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COLLECTIVE EFFORT, EQUITABLE OUTCOMES:
A CASE STUDY OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS AND
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

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Abstract

Educational equity remains a persistent challenge in public education, particularly as schools seek collaborative structures that can reduce disparities in student outcomes. This qualitative case study examined how elementary principals in Norman Public Schools understood educational equity and used Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to support equitable instructional practices. Guided by Transformative Leadership Theory, the study explored principals' definitions of equity, their views of the purpose of PLCs, and the ways PLCs were used to address student learning disparities. Six elementary principals were selected through purposeful maximum variation sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, analysis of PLC and school documents, and analytic memos, and were analyzed through iterative coding and cross-case comparison. Findings showed that principals primarily defined equity as access to high-quality instruction, targeted support, and intervention rather than as an explicitly systemic or justice-centered construct. PLCs were widely understood as collaborative systems for instructional improvement and were used to analyze data, identify learning needs, and coordinate responses for students. However, equity leadership within PLCs was more often enacted through instructional decisions than through explicit discussion of bias, power, or structural inequity. These findings suggest that PLCs can support more equitable outcomes when principals intentionally expand collaboration beyond achievement data to include access, opportunity, and systemic inequities.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Ensuring equity for all students in K-12 public education is not only a moral imperative but a foundational necessity for a just and prosperous society. Every child, regardless of background, deserves equal access to high-quality educational opportunities, including qualified teachers, social-emotional support, and well-funded schools that nurture their talents and aspirations. Despite equity being a longstanding focus of American education policy and practice, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, n.d.) and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.) consistently highlight persistent achievement gaps in U.S. schools between White students and their Black, Hispanic, disabled, English learner, and economically disadvantaged peers.

From the beginning, the United States of America envisioned a free, quality public education for students of all socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Coined as the "great equalizer" by Horace Mann in 1848, public education was meant to level the playing field by ensuring every student, regardless of race or social status, has a chance to excel academically and in life. Many educational laws and policies over the past century were designed to decrease existing inequities.

Beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the U.S. Supreme Court dismantled the 'separate but equal' doctrine established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) (National Archives, 2021), thus effectively ending legalized racial segregation in American schools. This decision became a catalyst for the broader civil rights movement, reshaping the fight for equality in the United States. Additionally, this landmark ruling set in motion the passage of other laws that were designed to provide equitable access and inclusion.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) were created to address the inequality of educational access for underprivileged and children with disabilities and were intended to help ensure access to a quality education (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2022). The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 (Wiese & Garcia, 2001) and the Lau v. Nichols' decision in 1974 (IDRA, 2024) recognized the need for equitable educational opportunities for students with limited English proficiency, emphasizing their need for additional support and providing schools with funding for supplemental language programs. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is yet another law aimed at reducing inequities that specifically led to increasing opportunities for girls and women in education, including in athletics and STEM fields (U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2023). Together, these legal milestones laid the groundwork for ongoing efforts to confront and reduce educational inequities, setting the stage for the next wave of reforms aimed at expanding access and opportunity for all students.

Although these legal achievements created a framework for advancement, significant academic and opportunity gaps continue to persist in public education, highlighting ongoing disparities in student outcomes and access to resources. A 1983 report titled *A Nation at Risk* highlighted critical flaws in the education system, including declining student achievement, poorly prepared teachers, and inconsistent academic standards (James et al., 2001). Since then, extensive efforts have been made by educators, administrators, and policymakers to narrow the academic gap through improving curricula, increasing accountability, and implementing new legislation. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, built on the early foundation of education reform efforts and focused particularly on accountability and standards. Aimed to ensure that all

students, regardless of background, achieved academic proficiency, specifically in reading and math, NCLB required standardized testing, rigorous academic standards, and increased transparency of student achievement through annual school report cards (Growe & Montgomery, 2003; McDonald, 2002; Neill, 2016).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law in 2015 to replace No Child Left Behind (NCLB), modernized the approach to closing achievement gaps by providing additional support for disadvantaged and high-need students while granting states greater control over educational decisions, with a continued focus on accountability and equity (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary, 2002). This shift also required school districts to ensure that every teacher was "highly qualified," a requirement aimed to address challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, particularly in schools serving low-income students (Growe & Montgomery, 2003; Lee & Lee, 2018).

Accountability measures set forth by NCLB and ESSA were designed to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction, and increase outcomes for all students; however, a “lack of opportunity from systems, structures, and adults” (Mooney, 2018, para. 7) continues to be a barrier to success for students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and marginalized student groups (Milner, 2012; Pendakur, 2023; Pitre, 2014). Consequently, disadvantages within the educational system that contribute to inequalities in educational opportunities cause some researchers to shift their focus away from the academic gap to recognizing institutional practices that influence disparities known as the opportunity gap (Carlock et al., 2022; Flores, 2018; Milner, 2012; Carter & Welner, 2013). Lack of access to qualified teachers, appropriate funding and resources, and social and mental health supports play into inequitable opportunities experienced by many minority and disadvantaged students as

compared to their White counterparts (Carlock et al., 2022; Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pendakur, 2023; Pitre, 2014; Poole, 2024).

Beyond policies, educators have tried a variety of reform practices and improvement programs to address disparities in U.S. schools. These efforts often focus on expanding access to high-quality educational resources, promoting culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995) and providing targeted support for underrepresented student groups (Hagel, 2014; Williams, 2011). Schools are increasingly adopting data-driven approaches to identify gaps in achievement and allocate resources more equitably (Datnow & Park, 2018; McIntyre, 2016). Additionally, initiatives like early intervention programs (Bassok & Latham, 2017) and professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Romas, 2022; Vegas & Winthrop, 2020) aim to create more inclusive learning environments. Despite the implementation of various reform practices aimed at fostering equity in education, significant challenges persist in dismantling systemic barriers and providing tailored support, making it increasingly difficult for school districts across the nation to create an environment where every student can thrive (Cardichon et al., 2020; Milner, 2012; Mooney, 2018; Poole, 2024).

The persistence of achievement gaps between impoverished and affluent students, as well as between African American, Hispanic, and White students, has been well-documented since the 1970s (Growe & Montgomery, 2003), illustrating the complexity of overcoming these challenges. According to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 4th grade assessment scores, achievement gaps were still evident. In reading, White students scored 28 points higher than Black students and 22 points higher than Hispanic students. In mathematics, White students scored 29 points higher than Black students and 21 points higher than Hispanic students. Again, the gap trend was similar when comparing non-disabled and

disabled, English learners and non-English Learners, and non-Economically Disadvantaged and Economically Disadvantaged student groups (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], n.d.).

Although school districts and school sites have adopted research-based school improvement plans in an attempt to address the needs of underperforming student groups, they often fail to address the root causes for educational inequalities (Edwards-Hudson, 2022; McIntyre, 2016). Psychological constructs, such as low expectations and deficit mindsets, are another set of factors that researchers have attributed to the opportunity gap (Miller, 2019; Pendakur, 2023). Not only are these factors difficult to address, they can be detrimental to student learning and achievement (Hung et al., 2020; Jacoby-Senghor et al., 2016; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007; Van den Bergh et al., 2010; Williams, 2011). From day one, teachers have opinions and make assumptions about the students who enter their classroom. When teachers have low expectations of students' ability, pedagogical decisions they make may also be impacted (Hayes, 2018). For example, a teacher may believe that some students cannot master grade level skills and fail to engage these students in critical thinking or teach them grade level content while, at the same time, offer other students more opportunities to engage in more challenging and rigorous content (Hayes, 2018; Milner, 2012; Van den Bergh et al., 2010). These assumptions and instructional decisions not only have a significant impact on student success but can also be unconscious (Jacoby-Senghor et al., 2016; Miller, 2019; Van den Bergh et al., 2010). Often, teachers' deficit mindset of disabled and marginalized student groups results in low performance and often creates additional barriers and inequities in classrooms and schools (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015; Haynes, 2018; Pendakur, 2023; Van den Bergh et al., 2010; Warikoo et al., 2016). In 1968, Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson conducted the "Pygmalion" experiment which examined

the effects of teacher expectations on student performance. In this study, researchers told elementary school teachers that certain students were identified as having high potential for intellectual growth; however, these students were randomly chosen with no real basis for their perceived academic advantage. Findings revealed that the selected students demonstrated significant improvements in IQ scores compared to their peers, and their improvements were attributed to the teachers' elevated expectations (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). In other words, the teachers' beliefs in the students' advanced skills and capacity guided their instructional decisions to provide enhanced learning opportunities, additional wait time, and differentiated feedback. This experiment illustrates the teacher expectancy effect, where higher expectations contribute to improved student performance. Furthermore, it highlights the role of unconscious bias in education, as teachers may unknowingly treat students differently based on preconceived notions. The study's findings emphasize the importance of equity in education, suggesting that all students could benefit from high expectations. Ultimately, the Pygmalion experiment demonstrates the profound impact of teacher expectations on student success and the necessity for intentional, equitable approaches in education (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Since the Pygmalion experiment, numerous studies have reinforced the idea that teacher biases play a critical role in shaping academic achievement and educational opportunities, particularly for marginalized students. Van den Bergh et al. (2010) found that teachers with implicit prejudices against ethnic minority students tended to set lower expectations for their academic performance, reinforcing the ethnic achievement gap by limiting students' access to academic support and opportunities. Similarly, Warikoo et al. (2016) revealed that teachers with higher levels of implicit racial bias were more likely to perceive students of color as disruptive or less capable, resulting in disproportionate disciplinary actions and diminished academic

expectations. These biased perceptions create additional barriers that hinder student success and perpetuate inequities in the classroom. Expanding on this issue, Bertrand and Marsh (2015) examined how teachers interpret student performance data and found that deficit thinking, where educators attribute low achievement to students' inherent deficiencies rather than systemic factors, further contributes to educational disparities. Teachers frequently blamed marginalized students' academic struggles on a lack of motivation or parental support rather than evaluating the role of instructional practices and systemic inequities. Collectively, these studies highlight how implicit biases and deficit mindsets among educators create self-fulfilling cycles of low expectations, limited academic opportunities, and reinforced achievement gaps for marginalized student groups (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015; Van den Bergh et al., 2010; Warikoo et al., 2016). Additionally, they underscore the need for professional development programs that help educators recognize and mitigate biases in their teaching practices (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Van den Bergh et al., 2010; Warikoo et al., 2016). Professional learning communities have become a popular organizational structure for facilitating teacher learning on issues that can elevate student performance and mitigate disparities in educational opportunities.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are recognized as a powerful mechanism for driving change in schools through intentional collaboration and a focus on learning rather than teaching (Beckmann-Bartlett, 2016; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Stoll et al., 2006; Ontario Principals' Council, 2009). Within PLCs, teachers work together to enhance each other's pedagogical capacity and implement transformative practices (Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006), leading to improved instruction (Evans, 1996; DuFour & Fullan, 2012; Lujan & Day, 2010). These collaborative efforts not only shift instructional strategies but also influence teacher

mindsets and promote more equitable classroom practices. As a result, PLCs contribute to enhanced student learning and help reduce disparities in teacher quality that often lead to inequitable outcomes (Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Lepe-Ramirez, 2018; Romas, 2022).

One critical area where PLCs can drive change is in examining pedagogical practices through an equity lens to ensure all students have access to high-quality learning opportunities. Richard DuFour identified one of the foundational ideas of PLCs as the collective belief that all students can learn at high levels, meaning all students can master essential grade-level content regardless of their backgrounds, disabilities, or circumstances (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). PLCs provide the structure and support necessary to help educators critically reflect on and shift their cultural understandings and beliefs of students, fostering more inclusive teaching practices, reducing implicit biases, and ensuring that all learners receive equitable opportunities to succeed (Fisher et al., 2019; Friedrich & McKinney, 2010; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Lepe-Ramirez, 2018; Romas, 2022). In 2018, Adriana Lepe-Ramirez studied how issues of equity and teacher bias could be mitigated by utilizing PLCs to foster teacher pedagogy and instructional practices that support all learners (Lepe-Ramirez, 2018). Her findings concluded that, although shifting teachers' belief systems was challenging, PLCs contributed to progress toward more equitable learning environments in some teams (Lepe-Ramirez, 2018).

To ensure these equity-focused efforts lead to meaningful and lasting change, PLCs must be results-oriented, with progress assessed and measured rather than assumed (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2008, 2016). Shifting teacher mindsets to promote more equitable student outcomes within PLCs requires a clear, data-driven approach that provides immediate, actionable feedback. As Pfeffer and Sutton (as cited in DuFour et al., 2016, p. 199) state, “control and improvement come from measures that provide information about processes, measures that give

people immediate and understandable information about how they need to act." This underscores the importance of moving beyond discussions of equity and embedding measurable strategies within PLCs. Teachers need concrete data to assess their instructional practices, track their impact on diverse learners, and adjust their approaches accordingly. When PLCs provide regular, accessible feedback, educators can continuously refine their methods to ensure that all students, particularly those from marginalized groups, receive the necessary support to succeed. This approach fosters a collective responsibility for student achievement, ensuring that equity is not just a goal but an ongoing, measurable commitment within the entire teaching community (Fisher et al., 2019; Romas, 2022).

Educational equity cannot be accomplished without exemplary leadership to create urgency and commitment for change (Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007). Empirical data confirms that, second to classroom teachers, school principals can have the greatest impact on student learning and academic achievement (Grissom et al., 2021; Hagel, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2004). In order to increase learning and academic achievement for all students, equity-focused principals must lead transformatively to build safe and welcoming school communities where diverse students are valued (Demerath, 2018; Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007). Scholars assert that school principals play a pivotal role in fostering equitable learning environments by implementing instructional approaches rooted in equity, such as culturally responsive teaching (Danridge et al., 2000; Ylimaki et al., 2012). By setting high instructional expectations for disabled and marginalized students (DeMatthews, 2018; Gerhart et al., 2011), facilitating collaboration (Theoharis, 2007; Ylimaki et al., 2012), utilizing student data (Datnow et al., 2013; LaRocque, 2007; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011), and providing targeted professional development (Garza et al., 2014; Gerhart et al., 2011; Gleason & Gerzon, 2013) principals can transform

teacher practices and mindsets about student ability, ultimately driving more inclusive and effective instruction (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004).

Principals play a critical role in leading effective PLCs that promote equity (Ahn et al., 2024; Lepe-Ramirez, 2018). Leading for equity requires principals to intentionally integrate an equity focus into their schools, ensuring that teachers and staff are fully committed to providing opportunities for every student, including marginalized and disabled students, to learn and succeed at high levels (DeMatthews, 2018; Gerhart et al., 2011; Gleason & Gerzon, 2013). This requires a cultural shift in teachers having high expectations for all students and demands principals to "reframe professional development for individual educators, collaborative teams, and schools as a whole" (Gleason & Gerzon, 2013, p. 3). Principals must create systems of support that allow time for teachers to engage in meaningful collaboration and build trusting relationships that foster transparency and open dialogue (Taylor, 2007; Theoharis, 2007; Ylimaki et al., 2012). In this context, PLCs serve as the platform where teachers can build trust needed to have transparent dialog and collectively reflect on and refine their practices to meet the diverse needs of students (Gleason & Gerzon, 2013; Hord, 1997; Huffman, 2011; Lepe-Ramirez, 2018; Taylor, 2007). By addressing inequities and marginalization through school-wide practices and decisions, principals empower teachers to make systemic changes within the classroom, thus aligning PLC efforts with broader school goals for equity (Lepe-Ramirez 2018; Louie, 2015; Thorius, 2019; Zhang et al., 2018).

Problem Statement

Norman Public Schools (NPS), the 8th largest district in Oklahoma, serves approximately 16,000 students across 24 schools, 19 of which are Title I. In recent years, NPS has undergone notable demographic shifts, becoming increasingly diverse and economically challenged. By

2025, 49% of students identified as White—down from 57% in 2019—while Hispanic (20%), Multiracial (16%), Black (7%), Native American (5%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (3%) populations grew (Norman Public Schools, 2019, 2025). The percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch increased from 43% in 2019 to 53% in 2025, indicating rising economic hardship. English Language Learner (ELL) enrollment also rose from 6% to 8%, and over 75 languages are now spoken districtwide. While gifted (27%) and special education (18%) populations remained stable, these demographic trends reveal an increasingly complex student population (Norman Public Schools, 2019, 2025). As the district becomes more diverse, principals are faced with increasing challenges to effectively translate the district's strategic plan into intentional practices that ensure all students succeed.

These evolving demographics amplify the urgency of addressing academic achievement, particularly in light of significant learning loss stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. NPS continues to face academic challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, with student performance in reading and math still trailing behind pre-pandemic levels (Education Recovery Scorecard, 2025). According to the *Education Recovery Scorecard* (2025), from 2019 to 2022, NPS students in grades 3–8 lost an average of 0.69 grade levels in math, less than the state average of -0.88, and 0.34 grade levels in reading, outperforming the state's -0.69 loss. However, between 2022 and 2024, recovery slowed significantly. NPS gained only 0.03 grade levels in math, compared to the state's 0.21 gain, and declined by -0.48 grade levels in reading, compared to the state's smaller -0.13 decline. While early efforts buffered the initial impact of the pandemic, these recent setbacks suggest that NPS is falling further behind, especially for some student groups (Education Recovery Scorecard, 2025).

Between Spring of 2022 and Spring of 2024, math achievement trends show slower gains for White and Non-Poor students in NPS compared to the state (White: 0.12 vs. 0.27; non-Poor: 0.51 vs. 0.70). Meanwhile, Hispanic and Poor students in NPS saw minimal gains or further losses, while statewide peers improved (Hispanic: -0.11 vs. +0.08; Poor: +0.06 vs. +0.29). Moreover, some student groups showed reading recovery across the state while NPS students continued to decline. White students in NPS lost -0.39 grade levels (state -0.10), and Hispanic students declined -0.11 (state -0.25). Non-Poor students in NPS (-0.05) lagged behind statewide peers (+0.22), while Poor students (-0.33) fell further behind the state average (+0.06), widening the achievement gap.

Academic achievement is not the only area that suggests educational inequities exist. In 2024, NPS data revealed significant disparities in discipline, particularly among economically disadvantaged and Black students (Norman Public Schools, 2024). Although economically disadvantaged students made up 52% of the population, they accounted for 69% of behavioral incidents and 82% of suspensions, nearly double the suspension rate per incident (27.9%) compared to their non-economically disadvantaged peers (13.5%). Racial disparities also emerged. While White students were underrepresented in suspensions relative to their 50% enrollment (42%), Black students, who represented only 6.8% of the population, accounted for 13% of suspensions, nearly twice their enrollment share (Norman Public Schools, 2024). These disparities, combined with academic disparities, underscore the need for school-based leadership that is both equity-minded and action-oriented, prompting the district to launch an initiative that empowers principals with the tools, structures, and support necessary to address inequities within their unique school contexts. Central to this initiative is the implementation of PLCs, designed to foster collaborative, data-informed practices that advance equity at the school level.

Committed to addressing these inequities, NPS identified school principals as key agents of change who play a critical role in shaping equitable learning environments necessary for mitigating persistent disparities in student outcomes. A core component of this strategy was the adoption of PLCs. PLCs were designed as a vehicle for principals to facilitate ongoing collaboration among teachers, examine student data, reflect on instructional practices, and confront disparities in achievement and discipline. This approach positioned principals as equity-focused instructional leaders, playing a vital role in establishing a culture of shared leadership and continuous improvement (DuFour et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2007).

