of institutionalized oppression and subjugation in schools (Koschoreck & Slattery, 2006; Skrila et al., 2006). This body of literature holds important insights about schools and leaders who practice differently, paving the way for inquiry to elaborate “how leaders’ participation in school and neighborhood-based communities of learners . . . . matters to learning and equity” (Honig & Louis, 2007, p. 141).

Few studies have examined the experiences of current administrators from the insider perspective to reflect the standpoint of leaders who are living out the call for educational equity. Scholars refer to this view of reality the “emic” perspective, perhaps best known through Geertz’s (1973) account of the Balinese Cockfight. He tells the story
of his accidental fortune nearly being caught in a raid, which spawned a relationship with a key informant. Geertz recognized the advantage of being able to approach the phenomenon he was studying alongside someone who knew the event through and through. The informant was willing to translate the experience for Geertz, an ‘outsider’ to the Balinese ways of life. The emic interpretation renders knowledge that is distinct from an objective report of facts, because it represents the subjective, idiographic knowledge with which individuals make meaning in their lives.

As it relates to this study, school leaders attempting to improve equity work simultaneously from the center out and from the periphery in to renegotiate norms in their institutions. They realize that equity may occupy only marginal space in the practices of their staffs and colleagues. Still, they find ways to make equity central in their own practices, and locate it as a core concern of their organizations. These leaders do not have the benefit of starting from a blank slate cleared of former inequities so that equity can blossom. Instead, they must foster equity even when they find themselves amid daunting conditions of inequity. Henderson and Gornik (2007) referred to the “tension that transformative educators experience” (p. 173) and its role in altered practice, saying, “dissonance helped move the learning community in a positive direction” (p. 208). Of interest in this study are the details of this tension, and the ways it shapes school principals’ practices to achieve equity.

Theoharis (2007, 2009), and Tooms (2007) provided rare instances of research that illuminates how conflicting demands are perceived. The researchers emphasized the
particular qualities of experience for someone who is an “outside-insider”(Meyerson, 2003). Theoharis (2007) described principals’ felt isolation:

Meeting resistance from these sources left the principals feeling isolated, without models of how to do their social justice work, in a system not designed to support them, and working with and for people who did not share or value their social justice commitment. (p. 240)

In her study of closeted school administrators who negotiate their sexual identity, Tooms (2007) described how some principals’ practices related to a social justice agenda were sidelined in order to maintain job security:

[P]articipants believed that if they made efforts centered on queer advocacy within their own district it would draw attention to their own stigmatized status, and thus compromise their fit (p. 27).

These studies captured some of the nuances of school principals’ experiences and meaning making, as they are centered on leadership for equity. Nevertheless, there is only a minimal cache of knowledge about the life-world of school principals from their own perspectives as they pursue equity in their occupations. It appears limited compared to the knowledge base regarding technical aspects of administrative management.

Understanding the logic school principals’ make of their actions and decisions is essential in pursuing educational equity.

Rorrer’s (2001) research used district leaders as the focal point of analysis, but her findings are pertinent to the study of how building leaders address equity. She has analyzed the relationship between leadership and equity at the district level. She found
that school leaders developed general strategies that equipped them to operate in the
margins of tolerance for inequity in their organizations. Like Meyerson, Rorrer revealed
how leaders’ actions are mediated not only by their beliefs but also by their knowledge of
their organizations and communities. In her study, district administrators deemed
contextual features and conflicting belief systems relevant to specific decisions and
actions. They moved their organizations through phases that Rorrer called reproduction,
recognition, and reconstruction.

The present call for equity reaches beyond standardization and accountability
measures. Such measures cannot supply the durability of institutional change. From what
sources does institutional change for equity emerge? A deeper analysis of school
 principals’ beliefs and actions to address both inequity and equity would provide a
conceptual bridge between transformative goals for equity and leadership practices. To
that end, relatively little is known about what actually takes place on the ground—at the
level of school principals’ actions on behalf of equity in their daily practice. What
repertoire of local practices and beliefs might be relevant to achieving equity? My
investigation is aimed toward constructing a theory to explain principals’ problem-posing
and problem-solving processes as they are centered on creating meaning for equity.

Limitations

This study was designed to provide a valid representation of several elementary
school principals’ practices to effect equity. A number of factors limit the generalizability
of the findings from this research, such as the small number of participants involved in
the study, the duration of contact with participants, and the single source of data
(interviews). In addition, participants did not check my developing interpretations of the data to see if they coincided with their intended meanings. Although participants’ narratives provided detailed, valuable information from the perspective of those intimately involved in school reform and equity issues, the ideographic knowledge sought in this research does not lend itself to making predictive statements about whole populations. In addition, participants’ accounts are subject to the accuracy of their recollections, their interest in the questions being asked, and their willingness to share details of their experiences.

My own values and experience influence my interpretations of principals’ stories. The potential for bias exists because I am an instrument for data collection and interpretation. It is possible that my experiences (or lack of experience) will have filtered the data in ways that remained hidden from my understanding.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature is meant to hew a pathway through a large body of research having to do with education, change, and leadership as it pertains to the topic of addressing equity in schools. My inquiry was designed to explore practices of principals pursuing equity in order to theorize how they understand it and incorporate this meaning into their daily duties. The purpose of this chapter is to guide readers in comprehending some complex aspects of leadership aimed at achieving educational equity in American public schools. In the sections that follow, I present some of what is known about the topic and explain how this knowledge links to my investigation. I share the broader aim of unlocking avenues for human agency in creating equitable schooling with many of my contemporaries, who explore how schools take up the challenge posed by George Counts in 1932 to “build a new social order.” I believe nothing less will suffice, if the present order is found to be inequitable.

Griffiths (2003) wrote:

How can education best benefit all individuals and also, and at the same time, the society that they live in? This is a question of what to do in educational contexts so that the good of all does not depend on the ill of some. (p. 12)

At its core, my inquiry is sparked by an abiding concern for providing both individuals and their society the “best benefit” through education and educational leadership. Keeping Griffiths’s question of educational equity in mind, this chapter will
first explain common understandings and misconceptions related to the terms *equity* and *social justice*, and then describe my own understanding of the concepts. In this section, I explain how Freire’s (2003) constructs of transformative education and critical consciousness are relevant to a postmodern investigation of school principals’ interpretations of and practices for equity. Next, I report some of the insights gained from empirical studies and theoretical work on the topics of leadership and change. Then, I present information on studies of teachers and teaching practice, as they are involved in the process of change toward equity and social justice. I explain Gutierrez’s (2007) four dimensions of equity and justify the usefulness of a critical dimension for equity in undertaking this study.

Following that, I situate my present investigation of school principals’ meaning making and practices within contemporary research related to social justice and reconstructed notions of educational leadership. Coming closer to the topic of this research, I review studies having superintendents and principals engaged in the pursuit of social justice and equity as the focal point of analysis.

I issue an initial word of caution related to exploring principals’ practices to address equity because I suspect that both special projects and routine procedures comprise a large part of principals’ practices to effect equity. By special projects, I mean initiatives that may be conceived as long-term efforts, but with temporal definitions. In contrast, routine procedures are structures put in place to relegate some operations of the school to custom or habit, and they often are viewed as infinite. Routine procedures reverberate to produce (or diminish) equity because of their repetitive and habitual
nature. They manifest outcomes widely throughout a school building, at many levels. Since assumptions underlying regular, repeated procedures in schools are seldom questioned, it is easy to miss their importance in effecting equity. These are typically small actions that produce big results. Consequently, I investigated some elements of principals’ practices that at first appear mundane or inconsequential but perhaps are significant when addressing equity.

Definitions of Equity

A researcher interested in how school leaders make sense of equity needs a working definition of equity. In lay terms, the words *fair*, *right*, and *equal* are used as synonyms for *equity* and *equitable*. Webster’s Dictionary defines equity as “Fairness; impartiality; justice.” One can note irony in the common expression “more fair for me.”

General agreement on terminology and meaning notwithstanding, experience shows that equity is not so simple. It is rare to come by and difficult to enforce in social and educational contexts. This complexity is affirmed in part by generally meager advancements attained through school reform mandates for equity, although many such mandates state the intent of ensuring educational equity. Equity is often contested because what appears “fair and impartial” from one perspective does not always appear the same way from another perspective. Those who failed to recognize the advantage afforded them in prior arrangements are quick to protest, “That’s not fair!” when outcomes become less favorable to them.

Confounding the meaning of equity, Henze (2005) has noted, “*Equity* is slippery because people often have different understandings of this concept, but assume shared
understanding. Many people confuse equity with the more familiar notion of equality” (p. 245). *Equal* is an insufficient synonym for *equity* when applying the terms in educational contexts. Because students do not all come to school with the same backgrounds, and because they do not all enjoy the same privileges, equity is not served by treating everyone the same. Instead, actions to improve equity require an understanding of different resources, methodologies, and other forms of support for learners who vary in their experiences, culture, ethnicity, and myriad other elements of their background. Educational leaders must resist the conflation of equity and sameness in order to judge rightly in matters pertaining to equity (Goddard & Hart, 2007; Gutierrez, 2007, 2008).

Using the example of a district planning to modernize facilities, Barbara and Krovetz (2005) pointed out that most people understand the need to expend more resources on older buildings, because more will need to be done to them to reach a specified standard. That is equity, even though the amount of money spent on each building is not equal. The authors emphasized that some questions of equity seem simple to understand intellectually but are challenging to address in practice. An example would be considering whether a principal would willingly give up an outstanding staff member to allow that person to move to a school with greater need. Relinquishing advantage is a bitter pill to swallow, even in equity’s name.

Contemporary research on the pursuit of equity and social justice in schools clearly establishes that the ability to meet this challenge depends, in part, upon critical awareness (Barbara & Krovetz, 2005; Beswick, Sloat, & Willms, 2008; Black &
Murtadha, 2006; K. Brown, 2006; Evans, 2007a; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Goddard & Hart, 2007; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009; McKenzie et al., 2008). According to researchers, critical awareness can be viewed as the product of deliberate and dialogic critique of social institutions (including schooling and leadership), a consciousness of privilege and marginalization within organizations and society, and an understanding that these conditions are subject to change rather than immutable. Black and Murtadha (2006) claimed that “educational leaders need to develop capacity to conduct critical inquiry that frames and analyzes moral, cultural, and political challenges confronting educators and to subsequently act on those challenges” (p. 8).

The call for critically aware school leaders will resonate with those who know of Paulo Freire’s work. His ideas and methodology have exerted lasting influence around the world, and they represent seminal work in applying critical pedagogy to teaching and leadership practice. Although a thorough explanation of Freire’s contributions to the field of educational leadership is beyond my scope here, three elements of his work are particularly salient to this study: (a) the development of conscientização, or critical awareness; (b) banking and transformational models of education; and (c) the problem-posing stance achieved through praxis.

Freire (2003) saw the emancipatory potential of education as best opened through the development of conscientização, which means, “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). Conscientização requires attentiveness to power structures and the way they appear to define experiences. It prioritizes moral and practical aims of becoming
more fully human. This awareness disrupts comprehending reality as a fixed, impermeable structure, and paves the way toward transformation of consciousness.

Freire theorized that traditional instructional methodology and leadership advanced a “banking” or transmissive model for education. Via the transmissive model for education, schools act as instruments of oppression. Here’s how it works: in the banking model, students are viewed as empty of knowledge. They are the receptacles into which teachers pour their understandings, values, and perceptions. The content of instruction imports and preserves the settled beliefs and norms of a culture without regard of the privilege and oppression held within them. In the banking model, the educative process works (perhaps unintentionally) to promote ignorance at the peril of those who stand to benefit most from examination of their society’s norms and power relations. Freire wrote, “[T]he more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of the world” (p. 73). The same can be said of dominant conceptions of educational leadership that cast principals or teachers as empty vessels into which mandates for equity are poured.

In contrast, Freire argued for a problem-posing education. A problem-posing education has an explicitly transformative purpose and includes the knowledge and voices of students and community members. Distinguishing earlier traditional educational models from this transformative model, he wrote, “Problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical
intervention in reality” (p. 81). Freire emphasized the revolutionary nature and importance of education’s constant remaking through praxis, a human and humanizing integration of thinking and acting that allows transformation of consciousness and of the world.

Applying these constructs in a study of school principals’ practices permits examination of the ways in which principals may pose the problems of inequity to help others notice social, political, and economic contradictions, but without simply supplanting their own consciousness for others’. Furthermore, principals’ praxis must be undertaken from within the core of the organization to place what was formerly marginal into the center of practices and policies in their buildings. The task is distinctly the work of principals who are striving for equity, causing them to practice differently from their peers who do not have the same priority. This research focus represents a postmodern take on educational leadership, reflexive in its examination of the way privilege may shape perspectives of researchers and school leaders. A dynamic notion of knowledge (English, 2006) and reality further situate this investigation in a postmodern paradigm. Kezar, Carducci, and Contreras-McGavin (2006) have stated:

Social constructivists also examine perceptions, but postmodernists examine these perspectives critically. The critical stance in postmodernism differs from critical theorists in that postmodernists focus more on human agency and the ability of people to shape their existence rather than studying followers as victims of leaders and those in power. (p. 24)
By investigating the ways that school principals perceive the tacit knowledge about *how to do equity*, we might begin to understand the complexity of their leadership practice. Consistent with a desire to expose norms and values for the purpose of examination, in the next section I explain how I see that equity and social justice are related.

**Equity’s Link to Social Justice**

Throughout the literature related to equity in education is a strong association between conceptions of *equity* and *social justice*. This link has been the subject of investigation, particularly in contemporary studies of teaching practice and curriculum (Ares, 2006; Barrett & Pedretti, 2006; Beswick et al., 2008; Delpit, 2006; Kraft, 2007; Lotan, 2006), school reform initiatives and achievement gaps (Blackmore, 2004; Evans, 2007a; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Goddard & Hart, 2007; Gutierrez, 2007, 2008), and research theorizing new constructions of leadership and school leadership preparation paths (Black & Murtadha, 2006; K. Brown, 2006; Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2008; Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003; Scheurich & McKenzie, 2006; Theoharis, 2009).

Researchers have documented that social justice has become a key concern for educational practitioners and scholars alike at the advent of the 21st century. As Scheurich and McKenzie (2006) have pointed out, though:

Social justice is not a new issue. It has always been at the vital center of democracy. Indeed, the struggle to broaden the application of equitable democracy from a few wealthy White men to everyone regardless of her or his
gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability, culture, or home language is the heartbeat of democracy. (p. 9)

Citing many examples throughout American history, the authors traced a long-standing battle against inequity that characterizes the efforts of persons both inside and outside the educational field. They have claimed that work on behalf of an equitable democracy has contributed to the social justice movement, saying:

The critical hallmark [of lives well-lived] is the ongoing struggle to develop a community, a nation, in which all people are equitably cared about, respected, appreciated, and supported, no matter who a person is. This is what social justice is. (p. 9)

Other researchers echo the themes of equity and inclusion in their definitions of social justice. Marshall and Oliva (2006) wrote:

We sometimes speak of equity or cultural diversity. Sometimes our conversations expand to the need for tolerance and respect for human rights and identity. Sometimes our answer is that it is the achievement gap, or democracy and a sense of community and belongingness (or our nostalgia for that) . . . (p. 5)

Likewise, Theoharis (2009) described the work of principals who are social justice leaders, ones who “kept at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors in the United States” (p. 11).

Social justice leadership and pedagogy are by no means monolithic concepts, as Breault and Lack (2009) declared in their review of 1999-2006 literature related to equity
and empowerment in professional development schools. Adding to the complexity, Bogotch (2002) stated, “There are no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice prior to actually engaging in educational leadership practices” (p. 153). Similarly, McKenzie et al. (2008) argued for “a definition of social justice that is nonessentialized (that there is not one meaning that can be universally applied in every situation, with every marginalized individual, in the same way)” (p. 114).

My understanding of these statements is that the meaning of social justice is complex and comes into being only while it is being consciously pursued by human beings in the social world. Merely looking at the ends of educational practices is not sufficient, because means also are important. It would be illogical to declare a gain in social justice if in the process of achieving it, rights were violated or ethical principles discarded. In order to understand social justice, educational leaders must fully participate in (that is, knowingly experience) a quest for social justice. Such conceptualizations are ultimately grounded in a postmodern paradigm that Kezar and colleagues (2006) pointed out, “favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation, complexity, ambiguity, and simultaneity” (p. 23). Despite the difficulty in expressing a universal meaning of social justice, I explain below how I understand equity and social justice to be related. I offer this explanation to lend clarity to the subject of my research and to support the methods used in this study.