To support this work, the district provided principals with targeted resources, including job-embedded professional learning, collaborative structures, and data systems that enabled disaggregated student data analysis; tools essential for leading equity-focused school improvement. These structural supports helped ensure that PLCs were not just routine meetings, but strategic spaces where inclusive practices were developed, implemented, and refined (Cardichon et al., 2020). By embedding an equity focus within the PLC process, NPS aimed to shift mindsets, build staff capacity, and create systems that more effectively responded to the diverse academic and social-emotional needs of students (DuFour et al., 2016).

Despite the district's strategic investment in PLCs as a means to advance educational equity, the impact of these efforts remains uncertain. While PLCs were intended to serve as collaborative structures where principals and teachers could examine data, reflect on practice, and address disparities, student performance data indicates that achievement gaps persist. This disconnect between the district's equity-focused intentions and the lack of measurable academic improvement raises important questions about how PLCs are being enacted at the school level. Specifically, it calls for a closer examination of how elementary principals conceptualize

educational equity, how they interpret the purpose of PLCs, and in what ways, if any, do elementary principals use PLCs to advance educational equity in their schools.

Purpose of Study

In the face of societal tensions and post-pandemic gaps, school principals are more challenged than ever to ensure academic success for all students, regardless of ability, race, or socioeconomic status. Leading for educational equity is complex, as it "begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and addresses both individual and public good" (Shields, 2010, p. 558). Ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students is a moral obligation for every school principal; the challenge lies in how to achieve it.

One effective strategy for principals to promote equity is through PLCs. Although PLCs foster teacher collaboration and collective accountability (DuFour et al., 2016; Taylor, 2007; Theoharis, 2007; Ylimaki et al., 2012), their effectiveness depends on principals implementing strong organizational learning structures (Boone, 2014; Hipp et al., 2008; Sims & Penny, 2015; Weinbaum et al., 2004) and ensuring access to resources for analyzing student data and refining instructional practices (Ahn et al., 2024; Gleason & Gerzon, 2013; Hord, 1997; Huffman, 2011; Lepe-Ramirez, 2018; Ontario Principals' Council, 2009; Taylor, 2007). While PLCs have the potential to influence teacher collaboration and instructional practices related to equity, limited research has examined how they are used as leadership structures to advance equity in schools. To address this gap, this study examines how elementary principals in Norman Public Schools conceptualize educational equity and how they utilize PLCs as leadership structures to support equity-oriented instructional practices. The study also examines the challenges principals encounter in leveraging collaborative practices to address student learning disparities.

Research Questions

1. How do elementary principals define and understand educational equity in their schools?
2. How do elementary principals perceive the purpose and use of PLCs in their schools?
3. In what ways, if any, do elementary principals use PLCs to advance educational equity in their schools?

This qualitative study examines principals' leadership practices through the lens of Transformative Leadership Theory to explore how principals conceptualize educational equity and how they utilize PLCs as collaborative leadership structures that may support equity-oriented instructional practices. Focusing on elementary principals from a single school district, the study used in-depth interviews and document analysis to gather principals' perspectives on their roles in fostering collective efficacy and supporting dialogue that addresses equitable student outcomes. The study aims to uncover the leadership strategies that principals employ to sustain high-functioning PLCs, understand how those strategies promote equitable learning outcomes, and identify challenges that may hinder their progress towards advancing equity, particularly for marginalized student groups.

Significance of Study

Ensuring equitable opportunities for all students is a moral imperative for school principals. To fulfill this obligation, principals must create collaborative learning environments that address the inequities and barriers historically faced by marginalized groups in public schools. By actively engaging with issues such as bias, opportunity, equity, and achievement, principals not only promote social justice but also embody transformative leadership practices that drive systemic change, empowering all students to succeed.

Transformative leaders place issues of race, class, disability, gender identity, and other marginalizing conditions at the heart of their advocacy and leadership practice (Theoharis, 2007). To create meaningful change, principals must establish a sense of urgency and commitment to address these challenges, making exemplary leadership essential (Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007).

Advancing educational equity can be especially difficult given the political climate in Oklahoma, where local and state policies often hinder efforts to address race, socioeconomic status, and disability-related inequities. Despite these challenges, research highlights collective teacher efficacy as a critical factor in achieving a more equitable school culture (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). In this context, PLCs serve as a powerful tool for principals. PLCs provide a framework for teachers to collaborate, set high expectations, share best practices, analyze student data, and take collective responsibility for student success, ultimately helping to close opportunity gaps (Datnow et al., 2013; DuFour et al., 2016).

This study is significant because research is still needed in the area of embedding equity work such as mitigating deficit mindsets and opportunity gaps and collectively responding to equity goals through the PLC process. The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on collective efficacy, PLCs, transformative leadership, educational equity (Donohee et al., 2018; DuFour et al., 2016; Growe & Montgomery, 2003; Knechtges, 2017; Kyriakides et al., 2019; Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007; Wilson, 2022).

As educational systems continue to struggle with issues such as the achievement and opportunity gaps, this research is relevant and timely. Its findings will support Norman Public Schools' ongoing efforts to create an inclusive environment and will provide a valuable

framework for other school districts and principals working to promote fairness and equity in education.

Key Terms

For this study, the following terms and definitions guided the research:

- *Educational equity* - fairness and inclusion within schools, in which they provide quality education for all, ensuring inclusion as the basic standard for every student and understanding personal and social circumstances are not obstacles to learning outcomes (Kyriakides et al., 2019).
- *Achievement gap* - The disparity between the academic performance of different groups of students.
- *Opportunity gap* - Students experience inequities because of a lack of access to qualified staff, the absence of sufficient social-emotional health and support, and the lack of appropriate fiscal resources.
- *Collective efficacy* - A group's shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment (Donohoo et al., 2018).
- *Professional learning communities* - Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are groups of educators who work collaboratively in cycles of collective inquiry to experience job-embedded learning, analyze student data, plan instruction and improve the academic achievement of all students (DuFour et al., 2016).
- *Transformative leadership* - "Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise of not only

greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others" (Shields, 2010, p. 559).

Limitations of the Study

Creswell and Creswell (2018) define limitations as factors that could affect the findings. With that, there are limitations that must be acknowledged. Because this study was limited to Norman Public Schools, the number of eligible principals was limited. Furthermore, since this study only focused on NPS administrators with specific perspectives and experiences unique to this school district, findings may not apply to other administrators in other school districts.

As the researcher, there are factors that could influence my interpretations of the data collected in this study. First, this study and researcher experience as a White female educational leader were driven by her belief that her work should benefit all students including those who are marginalized in schools and society. Second, the researcher is a district administrator for Norman Public Schools and works with school principals in the area of teaching and learning. While she established a positive and trusting relationship with each of the principals who participated in the study, the researcher's positional authority could influence their answers during the interviews and behaviors during observations. They may worry about the possible effects of being transparent and honest about their personal perceptions and views about educational equity issues, which can be difficult to discuss, especially since a district core value is inclusiveness. In addition, the researcher may have personal implicit biases that she is unaware of that could impact her interpretation of the data. Triangulation of data was embedded into the methodology of this study to mitigate researcher bias as much as possible.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into 5 chapters. Chapter 1 presents an introduction to the research study and includes the background, purpose statement, research questions, significance of the study, definition of terms, limitations of study, and organization of dissertation. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature on educational equity, collective efficacy and professional learning communities, and transformational leadership. Chapter 3 presents the methods used to explore the research questions including research design, population, and context. Chapter 4 documents the findings of the study and data analysis of the results. Lastly, Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings, a summary of the study, and recommendations for educational leadership practices and future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This study explores whether and how elementary principals in Norman Public School implement Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as organizational structures to promote educational equity, as well as the challenges they encounter in leveraging collaborative strategies to support equitable student outcomes. To situate this inquiry within existing scholarship, Chapter 2 provides a critical review of empirically grounded literature drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, books, and national reports.

The literature is organized into three interconnected areas that collectively establish the foundation and rationale for the study. The chapter begins with an exploration of educational equity, including its historical development, evolving definitions, impact on student outcomes, and the role of leadership in advancing equitable practices. This is followed by a synthesis of literature on the history, definition, and core features of PLCs, with connections drawn between PLCs, educational equity, and leadership. The review concludes with the theoretical framework of transformative leadership underpinning this study.

Educational Equity

History

Educational inequity in American public education is not a new issue. Beginning in 1848, Horace Mann's vision of educating all students regardless of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds laid the foundation of educational equity in the sense that public education was a public good and that every student deserved to be an educated citizen. Despite Mann's vision of educating all, educational inequities began to emerge in the public school system as issues were addressed in the courts and laws were created. The case of *Watson v. Cambridge* (1893) and later

Beattie v. Board of Education (1919) ruled in favor of the exclusion of educating students with disabilities (*Watson V. City of Cambridge,* 157 Mass. 561, 1893; Forte, 2025). *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) set a historical precedent of segregation that began with "separate but equal" public facilities and eventually became a federal mandate for all public schools (National Archives, 2022). The impact of these court cases on students became evident. Although the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling guaranteed equality in the sense that White and Black students had access to equitable facilities and textbooks, the disproportionate property taxes resulted in unequal funding of Black schools versus White schools which often led to overcrowded Black schools in some states (National Archives, 2022).

Efforts to address education inequalities began when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) stating that due to the psychological harm that segregation had on Black children, separate accommodations were inherently unequal and violated the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause. Later, the Brown II ruling ensured schools were taking strides to secure nondiscrimination "with all deliberate speed." Both cases represent the foundational shift from exclusion and inequities to inclusion and equity. Educational policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) were created to help ensure access to quality education for underprivileged students and children with disabilities by providing federal grants and funds to systems that started, expanded, or improved educational programs for these students (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 2022). The Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 also addresses educational equity by prohibiting sex discrimination in educational programs that received any type of federal funds. Over the course of forty years, Title IX has expanded its reach of educational

equity to all aspects of educational programs and activities and includes fourteen protected classes including sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, part- or full-time status, disability, race, or national origin (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Access and inclusion, academic rigor, achievement gaps, and accountability then became focuses of educational equity. Beginning with A Nation at Risk (1983) followed by No Child Left Behind (2001), Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), and now Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (2020) all have addressed and attempted to ensure educational equity by narrowing the achievement gap through improving curricula, implementing high stakes testing, and increasing accountability for all student groups (Vermont Agency of Education, 2020).

Defining Educational Equity

Educational equity is a widely used yet variably interpreted term within the educational community as well as across the public, politicians, and scholars (Lefevre-Walke, 2021). At its core, equity in education refers to the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and outcomes, recognizing and addressing historical and systemic disadvantages that affect students based on race, socioeconomic status, language, disability, and other identity markers (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012). Unlike equality, which emphasizes uniformity, providing all students with the same resources, equity focuses on differentiated supports based on individual and group needs to ensure that all students can achieve meaningful success.

The distinction between equality and equity is essential yet frequently misunderstood in education discourse. Equality is commonly understood as sameness, providing every student with identical materials, instruction, and support. In contrast, equity acknowledges that students start from different places and therefore require different resources to reach comparable

outcomes. As Cook-Harvey et al. (2016) explain, equity demands that educational systems "level the playing field" by addressing both access and opportunity gaps, particularly for students who have been historically underserved.

Several educational organizations offer public-facing definitions of equity that reinforce this distinction. For instance, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) describes equity as a commitment to ensuring "all students receive the resources they need so they graduate prepared for success after high school," as opposed to equality, where "students are all treated the same and have access to similar resources" (Barth, 2016, p. 1). Similarly, the National Equity Project defines educational equity as a condition in which "each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential" (National Equity Project, n.d.). While such definitions are accessible and widely cited in schools and districts, the complexity of achieving equity in practice often goes beyond what these simplified descriptions can capture.

Efforts to define and implement equity in practice have increasingly focused on structural approaches. Roegman et al. (2017) examined how a network of superintendents engaged in instructional rounds to address "systematic inequities affecting student outcomes" across multiple districts (Roegman et al., 2017, p. 2). The study identified race, class, access, and success as critical equity concerns and explored how these were discussed and examined during observational walkthroughs. While the initiative resulted in an increased focus on equity over a six-year period, the authors found that cultural norms, such as the "culture of nice," and rigid adherence to protocols often hindered more critical and substantive engagement with equity issues. These findings suggest that even when equity is identified as a goal, the practices used to pursue it can fall short of addressing root causes or facilitating sustained structural change.

Together, these perspectives highlight the importance of clearly articulating what educational equity means in both theory and practice. Definitions must move beyond generalizations or surface-level commitments and be grounded in a nuanced understanding of systemic injustice and the differentiated supports required for all students to thrive. Clarifying this distinction is foundational for educational leaders seeking to evaluate or improve their own practices, especially when working within structures like professional learning communities that can either reinforce or challenge existing inequities.

Achievement Gap

The achievement gap, commonly described as the persistent disparity in academic performance among student groups categorized by race, class, socioeconomic status, or other demographic factors, has been well documented in educational research (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2006). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "achievement gaps occur when one group of students outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant" (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d.). These disparities have been well documented since the 1970s, particularly between White students and historically marginalized groups, such as Black and Latino students, as well as between students from affluent backgrounds and those living in poverty (Growe & Montgomery, 2003). Despite decades of reform efforts by educators, policymakers, and researchers, the achievement gap remains a persistent and troubling feature of the American education system (Bassok & Latham, 2017; Hung et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Williams, 2011).

While efforts to close the achievement gap have traditionally focused on K–12 settings, research demonstrates that disparities in academic readiness emerge long before students enter

kindergarten. Children's early learning experiences are deeply influenced by family income, parental education, language exposure, and access to quality early childhood programs. Studies show that achievement gaps based on income and race are already present at the point of school entry and tend to widen over time (Bassok & Latham, 2017; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Early developmental differences, fueled by socioeconomic status, cultural marginalization, and systemic barriers, can shape students' entire educational trajectories. As such, efforts to close achievement gaps must begin with an understanding of how inequities are rooted in the early years and perpetuated throughout formal schooling.

Numerous studies have attempted to identify the most salient contributors to these persistent disparities. Hung et al. (2020), in a large-scale quantitative study analyzing five years of standardized Math and English Language Arts scores across 2,868 school districts, found that broader societal inequities, particularly racial and economic inequality, were strongly associated with White/Black achievement gaps. Among various indicators, adult educational attainment within households emerged as the most significant predictor. Notably, school-based factors such as class size and per-pupil expenditures were not statistically significant contributors to achievement gaps in this study, raising questions about the extent to which in-school interventions alone can mitigate broader structural inequalities.

In contrast, Williams (2011) offered school-centered strategies for narrowing achievement gaps in her report *A Call for Change: Narrowing the Achievement Gap Between White and Minority Students*. She emphasized the importance of standards-based, student-centered instruction and highlighted the critical role of school culture in fostering student success. Key recommendations included cultivating a sense of belonging among students, prioritizing positive teacher-student relationships, and providing educators with time and support

for collaborative learning and reflection. These findings suggest that while schools cannot control all external factors, intentional practices within classrooms and school communities can still significantly influence outcomes for historically underserved students.

Although scholars differ on the relative weight of in-school versus out-of-school influences, there is general consensus that addressing achievement gaps requires multi-faceted, sustained efforts (Bassok & Latham, 2017; Growe & Montgomery, 2003; Hung et al., 2020; Williams, 2011). Early childhood interventions, culturally responsive teaching, data-driven instruction, and equitable resource distribution are all critical components (Hung et al., 2020; Williams, 2011). Equally important is the need for school leaders to examine whether institutional practices and expectations unintentionally reinforce racial, linguistic, or socioeconomic biases (Bassok & Latham, 2017; Growe & Montgomery, 2003).

The persistence of the achievement gap presents a moral and educational imperative for educators at all levels. As the research demonstrates, these disparities are not random but patterned and predictable, often reflecting deeply entrenched systemic inequities (Bassok & Latham, 2017; Growe & Montgomery, 2003; Hung et al., 2020; Williams, 2011). Educational leaders must therefore be willing to critically examine existing norms, challenge deficit-based narratives, and implement practices that promote equitable learning conditions for all students. While no single solution will eliminate the achievement gap, a combination of early intervention, inclusive pedagogy, and sustained leadership commitment can move schools closer to realizing educational equity.

Discipline Gap

While the previous section highlighted how disparities in early learning experiences, instruction, and access to resources contribute to the achievement gap, disciplinary practices also

play a critical role in sustaining educational inequities. The discipline gap, characterized by the disproportionate rates of disciplinary actions such as referrals, suspensions, and expulsions among student demographic groups, has well-documented, long-term negative effects on student achievement and school engagement. These disparities are especially evident among students of color, those from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities (Fowler, 2011; Gregory et al., 2010; Nguyen et al., 2019; Skiba et al., 2014).

Research spanning more than four decades has documented that students from historically marginalized backgrounds are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline, which in turn increases their risk of lower academic achievement, school disengagement, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Fowler, 2011; Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2014). The issue was first formally recognized in a 1975 report by the Children's Defense Fund, and, despite increased attention over the years, the racial discipline gap remains a persistent barrier to educational equity.

While many contributing factors influence the achievement gap, scholars argue that the discipline gap also plays a significant role in reinforcing academic disparities (Gregory et al., 2010; Lawson et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2014). A 2015 report endorsed by The Center for Civil Rights Remedies examined out-of-school suspension data from the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for the 2011–2012 school year. The findings revealed that approximately 3.5 million students were suspended, with about 1.55 million suspended more than once, amounting to an estimated 18 million lost instructional days. Suspension rates were three to five times higher in secondary schools than in elementary schools. Disparities were particularly acute among historically marginalized groups: 5% of White students were suspended compared to 7% of Latino students and 16% of Black students. Additionally, students with disabilities were two to

three times more likely to be suspended than their nondisabled peers (Lawson et al., 2015). These statistics suggest that exclusionary discipline practices disproportionately impact marginalized students, limiting their instructional access and reinforcing cycles of academic failure and disengagement. As Lawson and colleagues assert, without directly addressing the discipline gap, efforts to close the achievement gap will remain incomplete.

Additional research has expanded our understanding of how racial disparities in discipline affect subgroups within racial categories. A 2015 study conducted in Washington State analyzed data from the 2013–2014 academic year across all K–12 students. It found that, with the exception of White and Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) students, all other racial groups experienced disproportionately high rates of school discipline. Black students were 3.35 times, Latino students 1.5 times, and Native American students 2.24 times more likely to be disciplined than White students. Notably, once disaggregated from the broader AAPI group, Pacific Islander students exhibited disproportionately high rates of discipline. Furthermore, when Asian subgroups were separated, significant within-group disparities were revealed, for instance, Cambodian students were 3.3 times, and Lao students 5.31 times, more likely to be disciplined than their Chinese and Taiwanese peers, respectively (Nguyen et al., 2015). Building on this, Nguyen et al. (2019) further explored disproportionality within AAPI subgroups, challenging the monolithic treatment of this demographic in prior studies. Their findings affirmed that certain Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian subgroups face significantly higher disciplinary rates (Nguyen et al., 2019). These studies underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of racial discipline gaps that includes within-group differences and broadens the focus beyond the Black, Latino, and Native American student populations.

In another critical contribution, Skiba et al. (2014) conducted a multilevel analysis examining the factors that predict out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. At the individual level, variables included race, gender, socioeconomic status, and type of disciplinary infraction. At the school level, factors included percentage of Black student enrollment, average academic achievement, and school disciplinary philosophy. Findings confirmed that while individual characteristics were predictive, school-level factors such as school demographics, achievement levels, and principal attitudes toward discipline had a stronger impact on disciplinary outcomes (Skiba et al., 2014). These results underscore the importance of examining not only policy structures but also the unconscious beliefs and assumptions educators may hold, known as implicit biases, that shape how discipline is administered in schools.

Research consistently shows that students from marginalized communities are disproportionately disciplined, which contributes to diminished academic outcomes, higher dropout rates, and long-term social consequences. To meaningfully address these disparities, reform efforts must consider both systemic structures and the cognitive frameworks that underlie disciplinary decisions. The persistence of the discipline gap, especially when compounded by race and disability, signals the need to interrogate deeper institutional mechanisms. The following section explores how implicit bias manifests in educational settings and contributes to these enduring disparities in both discipline and academic achievement.

Implicit Bias

The study of implicit bias is an expanding field in educational research, particularly through the lens of educational equity. In order to effectively address how implicit bias contributes to systemic inequities school leaders must first gain a comprehensive understanding of what bias is and how it manifests within educational settings. While the term “bias” is

commonly used in everyday language, research has shown that bias exists in two forms: conscious or explicit bias and unconscious or implicit bias (Toribio, 2018). Implicit bias, as defined by the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, refers to "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner," which are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness (Kirwan Institute, 2017). These biases can cause individuals to make judgments or have attitudes about others based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, or appearance, without conscious intent.

Toribio (2018) further explains that implicit bias refers to "mental states responsible for implicitly biased, often discriminatory, behavior," which can result in actions that diverge from one's stated beliefs or values (p. 42). Greenwald and Krieger (2006) add that implicit biases, rooted in unconscious attitudes and stereotypes, can lead to behavior that contradicts a person's conscious principles, affecting decisions and interactions. This research underscores a key insight: implicit bias permeates individuals' decision-making, actions, and perceptions, often without their awareness, which can significantly shape educational outcomes.

Research has documented the impact of implicit bias on educational decision-making, with profound, long-lasting consequences for students' academic experiences. Skiba et al. (2002), as cited by Gregory et al. (2010), analyzed disciplinary referrals across 19 urban middle schools and found that Black students were more likely to be referred for subjective behaviors (e.g., disrespect, excessive noise), while White students were referred for more objectively observable behaviors (e.g., smoking, fighting). This disparity highlights how implicit teacher biases can influence discipline, thereby contributing to the discipline gap. Similarly, studies have shown that implicit bias can lead to lower expectations for students of color and disproportionate

referrals to special education (Miller, 2019), further compounding the achievement and discipline gaps.

While the impact of implicit bias on student outcomes is evident, it is crucial for educational leaders to understand the barriers implicit bias creates and the role they must play in dismantling these inequities. Clark and Zygmunt (2014) administered the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to pre-service teachers to measure their biases and found that many teachers, despite their best intentions, struggled to recognize or accept the presence of bias. Participants categorized their reactions to perceived bias into six levels, including disbelief and discomfort, underscoring the difficulty in acknowledging implicit biases. The results captured how people, particularly teachers, have a self-perception of being a "good" person and challenge any notion that says otherwise (Clark & Zygmunt, 2014). This finding is critical for school leaders as it highlights the need for leaders to foster self-awareness in educators and create environments where implicit biases can be identified and addressed through reflective practices.

The recognition of implicit bias is a necessary first step, but it is not sufficient on its own to create equitable educational environments. To address the challenges of implicit bias and its impact on student outcomes, educational leaders must engage in transformative leadership practices. Carolyn Shields (2004), in her work on dialogic leadership for social justice, suggests that principals must become agents of change by being "transformative leaders" that "cultivates positive relationships with marginalized students and their families, and facilitates moral dialogue" (Shields, 2004, p. 113). Shields (2004) emphasizes that effective leaders challenge the status quo and actively work to overcome systemic inequities, which includes confronting the biases that perpetuate the achievement and discipline gaps.

While implicit bias presents significant challenges to educational equity, it also offers school leaders a focal point for action. Through self-reflection, inclusive leadership practices, and an unwavering commitment to social justice, educational leaders can counteract the negative impact of implicit bias on students and work toward closing the achievement and discipline gaps. Therefore, the next section explores how equity-focused leadership can disrupt these inequities and create more inclusive, supportive, and responsive educational environments for all students.

Leadership for Educational Equity

Leadership for educational equity involves more than adopting new programs or revising policies; it demands a deep, sustained commitment to dismantling systemic barriers and confronting inequities. As previously discussed, the achievement and discipline gaps are not isolated issues, they are interwoven manifestations of broader structural inequities, often perpetuated by implicit bias. Addressing these challenges calls for leaders who are willing to interrogate institutional norms, foster inclusive school cultures, and prioritize culturally responsive practices in both instruction and policy. Scholars such as Theoharis (2007) and Khalifa (2018) emphasize that educational equity leadership involves transformational practices that actively challenge the status quo and advocate for systemic change. This aligns closely with the purpose of this study, which aims to explore whether and how elementary school PLCs to advance educational equity.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and amid ongoing societal tensions with racial and economic injustice, educational leaders are under heightened pressure to ensure success for all students, regardless of race, ability, language, or socioeconomic status. As Shields (2010) notes, leading for equity “begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and addresses both individual and public good” (p. 558).

The evolution of school leadership theory over the past several decades reflects a growing recognition of the need for more responsive and justice-oriented leadership. Throughout the 1970s through the early 1990s, transactional leadership models dominated school administration, with principals functioning primarily as managers guiding teachers through compliance-based systems (Leithwood, 1992; Lynch, 2012). However, in response to growing calls for reform and school improvement, leadership theory began to shift toward transformational models. Leaders were increasingly viewed as visionaries, responsible for cultivating collective commitments, building professional capacity, and inspiring collaborative decision-making toward school improvement goals (Giles et al., 2005; Leithwood, 1992).

While transformational leadership remains widely practiced today, researchers have begun to distinguish between transformational and transformative leadership. Transformational leadership empowers and motivates staff around a collective achievement of school goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006, as cited in Lynch, 2012), but often centers on internal school goals and performance outcomes. In contrast, transformative leadership, as described by Shields (2010), centers equity and social justice by intentionally challenging the educational status quo, fostering inclusive school communities, and promoting critical reflection and advocacy.

Given the persistent equity gaps facing today's schools, transformative leadership may offer a more relevant and urgent model for school leaders seeking to create meaningful, sustainable change. This framework not only equips leaders to respond to institutional bias and exclusionary practices, but also empowers them to become active agents of justice in their communities.

Transformative Leadership. At the heart of transformative leadership is the belief that all students deserve to feel a sense of belonging, safety, and value within their school

community, a foundational component of equitable education (Shields, 2004). In the pursuit of justice and inclusion, school principals must create educational environments where every student is seen, heard, and supported. Transformative leadership, also referred to as social justice leadership, aims to challenge and change inequitable systems by cultivating inclusive, democratic, and culturally responsive school communities (Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007).

A consistent finding in the literature is that effective transformative leadership begins with a clear and compelling vision rooted in equity and justice (Mendez-Morse, 1995; Ryan, 2012). Leaders who hold this vision intentionally embed equity into their values, practices, and decisions, addressing marginalization through meaningful action (Zhang et al., 2018). These actions often include eliminating inequitable school practices, facilitating moral dialogue, challenging implicit bias such as deficit mindsets, and fostering deep, authentic relationships with students and families (Shields, 2004; Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2007).

Despite its potential to effect lasting change, implementing social justice initiatives is not without challenge. Accountability pressures, standardized mandates, and political resistance can distract from or even deter equity-focused efforts. To navigate this tension, transformative leaders must construct organizational structures that balance accountability with inclusivity and shared decision-making. This might include creating collaborative spaces where teachers, families, and community members have a voice in school decisions, or supporting instructional strategies that promote creativity, critical thinking, and real-world relevance despite rigid standards (Mullen, 2008).

Another persistent challenge is deficit thinking, assumptions rooted in implicit bias that diminish the capabilities of students from marginalized backgrounds. School leaders and educators may hesitate to acknowledge differences such as race or socioeconomic status,

inadvertently reinforcing exclusion and silence (Shields, 2004). Sinek (2013) notes that behavior is often shaped by internalized assumptions or "perceived truths," while Gladwell (2013) explains how unconscious snap judgments can lead to inaccurate and potentially harmful conclusions. Within educational contexts, implicit biases can result in lower expectations and less meaningful engagement with diverse students. Transformative leaders must, therefore, create more inclusive classrooms by modeling moral courage through open conversations about deficit thinking (Shields, 2004). By replacing harmful assumptions with deep, relational understanding, school leaders create conditions for inclusion and student empowerment (Shields, 2004).

Ultimately, when school leaders embrace the challenges of creating inclusive, equitable, and socially just learning environments, they initiate change that reverberates throughout the school community. As the research affirms, transformative leadership is not merely about vision, it is about action, courage, and the will to dismantle systemic barriers in pursuit of educational equity (Shields, 2010; Zhang et al., 2018).

Leadership Matters. Educational equity cannot be accomplished without exemplary leadership that creates both urgency and sustained commitment for systemic change (Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007). Social justice leadership has prompted school leaders to confront the persistent inequities that historically marginalized groups face in our public schools. These leaders "make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically or currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision" (Theoharis, 2007, p.223).

Principals, in particular, hold a pivotal role in translating equity ideals into daily school practice. To increase academic achievement and foster inclusive environments, school leaders

must work collaboratively with staff to create equitable and culturally responsive school cultures (Wilson, 2022). Yet, studies show that many principals feel ill-prepared and lack adequate time, training, and resources to lead for equity effectively. As such, targeted professional development in equity-based instructional leadership is essential (Wilson, 2022).

Leading for equity requires a cultural shift that redefines how student success is understood and supported. Gleason and Gerzon (2013) emphasize that equity-focused principals uphold shared commitment that ensures "every student is achieving at high levels, emphasizing opportunities for every student learning, and working intentionally on each student's individual gifts and needs" (Gleason & Gerzon, 2013, p.1). Achieving this vision depends on principals' ability to cultivate collaborative, trusting environments, spaces where teachers engage in honest dialogue, examine practices, and continuously refine instruction to close opportunity gaps (Taylor, 2007; Zhang et al., 2018).

Ultimately, when principals make equity a foundational pillar of schoolwide decisions and professional practice, they empower teachers, transform school culture, and create the conditions for lasting, systemic change. It is this form of courageous and strategic leadership that lies at the heart of advancing educational equity.

Professional Learning Communities

History

A Nation at Risk, published in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, launched a series of national efforts to improve public education in the United States. The educational reform efforts of what has become known as the 'excellence movement' attempted to mandate school improvement through "top-down" rules and regulations; which was unsuccessful (DuFour et al., 2008). This led to what is known as the "restructuring movement: in

educational reform (DuFour et al., 2008). Despite an effort to close the student achievement gap through improving curricula, implementing high stakes testing, and increasing accountability for all student groups, educational reforms in the U.S. have had little success (Bausmith & Barry, 2011; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2008, 2016). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011) argued that educational policies deriving from national reform mandates "must keep pace with new ideas about what, when, and how teachers learn and must focus on developing schools' and teachers' capacities to be responsible for student learning" (p. 81) meaning without effective professional development for teachers and administers, strides to improve student achievement will fall short. For over three decades, professional learning communities have been utilized as an effective professional development structure to build teacher capacity through collective inquiry (Bausmith & Barry, 2011).

PLCs first emerged in the 1960s as an alternative to teaching in isolation. The notion of professional learning communities, also referred to as learning communities, emerged from several sources such as Dewey's notions of inquiry and Schön's concept of reflective practice (Bolam et al., 2005). In the beginning, teachers slowly and organically began embracing collaboration rather than the traditional teaching patterns that had dominated education for a century. Then, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, PLCs became recognized as a powerful way to champion change in schools through organic collaboration and a focus on learning rather than on teaching (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Stoll et al., 2006).

In 1993, McLaughlin and Talbert wrote a report for the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching in which they introduced the construct of professional communities, characterized by teacher reflection, professional inquiry, and a focus on student learning. They argued that professional communities as an organizational theory provided a

structure that “embrace effective opportunities for teachers to learn the new strategies, knowledge, and perspectives assumed by new curricula frameworks, higher standards, and expanded expectations for students' success and conceptual understanding (p. 20). Additionally, Sergiovanni (1994c) suggested that shared practices between teachers would be beneficial and argued that formal structures promoting collaboration were needed for institutional effectiveness.

In an effort to study school improvement and change efforts, Shirley Hord (1997) conducted an extensive research and literature review for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Recognizing a model of school culture that actively participated in and supported educational change, Shirley described PLCs as a community made up of teachers and administrators that were invested in improvement and continuous inquiry (Hord, 1997). She observed and reported five essential elements of effective PLCs; supportive and shared leadership, collective and creative inquiry, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice (Hord, 1997).

One year later, Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998) released a book called *Professional Learning Communities at Work* that provided a framework for school administrators and teachers to use as they develop highly effective PLC teams. In describing components of an effective PLC, DuFour offers three foundational ideas: shifting from a focus on teaching to a collective focus on student learning, fostering a culture of collaboration to improve teachers’ practice, and having a focus on results through student data analysis (Dufour & Eaker,1998). Comparatively, Stoll et al. (2006) suggested five key characteristics of PLCs: shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration,

and promotion of group and individual learning. Researchers and educators have used these defining features to define PLCs (Philpott & Oates, 2016).

Professional Learning Communities Defined

There is a substantial amount of literature and research on the term PLCs. While PLCs have subtle differences in contexts and forms, there is no universal definition; however, they are often characterized by common attributes such as collective learning and inquiry, supportive relationships, or shared vision, values, and beliefs (Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006; DuFour, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2011). For example, Shirley Hord (1997, p. 1) defined a "professional community of learners" as one:

> "… in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for their students' benefits; thus, this arrangement may also be termed *communities of continuous inquiry and improvement."*

Similarly, Lieberman and Miller (2011) defined learning communities as "Ongoing groups of teachers who meet regularly for the purposes of increasing their own learning and that of their students" (p. 2). Therefore, the idea of learning within and from one another not only enhances student learning and teacher capacity but also develops the school as a whole.

The authors of *The Principal as Professional Learning Community Leader* stated that PLCs was about the "synergy collaborative action" that drives school improvement (Ontario Principals' Council, 2009, p. 5); which expounded on the 2001 Standards for Staff Development National Staff Development Council, p. 1) definition of professional learning communities:

> "Ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving. These teams, often

> called learning communities or communities of practice, operate with a commitment to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of school district and school goals for student learning."

Both of these definitions speak to collaborative climate between teachers and the commitment to improvement.

Lastly, DuFour et al. (2016) described the work of professional learning communities as having a larger purpose. Rather than think of PLCs as an event or a meeting to attend, they argue that:

> "It is helpful to think of the school or district as the PLC and the various collaborative teams as the building blocks of the PLC. While collaborative teams are an essential part of the PLC process, the sum is greater than the individual parts. Much of the work of a PLC cannot be done by a team but instead requires a schoolwide or districtwide effort" (p. 10).

Literature also exposed a lack of consistency when defining PLCs (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2016; Philpott & Oates, 2016; Stoll et al., 2006). DuFour et al. (2016) asserted the term professional learning community has "become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously…it is in danger of losing all meaning" (p.9-10). In an effort to restore clarity, DuFour et al. (2016) describes three 'big ideas.' The first big idea is a focus on learning. Based on the premise that "the fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure that all students learn at high levels," this commitment is the fundamental belief of a PLC (p. 11). In order to ensure that all students are learning at high levels, the second big idea sets the expectation that teachers take collective responsibility by continuously working collaboratively; therefore, collaboration is not

optional but required. The third, and final big idea of PLC is a focus on results. Student data drives the work of a PLC and is used to inform and improve daily instruction in an effort to meet the learning needs of all students (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al., 2016). Similarly, Stoll et al. (2006), who also acknowledged the lack of universal definition of a PLC, suggested five key characteristics of PLCs: shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration, and promotion of group and individual learning. Researchers and educators have used these defining features to define PLCs.

"The most successful corporation of the future will be a learning organization" (Senge, 1990, p. 4). Fullan (1993) stated "the new problem of change…is what would it take to make the educational system a learning organization-expert at dealing with change as a normal part of its work, not just in relation to the latest policy, but as a way of life" (p. 4).These quotes speak to the notion of professional learning communities and the importance of building a collaborative culture where teachers learn with and from one another so they can better serve their students. Much of the existing literature on professional learning communities focus on the premise of these quotes: improving teacher capacity and improving school culture (Lee & Lee, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2006; Lieberman et al., 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2011). For example, McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) conducted an extensive four-year research study on teacher communities in twenty-two high schools across California and Michagan. Extensive data on high school teachers' work and perceptions of context and was collected through surveys, interviews, and observations. The authors described the challenges and characteristics of teaching communities and the types of instruction they advanced, and found that context (schools, departments, and communities) play a significant role in teacher performance and job satisfaction. For example, in the school context, teachers rarely collaborated, working mostly in

isolation. Instruction was teacher-centered and students worked independently on traditional, text heavy assignments. The department context fostered traditional teaching methods, students were tracked according to ability, and achievement was measured by standards-based assessments. In teaching communities, teachers fostered a culture of collaboration in which teachers actively shared instructional practices and shared a common belief that all students can learn.

In a 2001 study, Gross et al. examined how teacher teams evolved into learning communities. They observed English and History teachers who joined together in a learning community and tracked their stages of growth. Beginning with group identity, teachers met together but did not engage in sharing practices or discourse. The group then evolved in their interactions into what researchers called "navigation of fault lines." Teachers began engaging in critical dialogue and discourse through which they negotiated differences and developed norms. In the final stage of growth, teachers developed collective responsibility for student learning and showed commitment to one another (Gross et al., 2001).

Professional Learning Communities and Educational Equity

The persistent and complex problem of achievement, discipline, and opportunity gaps between White and ethnic minority students as well as affluent and students living in poverty continue to be a barrier to educational equity. Factors such as poverty, housing, and limited access to healthcare in addition to restricted lived experiences, limited vocabulary, and lack of academic access during preschool years have been identified as variables that impact both academic achievement and educational opportunities (Bassok & Latham, 2017; Growe & Montgomery, 2003; Hung et. al, 2020; Williams, 2011). Additionally, research suggests a cultural mismatch between teachers and students may also be a contributing factor since 81% of teachers in America are White and 40% of K-12 students are African-American and Latino

(Lepe-Ramirez, 2018). This disproportionate representation often results in teachers' attitudes and skewed academic and behavioral expectations based on White cultural norms (Friedrich & McKinney, 2010; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Romas, 2022). Increasing teachers' capacity to equitably support all students has become an urgent educational priority (Leonard & Woodland, 2022).

Examining pedagogical practices based on equity is a method teachers can use to ensure all students achieve at high levels; however, there are several mitigating factors including teachers' personal beliefs and implicit biases (Lepe-Ramirez, 2018). PLCs provide the structure and support necessary to shift teachers' cultural understanding and beliefs through collaboration, access to data, and clear expectations (Fisher et al., 2019; Friedrich & McKinney, 2010; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Lepe-Ramirez, 2018; Romas, 2022).