Some persons believe that inequity is the natural outcome of a classed society. Others assume those who are gifted intellectually, who are artistically or athletically talented, or whose descendants came from a particular race merit greater regard and
greater reward in society. In contrast, I believe that in a democratic society, this kind of inequity constitutes injustice. For that reason, equity and social justice are intimately connected. I understand social justice to be a philosophical and practical basis for my actions as an educator and as a researcher. To be indifferent to the oppression of any student is an unconscionable act. An educator is bound to seek remedy for conditions of inequity through equitable means (education being one). Social justice provides a vital reference for me to live out my calling. It is for me a very real possibility that engenders a way of being in the world and in my profession—a possibility that has profoundly changed my practice.

Therefore, one element of social justice is equity, or the ideal of fairness. I also understand social justice to include other elements, namely generativity (a focus on enlisting full participation of everyone, for the purpose of maximizing contribution to our collective future civilization and our present democracy) and commitment to pluralism (a belief that the presence of diverse ethnicities, religions, cultures, abilities, and sexual orientations fosters incomparable benefits for human beings and their intellectual and social development). I understand social justice leadership to be an enactment of primary concern for the dignity and value of each person as a member of the human race. Changes toward just and participatory relationships are key elements of this work. It is from this spirit that my study has been conceived and carried out.

What Makes Leading for Equity So Difficult?

The challenge surrounding the process of leading change for equity in schools becomes obvious from a review of the literature. Although some successes in improving
equity have been documented (Marshall & Young, 2006; Rorrer, 2006; Theoharis, 2009), much of the research tells a story of children being “left behind” in large numbers. The discipline gap (Monroe, 2009), the achievement gap (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009), and high school dropout rates (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Nichols & Berliner, 2007) affirm the presence of inequity within our educational institutions. Marshall and Oliva (2006) asserted that “The challenges of demographics and of inequities are chronic and remain unresolved by the piled-on years of traditional practice, scholarship, theory, and professional training in educational administration” (p. 12).

What gets in the way of leading change toward educational equity? I focus on four of the reasons I believe to be most pertinent to this research below. First, a body of research has emerged suggesting that dominant ideologies and associated norms work against equity reform, overtly and subtly reinforcing the status quo. Normative understandings are expressed as common sense, and those related to class and race (Apple, 2001; Evans, 2007b; Goddard & Hart, 2007; J. Smyth, 2001), ability and intelligence (Delpit, 2006; Oakes & Wells, 1997; Zaretsky, 2005), conservative modernization (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Giroux & Searles-Giroux 2006), and even leadership itself (Breault & Lack, 2009; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Taysum & Gunter, 2008) thwart equity reform. Premises upon which these perspectives are based are seldom questioned, yet they exert powerful influences from their rarely examined position.

For example, some researchers (Apple, 2001; Kozol, 2005; Nichols & Berliner, 2007) claim that no matter what their intent, school reforms may reproduce traditional
hierarchies of class, race, and gender. The scholars believe that many school reforms may worsen inequity even while narrowing the possibilities for collective action to improve schooling. Silence about inequitable conditions reinforces the notion that inequity is the deserved outcome of an inherent deficit, a move that pathologizes difference (El-Haj, 2006; Shields, 2004).

Deeper understanding of the real effects of school reforms can be achieved through the act of *repositioning*, which supposes that the true effects of any institution, policy, or practice can best be discerned by taking the standpoint of those who have the least power in a society (Apple, 2001). Giroux and Schmidt (2004), however, pointed out reductivist thinking and de-politicization in mainstream educational discourse cause issues of plurality to recede in consciousness. We (collectively) become subject to what Eisner (2002) has referred to as “secondary ignorance”—not knowing that we don’t know.

Other researchers have claimed that traditional leadership preparation programs leave school leaders ill equipped to lead change for equity because they haven’t learned to recognize oppression or haven’t been trained to regard inequity as a matter of professional significance (Evans, 2007a; Goddard & Hart, 2007; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Taysum & Gunter, 2008). In their discussion of preparing school leaders to fulfill the role of ushering a new social order in the 21st century, Jean-Marie, Normore, and Brooks (2009) emphasized:

School leaders must increase their awareness of various explicit and implicit forms of oppression, develop an intent to subvert the dominant paradigm, and
finally act as a committed advocate [*sic*] for educational change that makes a meaningful and positive change in the education and lives of traditionally marginalized and oppressed students. (p. 4)

A second difficulty in reform toward equity is that even for school leaders who possess critical awareness and an inclination for social justice work, the climate for change is arid. Reform must be accomplished from within systems that are likely to have many inequitable features. Conditions such as inadequate funding, racial, class, or gender discrimination make leading change for equity a grueling, risky business. In such a climate, school principals may find themselves (metaphorically speaking) expected to spin straw into gold—that is, while they are immersed in a district culture stratified along lines of gender, class, race, and ability, and at odds with precepts of equity, they are nonetheless expected to produce movement toward equity.

Third, isolation has long plagued the work of educators. In an atmosphere of intense scrutiny fueled by accountability schemes and standardization (Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005) and an emphasis on performativity and competition, (Blackmore, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Stefkovich & Begley, 2007), school principals may prioritize other aspects of their professional practice. Adding to the isolation, traditional patterns of professional socialization reinforce the expectation that individual enterprise and hard work are the ways to gain skill. Schedules often restrict the opportunity to meet with others. The exchange and legitimacy of knowledge is inhibited through such structures. Still, Marshall and Oliva (2006) maintain:
Delving deeply into social justice issues requires challenging the status quo, traditional patterns of privilege, and deep assumptions about what is real and good. It requires a surfacing of biases and a releasing of emotions that many find to be very uncomfortable. Furthermore, no staff development director, professor, student, or administrator can take on these challenges alone. Social justice leaders need space and sustenance for their efforts within the universities, districts, communities, and professional associations that encompass their careers and work. (p. 8)

A fourth reason that leading change for equity is difficult comes from its entanglement with moral judgment and values. Kraft (2007) acknowledged, “Perhaps the biggest challenge[s] facing advocates of teaching for social justice are opponents who claim that education should be value-free and objective” (p. 85). Equity work inherently involves value commitments, because judgments about what is fair rely on a sense of what is right, good, and ethical. The dilemma of leaving one’s value judgments at the schoolhouse door, while carrying in value commitments, is a hard one to reconcile. Thus, the fallacy of value-free educational enterprise gets in the way of dealing with issues of equity, leadership, and change.

Furthermore, doing what is good and right is an improbable outcome when persons do not recognize their own ignorance. Even well intentioned school leaders often avoid or minimize cultural, racial, gender, ability, or sexual orientation differences in their efforts to foster equity. For example, Evans (2007b) examined school leaders’ sense-making pertaining to issues of race and demographic change. She noted that deficit
thinking, incongruence between rhetoric and reality, and a “need to deny the relevance of race . . . while addressing issues of race and racial change” (p. 176) were present in the principals’ sense making. Sense making that denies race, class, or ability shelters ignorance, distancing educators from engagement in problematizing moral judgments.

From the research already conducted, it is clear that principals’ actions take place against a highly complex field of complementary and competing ideals, beliefs, and contingencies. If school leaders are to generate and sustain movement toward equity, the problem of inequity must become more than a prepackaged, universally defined challenge. As the call for equity within a diverse population becomes more strident, new definitions for leadership, difference, and equity have been created (El-Haj, 2007; English, 2008; Rottman, 2007). For these reasons, learning some of what is known about educational leadership for equity involves reviewing transformational leadership literature as well as examining literature on the transformation of leadership.

Transformational Leadership and Leadership Transformation

Transformational leadership refers to a style of leadership wherein leaders and followers create meaningful change in people’s lives as well as in the nature of organizations (Deal & Peterson, 2000; Leithwood, 1992; Schlechty, 2000). Leaders stimulate change in the organization by appealing to sources of motivation such as inspirational aims, the desire for integrity, and the opportunity to think creatively. According to this construction of leadership, visions and goals are largely expressed through the leaders’ skills and personal traits. Although much of the research on transformational leadership comes from the business sector, studies of the transformative
educational leader are becoming more numerous. In addition to building knowledge about how school administrators accomplish more effective student learning, this body of research has operated to stretch notions of leadership to include moral dimensions and consequences as they are related to power, identity, and equity.

Taking an example from the business world, Meyerson (2003) described *tempered radicals* as corporate leaders who are “cautious and committed catalysts who keep going and who slowly make a difference” (p. 5) rather than engaging in heroic, revolutionary change. Her explanation of the “outsider within” illuminated the way that some leaders experience philosophical, cultural, or social identity differences in their organizations. She noted that many tempered radicals recognize their own marginalized status but “tend not to interpret their differences as personally problematic—as something deviant about themselves. Though they may feel psychologically torn about their roles, they recognize that the tension is rooted in something bigger than themselves” (p. 32).

Paradoxically, while school leaders recognize that the tension they face may be harbored in “something bigger than themselves,” it is essential for them to see the task of improving equity as “not something bigger than themselves.” Yet, Barth (2000) has acknowledged the difficulty of overcoming educators’ beliefs that “the knowledge base for improving schools lies more in universities than within themselves” (p. 150). Earlier, Hargreaves (1996) claimed university and government-based research on educational reform and effective schools held fundamental assumptions that “the knowledge that could make teachers more effective was other peoples’ knowledge, not their own” (p.
107). These enduring attitudes have taken their toll on educators’ perceptions of the collective capacity to address equity issues.

Because school principals have dominant roles in relation to teachers, parents, and students in their buildings, the possibility exists for using their power to advance norms that foster equity. Conversely, school principals have subordinate roles in relation to district administrators, board members and county or state policymakers. As they interpret the received policies and mandates from their superiors, they can “very easily slip into roles as obedient servants of higher level administrators” (Henze, 2005, p. 248).

Moreover, some school principals deal daily with resistance, a tension rooted in their publicly supported organizations. Because of their professional commitments to the ideals of equity, building administrators may notice that their own perspectives differ from dominant values in their organizations. In such a context, principals would potentially share the experience of “outsiders within” their own school buildings or districts while they attempt to navigate meaningful, equity-minded change. This isolation and marginalization is likely to play a role in shaping both school leaders’ responses to inequity in their communities and their conceptions of the domain of leadership.

Black and Murtadha (2006) described shifts in notions of educational leadership as researchers and school leaders confront repeated patterns of disparate achievement for minority students in their argument *Towards a Signature Pedagogy in Educational Leadership*. They discussed how altered meanings were catalyzed by an awareness of limitations inherent in leadership conceptions. These conceptions lacked reference to local context and produced an exaggerated view of the leader as a lone hero of
transformation in organizations. The authors maintained, “Critical and value-explicit notions of leadership appeared in educational leadership when scholars began to critique the dominant, non-normative, and hierarchical conceptions of school leadership that drove practice” (p. 2).

Emerging constructions of educational leadership propose that fundamental knowledge is gained through the act of examining moral obligation in an interdependent world. Heightening attention to moral responsibilities brings issues of generativity, social justice, and sustainability to the foreground of educational practices (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Fullan, 2002; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1992). This interpretation of leadership recalibrates aims for education in profound ways, composing a language for leadership that connects rational judgment with neglected concepts such as care, compassion, human dignity, and love (as distinct from sentimentality or romance).

Reflective of this turn in conceptualizations of educational leadership, Dantley and Tillman (2006) asserted that school leaders are “public intellectuals who can draw on the principles of social justice and moral transformative leadership in their daily practice” (p. 16). According to the authors, the characteristics of moral transformative leadership include (a) a view of education and educational leadership from a progressive or critical theoretical perspective, (b) deconstruction of leadership practices to discover how those practices generate and perpetuate inequities and the marginalization of individuals outside the dominant culture, and (c) seeing schools as sites of activist creation, meant for bringing about the reconstruction of society. Contemporary conceptions of leadership that deliberately pin moral purpose to school improvement and equity move “the field from a
naïve era of modernity to a reflexive era that positions school leadership, and the life world of schools, as cultivating work that creates meaning and purpose rather than simple technical efficiency” (Black & Murtadha, 2006, p. 9).

Furthermore, educational scholars contend that the increasing number of studies grounded in leadership for social justice indicate rising collective consciousness about issues of inequity from within the field of educational leadership. Ultimately, the transformation in leadership conceptualization reflects a desire “to liberate students to make social changes, create space and spaces for trust, and nurture participatory, equitable, and just relationships rather than simply managing programs, services and facilities” (Jean-Marie et al., 2009, p. 13). Within the theoretical premises of such a conceptualization, the principles of democracy and equity are linked in ways that advance the social justice agenda in the everyday work of school leaders. This view of leadership stands in contrast to notions of leadership that valorize efficiency and technical-rational knowledge. Thus, in an alternative construction of educational leadership, theory serves many pragmatic purposes. It provides an avenue for social critique and opens imagination for dealing with conditions of inequity, while focusing attention on the facets of leadership practice that can initiate and sustain change (i.e., those that enhance agency and embrace participation).

Social Justice and Equity Leadership in Schools

The people closest to the point of instruction offer lessons about addressing equity. Gleaning insights of teachers and students involved in the daily pursuit of equity in the classroom, though, has been a relatively rare focus of educational research,
particularly at the elementary school level. (See, however, Ares, 2006; Delpit, 2003; Loewenberg-Ball & Wilson, 1996; Oakes & Wells, 1997; Yowell & Smylie, 1999). Factors such as the difficulty of arranging informed consent for child participants, students’ level of cognitive development, and developmental capacity to articulate understandings related to equity make it challenging to study students and teachers in classrooms pursuing equity. The time required to participate in such study is a practical concern for teachers in those classrooms. Additionally, traditional research has favored the perspective of leaders beyond (i.e. “above”) the classroom level, under representing knowledge and experience generated in classrooms that could inform leadership for equity. Not wishing to repeat the omission, here I provide some analysis of findings of from teacher and classroom studies and discuss how these findings link leadership, equity reform, and social justice in my research.

Teaching for Social Justice

Kraft (2007) has recognized that both limited articulation of actual practices and inaccessible language hinder application of critical pedagogy in educational contexts. He stated that pedagogies of social critique and hope have informed a call for “fundamental re-conception of schools, arguing for justice, equity, and empowerment as the center of educational experience” (p. 77). But, Kraft also noted that few studies have been undertaken to determine whether, or in what ways, such pedagogies are seated in the practices of teachers, or how practices associated with the pedagogies may also be useful to principals. In describing an observed model of teaching for social justice, the author found that the commitment for social justice teaching dictates not only what is taught but
also how it is taught, as well as the type of social/physical environment in which it is taught. It is reasonable to believe that a commitment to social justice leadership similarly shapes the content of administrative practices and the school building’s climate.

Kraft pointed out three elements of school design and practice that made teaching for social justice conducive. These were small schools; having a highly committed, self-reflective teaching staff; and the presence of a democratically run administration. School design that allowed “for all voices in the school community to be heard and valued in school-wide policy and decision-making processes” (p. 84) typified the schools Kraft studied. He emphasized, “Fundamentally, progressive educators believe that choosing to avoid serious discussion about social issues is a value judgment that perpetuates injustice, racism, sexism, classism, and inequality” (p. 85). Thus, a commitment to leading for social justice carries parallel commitments. These are that the logic of existing hierarchies of knowledge be deconstructed to expose debilitating effects in terms of equity, and that alternative schemes for knowledge production and legitimacy be constructed.

Loton’s (2006) research described a systemic approach to restructuring the classroom to “address the previous academic achievement, linguistic variability, and intellectual diversity found in heterogeneous classrooms” (p. 32). Teachers’ practices embodied a reconceptualization of intellectual competence which functioned to flatten traditional hierarchical understandings of intelligence. Loton found that assigning new meaning to intellectual competence worked to promote equal-status, productive interactions among students as well as between students and teachers. Critical awareness
in this case was evidenced by teachers’ recognition and treatment of the gaps in their own and their students’ understandings of intellectual capacity. Teachers worked to address these gaps as they sought to eliminate achievement gaps.