Fisher et al. (2019) challenged that PLCs often fall short of ensuring that all students, especially historically marginalized students, meet grade-level standards and achieve at high levels, and developed five questions they claimed would refocus the work of PLCs by putting equity "front and center in their collaborative conversations" (p. 44). The five questions are:

1. Where are we going?
2. Where are we now?
3. How do we move learning forward?
4. What did we learn today?
5. Who benefited and who did not benefit?

These five questions guide PLC teams to question and confront the "current realities faced by students and become better teachers and advocates for their future" (p. 47) For example, the first question challenges teacher teams to examine their beliefs about students' abilities and potential.

In an effort to meet students where they are at, oftentimes teachers plan below grade level lessons. This type of low expectation assumes students lack the ability to learn at high levels and creates inequitable outcomes. When teachers ask "where are we going," they can remain committed to the expectation that all students can achieve at high levels and identify scaffolding support students may need to achieve at that level (DuFour, 2004; DuFour et al. 2016; Fisher et al., 2019). Although all five questions challenge teachers to examine their current beliefs and cultural understanding, the last question requires PLCs teams to make changes that foster educational equity. When teams ask "who benefited and who did not," they must reflect on learning outcomes and evaluate if *all* student groups are achieving at high levels (Fisher et al., 2019). For example, if 3rd grade English Learner students are consistently performing well below grade level, the PLCs team must consider why and reflect on if their perceptions about their English learner's abilities and potential have, unintentionally, created learning barriers or inequitable conditions for learning.

Professional learning communities also provide time, space, and support for teachers to engage in critical dialogue needed to transform their beliefs and practices (Friedrich & McKinney, 2010; Lepe-Ramirez, 2018). In 2018, Adriana Lepe-Ramirez conducted research that focused on the perceptions and roles of district and site administrators on using PLCs as a means to mitigate teacher bias and issues of educational equity. Using Transformative Adult Learning (TAL) to examine teachers' beliefs and understanding of the students' they teach, she explored how PLCs might be used to address misperceptions and shift their understanding to new perspectives that impact instructional decisions. All of the participating administrators shared that PLC and equity work was challenging and experienced setbacks when staff lacked trusting relationships within their teams or did not fully understand the PLC process. Despite these

setbacks, school principals were able to identify teams who were making gradual progress towards meeting their site equity goals (Lepe-Ramirez, 2018).

Similarly, Friedrich and McKinney (2010) studied how twenty-five urban teachers across the United States utilized collaborative inquiry groups to promote equity. The authors characterized "inquiry for equity" as having "1) collaborative efforts that seek out effective teaching practices rooted in social justice traditions and 2) examination of specific evidence regarding which students are and are not being reached" (Friedrich & McKinney, 2010, p. 241-242). Teachers at this school challenged the status quo by "confronting a systematic pattern of underachievement and their unintentional role in perpetuating this pattern" (Friedrich & McKinney, 2010, p. 241). Their research revealed that inquiry for equity groups who remained focused on students, were able to build trust, work collaboratively, and create protocols that enabled them to critically examine their teaching and its impact on student learning (Friedrich & McKinney, 2010).

Ensuring equitable learning outcomes and educational opportunities for all students is a priority for many educators and student data analysis and usage is one vehicle that can be used for achieving equity (Datnow & Park, 2018; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2008, 2016; Friedrich & McKinney, 2010). A byproduct of school reform and accountability was the expectation for schools to use data to make informed decisions; however, schools' use of data often leads to questions of educational equity especially as they make curricular and instructional decisions and how students were impacted (Datnow & Park, 2018). Skrla et al. (2004) claimed that making data-informed decisions can help move schools closer to achieving educational equity. Coburn and Turner (2011) affirmed that educators are critical in determining what type of data is used, how it will be used, and why it's important. Furthermore, research concluded

making data informed decisions can have a profound impact on students' educational experiences and outcomes (Datnow & Park, 2018). One of the key characteristics of a professional learning community is being results oriented, meaning purposeful improvement cannot be assumed or imagined but assessed and measured (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2008, 2016). Jeffery Pfeffer and Robert Sutton (cited by DuFour et al., 2016, p. 199) stated that "control and improvement come from measures that provide information about processes, measures that give people immediate and understandable information about how they need to act." While PLCs may not be "singularly sufficient to ensure that equity is achieved" (Fisher et al., 2019, p.44), they can empower a collective efficacy to ensure that all students when the entire organization is committed to embedding equity goals into the PLC process (Romas, 2022).

One study aimed to uncover in which ways teachers' data use hinders or helps expand learning opportunities for students. The researchers examined a broad set of data decision tensions that were interconnected and complex. Data practices that hinder or help expand learning opportunities can be simultaneously present in a school because educators are active decision makers both individually and organizationally. They found that students were more likely to have increased opportunities for success, teachers throughout the school used data to challenge biases and stereotypical beliefs, examine student weaknesses and strengths, and individualize their teaching practices (Datnow & Park, 2018).

Another study explored the work of teacher inquiry for equity teams that aimed to collectively seek out socially just teaching practices and examine data to identify systematic barriers that prevent students from being reached (Friedrich & McKinney, 2010). Inquiry for equity teams exemplified the characteristics of a professional learning community: shared

purpose, vision, and goals, collaborative culture with a focus on learning, collective inquiry into best practices and current reality; learning by doing; a commitment to continuous improvement; and results oriented (DuFour et al., 2008). Researchers found that collective examination of data was a critical step in teachers addressing "unquestioned, hidden assumptions" (p. 242) and reported that teachers involved in inquiry for equity self-reported they felt empowered to face inequitable challenges and question their assumptions, beliefs, and biases that were getting in the way of teaching and reaching all students (Friedrich & McKinney, 2010).

Leading Professional Learning Communities

Research concludes that, second to classroom teachers, school principals can have the greatest impact on student learning and academic achievement (Grissom et al., 2021; Hagel, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2004). For instance, Dutta and Sahney (2016) found that principal leadership, indirectly through fostering teacher job satisfaction and a positive learning climate, has a positive effect on student achievement. Leithwood et al. (2006) presented four core practices of effective principals: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program. Their research, therefore, supports that principals have a vital role in the successful implementation of effective professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2008, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2006; Ontario Principals' Council, 2009).

When implementing PLCs, principals must begin by defining a clear and compelling vision (DuFour et al. 2008, 2016; Ontario Principals' Council, 2009). Visionary leadership is not new in education and has been widely researched. In his powerful book *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, Simon Sinek artfully describes when leaders can clearly communicate their compelling purpose, or vision, they will inspire others to action

(Sinek, 2013). When applied to public schools, school principals have an imperative moral obligation to ensure all children, especially those in marginalized populations, have equitable educational opportunities and achieve at high levels; however, they cannot accomplish this work alone.

DuFour et al. (2016) stated that setting a vision provides a sense of direction for the entire school and serves as a basis for the school's current reality as well as potential strategies to build and improve upon. Bennis and Biederman (1998) claimed when teachers believe they are a part of something that is "vital," then their "collective purpose makes everything they do seem meaningful and valuable" (p. 204). Burt Nanus (1992) also affirmed that "there is no more powerful engine driving an organization towards excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile and achievable vision of the future" (p. 3).

By setting a vision towards a collaborative culture focused on student learning, principals can then work with teachers to build a shared mission, core values, collective commitments, and goals (Ontario Principals' Council, 2009). Bottom line, principals who are effective in influencing the beliefs, attitudes, and conditions about teaching and learning by casting a vision of collaboration to promote the success of every student have laid the foundation of effective PLCs (DuFour et al., 2016).

Principals support effective professional learning communities by building a collaborative culture and collective responsibility (DuFour et al. 2008, 2016). In order to ensure that all students learn at high levels, principals must expect teachers to work "interdependently to achieve common goals for which all members are mutually accountable" (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 12). In order for this to happen, principals must create organizational structures that allow time for PLC teams to meet to assess student learning, address student needs, and reflect on their

teaching practices; additionally, resources needed to analyze student data and scaffold instruction must also be provided (Ontario Principals' Council, 2009). One study that exemplifies this rationale was conducted by Wells and Feun (2012). They studied eight middle schools from two different school districts who were implementing PLCs. They found a significant difference between the two school districts, specifically, in regards to "analyzing data and responding to student learning" (p. 233). It was concluded that the district with more success in its implementation of PLCs reported that the principals continuously fostered an environment where teachers led other teachers in efforts of improved student learning; furthermore, the principals were intentional about providing time and incentives for collective inquiry and professional development (Wells & Feun, 2012). This study affirms the importance of building the structure, expectation, and support for teachers to work collaboratively to improve not only student learning but also teacher capacity.

Principals also support effective PLCs by encouraging continuous learning, capacity building, and instructional change (DuFour & Eaker, 2008; DuFour et al., 2016; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Romas, 2022). DuFour et al. (2016) argued principals are the leaders of learning and the lead learners, meaning that principals must facilitate the learning of educators throughout the building by setting expectations and building structures that fully support the ongoing learning of the PLC process. This requires principals to shift their work from just having a teaching focus to having a learning focus (DuFour et al., 2016). This shift in focus will impact the discussions of a PLC from "what was taught" to "what was learned (p. 321). This requires principals and PLCs to look for student evidence of learning and determine ways their instructional practices could be strengthened (DuFour et al., 2016)

Another way principals encourage learning and build capacity is by modeling a commitment to learning (Ontario Principals' Council, 2009). When principals attend internal and external professional development opportunities, teachers see that they are not the only ones invested in the PLC process (Ontario Principals' Council, 2009). Furthermore, when principals become an active member of PLCs in their schools, they participate in the collective inquiry with their teachers and learn beside them (Ontario Principals' Council, 2009). This sends a powerful message of collective efficacy and keeps the entire school focused on the ultimate purpose, student learning (DuFour et al., 2016).

As principals shift their instructional leadership practices to focus on student learning, teachers will follow suit. This creates a culture of continuous learning because teachers in PLC teams begin to learn from one another; strengthening their own instructional practices that, in return, impact student learning (DuFour et al., 2008, 2016). Jacobs et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study examining teacher-led professional development. Teacher leaders within the same school created opportunities to share their teaching knowledge and effective instructional practices. The study found that when teachers were supported by their principals and were able to focus on critical issues, change in practices were found throughout the school (Jacobs et al., 2014). Lee and Lee (2018) also studied the impact of professional development through PLCs. The study aimed to determine if learning in PLCs could transform instructional practices. The researchers argued "PLCs that facilitate transformational change in instructional practices empower teachers to embrace ambiguity, conflict, and risk to improve both student and teacher development" (p.463). The findings implied that transformational change occurred when teachers were members of a highly effective PLC and taught in highly supportive conditions (Lee & Lee, 2018). Both Jacobs et al. (2014) and Lee and Lee (2018) studies of professional

development in PLCs support the notion that when principals create a culture of collaboration, teachers will feel empowered to lead each other.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs transformative leadership as a theoretical lens to examine how elementary principals implement PLCs as a strategy to promote equity and challenges they face in leveraging their collaborative culture to ensure equitable outcomes. Transformative Leadership Theory centers on critical reflection and the challenge of questioning the status quo. It empowers individuals to transform their biases and attitudes, gaining new perspectives on how students learn and achieve, ultimately leading to changes in instructional practices and increases in student achievement, particularly for disabled and marginalized student groups. This section begins with an overview of the history of transformative leadership theory, highlighting its key characteristics. It then explains how applying this framework will guide the investigation and analysis of educational equity efforts within PLCs. By combining transformative leadership with the collaborative nature of PLCs, school principals are positioned to engage in meaningful equity work, empowering teachers to reflect on and adjust their practices to ensure more equitable outcomes for all students.

Transformative Leadership Theory

Transformative leadership, as defined by Carolyn Shields, "begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and addresses both individual and public good" (Shields, 2010, p. 558). This leadership model is different from transactional and transformational as it critiques inequalities that marginalize and oppress large numbers of students and their families (Shields, 2004, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2020). Transformative leadership theory empowers leaders to "foster the academic success of all children through engaging in

moral dialogue that facilitates the development of strong relationships, supplants pathologizing silences, challenges existing beliefs and practices, and grounds educational resources in some criteria for social justice" (Shields, 2004, p.109).

Building on other critical leadership concepts and theories such as culturally relevant leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016) and leading for social justice (Theoharis, 2007), transformative leadership theory calls for action that goes beyond the local learning environment by invoking deep moral and ethical work that aims to impact the entire social system (Shields & Hesbol, 2019).

Tenets of Transformative Leadership Theory

Shields (2010, 2014, 2016, 2020; Shields & Hesbol, 2019) defined two fundamental assumptions and eight interconnected tenets that outline the core purpose of transformative leadership theory. The theoretical assumptions lie within educating students for public or private good (Labaree, 1997). The first assumption, educating students for private good, is that academic achievement outcomes are improved when students feel welcomed, respected, and included in an equitable learning environment and; therefore, are able to focus their individual attention on academics (Capper & Young, 2014 as cited in Shields & Hesbol, 2019). The second assumption, educating students for public good, is "that when educational institutions address such public good issues as democracy, civic life, and citizenship, then democratic society will be strengthened through the participation of knowledgeable and caring citizens" (Shields & Hesbol, 2019, p. 5). The eight tenets are: mandate for deep and equitable change; deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice; address inequitable uses of power; emancipation, democracy, inclusion equity, and justice; emphasis on private and

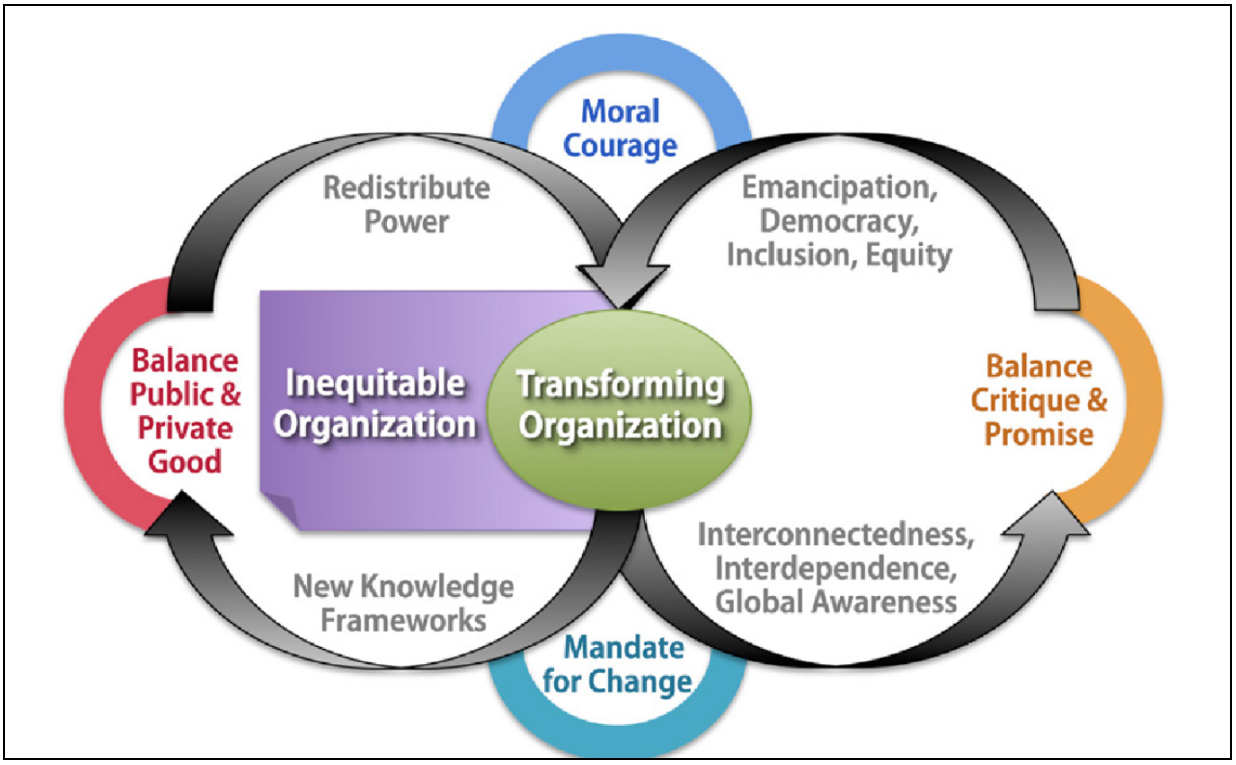
public good; interdependence, interconnectedness and global awareness; balance critique with promise; exhibit moral courage (Shields, 2010, 2014, 2016; Shields & Hesbol, 2019).

Shields' model of Transformative Leadership Theory (**Figure 2.1**) illustrates how the eight tenets are interrelated (Shields, 2016). The model is framed with a mandate for change and moral courage. Beginning with the mandate for deep and equitable change, leaders are required to "know oneself, one's organization, and one's community" so they can take action to adopt more equitable practices and policies (Shields, 2016; Shields & Hesbol, 2019, p. 5). Exhibiting moral courage, the perfect book end for the tenet mandate for deep and equitable change, critically challenges leaders to remain committed and take action. Because transformative leadership is complex and requires a high level of engagement, leaders must exhibit moral courage throughout their work. No doubt, this comes with personal, professional, and political challenges requiring crucial conversations and, often, encounters conflict that requires considerable courage. Challenging the status quo also requires transformative leaders to take risks. For example, Dawn Alexander (2014) conducted a phenomenology study examining the lived experiences of six school principals and the extent they utilized transformative leadership strategies to promote issues of social justice for their Black and Latino student populations. There were seven overarching themes that emerged from the interviews. "Data Driven" was one area the principals used as an essential strategy to identify if academic gaps were occurring, and where it was occurring. All six principals described data analysis as a means to identify teachers they needed to have difficult conversations with to help them reflectively question why certain students were struggling in their class (Alexander, 2014). Taking action and helping teachers identify contributing factors of academic gaps is critical in the work of transformative leadership. The tenet of (deconstructing and reconstructing) new knowledge frameworks that perpetuate

inequality and injustice most clearly frames the focus of my study by unpacking principals' actions to ensure that all students succeed. Social justice goals for educational equity and inclusion cannot be met until implicit bias and deficit assumptions are addressed explicitly and consistently (Miller, 2019). The tenets require leaders to shift mindsets and empower people to be a part of the call to action. Every student has value, unique strengths and are capable and transformative leaders must help teachers and staff recognize and promote these assets. Additionally, leaders must address inequitable uses of power within their district or school by ensuring every voice has a place in reestablishing equitable structures and systems, especially those voices that may have been previously ignored (Shields, 2010, 2014, 2016; Shields & Hesbol, 2019). Iris Jun (2011) wrote an article describing four key characteristics of transformative leadership: the notion of critique, empathy, school as a place of democracy, and dialogue. Jun stated that "dialogue - among educational leaders and teachers, between teachers and teachers, and teachers and students - is critical to transformative leadership" (p. 242). She goes on to explain that, according to Shields, principals must create time and space for people to discuss and understand different perspectives. Providing safe spaces for people to have a voice and share their own lived experiences is necessary to develop strong, trusting relationships needed to discuss different perspectives (Shields, 2004, 2009 as cited by Jun, 2011). Balancing critique and hope require collective efficacy to reflect and critique current practices. In the context of this study, this tenet frames the question of how elementary principals in Norman Public Schools have used professional learning communities (PLCs) to build awareness of educational (in)equities throughout their schools and create urgency for educators to address educational (in)equities.

Figure 2.1

Model of Transformative Leadership Theory



Note. From *Journal of Transformative Leadership & Policy Studies*, by C. M. Shields, 2016, Transformative Leadership Primer.

The eight tenets and two assumptions of transformative leadership theory guide the actions of leaders who pursue social justice and democracy and embark to uncover educational inequities within current systems, structures, and practices so that every student, especially those students who have been historically left behind, experience greater individual achievement and a "better life lived in common with others" (Shields, 2011, p. 2).

Summary of Transformative Leadership

In order to promote a more equitable and inclusive educational environment, transformative leadership theory draws on several other critical theories including leadership for

social justice. The lived realities of educators, students, families, and school communities as well as values of social justice, equity, and inclusion, are fundamental and separates transformative leadership from other leadership theories (Shields, 2010, 2011, 2020). Transformative leadership theory calls leaders to use a critical lens to examine and critique current systems, structures, and practices to eliminate educational inequalities; empower people to recognize that every student brings value, strengths, and is capable; advocate for educating for private and public good; and embody the moral courage needed to remain committed in the face of tension and opposition (Shields, 2020). Transformative leaders build strong relationships needed to engage stakeholders in critical dialogue, questioning current systems and policies, and reflecting on current practices and is a proven way to address achievement, discipline, and opportunity gaps (Shields, 2010, 2011, 2020). This theory provides a critical leadership lens needed to explore and understand how school principals leverage PLCs to achieve equity goals.

Conclusion

Educational equity is a broad and complex issue, particularly when examining its history and the lasting impact of inequities on disabled and historically marginalized students. For over seven decades, the goal of educational equity has been to ensure that all students reach their full academic and social potential (National Equity Project, n.d.). However, despite efforts from policymakers and educators, persistent academic and opportunity gaps remain (Bassok & Latham, 2017; Growe & Montgomery, 2003; Hung et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Williams, 2011).

Research highlights the critical role of leadership in addressing systemic inequities in public schools (Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2007). Principals, as instructional leaders, have the second greatest impact on student learning and achievement (Grissom et al., 2021; Hagel, 2014;

Leithwood et al., 2004). Transformative leadership theory provides a framework for challenging existing policies and practices that perpetuate inequities. By fostering critical dialogue and strong relationships, transformative leaders empower educators to recognize student strengths, advocate for both private and public good, and persist in equity-driven efforts despite resistance (Shields, 2010, 2011, 2020).

Within this framework, PLCs serve as a structured approach to advancing equity in schools. By engaging teachers in collaborative inquiry, PLCs create opportunities for educators to examine biases, refine instructional strategies, and develop culturally responsive practices (Gleason & Gerzon, 2013; Lepe-Ramirez, 2018; Taylor, 2007; Theoharis, 2007; Ylimaki et al., 2012). However, effective leadership is essential in shaping PLCs that operationalize equity through access to rigorous curriculum, consistent instruction, and targeted interventions, which translate collective efforts into meaningful changes in teaching and learning (DeMatthews, 2018; Gerhart et al., 2011; Gleason & Gerzon, 2013).

By leveraging transformative leadership within PLCs, principals can create school cultures that actively dismantle inequities. Through this process, teachers are empowered to shift their mindsets and instructional practices, ultimately fostering more equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter outlined the research design and methods used to explore whether and how elementary school principals in Norman Public Schools (NPS) utilize professional learning communities (PLCs) to promote educational equity. Chapter 3 outlined the use of a qualitative case study design and details the research setting, participant selection, data collection procedures, ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and strategies used to ensure trustworthiness throughout the study.

Research Design

Qualitative research helps us understand how people make sense of their world by examining the meaning individuals construct about their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study explored whether and how elementary principals within NPS implemented PLCs as a strategy to promote educational equity and the challenges they faced in doing so. The research questions focused on how principals defined and understood educational equity within their school, how they perceived the purpose of PLCs, and in what ways, if any, they used PLCs to advance educational equity in their schools. While consideration was given to both qualitative and quantitative designs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the research questions were inherently exploratory and called for a methodology that captured the depth of individual experience, the meaning participants assigned to their practices, and the influence of local context on leadership decisions.

To address these questions, a case study design was used as it allows the researcher to explore a bounded system, specifically, a group of elementary principals within a single district, within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a case study design is ideal when the goal is to examine a phenomenon in its natural setting and to explore the

interactions between the context and the individuals involved. This design is particularly well-suited when the researcher is seeking to understand the complexities of real-life practices, such as how PLCs may or may not contribute to equity-based outcomes. It is important to note that this study did not assume all principals are leading with an explicit equity focus. Rather, the aim was to explore the ways in which PLCs may or may not serve as a tool for advancing equity in schools.

By using a case study design, the study captured a comprehensive understanding of how PLCs are utilized by principals, whether explicitly or implicitly, as a strategy for promoting educational equity. Yin (2018) emphasizes that case studies are particularly effective when the research aims to investigate a phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the researcher is uncertain about the presence or absence of a particular practice or outcome. This aligns with the study's goal of uncovering whether and how principals' use of PLCs may contribute to equity-focused outcomes, without assuming an explicit or uniform focus on equity.

Furthermore, the case study design supports the collection of detailed, in-depth data from multiple sources, such as principal interviews, PLC agendas, and school improvement documents, which allows for triangulation of data and a richer understanding of the dynamics at play (Yin, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also note that the flexibility of the case study design allows for a deep dive into the participants' experiences, ensuring that both the context and the participants' perspectives are thoroughly explored. This methodological approach was crucial for understanding the complex ways that school leaders may or may not leverage PLCs to drive educational equity in their schools.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher plays a central and active role as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in a qualitative case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Unlike quantitative research, which often relies on standardized tools, qualitative case study research depends on the researcher's capacity to observe, engage, interpret, and make meaning of participants' experiences within their real-life context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher is responsible for collecting data through in-depth interviews and document analysis while remaining responsive to the evolving nature of the study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasize that qualitative researchers must engage in reflexivity, acknowledging their positionality, biases, and assumptions throughout the research process. This is particularly important in case study research, where the researcher interprets and constructs the narrative of the case. Additionally, Yin (2018) highlights the importance of clearly defining the boundaries of the case, triangulating data from multiple sources, and documenting the process explicitly. Collectively, these responsibilities position the researcher not only as a data collector but as a meaning-maker who must navigate the complexities of context, interpretation, and representation with rigor and transparency.

Researcher Bias

Because the researcher served as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative case study research, it was essential to recognize and address potential sources of bias. Given the nature of this qualitative case study research, the researcher's professional background in educational leadership, and experience within the school district, several forms of bias were considered. Confirmation bias was considered for this study, particularly because the researcher held prior beliefs about the effectiveness of PLCs as a strategy for advancing

educational equity, which could have led to overemphasizing data that supports preconceived assumptions while overlooking contradictory evidence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Similarly, positionality bias was taken into consideration due to the researcher's central office role and experiences within the school district, which may have influenced the interpretation of participant responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher was also mindful of potential interpretation bias, which could arise if personal definitions of key concepts, such as "collaboration" or "equity," were imposed on the data, rather than allowing interpretations to emerge from participants' own experiences and understandings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finally, rapport bias was considered, as elementary principals may have, intentionally or unintentionally, avoided difficult questions or provided surface-level responses due to their professional relationship with the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recognizing these potential biases was essential for maintaining analytical rigor and accurately representing the complex ways in which principals enact leadership in PLCs for equity.

To address potential biases and enhance the trustworthiness of this study, several strategies grounded in qualitative research best practices were employed. As a central office administrator who oversees the implementation of PLCs across the district, the researcher brought both contextual expertise and potential positionality bias to the study. While the researcher holds a professional investment in the district's PLC structures, there was no presumption that principals are intentionally leveraging these structures to promote educational equity. To critically manage this uncertainty and potential bias, the researcher implemented reflexive journaling after each interview to examine how professional experiences, leadership perspective, and prior beliefs about collaborative practices and equity may have influenced data collection and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles et al., 2019). The researcher also

consulted with colleagues outside of the research context, allowing them to question possible assumptions and help mitigate confirmation and interpretation bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to review summaries of their interviews and preliminary findings to confirm that their voices had been accurately and authentically captured (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Lastly, the researcher worked to capture a multidimensional understanding of whether and how principals utilize PLCs to promote educational equity by triangulating multiple data sources, including interviews and PLC-related documents, to validate and enrich the findings (Yin, 2018). These strategies aimed to support a rigorous, transparent, and contextually grounded research process that honored both the researcher's insider knowledge and the distinct perspectives of participating school leaders.

Instrument

In this qualitative case study, the researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection, consistent with the role of the researcher in qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As a central office administrator responsible for overseeing the implementation of PLCs across the district, the researcher brought both contextual expertise and a need for intentional reflexivity to the data collection process. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method used to explore how elementary principals defined and understood educational equity within their specific context, perceived the purpose of PLCs, and whether and how they used PLCs to support equitable student outcomes. An interview protocol was developed to align with the study's research questions and informed by current literature on PLCs and Transformative Leadership Theory (see **Appendix A**). The protocol included open-ended questions designed to encourage rich, reflective responses from participants. To strengthen the quality of the

instrument, the interview guide was reviewed by a qualitative research expert and piloted with a non-participating elementary principal to ensure clarity and alignment.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, and were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim. During and after each interview, the researcher took field notes to capture observational data and analytic reflections. In addition to interviews, the study included the collection of relevant documents, such as PLC agendas and supporting documents, school Title I plans, SMART goals, and other site-based documents submitted by participants or accessed through district platforms (see **Appendix B**). These documents were used to triangulate data sources and support a multidimensional understanding of how principals implement PLCs to advance equitable student outcomes (Yin, 2018). All data were securely stored, coded, and analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software program. Throughout the process, steps were taken to ensure confidentiality and trustworthiness, including reflexivity, peer debriefing, member checking, and the triangulation of multiple data sources.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population for this study consisted of elementary school principals in Norman Public Schools, who are actively involved in the implementation of PLCs in their schools and have at least one year in their current position. These principals were selected based on their leadership roles and participation in PLCs, regardless of whether their leadership approach was explicitly equity-focused. The purpose of this study was to explore how principals used PLCs to promote educational equity, and as such, the study did not assume prior commitment to equity initiatives. Instead, the research explored the extent to which principals' PLC practices aligned with or promoted educational equity, which allowed these practices to emerge through the data. This approach aligned with the Transformative Leadership framework (Shields & Hesbol, 2019),

which encourages critical inquiry into leadership practices and structural conditions that may reproduce or challenge inequities.

The study employed purposeful sampling, with principals selected based on the following criteria:

- They serve as principals at elementary schools within the district.
- They have at least one full year of experience with PLCs in their current role.
- They are currently engaged in PLC work, regardless of the explicit focus on equity, to ensure a wide range of practices and perspectives are included.

To capture diverse experiences and viewpoints, maximum variation sampling was employed, selecting principals from schools that vary in factors such as:

- school demographics (e.g., diversity in student populations, including racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity)
- achievement levels (e.g., schools with varying academic performance, including those with significant achievement gaps and those making progress).
- school resources and size (e.g., varying levels of resources, Title I status, and school size).
- leadership tenure (e.g., principals with different levels of experience, from newer to more seasoned leaders).

By selecting a broad range of principals from different school contexts, the study allowed for a rich examination of how principals approach PLCs and whether and how their efforts contribute to educational equity. The sample size included 6 elementary principals, which is appropriate for in-depth qualitative analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2002). The findings from this study allow for an exploration of how different leadership practices within

PLCs were aligned with, or diverged from, equity-focused leadership, providing insights into whether principals' PLC work was contributing to equitable student outcomes.

Data Collection

Data for this qualitative case study was collected through semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and analytic memos to explore how elementary principals within Norman Public Schools define educational equity, perceive the purpose of PLCs, and use, or do not use, PLCs to support equitable student outcomes. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source, allowing participants to share their perspectives and practices in their own words, while offering the flexibility to probe emergent ideas (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To complement the interviews, relevant school artifacts such as PLC documents, SMART goals, Title I plans, and other school-based documents were analyzed to examine how equity-related goals are reflected (or omitted) in the documented work of PLCs. This multi-source approach enables triangulation of data, which enhances credibility and supports the development of a rich, contextually grounded understanding (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the researcher maintained reflective journals, analytic memos and field notes throughout data collection and analysis to document patterns, reflect on researcher bias, and support an audit trail (Miles et al., 2019). Table 3.1 presents the alignment of research questions and data sources. These data sources were analyzed across cases to identify patterns that informed the development of themes and cross-case findings presented in Chapter 4.

Interview Protocol and Document Analysis

Given the exploratory nature of this study, data collection instruments were designed to uncover, rather than assume, equity-focused practices. Semi-structured interviews and document

analysis served as the primary data sources to examine both principals' perspectives and the practical enactment of leadership strategies within their schools.

Table 3.1

Alignment of Research Questions and Data Sources

Research Question	Data Sources	Purpose of Data Collection
How do elementary principals define and understand educational equity in their schools?	Semi-structured interviews Researcher memos	To capture principals' definitions and conceptualizations of equity and identify cross-case patterns in how equity is understood, interpreted, and framed across participants.
How do elementary principals perceive the purpose of professional learning communities (PLCs)?	Semi-structured interviews PLC-related documents (e.g., agendas, data trackers, norms) Researcher memos	To examine how principals describe the purpose and function of PLCs and to compare these perceptions with documented PLC structures and practices across cases.
How do elementary principals use PLCs to promote educational equity in their schools?	Semi-structured interviews PLC documents School-based documents (e.g. Title I, Smart goals) Researcher memos	To analyze how PLCs are used to identify and respond to differences in student learning and to examine how these practices align with equity-oriented goals across cases.

Note. Researcher memos were used to document emerging patterns, support cross-case analysis, and refine themes and findings.

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with elementary principals to allow for in-depth, open-ended exploration of their understandings, perceptions, and leadership practices. Because the study did not assume that equity is currently a guiding focus of PLCs, the interview protocol was intentionally broad and exploratory. Guiding questions included:

- How do you define educational equity, and what does it look like in your school?

- What are the main purposes of PLCs in your building?
- Can you describe how, if at all, PLCs support your school's equity goals?
- What kinds of data or collaborative practices are used in PLCs?
- What challenges do you face in using collaboration to support all student groups?
- In what ways do you see your role as an advocate for equity in your school and through your PLC leadership?

These questions were designed to surface whether equity was an intentional focus in PLCs and, if so, how it was defined and operationalized by school leaders. They also reflected the transformative leadership aim of critically reflecting on inequitable social norms, fostering inclusive collaboration, and disrupting practices that reinforce inequity (Shields, 2016). Interviews were video-recorded using Zoom, transcribed verbatim, and followed by analytic memos to document emerging themes and the researcher's reflections (Miles et al., 2019).

Document Analysis

To support or challenge principals' interview responses, relevant school documents were collected and analyzed for a comprehensive understanding of whether equity-focused leadership practices are evident in both discourse and documentation (see **Appendices C and D**). These documents included:

- PLC agendas and meeting notes
- school improvement plans or strategic goals
- frameworks or protocols used to guide collaborative work

Rather than assuming the presence of equity-focused content, these documents were analyzed using a coding rubric informed by the tenets of transformative leadership (Shields,

2016) and the PLC framework (DuFour et al., 2016). The rubric examined the presence or absence of the following:

- explicit references to educational equity
- use of disaggregated data to guide instructional decisions and identify opportunity gaps
- evidence of inclusive, collaborative leadership practices, such as shared decision-making and diverse stakeholder engagement
- action steps aimed at addressing systemic barriers for historically underserved student groups
- language that reflects moral or ethical commitments to social justice and equity (Shields, 2016)
- structures aligned with PLC principles, such as a focus on learning, results-oriented collaboration, and collective responsibility for student outcomes (DuFour et al., 2016)

This approach allowed the researcher to examine both the structural implementation of PLCs and the transformative intent behind leadership practices. It reflected transformative leadership's emphasis on critical reflection, moral purpose, and systemic change (Datnow & Park, 2018; Shields, 2016; Theoharis, 2007), while also recognizing PLCs as a mechanism for fostering collaborative, data-informed improvement (DuFour et al., 2016). Through triangulation of interviews and documents, the study aimed to surface how and whether equity is embedded in leadership practices, even when not explicitly named (Yin, 2018).

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this qualitative case study followed an iterative, hybrid deductive–inductive approach designed to examine how elementary principals understand educational equity and utilize PLCs within their school contexts. Analysis was guided by the study's research

questions and informed by Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2016), while remaining open to patterns emerging directly from participant experiences and documents.

The analytic process started with within-case analysis of each individual interview transcript. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times and coded using an initial cycle of open coding to capture participants' language, key concepts, and recurring ideas related to equity, PLC practices, and leadership actions (Saldaña, 2021) (see **Appendix E**). During this phase, the researcher engaged in analytic memoing to document emerging patterns, reflect on interpretations, and examine potential biases influencing the analysis (Miles et al., 2019). Initial codes were then grouped into broader categories representing patterns within each case.

Following within-case analysis, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify patterns and variations across participants. Categories from individual cases were systematically compared to identify recurring similarities and differences in how principals defined equity, described the purpose of PLCs, and utilized PLCs to address student learning needs. Through this process, categories were refined and synthesized into nine cross-case themes representing shared patterns across the six principals.

As analysis progressed, these themes were further examined and consolidated into four broader cross-case findings that captured overarching patterns in principals' conceptualizations of equity and their use of PLCs. This progression from codes to categories to themes and ultimately to findings reflects an iterative analytic process in which interpretations were continuously refined through comparison across data sources and cases.

In addition to interview data, document analysis was conducted concurrently to both corroborate and extend emerging findings. Documents, including PLC documents, Title I plans, SMART goals, and site-based reports, were analyzed using a coding framework informed by

both Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2016) and key principles of professional learning communities (DuFour et al., 2016). Document analysis focused on identifying evidence of equity-related language, use of data, collaborative structures, and instructional practices. These data were compared with interview findings to identify points of convergence, divergence, and elaboration.

Throughout the analysis, analytic memos served as a critical tool for synthesizing insights across interviews and documents, supporting the development of themes and cross-case findings (see **Appendix F**). The researcher engaged in constant comparative analysis, revisiting earlier data in light of new insights to refine categories, strengthen interpretations, and ensure alignment between the data, themes, and findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Finally, all data were interpreted through the lens of Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2016) to examine the extent to which principals' practices reflected elements of equity-focused or transformative leadership. Importantly, the analysis remained open to identifying both the presence and absence of such practices, allowing findings to reflect the range of ways equity was conceptualized and enacted within PLC structures.

This multi-stage, iterative analytic process enabled a comprehensive understanding of how principals used PLCs within their local contexts and the extent to which these practices aligned with or diverged from equity-oriented leadership. To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis process, several strategies were employed, as described in the following section.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of this qualitative case study, multiple strategies were employed, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln

& Guba, 1985). These strategies were integrated throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure that findings accurately represent participants' perspectives and are grounded in the data.

Credibility was established through the use of multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and analytic memos. This triangulation allowed for the comparison of principals' reported practices with documented evidence, strengthening the accuracy and depth of interpretations. Data were analyzed through both within-case and cross-case analysis, enabling the identification of consistent patterns across participants while also attending to variation in individual cases. Cross-case matrices and theme alignment tables were also used to systematically compare patterns across participants and support analytic consistency. Member checking was also employed, as participants were invited to review interview summaries and clarify or confirm the accuracy of their responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the use of rich, representative quotes in Chapter 4 supports credibility by grounding findings in participants' own words.