In her analysis, Loton found that teachers employed strategies to weaken the relation between perceived status and participation among students in their classrooms. They deliberately assigned competence to low-status individuals in an effort to equalize participation. Loton noted that such efforts were based on “the teacher’s public recognition of the wealth of intellectual competencies and problem-solving strategies that are relevant and valued in the classroom, just as they might be in daily life” (p. 36).

Breaking the order of privilege had its consequences, Loton reported—counter normative views of intelligence upset the arrangement of pupils above or below one another. This move was resented by some students accustomed to being “on top.” Perceptions spurred by false dichotomies (i.e., one student’s gain is necessarily another student’s loss) become evident in such thinking. In a similar fashion, school principals addressing equity may regard the full range of intellectual competencies and problem-solving strategies within the staff or student body as equally valuable, but other members of the organization may not. Related to this inquiry is the question of whether school principals who address equity matters concern themselves with ensuring their productive interactions with teachers and students, and if they do, whether they accomplish equal participation of their staffs and students through similar means.

For the sake of homing in on the subject of my investigation, I turn now toward Gutierrez’s (2007) work surrounding equity in mathematics teaching practices. Gutierrez
illuminated a complex dynamic at play in conceptualizations of equity. Arguing that “attending to context is key for equity purposes” (p. 2), she suggested that equity’s four dimensions (access, achievement, identity, and power) form essential axes for examining true equity in curriculum and teaching practices. These axes are useful in examining principals’ practices to address equity in their schools because they may be tacitly present in principals’ interpretations of equity, prompting changes in schools’ structures and operations to remedy inequity.

Gutierrez claimed that access and achievement are necessary for equity but are not sufficient, despite forming the dominant axis by which equity is judged. Gutierrez emphasized the importance of students’ “opportunities to draw upon their cultural and linguistic resources” (p. 3), seeing themselves in the curriculum, seeing subject matter relevant to their lives, and at the same time developing a vista on the broader world. This equally important dimension, which she called identity, is concerned with the balance between self and others. Gutierrez also proposed that the dimension of power requires deliberate attention because “it is not enough to call it equity if mathematics as a field and/or our relationships on this planet do not change” (p. 3). For this reason, social transformation is the main concern of the dimension of power. Gutierrez believes that identity and power constitute a critical axis for equity which allows students to build understandings about social and political issues in society through their mathematical inquiry. She claimed:

This axis builds upon the idea that mathematics is a human practice that reflects the agendas, priorities, and framings that participants bring to it. As such, a
diverse body of people are needed to practice mathematics, not just to build a 21st century workforce, but so that they might participate democratically. (p. 4)

Constructing equity to include not only access and achievement but also dimensions of power and identity would have significant implications for the work of principals navigating issues of inequity in their schools. Indeed, researchers have concurred that the primary work of promoting educational equity involves “recognizing, challenging, and changing traditional power relations” (Henze, 2005, p. 263). It is worthwhile to ask whether principals incorporate this kind of expanded meaning for equity, as they approach curriculum, instruction, and relations between school community members. Further, how might an expanded meaning of equity shape leadership practices in dealing with issues of inequity?

School Administrators Leading for Social Justice and Equity

As I turn toward studies of building principals and other administrators enacting social justice, I aim to link knowledge generated from these inquiries to my own investigation in ways that will emphasize self-consciousness, contextualization, and reflexivity. Even though I recognize the knowledge generated from research on the common traits of educational leaders for social justice, I cannot help but note what appears to be a sharp division in the literature between “leadership for social justice” and “teaching for social justice.” I have reviewed findings in both arenas in my research, but acknowledge the somewhat artificial division. I moved deliberately between the bodies of literature to inform my inquiry.

Importance of District Role
The challenges of leading an equity agenda are made more difficult by anemic district support for the schools and principals doing this work. Schools exist within a system, and Barbara and Krovetz (2005) have emphasized, “A principal cannot be expected to succeed in achieving equity unless it is also an expressed priority of the district” (p. 12). If the vision and priority established by education boards and superintendents are critical to schools’ success in achieving educational equity, then it is important to ask how principals’ practices are inflected by a lack of district focus on equity, and conversely, what practices emerge when equity becomes the province of an entire district.

Rorrer (2006) has studied how two districts framed the needs of low-income students. District leaders de-legitimized inequity while in pursuit of equity. According to the author, leaders eroded inequity by instigating dissatisfaction, altering interpretive schemas, and developing normative understandings. The process of altering interpretive schemas required changing widely shared orientations that were rooted in assumptions about operations in the district, Rorrer explained. A socially held consensus about which students were more capable was disrupted and replaced with beliefs that all children can achieve. Altering interpretive schemas involved making ideational changes spawned by an awareness of inconsistency between beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Rorrer contended that “some districts have determined that the threshold of tolerance [for inequity] is too high and that different practices, structures, and rules are necessary” (p. 232). We need to know more about how this awareness arises in districts, schools, and communities if we are to create just schools.
In addition, Rorrer described how superintendents’ actions had to be conspicuous enough to surface problematization of inequity, but remedies for inequity also had to be palatable enough to the community to avoid backlash. A fundamental challenge for school leaders lies in balancing the needs of diverse constituents, keeping a responsive posture in the community, and orchestrating changes to improve equity. Addressing equity relies upon rethinking assumptions, and prompting others to do so. This is work that calls for praxis, the application of theory in practice. In such a venture, the pragmatic orientations of school principals may support their efforts to achieve equity. These principals may use theory to pose practical problems and find ways to solve them. Of particular interest in this study is whether principals are engaged in developing altered interpretive schemas in their schools and, if so, by what means they accomplish this development.

_Perspectives of School Principals Working for Social Justice_

Taking a different focal point for his study, Theoharis (2009) has investigated the leadership traits of seven urban school principals. He noted the relative dearth of real-life examples of principals doing the work of social justice, asserting that constructive models and descriptions are needed in order to make “equity and justice a meaningful part of current and future administrators’ agendas” (p. 4). His study revealed that principals possessed traits of arrogant humility, passionate leadership, and tenacious commitment to social justice.

Without denying the many ways in which the participants were different from one another, Theoharis was able to show how contradictory impulses of humility and
confidence were woven throughout narratives of each school leader. The principals vacillated between expressing feelings of doubt and insignificance, versus a sense of pride and accomplishment as they reflected on their practices. Principals in the study understood their work to be intimately connected to their inner personalities. They saw their occupational roles as extensions of themselves. These leaders viewed their practices arising from commitments to their life’s work. Theoharis reported, “This passion comes across as sincerity, and although these principals encounter tremendous resistance, their sincerity and personal connection to the school and their children are recognized and respected by allies and resistors [sic] alike” (p. 17).

The detailed descriptions of who these social justice principals were underscored a common thread in their motivations to work for equity and social justice. Each of the seven principals attributed passion for social justice work to experiences outside or in advance of beginning their profession. The principals reported witnessing discrimination or experiencing it as they grew up, and mentioned the prevailing influence of family, religion, or friends. In the same way research participants in England described how understandings of equity were born of their own experiences of inclusion or exclusion (Taysum & Gunter, 2008). Taysum and Gunter investigated how headteachers conceptualized social justice. The authors discovered a “socially critical form of transformation in play” (p. 184) in the practices of these leaders (see also Koschorak & Slattery, 2006; Skrla et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2006, 2009). They found that school leaders enacted “a professional habitus where practitioners are disposed to recognize how the social world is constructed, challenge disadvantage, and work for socially just processes
and outcomes‖ (p. 184). My investigation sought an understanding of the content of this professional habitus.

Taysum and Gunter argue that narrow conceptualizations of social justice itself hinder its advancement in the world. They propose that rethinking frameworks for comprehending social justice will increase the language available to explore and apply social justice. Specifically, they suggested using Cribb and Gewirtz’s (2003) conceptualization of three forms of social justice to disturb the cycle of uncritical acceptance of taken-for-granted assumptions. In such a manner, “bare opportunities” (those of which the actor is ignorant) are replaced with those of persons who are fully informed of the range of opportunities and can subsequently act upon them.

Cribb and Gewirtz (as cited in Taysum & Gunter, 2008) identified three forms of social justice: distributive, cultural, and associational. Distributive social justice has to do with just allocations of economic and material resources, where deprivation of a material standard of living is addressed. Cultural justice involves recognizing cultures and respecting others, but as Taysum and Gunter (2008) pointed out, “[R]ecognizing multifarious cultures without enabling individuals from those cultures to make democratic contributions towards resolutions that influence them is potentially unjust” (p. 186). Associational justice is concerned with creating spaces for agents to participate in the decision-making process, despite the fact that these agents are outside the dominant group. Here, the authors noted that taking associational social justice into account might draw communities and educational leaders together into the process of “converting policy as text, into policy as discourse” (p. 186). They contend that a view of school leadership
which includes all (local and national politicians, educational professionals in schools, researchers, parents, and children) enables more sustainable and just change. There is a need for more study investigating how associational forms of social justice may be employed to move organizations toward equity.

Breault and Lack (2009) call for a wider view of leadership and its application to teacher education in their review of literature on equity and empowerment. They asserted, “Rather than more didactic teacher training models that emphasize technical rationality and explicit teacher strategies and procedures through apprenticeship approaches, teacher education for social justice relies heavily on dialectical, inquiry-based, and interpretive instructional strategies” (p. 157). Marshall and Oliva (2006) recognized similarly that to move toward social justice, we need a language that can “translate intellectual concepts into practice and experiential understandings” (p. 4). Pertaining to this study is the question of whether principals’ efforts to address equity include a process of dialectical inquiry with communities and staffs. Difficult subjects such as oppression, privilege, racism, and value commitment may arise within the context of dialectical inquiry. Learning how principals and staffs approach these topics would be beneficial in advancing educational leadership practices for equity.

Gutierrez (2008) has suggested that making achievement gap the sole focus of research may unintentionally occlude understanding of the way to remedy gap. She explained that such a focus ignores the dynamic nature of student identity and agency, in effect essentializing whole segments of school populations. In addition, Gutierrez emphasized that few people are aware that between-group variation is typically narrower
than within-group variation on achievement test measures. According to the author, among the dangers of an achievement gap lens for research are:

- Offering little more than a static picture of inequities, supporting deficit thinking and negative narratives about students of color and working-class students, perpetuating the myth that the problem (and therefore the solution) is a technical one, and promoting a narrow definition of learning and equity. (p. 357)

Taken as a whole, this body of research reflects growing interest in the cognitive aspects of school leadership. It presents a direction for inquiry that includes “focus on how school leaders frame, derive meaning, and make sense of the multiple messages they receive from their school environments and the ways they manage meaning for others through their words, actions and decision making” (Evans, 2007b, p. 160). It also cautions against a cursory interpretation of principals’ practices to ensure equity. My investigation takes up the interest in the cognitive elements of principals’ understanding of equity and leadership as it is embedded in their practices.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary school principals interpret and address equity issues in their practices. Because the subject of my research is manifested both explicitly and tacitly in the practices of particular school administrators, a qualitative lens for inquiry offers distinct advantages. What follows is a description of the general attributes of qualitative research along with some benefits of using a qualitative design for my investigation. I explain specific methodologies that inform and guide my study. This is followed by a presentation of my research questions, and a description of the methods of data collection and analysis. Lastly, I give details about the participants in the study.

General Attributes and Rationale of Qualitative Research

Hatch (2002) noted “there are as many kinds of qualitative research as there are qualitative researchers” (p. 20) however, some prevailing commonalities do exist. Creswell (2003) outlined several common attributes, including natural settings; multiple, humanistic methods; an emergent design; reflexive and interpretive analysis; complex, iterative, and simultaneous reasoning processes; and a wholistic view of social phenomena. These guiding tenets stand in contrast to quantitative inquiry, which assumes the nature of reality to be objective, determinable, and singular. Methods employed in qualitative research focus on behavior, but also on the underlying structures of beliefs surrounding the phenomena under study. Although quantitative inquiry in the social
science fields has produced important knowledge, it has left other questions unanswered. Complicated questions related to social mechanisms and human experience, particularly those related to beliefs, attitudes, and ideals, call for a framework that accounts for human agency and variability, rather than eliminating them (English, 2006). Discovery of ideographic knowledge (i.e., the nuanced understandings that persons make of their own experience) is the goal of qualitative research. This goal matches my aim to conduct research that illuminates the manner in which school principals make sense of equity and apply their understandings to their leadership practices.

**Natural Settings and Proximity**

In order to more accurately represent the whole of experience and reality, qualitative research is conducted in naturalistic settings rather than under laboratory-controlled conditions. Qualitative researchers intend to capture “experience near,” deliberately minimizing distance between the researcher and the researched. Rather than aiming for predictability and generalizability across entire populations, qualitative research focuses on rendering a view that closely matches the partial and situated knowledge possessed by the individuals experiencing the phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

**Multiple, Humanistic Methods**

Multiple, humanistic methods of gathering and analyzing data reflect the qualitative researcher’s commitment to developing deeply informed interpretations of the phenomena under study (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002). Janesick (2003) wrote, “the process of reduction of data into a compelling, authentic, and
meaningful statement constitutes an end goal of qualitative research design” (p. 61). Observations, interviews, and artifact review are frequently employed in qualitative research.

Qualitative researchers acknowledge the impossibility of neutrality in research design and study. Unlike the positivist assumptions associated with quantitative research, the understanding behind qualitative research methods is that knowledge production is an ideologically charged act (Janesick, 2003).

Emergent Design

Qualitative research hinges on an emergent design, rather than a tightly preconfigured one. Informed by the pursuit of originating questions and those that arise during data collection, the researcher follows a course of action that is largely shaped by responses, observations, and analysis in the midst of data collection. Repeated toggling between data collection and analysis is meant to enhance the researcher’s ability to direct his or her inquiry toward emerging themes and illuminate possible relationships between those themes.

Reflexive and Interpretive Analysis

A major distinction between quantitative and qualitative research paradigms is the type of analysis. Interpretive analysis is founded on the premise that multiple realities exist. Discovering variations between perspectives, how they relate to individual positions, and how they make sense to participants was an explicit goal of my investigation. A reflexive analysis demands that researchers turn the examination of positionality and sense making back on the research process.
Mays and Pope (2000) define reflexivity in their discussion of rigor in qualitative research:

Reflexivity means sensitivity to the ways in which the researcher and the research process have shaped the collected data, including the role of prior assumptions and experience, which can influence even the most avowedly inductive inquiries. Personal and intellectual biases need to be made plain at the outset of any research reports to enhance the credibility of the findings. (p. 51)

Throughout the inquiry process, I sought an understanding of my own positionality and prior assumptions. I meant to use these judiciously, to help understand data and construct theory. The task of discovering how my own perspectives may have colored my interpretations was made easier through the use of grounded theory methods, which are explained in a later section, Rationale for Selection of Method.

Theoretical Framework

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) pointed out that specific demands are made of researchers who adopt interpretive frameworks when they noted “The net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises may be termed a paradigm, or an interpretive framework” (p. 33). In other words, choosing an interpretive paradigm involves awareness of the distinctions between various conceptions of reality and its nature. It requires a commitment to the idea of plurality in how one can come to know. These demands shape the kinds of questions pursued by the researcher, as well as his or her interpretations. Bogdan and Bicklen (2003) contended that “All research is guided by some theoretical orientation. Good researchers are aware of their
theoretical base and use it to help collect and analyze data” (p. 22). To that end, the theoretical orientation for this study is derived from several philosophical roots. Together, they have formed the grounds for my inquiry. Charmaz (2009) has claimed “Grounded theorists can invoke diverse theoretical starting points to open inquiry such as feminist theory, poststructuralism, Marxist theory, or symbolic interactionism” (p. 134). In this study, I have drawn from social constructivism, postmodernism, and pragmatism to create a theoretical base from which to launch my inquiry.

**Social Constructivism**

Social constructivism posits reality as a product of human beings in the social world. Ryan and Rottman (2007) explained that “a key element in this perspective is that humans are the architects of the institutions in which they live and work” (p. 12). Social constructivism regards the nature of reality as relative and co-constructed. From the social constructivist perspective, the ways of knowing reality are subjective (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Research pursued from a social constructivist view emphasizes the fundamental place of human subjectivity and meaning-making as they relate to experience. In this perspective, what is contingent, taken-for-granted, and complex becomes central rather than marginal to study. For this study, I was interested in discovering how elementary principals carried out their daily duties based on the meanings they made and employed about equity. I sought the particular, nuanced understandings with which participants made sense of their experience, rather than abstract and universal laws governing school principals’ practices related to equity.

**Postmodern Paradigm**
Postmodernism is an element of my theoretical base in approaching this study of school principals interpreting and addressing equity. Postmodern researchers reject belief in an objective and linear reality, and question viewing individuals as completely autonomous beings. Instead, postmodernists recognize and emphasize how contextual features such as power relations, cultural norms, and assumptions both shape and are shaped by experience. Postmodern approaches to study “make apparent the complexities and ambiguities inherent in leadership” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 23) in order to disturb hegemonic forms of reality. Like other postmodern researchers, I see my study as a form of activism by granting space and voice to that which I believe has been neglected. In the case of exploring how school principals interpret and address equity, using a postmodern approach permits me to analyze the assumptions and meanings of participants in ways that prioritize the social, political, and moral aspects of educational leadership.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is relevant in the theoretical framework for this study, particularly as it is associated with grounded theory methodology. The pragmatist views human capability to form theory as essential to intelligent practice, not an ancillary accident. Hookway (2008) noted pragmatism’s holism of theory and practice when he stated “The content of a theory or concept is determined by what we should do with it. All the pragmatists, but most of all Dewey, challenge the sharp dichotomy that other philosophers draw between theoretical beliefs and practical deliberations” (para. 4.2). Star (2007) wrote, “One of the simplest and most difficult tenets of pragmatism is that understanding is based on consequences, not antecedents. . . . Rather, the process is
backwards to most modes of analysis” (p. 86). From this perspective, sense-making occurs as persons interpret an event or consequence, not ahead of that event. This logic applies similarly to the researcher making meaning of data and the study informant reflecting on his or her experience.

Accordingly, practice and theory are part of the same sphere, one that guides human beings and their actions in the world. Grounded theory methods and methodology (explained further below) are based on the pragmatist logic of abductive reasoning. An inquiry of school leaders’ practices to address issues of equity calls for attention to the maps or tools (i.e., theories and distinctions) with which persons conceive and navigate their processes. It obliges the same attention to the researcher’s process (Charmaz, 2009).

Research Questions

This study employed grounded theory methods for data collection and analysis. I aimed at discovering how elementary school principals negotiate their work to accommodate their understandings and beliefs about equity. I asked how leaders who have expressed concern for equity interpret and address equity issues in their practices. I purposefully situated the quest for equity within the context of recent school reforms, including policy mandates, accountability, school choice, and restructuring schemes. Supporting sub-questions are the following:

- What interpretations of equity surface as these elementary school principals talk about their practices?
- How do school principals perceive they are addressing equity?
• How are elementary school principals’ understandings of inequity related to their actions to achieve equity?

Rationale for Selection of Method

This investigation employed grounded theory methods. As Corbin (2009) has noted:

Since the original publication of The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), many different approaches to doing grounded theory have emerged. . . . Perhaps it would be better to think of grounded theory as a compendium of different methods that have as their purpose the construction of theory from data. (p. 41)

Furthermore, Bryant and Charmaz (2007) have stated, “Anyone contemplating the GTM [Grounded Theory Method] landscape must grasp the inherent complexity of what might be termed the ‘family of methods claiming the GTM mantle’” (p. 11). I chose grounded theory methods for my study, understanding these procedures and analytic techniques as guidelines that would be used “in very dynamic and flexible ways to stimulate the analysis” (Corbin, 2009, p. 50). Following is a brief explanation justifying the methods for my research design.

Grounded theory methods, and grounded theory methodology integrated my study in multiple ways. First, by relying on inductive reasoning rather than deductive logic, I made participants’ interpretations the primary instigators of developing theory. Because the genesis of theory in grounded theory methodology is tied to participants’ perceptions, the methods prioritize authentic representation, in my view. Second, the process of
increasing abstraction to construct theory involved close attention to participants’
meaning-making and also actively engaged my own meaning-making. I was interested in
finding out how elementary school principals interpret and address equity issues, and the
methodology’s focus on abstracting whole processes to construct theory fit that interest.
In addition, grounded theory methodology allowed me to acknowledge fallibility with
integrity: I cannot deny my own perspectives and privileges as a researcher, nor is it my
desire to hide them. Instead, I wanted to avail myself of advantages of my knowledge and
participants’ knowledge while I conducted this study. Finally, as Stern (2007) has said,
“It thrills the investigator” (p. 124). Grounded theory methods appealed to my sense of
discovery, which ignited and sustained my effort during arduous research work.

Acknowledging different approaches to doing grounded theory, Charmaz (2009)
explained that contemporary versions of grounded theory methodology grant both the
grounded theorist and the research participant multiple positions. She wrote:

Constructivist grounded theory assumes that we produce knowledge by grappling
with empirical problems. Knowledge rests on social constructions. We construct
research processes and products, but these constructions occur under preexisting
structural conditions, arise in emergent situations, and are influenced by the
researcher’s perspectives, privileges, positions, interactions, and geographical
locations. All these conditions inhere in the research situation but in most studies
remain unmentioned or are completely ignored (p. 130).

Grounded theory methods were particularly well suited to focus my research in
ways that accounted for preexisting inequity even while school leaders addressed equity.
It aimed my investigation at historical, social, and political circumstances that constrain or advance the process of addressing equity issues, in order to build knowledge of the conditions under which that process may emerge.

Methods of Data Collection

Grounded theory is an inductive process, and it supposes that through constant comparison, researchers can approach the understandings with which participants make meaning in their lives, explaining these understandings in a theory derived from the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). I delved into accounts and observations, identifying categories in the data, then went back to find more examples and new leads which were used as a starting point for conceptual abstraction about what was going on. Holton (2007) emphasized that the move from description to explanation involves skill in “lifting concepts above the data and integrating them into a theory that explains the latent social pattern underlying the behavior” (p. 273).

Throughout the grounded theory process, layers of discovery are fueled by the exploration of initial and subsequent questions. This process is iterative and reflexive. Data collection and analysis go beyond surface meanings, looking for “views and values as well as acts and facts” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 275) to strengthen the coherence and depth of resulting theory.

Grounded theory generates statements that explain how subjects understand their realities. The findings from grounded theory analysis are considered conditional; they are always subject to further refinement. Although they do not approach the level of generalizable truth, they do “constitute a set of hypotheses and concepts that other
researchers can transport to similar research problems and to other substantive fields” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 273).

The constructivist grounded theory method allowed data collection and beginning analysis to occur in close temporal proximity. Furthermore, raw data (exact words of participants) formed the basis for emerging categories and concepts. Using the constant comparative technique, I was able to generate new categories with successive interviews as well as establish and confirm concepts. This kind of analysis preserved a fit with real life and time, without sacrificing the opportunity to check leads, settle confusions, or explore alternative categories during fieldwork.

Sites, Sample, and Participants

In this research, 48 elementary principals were invited to complete a brief probe regarding the perceived importance of equity in daily practice via electronic communication. The probe appears in Appendix A. The 20 resulting responses allowed me to gauge the level of involvement that individual principals ascribed to matters of equity while they conducted their work.

Potential participants were then selected based on their responses to the initial probe. These individuals were ones who indicated they were consciously striving for equity in their practice, saw connections to matters of equity while they tended to their duties, and rated equity issues as central or intermediate concerns in their work. Of the 20 persons who responded to the probe, 13 had responses as described; 9 of these 13 respondents subsequently scheduled and participated in interviews.
Procedures were designed to collect a purposeful sample of school principals engaged in equity work. Purposeful sampling made sense for this investigation because in order to obtain relevant data, I needed to gather the perspectives of elementary school principals who were able to reflect about issues of equity in their work. As Morse (2007) pointed out, “It is necessary to locate ‘excellent’ participants to obtain excellent data” (p. 231). Thus, interpretations generated from this sample were likely not representative of a wider population of practicing school principals. I selected elementary school principals because I have experience at this level which potentially provided a background for understanding themes and relationships in participants’ accounts. In addition, I was interested in finding out how school leaders approach equity in ways that are particularly suited for the young children and families they serve.

Following Internal Review Board stipulations, I contacted participants by e-mail and telephone after reviewing probe responses. I included a brief description of the subject and purpose of my research, the time required to participate, the potential benefits and risks involved in the study. To those who indicated willingness to participate, I provided a more detailed description of the focus and sequence of interview content along with possible risks, then later obtained formal consent for participation and set up interviewing schedules.

To deepen the dimension of my analysis, I attempted to include participants whose positions and perspectives varied on demographic characteristics such as the sizes of the buildings at which they worked, their districts’ demographic attributes, geographic location, and preparation paths to the principalship. Because it was uncertain how
perceptions and practices pertaining to equity might be associated with race, gender, or other axes of difference, the participant group represented diversity found within the field of elementary school principals.

I conducted an in-depth, semi-structured interview with each participant. The interview took between 60 and 80 minutes. Interviews were recorded digitally at participants’ workplaces, then transcribed later. Table 1 contains information about the types of districts and building sizes, years of experience in the role of principal, and ethnicity of study participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of research participants.
Table 1

General Description of Participants and Their Professional Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>District type</th>
<th>Building grade levels and total student population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Inner ring</td>
<td>Kindergarten-fifth grade; 360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Inner ring</td>
<td>Preschool-third grade; 470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Kindergarten-fifth grade; 330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Inner ring</td>
<td>Preschool-fifth grade; 450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Inner ring</td>
<td>Kindergarten-fourth grade; 350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeannette</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Kindergarten-fifth grade; 710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Preschool-fifth grade; 800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marvin</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Preschool-fifth grade; 1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Inner ring</td>
<td>Kindergarten-third grade; 400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Inner-ring districts are those adjacent to an urban, inner city school district.

Following Charmaz’s (1990) example, interviews moved from leads and questions posed at informational levels through reflective and feeling levels. For instance, at first participants were asked in general about their work settings and the chronology of
their careers. Later questions probed school principals’ interpretations of equity and inequity, and were aimed toward gathering specific accounts of addressing equity issues on the job. Further interviewing focused on participants’ feelings associated with their daily work—the challenges and rewards they see within their roles currently.

Using the Constant Comparative Technique to Code and Categorize Data

One round of interviews with participants was conducted to obtain the data sample. Digital recordings of interviews as well as handwritten notes, permitted me to revisit and gather details beyond those apparent during interviewing. Separate copies of segments of sound recordings and a reference log with dates, times, and sites for interviews provided a safeguard for data and made subsequent access to specific quotations and other information easier. These arrangements were part of my preparation for capturing what was going on, reducing the chance that important details would be overlooked or inaccessible.

Following each interview, I listened to recordings, making brief notes as I encountered phrases, ideas, or intonation that could prompt more thinking. These notes suggested phrases, or specific questions that could be pursued in subsequent interviews. I transcribed interviews and then used open, line-by-line coding to get a bead on what participants were revealing as they spoke. I listed emerging categories and located specific phrases or ideas that supported them in the set of transcribed data. During this process, I tried out and later abandoned or redefined many codes to reduce redundancy or account for variation.
As categories were explored and as further data were collected, more focused codes were developed that explored connections between concepts, relationships within a concept, and confusions. This process involved listening to interviews shortly after they were conducted, considering further questions to clarify distinctions made in earlier interviews, and reading transcriptions over and over to refine the codes. Charmaz (1990) recommended line-by-line, open coding initially, with a “theoretical eye”—a posture that moves the researcher’s inquiry beyond description by “invoke[ing] his or her theoretical perspective to raise questions about the data” (p. 1168). Therefore, rather than only coding for topics, I also used codes that focused on processes, assumptions, and consequences. By simultaneously attending to specificity and analysis throughout the coding processes, I tied data and developing categories together. Here, the range of a core conceptual category of internal process of recognizing equity began to emerge.

Throughout data collection and analysis, I employed memo writing. Memo writing helped me define leads, elaborate processes, and pose further questions of the data. It linked the empirical realities of principals to my analysis by explicitly identifying the raw data that supported a comparison, pattern, or property. Specifically, I identified connections between categories suggested by earlier coding (for example, “inadequate resources”) and larger processes (“reconceptualizing gap”) through memo writing. In addition, as memo writing proceeded over time, I was able to increase the level of abstraction in my emerging theory.

By sorting through multiple memos, I specified some links between concepts. The process of raising categories to a conceptual level was accomplished through constant
comparison and continued questioning. Holton (2007) described the constant comparison technique:

The constant comparative method enables the generation of theory through systematic and explicit coding and analytic procedures. The process involves three types of comparison. Incidents are compared to incidents to establish underlying uniformity and its varying conditions. The uniformity and the conditions become generated concepts and hypotheses. Then, concepts are compared to more incidents to generate new theoretical properties of the concept and more hypotheses. The purpose is theoretical elaboration, saturation and verification of concepts, densification of concepts by developing their properties and generation of further concepts. Finally, concepts are compared to concepts. The purpose is to establish the best fit of many choices of concepts to a set of indicators, the conceptual levels between the concepts that refer to the same set of indicators and the integration into hypotheses between the concepts, which becomes the theory. (p. 278)

*Theoretical sampling* refers to refinement of ideas in order to generate theory that is more dense, saturated, and useful. In this study, I used theoretical sampling to check the boundaries and relevance of concepts by repeatedly returning to the data following the entire set of interviews. Specifically, theoretical sampling helped me to discover a trio of processes (reconceptualization, witnessing, and mending) involved in making a problem of inequity.

Strategies for Ensuring Quality and Rigor
Several elements of grounded theory method build credibility and trustworthiness. The constant comparison process, simultaneous collection and analysis of data, and the deliberate search for data which run counter to developing categories work toward increasing the precision and completeness of emerging theory (Charmaz, 1990; Holton, 2007). Explanations that define categories using participants’ own words, theoretical sampling, and triangulation within interviews and between interviews all contribute to a strong basis for data interpretation and theory construction. In addition, the various demographic attributes of research participants and the variety of building/district sizes and types represented in my sample contributed to the depth of the resulting theory.

This study did not seek or ensure conditions that would render findings representative across entire populations. Instead, the inquiry focused on perspectives of school principals as they are embedded in the context of specific buildings, districts, and communities. The theory generated is meant to describe how these school principals understand equity and act on that understanding during their daily work.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This study centered on examining how elementary school principals interpret and address equity issues in their practices. As stated earlier, I relied on Grounded Theory as a framework for my inquiry. I used the Constant Comparative method to analyze the data that I gathered through interviews. This analysis generated two general themes focused primarily on (a) how participants recognized issues of equity in their schools (an internal, self reflective process) and (b) the external efforts participants used to educate others and engage them in equity work (a process requiring interaction and dialog between the participant and his or her colleagues). In addition, a third theme, (c) revealed how principals addressed equity issues across common procedural contexts. This chapter begins with a description of Theme A and will explore how participants identified equity issues at the building sites. This theme is illustrated with quotes from the interview data. Next, I discuss Theme B, tracing how participants perceived that they worked with others to help them recognize equity issues in schools. In the final section of this chapter, I present Theme C which shows how principals viewed they addressed equity matters in their actions and decisions related to tasks of class placement, discipline, scheduling and curriculum at their specific school sites.

Theme A: Internal Process of Recognizing Equity

Participants noted that before they approached staffs with issues of equity, they mulled over these issues through a process that I am describing as reconceptualizing gap.
Reconceptualizing gap means that school principals noted the presence of inequity, and then processed gaps in a manner that widened their perspectives about the sources of inequity contributing to the gaps. This method of constructing gap implicated the school, and the principals themselves, in solving inequity. Participants consistently expressed how they reframed conditions or situations to accomplish understandings that went beyond face appearance.

For example, Sophia described learning of distinctions between sameness and equity: “I thought that I would just treat everyone the same. Everyone was going to be treated the same. And I quickly learned that that was not going to be the case. That equitable did not mean the same things for everyone.” Michelle similarly commented “Equal isn’t fair. I mean that sometimes, I know that. I’ve come to that realization.” Keith stated that while applying discipline in his building, he needed to look at “all the features of that child’s life and experience…but when somebody is looking from the outside that doesn’t know all of those things about the child, they may perceive your actions to be not equitable.”