Transferability was supported through the use of purposeful maximum variation sampling, which included principals from schools with diverse student populations, achievement levels, and contexts. Detailed descriptions of participants, school contexts, and PLC structures are provided in Chapter 4 to allow readers to determine the applicability of findings to other settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By providing thick, contextualized descriptions of both leadership practices and school environments, this study enables readers to make informed judgments about the relevance of findings beyond the study context.

Dependability was addressed through a systematic and transparent data analysis process. Data analysis followed an iterative progression from coding to categories to themes and

ultimately to cross-case findings. Analytic memos were maintained throughout the study to document coding decisions, emerging patterns, and shifts in interpretation. A consistent coding framework was applied across all data sources, and cross-case comparison was used to refine themes and ensure consistency in interpretation. This audit trail provides a clear account of how findings were developed from the data (Miles et al., 2019).

Confirmability was supported through reflexivity, triangulation, and the use of analytic memos. The researcher engaged in ongoing reflection to examine how personal experiences, professional role, and assumptions about PLCs and equity may influence data interpretation. Analytic memos were used to distinguish between participant perspectives and researcher interpretations, supporting transparency in the analytic process. Triangulation across interviews, documents, and cross-case patterns further ensured that findings were grounded in the data rather than shaped by researcher bias (Yin, 2018).

Together, these strategies strengthened the trustworthiness of the study by ensuring that findings were credible, grounded in multiple sources of data, and reflective of the complex ways principals understand and enact equity through PLCs.

Researcher Positionality and Assumptions

As a central office administrator who supports the implementation of PLCs across the school district, the researcher brought an insider perspective to this qualitative case study. This positionality provided valuable contextual understanding of district structures, policies, and practices that shape how school leaders engage in collaborative work. However, it also required careful attention to the assumptions and potential biases that may have influenced the study's design, data collection, and analysis.

This research was grounded in several key assumptions. First, the researcher assumed that educational equity is a professional and moral imperative, and that schools must take active steps to eliminate disparities in outcomes, especially for historically underserved student populations (Shields, 2010). Second, the researcher believed that elementary principals play a critical role in advancing equity through their leadership of PLCs, and that collaborative structures, when purposefully led, can serve as vehicles for equitable school improvement (DuFour & Fullan, 2012). This study also assumed that the lived experiences and interpretations of principals are essential to understanding how equity work is enacted in contextually complex school environments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Given the researcher's role and commitment to equity, she acknowledged the potential for confirmation bias, particularly the tendency to highlight data that affirmed her professional beliefs about the promise of PLCs. To mitigate this, she engaged in continuous reflexivity through journaling and analytic memos, utilized peer debriefing, and invited participant feedback through member checking to ensure that findings are grounded in principals lived realities rather than filtered through her own assumptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles et al., 2019). Additionally, she recognized the professional power dynamic that may have existed between her and the participants, and took deliberate steps to create a safe and voluntary space for honest dialogue. This included ensuring confidentiality, emphasizing that participation is not evaluative, and remaining open to findings that may challenge existing district practices or assumptions.

By integrating these assumptions and positionality considerations into the research process, the researcher aimed to uphold the rigor, credibility, and trustworthiness of the study while honoring the complex realities principals face in leading for educational equity.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study included several delimitations that defined its scope and boundaries. It was delimited to elementary principals within the Norman Public School district who are actively engaged in leading PLCs. This decision reflected the researcher's role as a central office administrator who oversees PLC implementation across the district. The study was further delimited to schools where formal PLC structures are in place, as the goal was to examine how, if at all, principals were using these structures to advance educational equity. Importantly, this study was exploratory in nature; the researcher did not assume that principals were leading PLCs with an equity focus but sought to understand whether and how equity was being addressed through collaborative leadership. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with principals, along with an analysis of relevant documents such as PLC agendas and school improvement plans. The perspectives of teachers and students, as well as direct observations of PLC meetings, were not included in order to maintain a focused scope centered on the role of principal leadership.

Despite efforts to ensure methodological rigor, the study was subject to several limitations. First, because it was confined to one school district, the findings may not be transferable to other settings with different demographic profiles, organizational cultures, or PLC implementation practices. Second, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews may have introduced social desirability bias, as principals might have presented their practices in ways that align with perceived district expectations, especially given the researcher's administrative role. The absence of teacher and student voices may also have constrained the study's ability to capture a more comprehensive understanding of how equity is, or is not, being addressed at different levels of the school. Lastly, the researcher's involvement in supporting

PLCs may have posed a risk of interpretive bias. However, strategies such as reflexivity, triangulation of data sources, and peer debriefing were used to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are central to the design and execution of this study. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Norman Public Schools to ensure adherence to ethical research standards (see **Appendices G and H**). Participants were invited through a recruitment email and were provided with an informed consent letter before participation in the study (see **Appendices I and J**). Given the researcher's role as a central office administrator, particular care was taken to minimize power dynamics that could influence participants' willingness to participate or shape their responses. Participants were assured that their decision to participate, or not, would have no impact on their professional standing or evaluation. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and identifying details in documents such as PLC agendas or school improvement plans were de-identified. All data were securely stored on password-protected devices, and access was limited to the researcher. Additionally, reflexivity and peer debriefing were employed throughout the study to mitigate potential biases and maintain ethical integrity in the interpretation of findings.

Summary

This chapter described the methodology for a qualitative case study designed to explore whether and how elementary principals in Norman Public Schools were leveraging professional learning communities (PLCs) to promote educational equity. Anchored in a constructivist paradigm and informed by transformative leadership theory, this study sought to understand principals' definitions of equity, their perceptions of PLCs, and the extent to which collaborative

structures are used to support equitable student outcomes. A qualitative case study design is appropriate for investigating this bounded group, elementary school leaders within one district, in a way that captures rich, context-specific insights and reveals complexity.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and the analysis of documents such as PLC agendas and school improvement plans. Purposeful sampling was used to identify principals with relevant leadership experience and engagement in PLCs, though the study remains open to discovering the degree to which equity is an intentional focus. Thematic coding, triangulation of data sources, analytic memos, and iterative analysis were used to interpret the data. Given the researcher's dual role as a central office administrator, ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and the mitigation of power dynamics were especially important. To ensure trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and audit trails were implemented to support credibility and confirmability.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the results and interpretation of the data collected. Data from interviews and documents were analyzed within and across cases to identify recurring patterns, which were developed into themes and synthesized into cross-case findings presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 offers a discussion of these findings in relation to the existing literature and theoretical framework, highlighting implications for practice, policy, and future research.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction to Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the study examining how elementary principals conceptualize educational equity and utilize Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to support equitable learning opportunities. The study explored whether and how principals use PLCs as leadership structures to promote equity and address student learning disparities. Data sources included interviews with six elementary principals and analysis of various school-based documents, including PLC agendas, school improvement plans, and site goals. Some cases submitted a district document outlining PLC expectations which was included in the document analysis.

The chapter begins with an overview of participants and data sources, followed by a summary of the analytic process. Findings are presented through cross-case analysis and organized into four major findings that address the study's research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary of key patterns across cases.

The following section provides an overview of the participants included in the study.

Participant Overview

The following profiles provide additional context for each principal and their school setting, including their perspectives on educational equity and the role of PLCs in their schools.

Principal A

Principal A leads a school with a diverse student population, and described a strong commitment to equitable outcomes through differentiated supports. Across the interview, Principal A described educational equity as ensuring equitable outcomes through differentiated supports, noting that individual needs look different because "every child deserves to see over the fence."

Table 4.1

Participant Characteristics of Elementary Principals

Participant ID	School ID	Years as Principal	Years at Current School	School Size	Econ. Dis. %	Years of PLC at School	PLC Maturity/ Experience
Principal A	School A	5	3	354	77	5	Developing
Principal B	School B	8	3	335	63	10	Established
Principal C	School C	36	15	361	30	15	Established
Principal D	School D	5	5	400	55	5	Established
Principal E	School E	8	8	551	53	7	Established
Principal F	School F	14	14	202	79	8	Developing

Note. PLC = Professional Learning Community

PLCs were described as collaborative spaces intentionally designed for refining standards, calibrating assessments, strengthening Tier 1 instruction, and advocating for targeted supports grounded in evidence. Document analysis from this site reinforced the emphasis on collaborative data analysis used to inform daily instructional practices and flexible student groups for extensions and interventions for all students.

Principal B

Principal B leads a school with high student needs and low teacher turnover where established PLC structures have primarily focused on closing achievement gaps through interventions. Principal B presents as a systems-oriented and capacity-conscious instructional leader who, through her three-year tenure, is leveraging PLCs as structured mechanisms for

preserving instructional access and strengthening core teaching practices. Across the interview, equity was consistently framed as ensuring student success through meeting individual learning needs, particularly through high-quality Tier 1 instruction, aligned intervention systems, and coordinated enrichment opportunities. Principal B described PLCs as organized, data-driven spaces where teachers clarify standards, analyze common formative assessments, and make instructional adjustments aimed at maximizing learning time and preventing student skill gaps. Document analysis for Principal B reinforced this perspective, indicating a strong commitment to equity operationalized through instructional systems and collaborative structures, particularly through data-driven PLC practices and inclusive organizational processes.

Principal C

Principal C leads a school that has been deeply committed to the work of PLCs, and recently encountered a moderate level of teacher turnover. Principal C presents as a systems-oriented instructional leader who positions PLCs as the central infrastructure for advancing educational equity within the school. Across the interview, equity is framed as a moral and organizational commitment to ensuring that every student receives what they need to grow, with particular sustained attention to special education and economically disadvantaged students. PLCs are described not as supplemental structures but as the way they do business, reflecting a deeply institutionalized collaborative model grounded in data transparency, collective responsibility, and coordinated intervention. Document analysis for Principal C reinforced this perspective, indicating strong, well-established PLC infrastructure centered on collaborative problem-solving, data-informed instruction, and collective responsibility for student learning.

Principal D

Principal D leads a school of highly committed staff members passionate about students getting what they need. Principal D presents as a systems-oriented instructional leader who conceptualizes equity as ensuring that every student receives responsive instruction and appropriate support regardless of classroom placement. Throughout the interview, equity was frequently described through the phrase "every kid, any classroom," signaling a commitment to consistency of instructional opportunity across the school. PLCs function as the central mechanism through which this commitment is operationalized and described as collaborative spaces in which teachers, specialists, and other staff use student performance data to guide daily instruction and collectively address student needs. Principal D's document analysis confirms a well-structured PLC system characterized by collaborative inquiry, data-driven decision-making, and collective responsibility for student learning.

Principal E

Principal E leads a school known for its strong positive school culture of belonging and school-wide traditions giving all students enriched experiences throughout the school year. Principal E presents as a relationally grounded and systems-aware instructional leader who views PLCs as collaborative structures for improving instruction, strengthening teacher capacity, and protecting student access to meaningful learning opportunities. Across the interview, equity was consistently framed as ensuring that students receive consistent instruction, balanced learning experiences, and opportunities for both intervention and enrichment regardless of classroom assignment. PLCs function as collaborative spaces where teachers analyze data, refine instructional practices, coordinate intervention and enrichment supports, and examine emerging patterns in student learning. Principal E's document analysis confirmed perceptions of a strong

instructional and collaborative PLC system paired with an expanded focus on inclusion and belonging.

Principal F

Principal F leads a small school of diverse learners and presents as a reflective instructional leader who conceptualizes educational equity primarily through the lens of individualized support and instructional responsiveness. Throughout the interview, equity is most often framed as ensuring that "every kid gets what they need," signaling a belief that fairness in schooling is achieved when instructional decisions are tailored to address each student's specific academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. PLCs are conceptualized as structured processes for collaborative problem-solving and instructional improvement. Further, Principal F described PLCs as spaces where teachers move beyond general observations about student performance to identify specific skills or standards that students need to master. Document analysis for Principal F reinforced the emphasis on data-driven instructional improvement through PLC structures.

Overview of Findings

Although principals worked in different school contexts, several common patterns emerged across interviews regarding how educational equity was conceptualized and how PLCs functioned as structures for instructional improvement. The following sections present the data and findings organized by the study's research questions.

Data analysis followed an iterative, hybrid deductive–inductive coding process, beginning with individual interview analysis and extending to document analysis, with codes refined into categories. Through cross-case comparison, these categories were synthesized into nine themes representing recurring patterns in principals' perspectives and practices. These

themes were further consolidated into four major findings that capture broader patterns in how principals conceptualize equity and utilize PLCs to address student learning disparities. The four cross-case findings were as follows:

1. Principals primarily conceptualized equity as ensuring access to learning opportunities and instructional support.
2. PLCs were widely understood as collaborative systems for instructional improvement.
3. PLCs functioned as mechanisms for identifying and responding to student learning disparities.
4. Equity leadership within PLCs often occurred through instructional decision-making/practice rather than explicit equity discourse.

Findings 1–3 correspond directly to the study's research questions, while Finding 4 represents a cross-cutting pattern that emerged across cases. Table 4.2 shows the alignment of the research questions, themes, and findings.

Analysis across the six principals revealed consistent patterns in how educational equity was conceptualized and enacted through PLCs, as well as important variation in emphasis across cases. While each principal demonstrated a commitment to improving student learning outcomes, differences emerged in how equity was defined, the depth of equity-oriented leadership, and the ways in which PLCs were utilized to support equitable practices.

Finding 1: Principals Conceptualize Educational Equity as Access to Instruction and Support

This finding addresses Research Question 1, which explored how elementary principals define and understand educational equity in their schools. Across all six cases, principals primarily conceptualized educational equity as ensuring that all students have access to grade-level instruction and the supports necessary to achieve academic success. While principals varied

in how broadly they defined equity, the dominant pattern across cases reflects an access-oriented and instructional understanding, with limited evidence of systemic or justice-oriented perspectives.

Equity as Access to Learning and Instructional Support. A prominent theme related to principals' conceptualizations of educational equity was equity as access to learning and instructional support. Across interviews, principals frequently described equity as ensuring that all students receive the support necessary to succeed academically. Across cases, equity was framed as ensuring that all students receive consistent, high-quality instruction supported by coordinated intervention and enrichment structures.

For example, Principal D described equity through the phrase "every kid, any classroom," which emphasizes both consistency of instructional opportunity and responsiveness to individual student needs. Similarly, Principal B explained that "every kid gets what they need," highlighting the importance of meeting students where they are through targeted supports and intervention systems. Principal A also emphasized instructional consistency, noting "That's where equity starts. It's every kid, having access to high quality tier one instruction that is really engaging and really focused on the critical standard that the grade level needs," reinforcing the idea that equitable practice involves access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum across classrooms.

Across cases, principals emphasized Tier 1 instruction, intervention systems, and enrichment as central components of equitable practice. These descriptions reflect a shared understanding of equity as access to instruction and coordinated academic support systems.

Document analysis reinforced this pattern of collective responsibility, as evidenced in goals and action steps focused on improving academic outcomes and closing performance gaps

through targeted interventions and data-driven instruction. These practices were consistently reflected across Title I plans, SMART goals, and PLC agendas, reinforcing that equity was most often operationalized as access to learning through structured plans aimed at closing performance gaps through targeted interventions and data-driven instruction.

Equity as Belonging and Inclusive School Culture. While access to instruction was the dominant framing of equity, some principals extended this understanding to include belonging, representation, and inclusive school culture. In these cases, equity was not only framed in terms of academic access and support but also as ensuring that students, and in some cases teachers, feel valued, included, and supported within the school environment.

Principal E most clearly reflected this perspective, emphasizing the importance of shared experiences and representation. For example, Principal E noted that "these whole-school events create shared experiences for all students… [and] help level the playing field," highlighting how schools can mitigate differences in access to enrichment opportunities. Document analysis further reinforced this perspective through explicit commitments to belonging, representation, and inclusive school culture. Similarly, document analysis from Principal B's school emphasized creating environments where students feel "seen, valued, and excited to learn," reflecting a schoolwide focus on inclusion and engagement.

While Principals B and E emphasized belonging through cultural inclusion and shared experiences, Principal D reflected a different dimension of belonging grounded in psychological safety and inclusive professional practice. For example, Principal D described PLC environments where "teachers feel safe because it's vulnerable," highlighting the importance of trust and openness in collaborative discussions about

student learning. This sense of professional belonging enabled teachers to engage in candid conversations about instructional differences and student outcomes, such as when a teacher openly acknowledged disparities in her students' performance and sought support from colleagues. In this case, inclusion was not expressed through cultural representation but through the creation of safe, collaborative spaces where educators could collectively examine and respond to student needs.

Together, these findings suggest that belonging operates at multiple levels across cases, including student experiences, cultural representation, and professional collaboration. However, even within these broader conceptualizations, equity remained grounded in improving engagement and access to opportunities. As a result, belonging and inclusion function as extensions of access-oriented equity rather than as components of a transformative or justice-oriented approach.

Levels of Equity Understanding. While all principals defined equity in terms of access and support, variation emerged in the depth of their understanding. Most principals demonstrated an instructional-level understanding of equity, focusing on classroom practices, data-informed instruction, and targeted support for individual students rather than through explicit examination of systemic inequities, structural power dynamics, or sociopolitical conditions within the educational system.

Principals B and E emphasized consistency of instructional access as central to equitable practice. Principal B described the importance of strong core instruction, noting that "you can't out intervene a Tier 1 problem," emphasizing that equitable practice begins with ensuring all students have access to high-quality, consistent instruction before relying on intervention systems. Similarly, Principal E noted that "equity is a guaranteed and viable curriculum,"

directly linking equity to consistency of instructional opportunity across classrooms. This reflects a form of instructional access-centered equity leadership, in which equity is advanced through the protection of instructional time and the coordination of support structures to expand learning opportunities for all students. Document analysis further supported this pattern, with Title I school plans and PLC documents emphasizing curriculum alignment, consistent instructional practices, and coordinated intervention systems to ensure all students had access to grade-level learning.

Principals C and F demonstrated a slightly broader awareness of student differences by emphasizing targeted supports for specific student populations. Principal C described the importance of "every student receives what they need to grow," referencing the need to respond to individuals, more specifically, special education and economically disadvantaged students. Similarly, Principal F emphasized intervention systems designed to support students within a high-poverty context who are not meeting academic expectations. These cases illustrate a clear commitment to addressing individual student needs and highlight how equity commitments can become deeply embedded in collaborative school systems; however, equity work remains primarily achievement-oriented and growth-centered. While achievement gaps for special education and economically disadvantaged students are explicitly acknowledged and targeted, discussions rarely extend into structural critique, power-conscious examination, or justice-oriented reconstruction of systems.

Taken together, these patterns illustrate that principals demonstrate varying degrees of attention to student needs, ranging from instructional alignment to targeted supports and inclusive experiences. Furthermore, there was limited evidence of equity being framed as a moral or justice-oriented imperative, which indicates principals' understanding of equity remains

consistently grounded in instructional practice. Across cases, equity is conceptualized as improving access to learning, supporting individual student growth, and coordinating instructional systems rather than as a systemic or justice-oriented endeavor. This suggests that, despite variation in emphasis, principals' approaches to equity do not extend into deeper examination of structural inequities, power dynamics, or sociopolitical conditions shaping educational outcomes.