Participants also saw themselves working from a distinctive orientation to determine the presence and sources of inequity while reconceptualizing gap. This orientation had to do with prioritizing the matter of equity within leadership and operational practices in their school buildings. Michelle emphasized that in her professional practice, equity took precedence over other matters. She linked this priority to her own experiences with bias and discrimination and expressed hope in shaping school experience differently for her students. Michelle said:
I guess, just even in my own experiences growing up, being a basketball coach, fighting for equity for females, just in that arena, has always been, um, ah, what’s the word I want to use? . . . Passion isn’t the right word because I have a passion for it. But, it’s always been a priority, I guess, for me. Because of those experiences, and I want to I guess change students’ experiences so that they don’t look necessarily like what my experience was.

As principals described it, the orientation established through reconceptualizing gap involved their commitment to account for perspectives that had previously been ignored or neglected within the school community. Chiefly, the principals saw that their young students’ perspectives were easily overlooked or dismissed. However, in a number of cases, principals also mentioned how perspectives of parents of children in their schools were marginalized.

In an example demonstrating how principals reconceptualized gap to include neglected student perspectives, Theresa noted that children with behavioral disabilities were commonly removed from class in the district where she works. She insisted that those children “need access to the same curriculum as everyone else… I’m not sure if there’s equity to the curriculum.” In another instance, Jeannette identified equity issues related to her state’s testing scheme. She reported that students who aren’t able to understand or speak English are held to the same standards as those who have spoken English all their lives, adding that even native English speaking students struggle to pass the test. Greg demonstrated attending to students’ perspectives to reconceptualize gap when he stated:
You go to a world where at school where you’re a black child, and you don’t see any pictures of successful you—don’t interact with successful you. If you never have that model to compare yourself to, you’re not done, you’re not finished. And that affects you.

Michelle considered the experience of some of her students’ parents when she reflected, “I can imagine if someone doesn’t have a two house income [meaning two wage earners] what that experience must be like, and the decisions that they have to make for their own family.” This perspective informed her perceptions of parents and how they cared for their children, even if they did not attend school events. She saw her perceptions about parents as relevant to pursuing equity in her school.

In another example of reconceptualizing gap, Sophia emphasized the importance of learning the vantage points of her community members:

I love to get to know my parents and my families. And, when you listen to them talk, and tell you about their difficulties, and you know, what they’re experiencing it puts everything in a different perspective.

Here she openly acknowledged the benefit of knowing the experiences of parents and families in her school in terms of building an internal recognition of equity. She stated “it puts everything in a different perspective.” To put it another way, it helped her gain insight into the gap between her own experience and that of the parents of her students.

Principals Greg, Michelle, Sophia, and Carolyn discussed how they recognized equity issues, using the terms “mental models,” “middle-class assumptions,” and “frameworks.” They frequently indicated their intent to change or unsettle these mental
constructs, viewing them as contributing to inequity in their schools. “We have a majority of middle-class teachers that don’t have that necessarily that background, or that ability to look deep within the class,” Greg stated. Michelle commented, “[W]e’re making assumptions about children, and not really understanding the impact of assumptions.” Carolyn similarly conveyed, “I think that judging, making judgments about children based on, no—making judgments about parents, and then having it affect the child in the classroom is a huge issue.”

Via reconceptualization, the principals united aims of achieving equity, current gaps, and their own potential influence on those gaps at their local sites. Reconceptualizing gap allowed principals to behold an entrance for pursuing equity in their schools and shifted static views of gaps into ones that were amenable to leaders’ actions. In participants’ minds, this changed orientation to considering a problem was an important part of dealing with day-to-day decisions that at first glance did not appear to be rooted in issues of equity.

Therefore, principals built internal recognition of equity by plumbing the logic of gaps that encompassed family life, future employment and wealth, individual self-efficacy, and overall well-being of the students and communities they served. Throughout this process, they realized that there were no guarantees of equity within their districts, much less outside them.

Participants told of gaps in the school’s physical plant or environment, for instance. Jeannette revealed, “My building was cut short of a lot of other things because I was the last done. We got like a box, compared to what she got.” Greg noted the
differences across the district’s buildings in technology, lighting, and space, admitting, “Even within the district . . . There’s inequality and inequity in the actual facility’s structure.” Robin noted that class sizes in her building were large in comparison with those in the rest of the district’s elementary buildings. Reconceptualizing gap in these cases drew attention to the limits imposed on students through inequitable distribution of district or federal resources and the resulting incongruence with ideals of equity.

Participants recognized they required a complex understanding informed by different perspectives to do equity work. These understandings were evident in principals’ accounts when they spoke about identifying inequity. Principals presented realities very different from what one would expect in an equitable educational system. They were aware of gaps in dignity and worth. Theresa recalled, “Having to ration out toilet paper when we’re going to the bathroom and I’m looking at other of the magnet schools that got a lot of notoriety because the stars’ kids went there.” She described plentiful supplies and equipment at other school sites within the district, noting the situation as an example of inequity and questioning acceptance of this condition as an inevitable product of the socioeconomic status of students at her school.

Principals also noted gaps in belonging. Jeannette recounted her own early experience as an African American principal of a White staff, saying, “It was very lonely. The staff wasn’t very receptive at all . . . they would turn their heads when I would come by, pretend they were in a conversation.” In addition, speaking of her students, Jeannette said, “You want the children to feel comfortable, safe, loved, appreciated [a sense of belonging and value], and not just a test score when they’re here.” Theresa noted the
predominantly White active membership of Parent Teacher Organization, and wondered, “Do they [minority parents] feel welcome here?” These examples have to do with the manner in which principals reconceptualized gap to include the disparity between the ethnic makeup of the school population, and representation in active membership in related groups (parent teacher organizations, student bodies, colleagues). Participants viewed this gap as pertinent to recognizing equity at building sites.

Participants named gaps in class, culture, and race. Sophia identified “trying to bridge that gap between white, middle-class women teaching urban boys with black faces. I mean, quite frankly, and, so how do we bridge that gap?” Jeannette recognized, “When our American children come to school, their vocabulary base is so broad. When our bilingual children straight from Mexico come, their Spanish base is so limited.” Participants knew of gaps in social capital. Greg stated, “They’re [students in other districts] already in a nice social network, where they learn those social skills to be successful. . . . It’s hard to teach my kids soft skills, which are important skills to be appropriate for the work world, when I have to teach them survival skills first.” In each of these cases, participants acknowledged societal conditions that promoted gaps at their schools. However, the educators processed gaps in culture, class, and race to locate attendant problems of inequity within the domain of their own professional practices at the school site.

Just as significantly, participants recognized gaps in student expectations contributed to inequity. For example, Greg contested limited teacher expectations for some students’ future employment, saying, “if you give them the skills to work the
fries—that negatively affects the child.” In these situations, reconceptualizing gap drew attention to the manner in which expectations influenced students’ future occupations. Principals recognized that teachers’ limited conceptions of students’ capacity for employment in well-paid occupations ultimately affected students’ likelihood of escaping poverty.

Although blame for general societal conditions of inequity was suspended in reconceptualized gaps, participants clearly located the issue of equity inside the realm of their own awareness, responsibility, and influence. Through reconceptualizing gaps, these educators emphasized their understandings that inequity posed a moral dilemma. Greg put it this way: “Kids of poverty are not stupid. They’re just at risk, because of their environmental circumstances.” Sophia stated, “Just because they can’t afford to buy a $300,000 house, they shouldn’t be deprived of a quality education with resources.” She questioned the distribution of federal and state resources as she reconceptualized the gap in school funding for different districts.

Reconceptualizing gap brought to light some of the ambivalence that participants felt at having responsibility for mitigating gaps that students presented upon arriving at school. These gaps were commonly known as disadvantages. Participants viewed disadvantages as emanating from circumstances outside the school, such as poverty, racial discrimination, and language barriers. Greg demonstrated this viewpoint when he discussed the need for “closing that gap” when students are already at a disadvantage. He explained the “new problem of the working poor,” stating that the number of working hours required for some parents in his district to fund necessities (adequate food, shelter,
and clothing) left their children at profound disadvantages when they arrived at school. This was because children accrued fewer hours of the specific type of parent-child interaction commonly known as “readiness experience.”

The setbacks endured by students outside the walls of his school did not prevent Greg from noting additional sources of inequity inside his school. He made the point that in his building, common assumptions of kindergarten readiness implied that young children’s home experiences were widely shared. Instead, he recognized that many of his students lacked home experiences that translated to opportunities and advantages later during schooling. Greg believed that it was not surprising that socioeconomic status is strongly correlated with achievement in school, because of the “tool table” that children acquire when they are exposed to basic knowledge through their interactions with parents at home. He called this acquisition *mommy smarts*:

That means that the mother had worked with a child on the basic skills. And now, when the child comes to school, that child has the ability to take off, at a higher level. But the problem is those kids don’t come with the “mommy smarts,” they’re behind . . . it causes a strong separation of achievement.

Greg tested out the logic of gap in these circumstances as he elaborated the subtle ways in which his school reinforced or magnified inequity. Through reconceptualizing gap, he questioned the assumptions of a “middle-class framework” for schooling, seeing its consequences as heaping up inequity for students in his building. “As a school system, we think that, we function under a middle-class framework—where we think that we’re sending kids home, the parents are teaching the kids,” he said. Specifically, he raised the
issue of his school and district operating in ways that do not account for the realities of students’ lives when children are members of a lower socioeconomic class. He gave the example of children taking on child-raising responsibilities while parents are away at work for long hours. Due to his reconceptualization of gap, Greg was able to deconstruct the apparent links between socioeconomic status and achievement to build internal recognition of equity.

In another example of reconceptualizing gap, Jeannette explained how limited prior access to schooling affected the students who immigrated to her district:

Where we don’t have equity is the beginning of their [students’] lives . . . Many of our parents come from rural Mexico or very rural Puerto Rico. There’s a major difference when that happens. Even though the language is different when they come here, if they’re from rural, the farming area, the teachers aren’t there every day or every season. So the children don’t go to school like our children do, so that access to education is not there.

Jeannette went on to explain how her school unintentionally amplified those disadvantages through daily operations that stripped students and their families of relevant cultural knowledge. She detailed her school’s implicit message that speaking Spanish was a hindrance:

These grandmothers [who care for recently emigrated youngsters], you see them and they’re very quiet. And they picture themselves, some of them—I just had a conversation with a grandmother yesterday, said she was dumb. Called herself
dumb because she didn’t know English well. . . Many of our grandparents think that the Spanish language is going to keep the child limited . . .

Jeannette rendered a telling, but rarely considered perspective that subsequently informed her actions to remedy inequity. She recognized that because caretakers believed their native language would deter youngsters’ acquisition of English, they had fewer verbal interactions of any kind in their grandchildren’s presence. The resulting absence of typical immersion in native language actually confounded students’ ability to learn English. Jeannette sought to dispel the harmful myth explicitly during the school’s Open House night. She told me, “We preached, ‘Tell stories. Make sure that the children are truly bilingual because the Spanish has to be very high so that the English will be up there with the Spanish.’”

In summary, participants employed a process which was centered on building internal recognition of issues of equity in their schools (Theme A). The process involved reconceptualizing gap. This allowed participants to reconcile the ideals of equity with the reality of day-to-day leadership. The reconceptualized gaps provided a crucial reference for daily practice, as well as a link between conditions of inequity and possibilities for equity. At its core, reconceptualizing gap was mainly a process of deconstructing and reconstructing reality. It unsettled the perception that schools could do nothing about inequity by aiding participants in placing equity at the forefront of their consciousness while conducting their duties as principal. Consequently, reconceptualized gaps were not just unfortunate truths against which main school operations were set; they were integral to the ways principals negotiated those operations.
Theme B: External Efforts to Educate Others and Engage Them in Equity Work

Theme B revealed itself to be centered on participants’ external efforts to build their colleagues’ understandings of equity. Here participants provided examples of how they saw themselves addressing equity by involving their staffs in opportunities to explore and understand diverse perspectives within their communities. Dialogue and interaction with colleagues characterized these efforts. Opportunities to examine various perspectives occurred across multiple situations such as formal staff inservice activities, informal project work, book study groups, and walk-throughs. Throughout these interactions, principals consistently described their attempts to enlighten their staffs by providing experience that would cause them to notice disparate realities or incongruous assumptions related to equity. The act of *witnessing* formed one means by which principals sought to educate their staffs and communities with regard to equity. A second way principals helped colleagues develop stronger understandings of equity involved *repositioning*.

In the next section, I first provide examples and explanations of the process of witnessing, in which principals sought to unsettle staffs’ previously established conceptualizations of equity. I conclude this section by describing how participants led staffs through the process of repositioning to support alternative constructions of equity. *Witnessing*

Analysis of principals’ responses revealed witnessing as a recurrent mean by which principals perceived that they could “open the eyes” of their staff to issues of equity. Witnessing meant that leaders explicitly posed inequity as a dilemma relevant
to the staff, students, or parents in school buildings. It heightened awareness of inequity and elevated concern for equity to the organizational level. Through witnessing, principals took issue with inequity in ways that functioned to make others aware of neglected perspectives.

To review, principals pointed out that some conditions of inequity were created before students entered formal schooling, through no fault of their (the students’ or the schools’) own. Blame was suspended for creating those conditions of inequity. In reconceptualizing gaps, the participants also regarded how schools (or their agents: teachers, principals, district leaders) had traditionally amplified the disadvantage present at the advent of schooling, and examined moral obligations to the contrary.

As they deliberately traced some of the ways that schooling exacerbates the disadvantages education means to remedy, participants’ witness brought tolerance for inequity to light within their organizations. Principals’ narratives were laced with examples of how principals became aware of dissonant perspectives themselves, or highlighted these perspectives for their staffs. By juxtaposing worldviews of students, their parents, and staff members, research participants saw themselves presenting information that stirred consciousness among their colleagues. Thus, witnessing offered an antidote for institutional denial, preventing the problem of inequity from becoming the “white noise” in the background of school operations.

Instead, participants took issue with social structures and problems (such as socio economic class, racism, and violence) as well as school structures (such as testing schemes, the hidden curriculum, and discipline plans) as they saw these intersecting with
equity matters. Sophia commented on the way witnessing worked to advance understanding of equity, saying,

I think that’s one thing that teachers really—I’ve opened their eyes to, many of them. I think when they start to see that this is real, it’s right here in [city name omitted to protect confidentiality] . . . that’s changed their hearts a little bit.

She had employed home visits and book study groups as opportunities to support growth in staff’s knowledge base surrounding equity issues. Through these experiences, staff members came to know the perspectives of their students in ways they had not known before. Sophia reported that for many of her colleagues, this was the first time they had ever examined (either vicariously through text or through first-hand visits) the realities of their students’ lives. She counted her attention to the gap in realities of school staff and students as an accomplishment, saying “And that’s what I’ve been able to bring here [to her building]. To see that there is this great I guess for your purposes inequity, but this great, also this discrepancy between our [staff] home lives and theirs.”

Michelle observed that discussion of issues related to race and class were muted in her district. The prevailing silence that surrounds race and racial issues prompted her to note, “We don’t want to talk about the real issues. And until we begin to talk about the real issues that are going on, we’re, you know, change isn’t going to come.” After discussing some of her experiences as an African American principal in her school district, Michelle expressed her belief that avoiding discussions of race in schools has constricted understanding that could advance equity. She told me, “And those can be very healthy conversations and one can come to their, come to realizations about themselves
and their own experiences.” Her efforts to improve equity included conducting book study groups to address this reconceptualized gap. Groups in her building were voluntary and met about twice a month. Michelle said:

[We] talked about what we were reading. And what that did was really open up to allow for courageous conversation . . . Because to allow for those conversations, you have to have an environment where people feel that they can speak, and not be judged. And, you know, because everyone’s experiences [are] different.

Michelle perceived that highlighting these different experiences opened a path for new knowledge development. Establishing this new knowledge base was consequential in producing shifts toward equity, as she saw it.

In other examples of witnessing, participants’ responses focused on particular structures of schooling and how these may unintentionally foster inequity. For example, Sophia knew that other buildings in her district were well-staffed with support personnel, while in her elementary building there were far fewer support staff assigned. She said,

Talk about inequity—the high schools and middle schools have two assistant principals, two counselors, three secretaries, security. We have none of that. I’m going to have 450 kids myself this year.

She mentioned that central office administrators assumed that younger children required fewer support personnel for their education, when compared to the older students in the district. Sophia viewed this as an unfair assumption, particularly since behavioral and special education issues at her school were made more complex due to the developmental stages of her primary grade students and the legal matters associated with those issues.
“Try due processing a kindergartener,” Sophia said, pointing out that decisions about staffing were made by persons who were not aware of some of the demands of educating younger children in a large, urban elementary building.

In another example of witnessing related to school structures, Greg spoke of the consequences of state testing criteria. He used witnessing to contest what he perceived as a gap between equitable testing procedures and actual achievement test results:

I mean it’s basically we’re trying to do equal treatment of unequals…

So, last year whether it was your first time speaking English, or you speak no English, you have to take the [state test]. And we’re judged based on that criteria. You have to be kidding me that that’s equity!

At different points in his interview, Greg stressed his understanding that the quality of interaction between teachers and students profoundly influences achievement at school and into adulthood. He saw the nature of school interactions impinging on equity at his building site. Here, he described what he perceived as a cycle of damage accruing through as a result of limited prior-to-school ‘readiness’ experience and a dearth of models for success within school. Speaking about the long-term effects of feedback given in kindergarten, he said:

“…that hurts the area of what Bandura termed, the phrase of self-efficacy—your perceived ability to do a task. If you’re coming to school, and your actual experience, when you look around, observe the students who are successful, and you’re not—it has nothing to do with your actual ability, it has to do with whether you have mommy smarts or not—if you have the pre-training… So then you sit in
class, and argue—you skip class—no, not necessarily, but you’re going to pay less attention in school. Because if you don’t think you have it, you going pay less attention. What happens when you pay less attention? You’re going to actually have failure. Oh, there’s your experience again…”

By witnessing, participants negotiated meanings and means for equity that took up academic achievement as well as larger concerns for fairness and justice in a democratic society. Throughout this process with their school communities, principals deliberately surfaced dissonance in perspectives and knowledge of constituent groups. Witnessing made the margins of tolerance for inequity visible in the organization, and it upped the urgency of working on solutions for inequity. Principals made a conspicuous example of the will to do equity work through their examination of diverse perspectives regarding equity.

**Repositioning**

Once participants had helped staffs begin to recognize disparity in the perceptions and experiences of some of the school’s constituent groups, they next sought to offer their colleagues support for new constructions of equity. This effort involved a phenomenon identified by Apple (2001) as *repositioning*. Apple maintained that in order to truly understand the impact of a decision or policy, we ought examine it from the perspective of those who have the least power in society. Participants knew the challenging nature of this feat because persons are often unaware of the powerful influence of value judgments and assumptions held within their perspectives. In educating others to build recognition of equity matters, research participants perceived
that exploring what appeared to be incongruous perspectives allowed them to approach issues of equity in ways that helped staffs identify hidden sources of inequity.

Rather than circumventing perspectives and experiences of their students and community members, principals and their colleagues achieved new understanding of those perspectives as they drew closer to them. Repositioning was the act of standing in someone else’s shoes to really understand the impact of decisions in terms of equity. Numerous examples of examining perspectives were cited throughout participants’ accounts. As Sophia said, “You have to look at the whole picture before you can make a judgment about what equity is going to look like.”

Carolyn provided a clear example of how she employed repositioning to determine class placement for some of her students. She explained:

Some parents are strong advocates for their children. Other parents for a million different reasons are not. And one of the biggest issues of equity that I see is how to be sure that all children get the teacher that’s just right for them. Who watches out for the kids that don’t have the parent who’s up at the school all the time?

Participants expressed an awareness of tensions in repositioning. For them, it required confronting the dilemma of how to effect equity for one group or individual while others perceived that their advantage had been diminished through the principal’s actions. For instance, as Theresa considered the balance of programming in her building, she became aware of a parent’s assumption that gifted programming should be prioritized. “Bending over backwards” to serve gifted students at her school in the past meant students not in the gifted track had less coherence in their school day schedules,
constituting a primary inequity, in Theresa’s mind. Change sought by the parent would have compounded that inequity, since it would come at the cost of interrupting the few concentrated blocks of academic time that existed for special education students, thereby heaping a second layer of disadvantage upon those students. Theresa said:

A lot of times I don’t find the special ed. parents, (I don’t know if it’s the nature of who they are), but they tend to not have a voice as much as the gifted parents. And, sometimes, equity for me is: okay, it’s almost like you’re being asked to give more credence to one or the other.

Her refusal to take action without reference to the coherence of the school day for particular groups of students affirmed her commitment to equity for students, faculty, and community. In highlighting the disparate experiences of groups of children with her staff, Theresa made margins of tolerance for inequity visible in her school, prompting others to examine how arrangements at their school either favored or marginalized specific segments of the student population. These actions formed a fundamental grounding for staff to notice incongruence with ideals of equity and instigated wider dissatisfaction with that condition.

Repositioning was a means by which principals saw themselves addressing equity in their schools. It comprised a method of deconstructing gaps in consciousness and discovering new understandings and obligations regarding equity. The principals believed that examining dissonant perspectives with their staffs aided colleagues and community members in reconceptualizing gap for themselves. Participants viewed repositioning as
moving colleagues toward an orientation in which understanding and pursuing equity in their schools became a priority.

Theme C: Addressing Equity Issues Across Procedural Contexts

Thus far, I have presented excerpts from the data which support themes of developing internal recognition of equity and making efforts to educate others about equity issues and engage them in this work. The processes of reconceptualizing gap, witnessing, and repositioning were demonstrated in discrete accounts from the data to represent how principals perceived they supported their own, and their colleagues’ deconstruction and reconstruction of equity issues.

As principals described the ways they addressed issues of equity in their practices, they indicated the processes were most commonly embedded in practical decisions about (a) class placement, (b) discipline, (c) scheduling, and (d) curriculum. These four contexts were consistently recognized as laden with equity issues. They merit attention because they further specify relationships between the processes of reconceptualizing gap, witnessing, and repositioning as these applied to the themes of internal recognition and external efforts to advance others’ knowledge of and engagement in equity work.

Here, interview data revealed that principals viewed their equity work as aimed toward changes in the school’s operational structures, and changes the structures of consciousness. Following are descriptions of the manner in which participants saw themselves tending to equity matters while they considered and carried out decisions related to the above-mentioned contexts.

Class Placement
All the school principals in this study reported that student assignment to classes was an equity-laden action. In each interview, participants recounted a number of factors that influenced any student’s placement, including individual student needs; balancing the class as a whole and respective classroom populations; ensuring like academic, ethnic, or racial peers; parent requests; and scheduling/staffing requirements. Throughout these discussions, the demands of fit, representation, and balance surfaced as complicating aspects of the decision-making process because participants recognized the possibility of inequitable results and also realized an element of control over them. The deliberate attempt to avoid inequity in class placement was shaped by reconceptualized gap: an understanding that fit, balance, and representation within a class all contributed to the quality of children’s learning experiences. Further, principals repositioned themselves to address equity, by elevating the individual child’s perspective in the classroom situation over other possible considerations.

For the purpose of this discussion, fit refers to how well a student’s learning profile, needs, and personality match a particular teacher’s perceived strengths, teaching style, and/or pedagogical allegiance. Representation involves the aspect of seeing others like yourself among peers in your class. Balance refers to replicating the ethnic, socioeconomic, racial, gender, and ability distribution of the grade level within individual classes.

Michelle reconceptualized gap when she considered the results of dividing 11 White males among the five third-grade classrooms. In the following excerpt from her interview, she expressed concern for preserving representation while she examined
placement options. She recognized a need to establish different referents for equity because of changing demographics in her school. She stated:

I see that [class assignment process] more challenging, just because there may be fewer of one particular sub-group of students. I’ll give you an example. Third grade, we have 11 Caucasian males. And that’s out of 120 and something students, five classrooms. Keeping in mind trying to keep a balance. Because I think, and not that it’s a bad thing, good thing, or whatever you want to call it, but I do think it’s important for students to see other students that look like them, and to have that experience as well.

Similarly, Carolyn reconceptualized gap to avoid inequity in the quality of school experience that would have resulted if balance had trumped all other factors in a class placement decision:

Here’s a perfect example: I had three white girls in a grade level, and this was just a few years ago. And I put them all in one room—and I did that because I’m not going to put one in each room, which would have been balancing it out. They would have had no children in the room that were like them.

Participants believed that thorough knowledge of each child could be gained by consulting teachers and, to a lesser extent, parents; considering official records; and recalling events or personal encounters with individual children. They saw themselves placing children in classes equitably by incorporating these understandings and acting as advocates for children whose parents had not been highly involved in school functions or who had not made specific written requests for the placement of their children. Carolyn
stressed the importance of her role as an advocate for those children, (repositioning) saying:

Some parents are very vocal about who they think will be [the best teacher for their child], and other parents would never dream of putting their two cents in. And so when I don’t get a vocal parent then I feel like I need to take a good look at that child and look at the choices and the other children in the class and make a decision about who I think will be the best teacher. Not just fill in the extra seats with them.

Carolyn also reconceptualized gap as she made decisions regarding staff and student placement in an inclusion kindergarten class. She noted that an inclusion kindergarten class had fewer class members than two other classrooms, which had 25 students each. Here, she confirms that teachers of the larger classes felt the situation was not equitable, repositioning by examining the impact of her decision as it appeared to the other kindergarten teachers:

And my inclusion kindergarten has 19—and my inclusion kindergarten has a full-time aide in it, and probably ¾ of the day a special ed teacher. That hardly looks equitable to the people who see it, including the two kindergarten colleagues with the 25 kids.

However, Carolyn reconceptualized the gap in student and staff assignment among the classes when she contested the idea that equal numbers of students make for a fair distribution of students. She instead positioned her analysis closer to student experience, saying:
But that’s a good example of “fair is not equal.” Because there are seven autistic children in the inclusive classroom, and they’re very high-functioning kids, but they have all kinds of quirky little needs. And they need individual help and attention. . . . In the beginning [of the year] it’s fair when you have those 19 kids to have all those adults in the room.

As she was describing her decision, Carolyn did not deny the appearance of inequity from the standpoint of the other kindergarten teachers. Rather than dismissing the perspective as irrelevant, she used repositioning to examine the dissonant perspective, validated it through witnessing, and made an attempt to remedy that gap. She said:

I know that it’s amazingly hard to be alone in the class with 25 kindergartners, so as much as possible I try to support them. Like when the inclusion classroom is maybe in the special [gym, music, art, library classes] then I send one of the extra people over there just to help out.

For study participants, addressing equity entailed revising traditional procedures for assigning students to classes. The changed procedures integrated referents of representation, fit, and balance. Altered thinking processes positioned principals to act as advocates on behalf of students who had previously “filled the extra seats” in classes once others had been placed.

Discipline

Discipline procedures were of unanimous concern for the school principals in this study. Every informant revealed their effort to build internal recognition and to aid other staff in developing awareness of equity issues to ensure that discipline was applied fairly
in their buildings. Several participants had constructed discipline in ways that resisted a strictly behaviorist orientation. Misbehavior was not necessarily seen as an intentional and aberrant act of pathological defiance. Instead, principals set conflicts within the attendant cultural, historical, and social context to try and understand the circumstances that gave rise to situations requiring discipline. In some cases, children referred for disciplining had not returned homework or proper paperwork, showing a lack of action rather than the more typical negative action that results in a call for discipline.

In addition to revealing and contesting biases about parents’ caring and deficit thinking (to which I return below), efforts to apply discipline fairly included teaching all students the expectations for schooling explicitly, giving students time to regain composure or perspective in situations of social conflict, permitting input from parents and students about some of the punitive measures used, and knowing the children and their cultural backgrounds. In Michelle’s building, for instance, a plan was developed that allowed students time to rethink and make reparations related to functioning at school within accepted social norms. She told me, “We all had input in developing that: students had input, parents and teachers.” In Carolyn’s school, the staff developed a “life skill of the week” program that fixed attention on specific scholarly or social traits. Carolyn described repositioning with her staff as she acknowledged the perspective of the children who had arrived at school without having learned those social or scholarly traits at home:

It’s made a huge difference. . . . And probably a way that that has actually leveled the playing field is because some children have those skills and know that because they are taught that at home, and other children have never heard of it, and so
what we’re doing is training everyone on the skills that we decided that we all would exemplify.

In another example, Theresa contested the regularity with which children who had behavioral disabilities were being excluded from class in the district where she works. In her view, the exclusion of special needs students from the point of instruction had a mounting ill effect as it accumulated throughout years of schooling. She saw common responses to student misbehavior, such as teachers “putting kids out,” at least partially a result of placing inexperienced teachers in roles as special education teachers. Thus, the injury of exclusion was linked to institutionalized inequity in Theresa’s reconceptualized gap. This gap was a larger concern than the immediate building but a central concern for Theresa, who witnessed another gap:

I’m gonna’ say it like it is. I really believe sometimes, we need to get the most experienced, the most well-versed special education teachers into our schools.

And I often times find that they’re the youngest teachers. Especially in the SED [specific educational disability] rooms.

She acknowledged a problem in equity as she explained the gaps in awareness between those at school and the parents of youngsters who are regularly excluded from class, saying:

But it’s very easy to put them to the office, they sit down here all day, or the buddy system where you put your student into another room. But what happens here often, and it happens in a lot of urban schools, I think the parents don’t
know, that those kids sit out all day long in another room, or they sit in the office for half the day.

She attempted to address equity at her site with professional development for SED teachers, supplying more time for collaboration with those teachers, and implementing a school-wide, tiered system of support for students with learning needs, including those with behavioral difficulties. She viewed these supports as encouraging longevity of service, experience, and skill for teachers in a challenging role, thereby improving equity by increasing the quality of instruction and schooling for students with behavioral disabilities.

In a similar fashion, other participants highlighted patterns of marginalization that reinforced inequity in disciplining within their elementary school buildings. Several participants were aware of the necessity of working with staff to uncover these patterns. For those principals, patterns of marginalization were consequential in producing “double jeopardy” for some students. Principals described the process of examining hidden assumptions with their staffs by posing a line of inquiry related to beliefs about parents and caring. Their work involved creating a consciousness of consciousness to augment emerging understandings about how one’s assumptions impact equity.

Principals emphasized that unquestioned assumptions commonly held by themselves, their communities, their staffs, or the students themselves impeded equity in those situations. These unquestioned assumptions constituted ignorance, in the view of many study participants. Greg stated it this way as he reconceptualized gap and used repositioning to gain deeper understanding of equity issues in his school:
But when we’re dealing with efficacy, esteem, and those type of things, and when we’re dealing with accidental “oops”—meaning I crossed your cultural rule or cultural barrier just by not knowing, then that affects a child. I believe, I’ve seen. How about that? I’ve seen misinterpretation of behaviors, and then it causes anger within the child.

In a fitting example of the phenomenon Greg had described, Carolyn told of coming to know about the ways she interpreted cultural practices that were unfamiliar when she first began as principal in a new district, and how these interpretations were an impediment to equity. She reconceptualized gap to include her own *unknowing*, saying:

In my previous building, if the principal was disciplining you, and I’m not a yell... but if I’m talking to you the children would all look right at you because they would know that they were talked to. Where in this building sometimes the children don’t look at you, and they look down. And at first, when I came here I would say, “look at me when I’m talking to you.” And over time what I’ve learned and realized is some children are culturally taught not to look at the adult when they are being disciplined.

In reconceptualizing gap to include her own dys-consciousness, this principal understood that though she did not mean to be unfair, her ignorance was not without harm because her subsequent actions were based on conclusions that students were being disrespectful. Thus, Carolyn constructed meaning for equity which heightened her sensitivity to dissonant perspectives. Carolyn went further, illuminating her work with teachers as they examined assumptions about parents and caring in her building. As the
staff began to inquire about assumptions, Carolyn used the term “mental models” to link the taken-for-granted knowledge to underlying premises:

And one of the things that I talked about with my staff was, what mental models do we have as a faculty and how does it affect our work with kids? And, of course, nobody had any mental models when we first started out . . .