Synthesis of Finding 1. Taken together, these themes demonstrate that principals conceptualize educational equity primarily as an instructional and organizational responsibility focused on ensuring access to learning and supporting student success. Although some principals extended their definitions to include belonging, representation, and responsiveness to student differences, these perspectives remained closely tied to improving academic outcomes and school experiences. Across cases, there was limited evidence of equity being framed as a systemic, political, or justice-oriented endeavor. Instead, equity was consistently operationalized through instructional practices, intervention systems, and coordinated supports. This pattern suggests that principals' understanding of equity is deeply rooted in improving teaching and learning conditions rather than interrogating or transforming the broader structural conditions that produce inequities.

Finding 2: PLCs Function as Collaborative Instructional Improvement Systems

This finding addresses Research Question 2, which explored how elementary principals perceive the purpose and use of PLCs in their schools. Across all six cases, PLCs functioned as the central organizational structure through which teachers planned instruction, analyzed student data, and coordinated responses to student learning needs. In this way, PLCs operated as

collaborative learning systems, data-driven decision-making structures, and spaces where principals facilitated ongoing collaborative inquiry.

Professional Learning Communities as Collaborative Learning Systems. A prominent theme across all cases was the role of PLCs as collaborative learning systems. Principals consistently described PLCs as structured opportunities for teachers to work interdependently to improve instructional practice and student outcomes. Collaboration was not limited to sharing ideas but involved collective responsibility for student learning, joint planning, and shared accountability for results.

For example, Principal C described PLCs as "the way we do business," a space where teachers look at data for "every single child" and ensure "the teaching we do reflects that close attention to every single child's needs." Similarly, Principal A noted that PLCs are "the community where learning is at the core of the conversation," a space for teachers to "leverage our resources and spend that time very intentionally," because "we all have a stake in the outcome," highlighting that collaboration supports instructional consistency across classrooms. Principal E further reinforced this idea by explaining that PLCs create opportunities for teachers to "have that discussion of how we're teaching," demonstrating how collaboration extends beyond discussion into shared instructional practice.

Document analysis reinforced this pattern, as PLC agendas, team norms, and planning documents consistently outlined structures for collaborative work. For example, Schools A and E PLC documents included shared team norms, defined roles such as facilitator and recorder, and collaborative planning cycles focused on common formative assessments and intervention planning. Similarly, Schools B & F documents emphasized collective responsibility through grade-level planning, shared assessments, and coordinated instructional strategies.

Across cases, PLCs functioned as systems for collective professional learning, where teachers worked collaboratively to refine instruction and support student success. This reflects a shared understanding of PLCs as collaborative structures designed to improve teaching and learning through joint responsibility and ongoing professional dialogue.

Professional Learning Communities as Data-Driven Decision Structures. A second major theme was the role of PLCs as data-driven decision structures. Across all cases, principals emphasized the use of student data as a central component of PLC work, guiding instructional planning, intervention decisions, and progress monitoring.

For example, Principal D explained that PLCs are used to "continuously look at student data" to "drive our instruction," highlighting how data informs instructional decisions. Similarly, Principal F described analyzing "Savvas [reading] unit and weekly assessments" in the intermediate grades and "UFLI and FAST [reading]" in primary grades to determine next steps for students. Principal B further emphasized that PLCs provide a structure for grade level teams to "go through those four questions of the PLC" and "find a way to respond to that data," demonstrating how analysis of student performance is embedded in ongoing instructional planning.

Document analysis further supported this theme, as multiple sources across cases demonstrated the systematic use of performance data within PLC processes. For example, Title I plans and SMART goals from schools D, E, and F included detailed analysis of student assessments results, including subgroup outcomes and growth targets. PLC agendas and data trackers from schools A and C documented cycles of assessment, analysis, and instructional adjustment, illustrating how data was used to guide decision-making and monitor progress over time.

Across cases, PLCs functioned as structured systems for using data to inform instructional practice, enabling teachers to identify student needs, adjust instruction, and monitor progress. This reflects a consistent emphasis on data-driven decision-making as a core component of PLC work.

Principals as Facilitators of Collaborative Inquiry. A third theme highlighted the role of principals as facilitators of collaborative inquiry within PLCs. Across all cases, principals actively shaped the structure, focus, and expectations of PLCs, guiding teachers' engagement in PLC processes.

For example, Principal F described their role in PLCs is to focus teacher discussions on "using data to drill down" and "make decisions" about "a specific skill or a specific standard that needs to be improved," emphasizing the importance of establishing clear expectations for PLC work. Similarly, Principal A explained how they "restructured PLCs to have alignment with our smart goals" to focus collectively on "how we are gathering [student] data intentionally," highlighting their role in guiding instructional conversations and maintaining focus on student learning. Principal C further noted that teachers "meet with me weekly" to "talk about each little piece of the curriculum" and "connect their assessments," demonstrating how leadership supports consistency and accountability within PLC processes.

Document analysis reinforced this theme, as PLC structures were often shaped by leadership through templates, agendas, and organizational systems. For example, PLC agenda templates and guiding coalition structures reflected intentional design by Principal B to focus collaboration on student learning and instructional improvement. Leadership teams and shared decision-making structures consistently outlined in many SMART goals, Title I plans, and PLC documents further supported the implementation and sustainability of PLC practices.

Across cases, principals played a critical role in facilitating collaborative inquiry by establishing structures, guiding conversations, and maintaining a focus on student learning. This reflects the importance of leadership in shaping PLCs as effective systems for instructional improvement.

Synthesis of Finding 2. Taken together, these themes illustrate that PLCs function as collaborative instructional improvement systems across all cases. Through structured collaboration, systematic use of data, and leadership support, PLCs across schools provided a consistent framework for improving teaching practices and responding to student learning needs. While implementation varied across contexts, the core functions of collaboration, data use, and guided inquiry were evident in all schools. This pattern suggests that principals conceptualize PLCs not only as structures for collaboration, but as essential systems for organizing and sustaining instructional improvement across their schools.

Finding 3: Professional Learning Communities as Mechanisms for Identifying and Responding to Student Learning Disparities

This finding addresses Research Question 3, which explored how elementary principals use PLCs to advance educational equity in their schools. Across all six cases, PLCs functioned as key organizational mechanisms for identifying and responding to differences in student learning. Principals consistently described PLCs as structured spaces where teachers analyze student performance and identify gaps in learning. These discussions informed instructional responses designed to support student growth.

While PLCs were effective in identifying disparities in student performance and coordinating instructional responses, these efforts were primarily focused on improving

academic outcomes through instructional adjustments rather than addressing broader systemic inequities.

This finding is supported by two cross-case themes: (a) PLCs as mechanisms for identifying learning disparities and (b) PLCs as systems for coordinated instructional responses.

Professional Learning Communities as Mechanisms for Identifying Learning Disparities. Across all cases, PLCs functioned as structured systems for identifying disparities in student learning through ongoing analysis of student performance data. Principals described how teachers regularly examined common formative assessments, benchmark data, and classroom performance to determine which students were not meeting expected learning targets. These discussions were embedded within recurring PLC cycles and focused on identifying gaps in student understanding across classrooms and grade levels.

For example, Principal D explained that PLC teams "continuously look at student data" to "drive our instruction," highlighting how identifying gaps in student learning is an ongoing process within PLCs. Similarly, Principal C described how teams examine data for "every single child" to determine which students require additional support, emphasizing the importance of closely monitoring individual student performance. Principals A, B, and F similarly described the use of multiple data sources including benchmark and weekly assessments, to identify patterns in student learning and determine next steps.

Document analysis reinforced this pattern, as PLC agendas, data trackers, and school SMART goals consistently included processes for reviewing student performance and identifying gaps in learning. For example, Title I plans across multiple schools included subgroup data analysis, highlighting differences in performance among economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and students with disabilities. PLC documents also

reflected cycles of assessment and analysis, with teams reviewing common formative assessment results and identifying students who had not yet demonstrated mastery of grade-level standards. For example, a PLC agenda from School A documented on-going cycles of common formative assessments (CFAs) and data analysis that tracked student mastery of essential grade-level skills. The tracker was used to determine which students needed intervention or extension.

Across cases, PLCs enabled educators to systematically identify disparities in student learning, particularly among students who were not yet meeting grade-level expectations. However, these disparities were most often framed in terms of academic performance and skill gaps rather than broader structural or systemic inequities. As a result, the identification of disparities remained closely tied to instructional outcomes rather than deeper examination of the conditions that contribute to those disparities.

Professional Learning Communities as Systems for Coordinated Instructional Responses. In addition to identifying disparities in student learning, PLCs functioned as systems for coordinating instructional responses to address these differences. Across all cases, principals described how PLC teams used data to develop targeted interventions, adjust instructional strategies, and provide additional support for students who were not meeting learning expectations.

For example, Principal A described how PLC teams organize students into flexible groups based on assessment data, allowing teachers to provide targeted instruction aligned to student needs. Similarly, Principal E explained that PLC discussions focus on “how we’re teaching” and adjusting instruction to improve student outcomes. Principals C and D further emphasized the importance of coordinated responses, noting that teachers work together to

determine how to respond when students need intervention or extensions, and ensure consistency in instructional practices across classrooms.

Document analysis further supported this theme, as school SMART goals, Title I plans, and PLC documents consistently outlined systems for responding to identified learning needs. For example, several schools implemented structured intervention periods, such as WIN (What I Need) time, where students received targeted support based on their performance data. Title I plans and SMART goals also detailed coordinated intervention systems, enrichment opportunities, and progress monitoring structures designed to improve student outcomes and close performance gaps.

Across cases, PLCs functioned as coordinated systems for responding to student learning disparities through instructional adjustments and targeted supports. These responses were primarily focused on improving academic outcomes and ensuring that students received the support necessary to meet grade-level expectations. While these practices reflect a clear commitment to addressing differences in student learning, they remain grounded in instructional responses rather than efforts to address systemic inequities or structural barriers to educational opportunity.

Synthesis of Finding 3. Taken together, these themes demonstrate that PLCs function as mechanisms for both identifying and responding to student learning disparities across schools. Through structured data analysis and coordinated instructional responses, PLCs enable educators to recognize differences in student performance and implement targeted strategies to support student growth. However, these efforts are primarily focused on addressing disparities at the level of instruction and student outcomes rather than engaging in deeper examination of systemic inequities or structural conditions. This suggests that while PLCs play an important role in

advancing equity through instructional practice, their use remains largely within an improvement-oriented framework rather than a transformative or justice-oriented approach. This pattern positions PLCs as mechanisms for managing disparities in student performance rather than addressing the broader conditions that produce those disparities.

Finding 4: Equity Leadership within PLCs Occurred Through Instructional Practices

This finding synthesizes how principals enact equity leadership within the context of PLCs and addresses the study's broader purpose. Across all six cases, equity leadership was most consistently enacted through instructional practices, including improving Tier 1 instruction, coordinating interventions, and using data to guide decision-making. While principals demonstrated a clear commitment to supporting student learning and addressing disparities in academic performance, these efforts were primarily situated within instructional systems rather than broader efforts to examine or disrupt systemic inequities.

Across findings, equity leadership was operationalized through practices such as curriculum alignment, data-driven instruction, intervention planning, and collaborative inquiry within PLCs. Although these practices contributed to improving access to learning and supporting student growth, there was limited evidence of leadership actions aligned with transformative leadership principles such as critically examining power, addressing systemic inequities, or engaging in justice-oriented change.

This finding is supported by Instructional Equity Leadership Through Collaborative Systems, which highlights how equity leadership is enacted primarily through instructional improvement efforts rather than systemic transformation.

Instructional Equity Leadership Through Collaborative Systems. Across all cases, principals enacted equity leadership primarily through instructional practices aimed at improving

teaching and learning. These practices included strengthening Tier 1 instruction, aligning curriculum and assessment, implementing intervention systems, and using data to guide instructional decisions. Rather than positioning equity as a broader organizational or systemic endeavor, principals consistently framed equity as improving instructional access and supporting student achievement through coordinated school practices.

For example, Principal A emphasized that equity begins with "high-quality Tier 1 instruction," highlighting the importance of ensuring that all students have access to rigorous and engaging learning experiences. Similarly, Principal B noted that "you can't out intervene a Tier 1 problem," reinforcing the idea that equitable outcomes depend on strong core instruction. Principal D described equity through the phrase "every kid, any classroom," emphasizing consistency in instructional opportunities across classrooms. Across cases, principals consistently linked equity to instructional quality, access to grade-level content, and coordinated support systems.

Document analysis further reinforced this pattern, as school Title I plans, SMART goals, and PLC documents consistently emphasized instructional strategies, intervention systems, and data-driven practices. Across all schools, equity was operationalized through goals focused on increasing academic achievement, closing performance gaps, and improving instructional effectiveness. Title I plans frequently included targeted supports for specific student groups, while PLC documents outlined systems for intervention, enrichment, and progress monitoring. Furthermore, SMART goals focused on increasing academic growth across grade levels. These documents reflect a consistent emphasis on instructional improvement as the primary mechanism for advancing equity.

While these practices demonstrate a strong commitment to improving student learning and addressing disparities in academic performance, they reflect an instructional-access and improvement-oriented approach to equity rather than a transformative one. There was limited evidence of principals engaging in critical examination of systemic inequities, power dynamics, or structural conditions that contribute to unequal educational outcomes. Equity leadership, as enacted in these cases, was primarily focused on improving access and outcomes within existing systems rather than transforming those systems.

Across cases, equity leadership was most visible in the ways principals organized instructional systems, supported teacher collaboration, and used data to guide decision-making. While these efforts are essential for improving student outcomes, they suggest that equity work remains largely confined to instructional practices rather than extending into broader efforts aimed at systemic or justice-oriented change.

Synthesis of Finding 4. Taken together, the findings of this study indicate that equity leadership in participating elementary schools is most commonly enacted through instructional practices designed to improve teaching and learning. PLCs serve as key organizational structures that support this work by enabling collaboration, data analysis, and coordinated instructional responses. However, while these practices contribute to improving access to learning and addressing disparities in student performance, they remain largely focused on instructional improvement rather than systemic transformation.

This suggests that equity leadership, as practiced across these schools, is situated within an improvement-oriented framework that prioritizes access, support, and academic outcomes. There is limited evidence of leadership practices aligned with transformative approaches to equity, such as challenging existing power structures, addressing institutional inequities, or

engaging in broader social justice work. As a result, equity efforts are primarily directed toward enhancing instructional effectiveness rather than fundamentally rethinking or restructuring the systems that produce inequitable outcomes.

To further illustrate the consistency of themes across cases, Table 4.2 presents the distribution of themes identified across the six principals. As shown, most themes were evident across all cases, with limited variation in the extent to which certain themes, such as belonging and inclusive school culture, were emphasized. This distribution reinforces the cross-case nature of the findings, highlighting both the consistency of instructional equity practices and the limited variation in how principals conceptualize and enact equity.

Table 4.2

Distribution of Themes Across Cases

Theme	Principal A	Principal B	Principal C	Principal D	Principal E	Principal F
Equity as Access to Learning and Instructional Support	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Equity as Belonging and Inclusive School Culture		✓		✓	✓	
Levels of Equity Understanding	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
PLCs as Collaborative Learning Systems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
PLCs as Data-Driven Decision Structures	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Principals as Facilitators of Collaborative Inquiry	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Theme	Principal A	Principal B	Principal C	Principal D	Principal E	Principal F
PLCs as Mechanisms for Identifying Learning Disparities	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
PLCs as Systems for Coordinated Instructional Responses	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Instructional Equity Leadership Through Collaborative Systems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note. Checkmarks indicate that the theme was supported by evidence in interview data, document analysis, or both.

Cross-Case Patterns

Across all six cases, consistent cross-case patterns emerged that deepen understanding of how principals conceptualize and enact equity through PLC structures. As shown in Table 4.3, the alignment between research questions, themes, and findings reflects a clear progression from coding to cross-case interpretation. Principals consistently defined educational equity as access to high-quality instruction and targeted support, emphasizing Tier 1 instruction, intervention systems, and coordinated responses to student learning needs. While some principals extended this understanding to include belonging and inclusive school culture, these perspectives remained closely tied to improving student experiences and outcomes rather than examining systemic inequities or structural barriers. Although variation existed in how principals emphasized inclusion and responsiveness, the dominant pattern across cases reflects an instructional and access-oriented understanding of equity.

PLCs functioned consistently across cases as the central organizational structure for instructional improvement. Principals described PLCs as structured systems that supported collaboration, data use, and shared responsibility for student learning. As illustrated in Table 4.4, triangulation across interviews, documents, and analytic memos confirmed that PLCs were used to identify student learning disparities through analysis of common formative assessments, benchmark data, and subgroup performance indicators. These practices were embedded in recurring PLC cycles and supported by formal structures such as PLC agendas, SMART goals, and Title I plans. Across schools, teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry to determine which students had not met learning targets and to plan instructional responses.

Despite the strength of these structures, the use of PLCs to advance equity remained primarily instructional in focus. Across cases, PLC teams coordinated interventions, implemented flexible grouping, and adjusted instruction to support student learning; however, these actions were largely centered on improving academic outcomes rather than addressing broader systemic inequities. As a result, principals' practices reflect a shared pattern of instructional equity leadership enacted through collaborative systems. Although principals varied along a continuum, from instructional coherence to collaborative inquiry, their approaches remained grounded in improvement-oriented practices rather than transformative or justice-oriented leadership. These patterns highlight both the strengths and limitations of PLCs as mechanisms for advancing educational equity and provide a foundation for further interpretation in Chapter 5.

Figure 4.1

Equity Leadership Continuum in PLC Contexts

Instructional Coherence Leadership (A, C)	Instructional Access Leadership (B, E)	Instructional Inquiry Leadership (D, F)
Focus of Equity Work: Alignment & consistency	Access & opportunity	Reflection & inquiry
PLC Function: Curriculum alignment	Coordination of supports	Data dialogue & inquiry
Equity Practices: Intervention planning Subgroup monitoring	Expanding access Flexible grouping	Instructional adjustment Collaborative calibration
Shared Pattern Across All Cases: PLCs function as instructional improvement systems that support equity through data use, intervention planning, and expanded access to learning opportunities.		

Table 4.3

Cross-Case Patterns Across Research Questions, Themes, and Findings

Research Question	Themes	Cross-Case Pattern	Evidence Sources
RQ1: Equity Understanding	Equity as Access; Belonging; Levels of Understanding	Equity defined primarily as access to instruction and support	Interview quotes (A–F); Title I plans; Equity summaries
RQ2: PLC Purpose & Use	Collaborative Systems; Data-Driven Structures; Principal Facilitation	PLCs function as structured instructional improvement systems	PLC agendas; SMART goals; Interview data
RQ3: PLCs & Equity	Identifying Disparities; Instructional Responses	PLCs identify and respond to learning disparities through data and intervention systems	CFA trackers; intervention plans; interviews

Research Question	Themes	Cross-Case Pattern	Evidence Sources
Cross-Findings Pattern	Instructional Equity Leadership	Equity leadership enacted primarily through instructional practices rather than systemic transformation	All data sources

Note. Patterns were identified through cross-case analysis of interview data, document analysis, and analytic memos.