She witnessed a gap in awareness, or a lack of consciousness about consciousness, in this case. She worked to expose an assumption frequently held by teachers in her building, that parents of children who do not complete homework do not value their children’s education:

But as we delved deeper and reflected on our practice that was one that came out for many people on the staff, which was if a child comes in without their homework (that was really the big issue, kids that didn’t do their homework)—the parents don’t care. And *that was* the mental model. And, you know, kids that don’t do the homework, kids that don’t bring in their supplies, don’t have lunch money, that come to school dirty . . .

Similarly, other participants cited assumptions of “parents not caring” when staff members encountered students’ lack of preparation, tardiness, or irregular attendance at school, or parents’ absence from conferences and school events. Michelle stated:

I think that we sometimes put our middle-class on experiences. On students and parents who may not come from that same experience . . . And you know that can be middle-class teachers of any race. And we make assumptions. We make
assumptions that a parent may not come to parent conference, that they don’t care about their child. And that may not be the case.

These assumptions formed the basis for differential treatment that was generally accepted as warranted by staff in participants’ buildings. Principals noted that staff were likely to impose disciplinary sanctions for students’ lack of supplies, required paperwork, or homework. Through staff discussion about those situations, participants described how it became evident that some of the schools’ efforts were inhibited by a premise of “parents not caring.” Teachers acknowledged that they made fewer attempts to communicate with parents or caretakers in solving these problems. Even if assumptions of “parents not caring” were valid, Carolyn maintained it should draw the opposite reaction from educators who seek equity. She said, “And you can hear people say, well, there’s no point in me calling her anyway; she doesn’t care. And that is exactly the child who needs the teacher’s attention and the work and the extra care most.” For many participants, addressing equity therefore entailed discovery of hidden assumptions and the influence of those assumptions upon staff members’ efforts to enlist parents’ or other professionals’ help in solving discipline, homework, or other problems at school.

_Scheduling_

Constructing a master schedule was recognized as a task in which equity was at play. Decisions about time and space are particularly consequential in producing or limiting equity because a regular schedule repeats its effect daily in the lives of students and staff in schools. As Carolyn constructed the new schedule for her building, she expressed how she approached the task with equity in mind. This involved repositioning
to prioritize the coherence of students’ school days. Carolyn described how scheduling decisions of the past resulted in a fractured school day for the students at one grade level:

So here’s a huge one: special schedule. For the first time ever this year I did not let teachers drive the special schedule. I always let teachers make it, but in the past, the art, the music, the library, the PE teachers were allowed to create the schedule so like, if they were going to do the first grade (this is probably stuff you live with, every day). First grade, first grade, first grade [listing the progression of classes coming to gym class] . . . But, in doing that last year, one grade level’s schedule was just a disaster. You’d be in class for half an hour, then you’d go back to a special, then you’d be in for another 45 minutes, then back out.

To address equity issues, Carolyn recalibrated the schedule to take into account the experience of the children who are generally left out of scheduling decisions and also to remedy what she perceived as privilege on the part of the specialist teachers:

On the other hand, we have full-time specialists, and they have (and again this is resources), they have tremendous amounts of free time in their days. For example, my music teacher teaches 15 hours a week, and she’s here full time. So, for her to bounce from a first grade to a fourth grade then to a kindergarten and back to a third, seems okay to me because she has a lot of opportunities in her day to regroup and make prep.

Later, she described how she explicitly named the reference point for the decisions publicly with her staff, and she indicated that even the specialist teachers had eventually come to understand and accept the change:
But that took some discussion, because some people didn’t see it, but my decision to do that was not because I was favoring the classroom teacher over the specialist. What I was favoring was the academic time, and what would be the very best way, how could I create, give people common planning time, but also create large blocks of time for the teacher to do her major subject teaching.

Curriculum

Participants commented that exposing children to rigorous curricula was tantamount to their mastery of it—a practice that improved equity, in their minds. By holding on to the possibility of high achievement despite understandings of gaps in resources, language, or culture, the principals saw themselves fortifying equity, but knowingly rather than naively.

“We’re causing kids to be set up,” Greg began, as he reconceptualized gap to include unintended consequences of teachers’ interventions on behalf of their students who had recently emigrated from Mexico. He was convinced that teachers believed they were doing “the right thing” by eliminating core curricula and substituting other curriculum to allow their students more success at school, but they were unaware of the eventual effect of “choosing what they feel is important.” This led to what he believed were avoidable gaps in student achievement. He witnessed this gap for staff to help them discover the eventual outcome of “intervention” that supplied students with instruction and materials only at current reading level, rather than scaffolding instruction to accelerate literacy skills to appropriate grade levels. Greg noted, “When they go to the middle school or high school, and that same philosophy carries itself on, we have kids
who are not able to graduate. They’re not able to read, not able to write at appropriate grade levels.” In addition, Greg recognized the hidden but damaging effect of teachers’ limited student expectations for the classroom and beyond, recalling his early days as principal in his school and providing examples of further reconceptualization and witnessing:

When I came here, a teacher said, “you want these kids to learn all these big words and all these things. And I’m just trying to get my kids to be able to be successful if they want to work at McDonald’s.” What?! And then I said, “Are you kidding me?!”

Greg worked with his staff to address equity by focusing on stepping up rigor. He introduced Bloom’s Taxonomy and higher-level questioning in staff meetings, and in subsequent classroom visits, he provided teachers with a tally of the numbers of each type of question asked during a lesson. Greg emphasized that these informal classroom visits had nothing to do with official performance evaluations, because the instruments for formal evaluations focused on teacher actions, and it was more important, he believed, to attend to student learning. He also stressed the necessity of an abiding belief in students’ capacity to learn (alongside ongoing assessments), saying:

We cannot afford to take the chance that we taught a lesson and we give a test at the end of the week. And 60% passed. We want 100% to pass. So, if you’ve seen the word “believe” where I have, “If you believe it, you can achieve it.” That changes the whole framework of the teachers. That we instill self-efficacy of the child.
Jeannette said, “We’ve got to fast forward, and that’s why my idea about the Saturday School.” Her vision for the Saturday School was a place where kids and their families could come for additional learning opportunities after the usual school week ended. She pictured incorporating kinesthetic learning, cultural heritage, music, and mentorship along with individual goal-setting and targeted instruction for language development in this special program for at-risk students in Grades 3-5. As she elaborated her plans to mend the gap in achievement for students who were not native English speakers, Jeannette revealed an awareness that Spanish-speaking families did not have full access to social connections that often serve to advance student learning. She designed the program to build in the opportunity to develop social ties between families, as well as to set learning within a history and culture for each individual involved.

Jeannette told me:

We’re going to look at their needs and then try and have a mentor for every five kids and have that mentor know the history of that child, know where they are. And we’ll be doing clusters so in this cluster these kids need certain skills so we’re not all over the place. And in this cluster these; and so we’re gonna’ get the parents together so they know each other. We’ll do some background history on the families. You know, where are they from? So that we have families that are sort of from similar cities in Mexico, Puerto Rico, so the families can get together.

By reconceptualizing gap and witnessing, this principal aimed the Saturday School experience toward deepening cultural relevance while inviting greater family participation, including resources and tutoring for parents and caretakers. Jeannette
believed addressing this specific example of inequity, was better accomplished by offering culturally-relevant instruction through generations of families rather than delivering isolated instructions to the at-risk students.

Summary of Findings

The data showed that study participants saw themselves interpreting and addressing equity issues via their efforts in two domains, internal and external. They developed internal recognition of equity matters and educated others for the purpose of engaging their school communities in equity work. The principals employed specific processes of reconceptualizing gap, witnessing, and repositioning in their efforts. Participants believed that these processes supported development of awareness and concern for equity issues. Principals understood that little could be gained from policies and mandates perceived as distant and irrelevant to current practices or situations.

Instead, they linked the intent of those policies to the local site in ways they believed their colleagues would see as meaningful and empowering. They instigated breakthroughs in consciousness while examining dissonant perspectives with their staffs. Throughout their equity work, research participants paid attention to the dominance of particular structures and perspectives in the school in relation to other possible but less represented structures and perspectives. These elementary school principals most often recognized the contexts of class placement, discipline, scheduling, and curriculum as contexts where equity issues were highly prevalent. Primarily, the participants perceived that in order to address equity in their schools, they needed to foster changes in mental constructs as much as they needed to craft changes in organizational structures.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The research reported here represents an initial foray into the experiences of elementary principals who are shaping their practices because of, and in spite of, current federal policy regarding equity. This is a difficult undertaking because, as Rorrer (2006) contended, “they face continuous and competing demands to change as well as face changing demands” (p. 229). Study participants were uniquely qualified to explain the phenomenon of addressing equity in their buildings and communities during a time when rhetoric for reform does not match the social, political, and cultural realities of many of the students and families they serve. These principals recognized that a sense of equity is tangled up in the particulars of events as well as the history of local and larger circumstances. They knew that addressing equity meant changing operational structures as well as changing the structures of consciousness. Study participants aimed their efforts toward both of these fronts in order to institutionalize the pursuit of equity in their schools.

Thus, the theory generated in my study explains how participants employed processes beneficial in advancing the pursuit of equity as a collective endeavor, rather than the pet project of an individual with positional authority. Addressing equity in this manner presented a sharp departure from the mindsets of high-stakes accountability, individual performance, and standardization. Principals resisted imposing consciousness
upon others, instead leading their communities through an examination of premises inherent in various knowledge claims, and testing the validity of those claims from various perspectives.

Dye (2004) has illuminated the value of inquiry into the ways in which an entire society practices their commitment to cultural pluralism. He noted implications for social reform, saying:

Social, political, and economic innovation is maximized with unlike minds that lack status orientations, searching together for common understanding/meaning. The outcome to look for is never a transformation into like minds, but the priority set by the process of the inclusive search. (p. 4)

I contend that without the foothold established within a collective in pursuit of equity, changes for equity have little chance of survival past the tenure of specific principals. It is the accumulated works of many that leave deposits of equity in institutional practices long after individuals have gone. Still more study of teacher, student, and parent perspectives in school buildings is critical for stronger understandings of the ways in which school communities become focused on equity and enact social justice aims through education. In the interest of surfacing tentative and emergent knowledge about making way for equity, in this chapter I discuss implications, further questions, and recommendations for application of research findings.

Critical Awareness as a Scaffold for Reconceptualization

For principals in this study, a drive to become aware undergirded the process of interpreting and addressing equity. Addressing equity was not a matter of applying a
heuristic to daily operations. It was rather a hermeneutic search for understanding. Principals used knowledge of dissonant perspectives, moral aims, and transformative beliefs about the purpose of education as they conducted their daily duties. Galvanizing energy and agency around pursuit of equity in their organizations depended on becoming conscious of and acting upon the structural constraints impeding equity (including institutionalized ignorance).

Confronting shared ignorance with staff permitted the space for new practices to take root. This was not accomplished in clean, uniform steps. New practices could only come into view as persons became aware that old ones failed them. Principals led their staffs through repositioning, via their own witness and the collective examination of diverse perspectives. As staffs engaged in social critique, building leaders sought shifts in the social consensus regarding conditions of equity in their schools. They saw these shifts sustained by the development of critical awareness. In this case, critical awareness formed an interpretive tool; it supported the reconceptualization necessary to address equity. In this fashion, critical social consciousness formed a scaffold for tending to equity in the context of daily operations. The process of confronting shared ignorance through social critique supported deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings for equity.

Transformative Education Is a Radical Undertaking

As participants practiced it, posing the tolerance for inequity as a problem in their schools represents an emergent application of Freire’s (2003) transformative model of education wherein people move toward becoming more fully human through re-
conscientization. In addition to problematizing obvious structures such as schedules, class placement, and curricula, school principals worked at the subconscious level (their own as well as their staffs’) to achieve shifts in understanding the concept of equity. These shifts were essential, in participants’ views, to moving the organization toward improvements in equity. In this manner, school principals established new interpretive schemata (Rorrer, 2006) that grounded efforts to remedy present inequity and avoid future inequity. In several cases, school principals contributed to the process of transformation by helping people to “see” their beliefs and premises about education and schooling, as well as the influence of those leading ideas upon their individual and collective practices.

Rather than seeing schooling as a “banking” enterprise in which students and/or teachers are viewed as empty and unknowing vessels to be filled with knowledge and theories, research participants enacted a problem-posing education. They problematized inequity for themselves and prompted others to do the same. As they addressed equity in their practices, school principals infused a critical dimension to their understanding of equity (Gutierrez, 2007) by framing their actions with reference to issues of identity and power. This meant that they were checking a balance between self and others from the perspective of others. In order to accomplish an understanding of those perspectives, it was necessary to be aware of their own consciousness, particularly given that unquestioned assumptions likely hold residual sources of bias. Principals had to provoke others to this awareness as well. In this case, participants gained new understanding of their own positionality through the act of examining others’ perspectives. The relation
between positions clarified where one stood and oriented the principals’ actions to improve equity.

By reconceptualizing gaps, these school leaders employed their understandings of power in the organization to subsequently restructure relations. Reconceptualized gaps opened avenues for wider representation, specifically for marginalized groups. Several principals shared both responsibility for and contribution to shaping a transformed set of beliefs and structures with their staffs, parents, and/or students. For example, Michelle incorporated parents’ suggestions in devising a discipline plan for her school, Carolyn enlisted teachers’ participation in defining building goals and means as they were related to excellence and equity, and Sophia created opportunities for her staff to witness at first hand the realities of students’ home lives.

Thus, elementary principals were actively involved in creating conditions in which they themselves, as well as others, could see from an altered vantage point. This altered vantage point could not be achieved without breaking through a layer of automatic but unexamined knowledge (assumptions). Penetrating the absence of consciousness about consciousness disrupted relegating daily interactions and routines to thoughtless habit at the peril of equity. Greene (1984) spoke of this tendency when she wrote, “To proceed unthinkingly is to be caught in the flux of things, to be ‘caught up’ in dailyness, in the sequences of tasks and routines” (p. 57).

Principals in this study emphasized that unquestioned assumptions commonly held by themselves, their communities, their staffs, or the students themselves impeded equity. Greg specifically confronted assumptions about students’ future employment and
value to society in his actions to address equity. He (along with Michelle, Jeannette, Carolyn, and Sophia) noted that a “middle-class framework” for schooling unintentionally, but unfairly kept students without the “proper” readiness from receiving the best efforts of their teachers. To his way of thinking, this reduced children’s belief in self-efficacy. Hence, unquestioned assumptions constitute a kind of ignorance that blocks agency, in the views of study participants.

Eisner (2005) believed that consciousness of consciousness is imperative to intelligent practice (see also Dewey, 1929; Freire, 2003; Greene, 1988; Griffiths, 2006; J. Smyth, 2001). He distinguished between primary and secondary ignorance, saying:

Primary ignorance about teaching, or about anything else for that matter, is when you do not know something but you know that you do not know it. In such a situation you can do something about it. Secondary ignorance is when you do not know something but do not know you do not know it. In this case, you can do nothing about the problem. (p. 139)

For several of the participants in this study, the development of critical social awareness was predicated on coming to know of one’s own secondary ignorance (K. Brown, 2006; Greene, 1984; Shields, 2004). Paving the way for this awareness was what Corson (2002) has described as constructive skepticism of things presented as though they were common sense, for, “common sense is filled with error of every conceivable kind” (p. 2). In addressing equity matters, the principals sought to disrupt the entrenched ideas and organizational patterns (i.e. common sense) that influenced educators’ practices. Using the terms “mental models” or “middle-class framework,” they described
the work they’d done on behalf of equity to lead toward discovery of the influence of unquestioned assumptions in daily practices. This effort involved practical work at the stem of knowledge, to become self-conscious of the ways in which one can know what one knows. For instance, Michelle, Greg, Sophia, Jeannette, and Carolyn, along with their staffs, engaged in book study groups, workshop presentations, and sharing stories that disturbed leading (often hidden) ideas regarding deficits believed to be associated with socioeconomic class, race, gender, or ability. To really understand equity meant examining dimensions of knowing so that blind spots could be revealed. Toward this end, participants engaged in social critique and sought to establish it as a collective endeavor in their schools. In so doing, these principals enacted a transformative, rather than a banking, model of education.

Freire (2003) illuminated the differences between a banking model of education and a problem-posing, or transformative, one. In addition to other distinctions, he underscored the role of critical awareness in a transformative model of education. He wrote:

“Problem posing” education, responding to the essence of consciousness—

*intentionality*—rejects communiqués and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being *conscious of*, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself in a Jasperian “split”—consciousness as consciousness of consciousness (p. 79).

Unfortunately, consciousness of consciousness has been “left behind” in the rush for accountability and standardization in our schools. Nevertheless, K. Brown (2006) has
recognized that “Assessing beliefs in an effort to make them known and subject to critical analysis is an important first step in the process [of adjusting thinking to modify belief systems]” (p. 703). Describing the tenets of transformative learning theory (attributed to Mezirow, 1991), Brown emphasized rational discourse as a means for gauging the truthfulness of one’s meaning constructions. Participants Greg, Sophia, Michelle, Jeannette, and Carolyn understood the value of rational discourse, defined by Brown as “the commitment to extended and repeated conversations that evolve with time into a culture of careful listening and cautious openness to new perspectives” (p. 709). Book study groups, task-defining collectives, and project work undertaken at school sites embodied a view of rational discourse prized for its value in scaffolding new understandings and agency related to equity.

Participants recognized that understanding could not start from “unknowing,” or the absence of knowledge; it began instead with knowing that unknowing existed. That is, they realized the necessity of first bringing to a level of consciousness that which was formerly ignored, so as to disclose unknowing, and then re-created understandings of equity from multiple perspectives that were informed by different lenses. These educators carefully sought out perspectives of others and brought them to bear in reconceptualizing gaps. Principals’ actions penetrated a façade of knowing—a certain “dysconsciousness” that J. King (1991) has suggested serves to justify inequity by its uncritical habit of mind. The process of coming to know of one’s own (and colleagues’) unthinking was an indispensable first step to acquiring beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes that do not reify inequity.
Resisting Smoothing and Decontextualization

Because of an increasingly recognized urgency in addressing issues of equity, typical institutional responses may focus on “getting a grip” on the problem. Even in the face of this demand, though, participants were aware of the danger of homogenizing meaning or means for equity. Instead, school principals in this study demonstrated what might be considered a counterintuitive tendency toward complexifying equity, swaddling the issue in its context. Re-historicizing, re-politicizing, and re-culturing the “texts” by which equity was conceived yielded more complete understandings of inequity in their communities, but it also broached the possibility of non-neutral practice. In effect, research participants embedded Apple’s (2001) repositioning in their leadership practices, via reconceptualizing gaps to incorporate neglected perspectives.

In leading schools toward improved equity, participants resisted simplification and understatement of its issues, acknowledging the “bumps in the road,” such as the need to work against what they considered to be unfair federal and local funding, reveal instances of district bias or discrimination, and confront the ravages of poverty. Nevertheless, school principals absorbed themselves in examining the perspectives of marginalized groups in their school communities. They saw themselves doing the things that would help them, and their colleagues, come nearer to the students’ or parents’ realities. They had seen that by contextualizing the lives of students, they disclosed realities of which some teachers (and they themselves, formerly) were ignorant.

In light of these findings, associational justice (as described by Taysum & Gunter, 2008) fits participants’ sense-making regarding equity. That is, study participants
deliberately opened access for the voices and perspectives of agents who were not part of
the dominant group. The principals attempted to ensure that these voices were
represented when posing and solving problems of inequity, granting the opportunity for
perspectives to be witnessed at first hand, occasionally. More often though, presenting
dissonant realities was done vicariously through book study or professional in-service. It
could be that school leaders sensed that increased staff resistance would result from
feelings of indictment; and in such cases, they may have buffered “raw” realities. If so, it
provides additional evidence that principals’ knowledge of leading an equity agenda is
less a set of standardized practices than an enactment of sophisticated, densely-informed
ways of being and becoming. Further study of how principals may infuse their practices
with a critical dimension for equity would be helpful in learning the ways that schools
and their communities come to advance equity.

Participants repeatedly demonstrated to their staffs the belief that widely informed
perspectives are critical in achieving equity by insisting that underrepresented voices and
viewpoints were given credence through their witness of reconceptualized gaps. In so
doing, school principals underscored the significance of means for leadership practice
aimed toward the ends of improving equity—that is, leaders had to accomplish equity in
a way that is equitable. Their processing reflected an emerging sense of practical
judgment when it came to equity. R. Smith (1999) has asserted that in practical judgment,
“we see the good to be realized as something to be sought through the action and not as
an independently specifiable aim” (p. 331). The pragmatic understanding expressed
through witnessing reconceptualized gaps merged moral considerations of “what is right” with “how it is right” to manifest equity-laden practices.

Immersion in multiple perspectives presented one way of approximating the reality of inequity, despite the relative privilege in which principals understood they lived. Repositioning by examining experiences from others’ vantage points and contextualizing equity both acted to equip school leaders to imagine the differences they could make in their roles, despite others’ deterministic mind-sets that “there is nothing we can do.” In this study of school principals’ practices to address equity, at least six participants consciously resisted valorizing technical aspects of their work over the moral ones. In spite of “common sense” and standard operating procedures in their buildings or districts, these educators did not “avoid situations where their values (e.g., sexist, racist, class, generational, religious), leadership styles, and professional goals can be challenged and dismantled” (K. Brown, 2006, p. 731). They tolerated heightened personal and professional risk in addressing issues of equity, and yet they actively set out to diminish the risk for others to do the same by creating an inclusive climate, openly acknowledging challenges, and legitimating diverse sources of knowledge.

Through these efforts, study participants powerfully enacted what Greene (1988) described as

[O]ne way of conceiving of what freedom signifies—the freedom to alter situations by reinterpreting them, and by so doing, seeing oneself as a person in a new perspective. Once this happens, there are new beginnings, new actions to undertake in the world. (p. 90)
Recommendations

Elementary school principals in this study recognized the importance of capturing collective imagination in ways that defied institutionalized helplessness and hopelessness. Simultaneously, they lifted the veil that separated home lives and childhoods of educators and their students. They perceived that a juxtaposition of disparate realities could instigate a cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction of understandings of equity. They recognized this cycle, in turn, could catalyze progress and momentum in achieving educational equity in ways that eclipsed reliance on policy and mandates alone.

However, research participants unanimously failed to mention the link between social justice and their work as school leaders pursuing equity. Several principals mentioned feelings of marginalization and disintegration within their districts but by failing to realize links to social justice, they cut themselves off from potential support of preexisting social justice networks. What could be the benefit of such an association?

One recommendation implied by this study is to forge links between practitioners, scholars, and research. With respect to equity’s critical dimensions of identity and power, these connections would likely be qualitatively different from existing traditional partnerships. By developing collectives where “unlike minds that lack status orientations [are] searching together for common understanding/meaning” (Dye, 2004, p.3), educators, scholars, politicians, and parents could access bodies of knowledge, relationships, encouragement, and skills to support their quest for educational equity.

Further study of emerging social justice alliances and networks could shape hybrid relationships between public school educators, policymakers, and scholars to
advance equity in innovative ways (for example, through online communities, or in concert with civic groups). Such venues would answer the call issued by Hargreaves (1996) to blur “the boundaries between university discourse and school-level discourse about education” (p. 105). In addition, they could provide an antidote for overreliance on unidimensional data and dichotomous mindsets. Through this kind of arrangement, practitioners may find voice and space for their knowledge and the knowledge of their students to be represented. So too, they might be able to contribute to change in the larger realm—national or global policies and practices aimed at equity and social justice. Research investigating how agency toward equity may be enlarged in this setting would add to the knowledge base for social justice and equity.

A final recommendation is for school districts to adopt leadership configurations which increasingly rely on the wisdom of collected knowledge (i.e., the combined experiences of students, staff, and parents) rather than solely on individual knowledge or policy stipulations. From the data gathered in this study, a fitting characterization of principals’ work toward equity is that it begins at the edges of established knowledge bases for educational leadership. At the margins of standardized practices and leader-centric policies are fertile fields, perhaps grounding discovery of how educational equity may be harvested even within conditions of inequity. Adopting operational models that flatten leadership hierarchy enables wider perspectives of, and more meaningful participation in, a shift in social consensus about equity. Making the collected knowledge visible and accessible as schools move toward educational equity facilitates the process of addressing equity. In addition to achievement test scoring patterns and other
accountability data, collecting qualitative data related to perceptions of equity in schools would offer a more complete picture of conditions and possibly bring the need for change to light. Multiple sources of data about equity can only support growth in understanding the various perspectives and priorities of the school community.

This is courageous work, because some districts would prefer to deny or minimize the issue of equity, at least for “out-of-house” consumption. Central office leaders are rightfully concerned about public approval in an era of shrinking financial commitment to public schools, but deficient district-level support for principals pursuing equity can profoundly affect the efficacy of those principals’ practices to address equity. In the absence of this support, principals fend for themselves and their students under conditions that are, at best, inhospitable to change. As Barbara and Krovetz (2005) have noted, “a principal’s capacity to lead the equity agenda at a school is compromised without the context of a district focus” (p. 13).

Adding to the challenge of pursuing equity, four participants cited examples of discriminatory leadership advancement practices in their districts. These hidden sources of inequity particularly constrain the professional practices of minority school leaders who must balance their desire to improve equity with the knowledge that their status already is tenuous. “Rocking the boat” may be harmful to these professionals since elevated concern for equity distinguishes them further, and possibly as ones whose “fitness” for leadership is questioned. (See Tooms, 2007, for a thorough explanation of the construct of fit as it applied to school administrators negotiating sexual identity.) Marshall (2006) stated, “In the professional culture, women and minority administrators
often feel they must hide feelings of difference and exclusion and become more like the dominant White men to be successful” (p. 5).

Under these conditions, some principals become subject to what Aronson (2004) has referred to as “stereotype threat.” By bringing inequity to the attention of their superiors, they risk appearing to confirm a myth of “emotionality” or “pursuing a personal agenda” (both unacceptable under prevailing professional norms). These same principals, however, risk moral jeopardy in not testifying to the presence of inequity in their districts and buildings. “Don’t rock the boat” is a familiar theme to school principals in this position. To ameliorate these conditions, equity audits as conceived by Skrla et al. (2006) could be used as a district-wide tool. Furthermore, equity audits could be adapted to encompass the professional leadership advancement practices of central office staff. The work of leading for equity is challenging enough without the added burden of discrimination and inequity from within.

Further Questions and Conclusion

A limitation of note in this work is that I did not provide a robust elaboration of a “grounded theory” per se. This was due to sample size, tertiary contact with participants, and even my own struggles with dogma vs. open-mindedness as I continue to unpack whose “equity” counts. What this phenomenon does, however, is open the door for richer implications specific to further research questions such as whose version of equity matters, what connections exist between leadership preparation and curriculum theorizing, and how these may be relevant in principals’ day to day practices regarding class placement, staff assignment and other duties. Furthermore, my research has
underscored the need for inquiry about the positions and perspectives of teachers and students as they relate to the principals’ actions to address equity.

Based on the results of this investigation, links between leadership preparation, curriculum theorizing, and institutional change for equity are generally under-recognized. If schools are to adopt more equitable models for educating young children, the content of educational leadership programs deserves attention. Exposing and interrogating beliefs related to equity and diversity are essential to the development of a shared knowledge base for educational leaders. However, without specific focus on integrating both leadership and curriculum theories, including their potential worth in shaping students’ school experience toward improved equity, the priority of seeking equity cannot be established. An educational leadership program that makes theory practical in the pursuit of equity offers particular benefit in terms of equipping school staff and students for social reconstruction and agency.

Understanding the relevance of beliefs and theories to one’s daily practice can be viewed as a ‘new literacy’ for educators in the 21st century. In a climate where policy is king, it takes significant fortitude to resist wholesale acceptance of the premises inherent in “best practices.” Here is where posing the question “best for whom?” comes into play. School leaders require knowledge of the power structures within the school organization, so they may deliberately construct new relations to advance equity. As educational leaders pursue equity in their daily work, they will need to acknowledge the multiple realities of those in their school communities. They will need skill in examining plural perspectives rather than only dominant ones.
Making way for equity amid conditions of inequity is demanding work. It taxes the intellect and tests the moral conviction behind the phrase “liberty and justice for all.” Yet the quest holds potential to transform the lives of students and educators in our nation’s schools. As demographics in public schools continue to shift, how are educational leaders creating new meaning for equity, and how do they divest themselves of useless meanings for equity? What might distinguish organizational readiness in moving toward equity? What is the nature of that movement? To what extent are the practices of principals actively seeking equity interpreted as successful in accomplishing that aim, both by the principals themselves and by others? Although some research has been conducted to help define the practices of educators in pursuit of educational equity, it is a relatively new thrust of study, particularly as it is associated with social justice, pluralism, spiritual and moral leadership, and curriculum wisdom.

Perhaps Principal Carolyn captured the pursuit of equity best as she expressed “trying to build something for everybody with everybody.” Continued study of how building administrators and their organizations address equity is important to children who are indelibly imprinted with the marks of schooling. It matters as well to teachers and principals who seek new meaning for their work. Educators who dare to imagine those marks as generative imprints of love, grace, and justice, as I do, must push their schools to transcend the mandates and take on the mission of equity.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Initial Probe
Appendix A

Initial Probe

Elliott and Lazenbatt (2004) note implications of theoretical sampling for the researcher preparing a research proposal, writing that “the questions used for data collection or the sampling strategy cannot be pre-determined before the grounded theory research begins, but can emerge only from the data analysis” (p. 3). Nonetheless, it is necessary to develop at least an initial idea of the types of questions that might bring to the surface the interpretations and practices of elementary school principals who recognize that they are dealing with issues of equity. The probe questions listed below are meant to gauge the level of concern and understanding about equity issues related to principals’ practices, as well as to identify those who are willing to engage in further complicated conversations (Pinar, 2004) about those issues.

- Would you consider yourself to be consciously striving for equity in your daily practice?
  YES       NO

- Do you see any connections to matters of equity as you go about your work?
  NONE                SOMEWHAT                FREQUENTLY

- Do you find that you are absorbed with conversation or reading related to issues of equity in educational practice?
None SOMEWHAT FREQUENTLY

- How would you rate the importance of equity issues to your actions on the job each day?
  A PERIPHERAL AN INTERMEDIATE A CENTRAL CONCERN CONCERN CONCERN

- Do you ever encounter difficult situations around matters of equity related to socioeconomic status, special education/inclusion, race, or gender?
  NONE SOMETIMES FREQUENTLY

- Do you perceive your own ideas about equity as central to a larger concern or mission?
  YES NO
APPENDIX B

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol
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Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Participants in the study were selected from the original set of elementary school principals who were contacted by email, with selection based on the principals indicating that equity issues are central to their practice. After obtaining their permission to participate further in the study, interviews were scheduled. A general outline of interview questions appears below. The format, number, sequence, and follow-up questions used varied based upon participants’ experiences and the responses they made. The document presented here provided a starting point for the interviews. I began by telling the participants a little about the study and my interest:

This research is organized around the questions of how school principals interpret and address equity issues in their practices. You have been invited to participate because you recognized your own challenges and interest in this subject. During interviews, it is my intent to focus on your account of your experience as a school administrator, and to examine the beliefs, ideas, and actions that shape your sense of equity and your practices to address it.

Next, I asked questions that followed this general outline.

1. Tell me about your career, and how you became the principal of this school.

Follow up questions included:

Are there any critical incidents that pointed you in the direction of school leadership?
Can you tell me about some of the most important duties and accomplishments associated with your position?

What are some of the joys that have come with this position?

2. Can you talk with me about your sense of equity? How would you define it?

Follow up questions included:

What are the important things for me to know about the way in which you make sense of equity?

What does inequity mean to you?

Are there any incidents or situations that helped you build your understanding about equity—in your role as a principal? At other times?

3. What are the issues you perceive as related to equity in your building or community?

Follow up questions included:

Are there any challenges you face in translating your ideas of equity into your practice?

Do you think that your concerns for equity are widely shared in your building, your district, your profession? How can you tell?

4. At times, there may appear to be more than one issue involved in a given situation in your building or community. Are there other issues that sometimes surface in your pursuit of equity?

Follow up questions included:

How do you handle those issues?
Have you ever felt like your definition of equity was in conflict with other of your own or your colleagues’ beliefs?

Follow up questions included:

Could you tell me more about that time?
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