Triangulation with Document Analysis

Data triangulation was achieved through the integration of multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and post-coding analytic memos. Evidence from interviews was consistently supported by document analysis, including PLC agendas, Title I plans, SMART goals, and school climate documents. For example, principals' descriptions of PLCs as data-driven and collaborative were reflected in documented PLC structures, data tracking systems, and intervention planning processes.

Similarly, findings related to equity as access to instruction and support were reinforced through school improvement plans and equity summaries, which emphasized closing performance gaps through instructional strategies and targeted interventions. The convergence of evidence across data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings and supported the identification of consistent cross-case patterns.

Table 4.4

Triangulation of Data Sources Across Themes

Theme	Interview Evidence	Document Evidence	Analytic Memo
Equity as Access to Learning & Instructional Support	Principals A–F emphasized Tier 1 instruction, intervention, and	Title I plans, SMART goals, PLC agendas emphasized access,	Memos noted consistent access-oriented framing across cases

Theme	Interview Evidence	Document Evidence	Analytic Memo
	"every student gets what they need"	intervention systems, closing gaps	
Equity as Belonging and Inclusive School Culture	Principals B, D, E referenced belonging, inclusion, and safe environments	Climate/culture summaries, school events promoting inclusion	Memos identified belonging as extension of access, not systemic equity
Depth of Equity Understanding	Variation in how principals described equity (instructional vs broader awareness)	Documents emphasized subgroup performance but limited systemic critique	Cross-case memos identified predominantly instructional-level understanding
PLCs as Collaborative Learning Systems	Principals described PLCs as "how we do business," shared responsibility	PLC agendas, team norms, meeting structures across schools	Memos highlighted collaboration as central organizing structure
PLCs as Data-Driven Decision Structures	Principals emphasized CFAs, benchmarks, "driving instruction with data"	Data trackers, subgroup tables, SMART goals, assessment cycles	Memos identified data use as consistent across all cases
Principals as Facilitators of Collaborative Inquiry	Principals described structuring PLCs, guiding conversations, aligning to goals	PLC templates, leadership teams, guiding coalition structures	Memos highlighted leadership role in shaping PLC focus
PLCs as Mechanisms for Identifying Learning Disparities	Principals described identifying "who didn't learn it" using data	Subgroup data in Title I plans, CFA analysis, performance tracking	Memos emphasized focus on academic disparities
PLCs as Systems for Coordinated Instructional Responses	Principals described intervention, reteaching, flexible grouping	WIN time, intervention blocks, enrichment systems, progress monitoring	Memos highlighted coordinated instructional responses across cases
Instructional Equity Leadership Through Collaborative Systems	Principals enacted equity through PLCs, instruction, and data systems	All documents emphasized instructional improvement, not systemic change	Memos identified overarching pattern of instructional (not transformative) equity leadership

Note. Triangulation was achieved through convergence of interview data, document analysis, and post-coding analytic memos across all six cases.

Summary of Findings

This chapter presented the findings of the study, organized into four cross-case findings that address the research questions. The findings demonstrated that principals conceptualize equity primarily as access to instruction and support, utilize PLCs as collaborative instructional improvement systems, and employ PLCs to identify and respond to student learning disparities through data-driven instructional practices.

While PLCs provided a structured and effective framework for improving teaching and learning, equity leadership was enacted primarily through instructional practices rather than broader systemic or transformative approaches. These findings highlight both the strengths and limitations of PLCs as mechanisms for advancing educational equity.

Chapter 5 interprets these findings in relation to the literature and theoretical framework, discusses implications for practice and policy, and offers recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary principals in Norman Public Schools conceptualize educational equity and how they utilize Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as leadership structures to support equity-oriented instructional practices. A qualitative cross-case design was used to collect data through interviews, document analysis, and analytic memos to identify patterns across six elementary school contexts. This chapter interprets the findings in relation to existing literature and transformative leadership theory, highlighting key insights, implications for practice, and directions for future research.

Summary of Findings

Findings from this study indicate that principals conceptualized equity as access to instruction and support. PLCs functioned as collaborative instructional systems used to analyze data and coordinate instructional responses to student learning needs. While PLCs supported the identification of learning disparities and instructional responses, there was limited evidence of leadership practices aligned with transformative approaches to equity. These findings are further examined through interpretation of each research question and associated cross-case patterns.

Interpretation of Findings

Finding 1: Principals Conceptualize Equity as Access to Instruction and Support

Findings related to Research Question 1 suggest that principals primarily conceptualize educational equity as an instructional and organizational responsibility focused on ensuring access to learning and supporting student success. This aligns with existing literature that frames equity in terms of opportunity to learn and differentiated support (DeMatthews, 2018; Gerhart et al., 2011; Gleason & Gerzon, 2013), where equity is operationalized through access to rigorous

curriculum, consistent instruction, and targeted interventions. Similarly, principals in this study emphasized Tier 1 instruction, coordinated intervention systems, and ensuring all students receive the support necessary to succeed. This pattern may reflect the ways in which accountability systems and instructional leadership expectations shape how principals operationalize equity in practice.

However, while participating principals highlighted access and instructional support, there was limited evidence of equity being framed as a systemic, political, or justice-oriented construct. This distinction is significant, as scholars argue that equity extends beyond access to include critical examination of structural inequities, power dynamics, and sociopolitical conditions that shape educational outcomes (Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2004, 2010; Shields & Hesbol, 2019). These findings suggest that principals' understandings of equity remain grounded in improving teaching and learning conditions, reflecting a pragmatic and instructionally focused approach to addressing student needs. While this approach supports academic improvement, it does not extend into systemic critique.

Finding 2: PLCs Function as Collaborative Instructional Improvement Systems

Findings related to Research Question 2 suggest that, across all cases, PLCs operated as collaborative learning systems, data-driven decision-making structures, and spaces where principals facilitated ongoing collaborative inquiry. These findings are strongly supported by foundational and empirical literature, which consistently describe PLCs as collaborative systems focused on instructional improvement. Foundational scholars such as Hord (1997), DuFour (2004), and Stoll et al. (2006) emphasize that PLCs are characterized by shared responsibility, collective inquiry, and ongoing collaboration centered on improving teaching and learning. Similarly, Lieberman and Miller (2011) highlight that professional learning within PLCs is

embedded in daily practice, allowing teachers to continuously refine instruction through collaboration. Empirical research further demonstrates that PLCs contribute to improved instructional practices and student outcomes through data-driven collaboration and shared problem solving (Lee & Lee, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2006; Lieberman et al., 2008).

Consistent with this body of research, principals in this study described PLCs as structured spaces where teachers collaboratively analyzed student data, aligned instruction, and coordinated responses to student learning needs. While these findings reinforce that PLCs function as collective instructional improvement systems, their role in advancing educational equity becomes more complex when examining how they are used to discuss and address differences in student learning. Examining data in PLCs is a key mechanism for identifying disparities in student learning; however, identifying differences is not synonymous with addressing equity. The next section builds on this difference by examining how PLCs are used to identify and respond to student learning disparities.

Finding 3: PLCs as Mechanisms for Identifying and Responding to Student Learning Disparities

Findings related to Research Question 3 suggest that, through structured data analysis and coordinated instructional responses, PLCs function as mechanisms for both identifying and responding to student learning disparities across schools. The findings are strongly supported by research on collaborative inquiry and data use within the school context. Studies by Datnow and Park (2018) and Coburn and Turner (2011) emphasize that effective data use is both collaborative and instructional, requiring educators to collectively interpret student performance data and translate it into instructional action. Similarly, the PLC framework articulated by DuFour and colleagues (1998, 2008, 2016) positions data use at the center of collaborative

practice, with common formative assessments guiding teachers in identifying which students have not met learning expectations and determining appropriate instructional responses. Additional research highlights how PLCs support ongoing progress monitoring and targeted interventions, enabling educators to adjust instruction based on student needs (Friedrich & McKinney, 2010; Romas, 2022).

Consistent with this literature, principals across this study described PLCs as structured spaces where teachers analyze data, identify learning gaps, and coordinate instructional responses. However, while both the literature and findings emphasize the role of PLCs in addressing learning disparities through instructional adjustments, these practices reveal an important discrepancy between instructional response and equity-focused leadership. Although teachers and principals worked collaboratively to provide targeted instructional support, these responses remained situated within an instructional framework and did not consistently involve examination of systemic conditions that contribute to inequitable outcomes. This discrepancy is significant because equity leadership extends beyond responding to student needs to include critical engagement with issues of power, access, and structural inequities. This shift from instructional response to leadership practice marks an important transition in understanding how equity is enacted within schools. The following section examines how principals enact equity leadership within PLC structures.

Finding 4: Equity Leadership within PLCs Occurred Through Instructional Practices

Findings across cases suggest that equity leadership is enacted primarily through instructional practices within PLC structures. While principals demonstrated a clear commitment to improving student outcomes and addressing learning disparities, these efforts were largely grounded in instructional improvement rather than in transformative or justice-oriented

approaches. Principals consistently emphasized the importance of high-quality Tier 1 instruction, data-driven decision-making, and coordinated intervention systems, positioning equity as a function of improving teaching and learning conditions. This reflects a form of instructional equity leadership in which efforts to support students are embedded within established systems of curriculum alignment, assessment, and intervention.

This finding aligns with research on instructional leadership, which highlights the role of school principals in improving student outcomes through a focus on teaching quality, data use, and collaborative learning (Leithwood et al., 2006). Additional research affirms the importance of principals in establishing structures, setting expectations, and supporting teacher collaboration to improve instruction and student learning (Wells & Feun, 2012). Similarly, research on PLCs emphasizes their role in fostering collective efficacy and promoting instructional improvement through shared analysis on student learning and coordinated responses (DuFour et al., 2016; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Romas, 2022). Together, this body of research suggests that instructional leadership and PLC implementation are closely intertwined in practice.

However, when examined through the lens of Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2010, 2016, 2020), a critical difference emerges. Transformative leadership extends beyond improving instructional practices to include a commitment to challenging inequitable systems, addressing issues of power, and advocating for social justice. While principals in this study demonstrated strong instructional leadership, there was limited evidence of leadership practices that engaged with these broader dimensions of equity. Discussions of equity were primarily framed in terms of student performance, access to instruction, and intervention systems, operating within existing structures rather than challenging them.

This difference highlights a gap between the theoretical ideals of transformative leadership and the realities of leadership practices within school contexts. While principals enacted equity through instructional systems designed to support student learning, these efforts remained largely technical and improvement-oriented rather than transformative. In other words, equity leadership was operationalized through efforts to increase access and improve student outcomes within existing structures, rather than through efforts to critically examine or disrupt those structures.

This finding is consistent with broader critiques in the literature, which suggest that equity work in schools is often reframed in ways that align with existing accountability systems and instructional priorities rather than as a challenge to systemic inequities (Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields & Hesbol, 2019). As a result, while principals may be engaging in practices that support equitable outcomes at the classroom level, these practices may not fully address the underlying conditions that contribute to inequity.

Taken together, these findings highlight a consistent pattern in which equity leadership is enacted through instructional systems designed to improve student outcomes. While these practices support access and academic success, they do not fully reflect the broader, justice-oriented dimensions of equity emphasized in Transformative Leadership Theory. This raises important questions about how equity leadership is conceptualized and enacted in practice. The following section examines these findings through the lens of Transformative Leadership Theory.

Theoretical Implications

This study was guided by Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2020), which emphasizes the role of school leaders in addressing systemic inequities,

challenging existing beliefs and practices, and promoting social justice within educational contexts. Transformative leadership extends beyond improving instructional practice to include critical examination of inequitable systems, advocacy of marginalized students, and a commitment to equity as a moral and sociopolitical imperative. This study highlights a critical distinction between instructional equity and transformative equity, demonstrating that efforts to improve access and outcomes do not necessarily engage with the systemic conditions that produce inequity.

Findings demonstrate partial alignment with the principles of transformative leadership. Across cases, principals exhibited a clear commitment to improving outcomes for all students, particularly through the use of data, collaborative structures, and targeted instructional supports. These practices reflect aspects of equity-oriented leadership, particularly in their focus on increasing access to high-quality instruction and addressing differences in student performance among subgroups. In this way, principals' work aligns with the transformative leadership emphasis on improving outcomes for underserved students. These findings both align with and extend transformative leadership theory by illustrating how equity is pragmatically enacted within instructional systems in school contexts.

However, the findings also reveal a significant gap between the theoretical ideals of transformative leadership and the ways in which equity is enacted in practice. While principals consistently addressed disparities in student learning through instructional strategies and intervention systems, there was limited evidence of leadership practices that engaged with the broader systemic, political, or sociocultural dimensions of inequity. Issues such as power, privilege, institutional bias, and structural barriers were largely absent from discussions of equity. This suggests that equity leadership in practice is often enacted within existing

instructional and organizational structures, rather than through the transformative, system-challenging approaches emphasized in the literature.

This gap suggests that transformative leadership, as conceptualized in the literature, may not fully align with the realities of school-based leadership practice. Principals appear to enact equity within the constraints of existing organizational structures, accountability systems, and instructional priorities, which emphasize measurable student outcomes and data-driven decision-making. As a result, equity work becomes embedded within instructional systems such as PLCs, where it is translated into practices focused on improving teaching and learning rather than addressing systemic inequities. This finding highlights a tension between the aspirational goals of transformative leadership and the practical demands of school leadership.

This study contributes to the literature on transformative leadership by illustrating how equity is operationalized within everyday school practices, particularly through PLC structures. While prior research emphasizes the importance of critical consciousness and systemic change, this study demonstrates that equity leadership in practice is often enacted through collaborative instructional systems that prioritize access, intervention, and academic improvement. This pattern suggests that the enactment of equity leadership is shaped by structural and organizational constraints that prioritize measurable instructional outcomes over critical engagement with systemic inequities.

These findings indicate that bridging the gap between instructional leadership and transformative leadership may require more intentional integration of equity-focused and justice-oriented perspectives into PLC processes and leadership practices. Without such integration, equity work may remain confined to instructional improvement efforts, limiting its potential to address the deeper systemic conditions that contribute to educational inequity.

To clarify this distinction, Table 5.1 presents a continuum of equity leadership that contrasts instructional approaches focused on access and achievement with transformative approaches that emphasize systemic change and social justice.

Table 5.1

Continuum of Equity Leadership: Instructional to Transformative Approaches

Dimension	Instructional Equity Leadership	Transformative Equity Leadership
Primary Focus	Access to high-quality instruction and support	Addressing systemic inequities and social justice
Goal of Equity Work	Improve student achievement and close performance gaps	Disrupt inequitable systems and conditions shaping outcomes
Use of Data	Identifying learning gaps and monitor student progress	Examine root causes of disparities, including structural and contextual factors
Leadership Practices	Support Instruction, facilitate PLCs, coordinate interventions	Advocate for marginalized students, challenge inequitable practices, lead systemic change
Role of PLCs	Collaborative analysis of student data and instructional planning	Spaces for critical inquiry, reflection on equity, and examination of bias and access
Conceptualization of Equity	Instructional and organizational responsibility	Moral, political, and justice-oriented responsibility

Note. This continuum illustrates the distinction between instructional and transformative approaches to equity leadership, as identified in the findings of this study and informed by Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2016).

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have several important implications for educational practice, particularly for school principals, PLC structures, and district-level support systems. While PLCs were found to be effective in supporting instructional improvement and responding to student

learning needs, the findings suggest that their potential to advance educational equity may be limited without intentional efforts to expand the focus of leadership and collaborative practice beyond instructional outcomes.

First, the findings highlight the need for principals to develop a broader and more comprehensive understanding of educational equity. While participating principals demonstrated a strong commitment to ensuring access to high-quality instruction and targeted supports, equity was primarily framed as an instructional responsibility rather than as a systemic or justice-oriented endeavor. As a result, principals may benefit from engaging in professional learning that deepens their understanding of equity as a sociopolitical construct, including attention to structural inequities, power dynamics, and institutional practices that shape student outcomes.

Additionally, principals play a critical role in shaping the focus and function of PLCs. The findings suggest that while principals effectively supported collaboration and data use, they may need to more intentionally facilitate conversations that move beyond student performance data to include critical reflection on the underlying causes of disparities. This may involve asking more probing questions during PLCs, such as examining patterns across student groups, considering how school practices may contribute to inequities, and creating space for discussions related to bias, access, and opportunity.

Second, the findings suggest that PLCs have strong potential as structures for advancing equity, but this potential is not fully realized in practice. PLCs were consistently used to analyze data, identify learning gaps, and coordinate instructional responses; however, these discussions were largely focused on improving academic outcomes rather than examining systemic inequities.

To strengthen the equity focus of PLCs, educators may need to expand the scope of PLC conversations to include deeper analysis of student experiences and contextual factors that influence learning. This could include disaggregating data by student subgroups, examining patterns related to discipline, attendance, and access to opportunities, and engaging in structured inquiry around questions of equity and inclusion. Additionally, PLC protocols and agendas could be revised to include explicit attention to equity-focused questions, ensuring that discussions extend beyond "what students learned" to include "why disparities exist" and "how school practices may contribute to those disparities."

Third, the findings highlight the important role of district leadership in shaping how equity is understood and enacted within schools. The emphasis on instructional improvement and data-driven decision-making observed in this study may reflect broader district priorities and accountability systems that prioritize measurable academic outcomes. While these priorities are important, they may also limit opportunities for deeper engagement with systemic inequities.

District leaders can support more comprehensive approaches to equity by providing clear guidance, resources, and expectations related to equity-focused leadership. This may include integrating equity frameworks into PLC expectations, providing professional development on culturally responsive and equity-centered practices, and creating structures that support critical reflection and dialogue at the school level. Additionally, districts can examine how policies, evaluation systems, and accountability measures either support or constrain equity-oriented leadership practices.

Finally, the findings suggest a need for more intentional integration of equity-focused leadership development within principal preparation and ongoing professional learning. While principals demonstrated strong instructional leadership skills, there was limited evidence of

preparation or support related to engaging in transformative or justice-oriented leadership practices.

Leadership development programs may benefit from incorporating opportunities for principals to engage in critical reflection, examine issues of equity and social justice, and develop the skills necessary to facilitate complex conversations within their schools. This may include training in areas such as equity literacy, culturally responsive leadership, and strategies for addressing systemic inequities within school structures. Without this intentional focus, equity leadership may remain confined to instructional improvement efforts rather than evolving into more transformative practice.

Taken together, these implications suggest that while PLCs provide a strong foundation for collaborative instructional improvement, their potential as mechanisms for advancing equity depends on the extent to which leaders intentionally expand their focus to include systemic, structural, and justice-oriented dimensions of equity.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several important directions for future research related to educational equity, leadership, and the role of professional learning communities (PLCs). While this study provides insight into how principals conceptualize and enact equity within PLC structures, it also highlights areas where further investigation is needed to deepen understanding of equity leadership in practice.

First, future research should further examine how school leaders conceptualize educational equity, particularly in relation to systemic and justice-oriented frameworks. Findings from this study indicate that principals primarily define equity in terms of access to instruction and differentiated support, with limited attention to broader sociopolitical dimensions of equity.

Additional research is needed to explore how principals develop more critical understandings of equity, including the role of leadership preparation programs, professional development, and contextual factors in shaping these perspectives. Longitudinal studies may be particularly useful in examining how principals' conceptualizations of equity evolve over time.

Second, future research should investigate how PLCs can be leveraged as spaces for deeper equity-focused inquiry. While PLCs in this study were effective in supporting data-driven decision-making and instructional improvement, they were not consistently used to examine systemic inequities or the root causes of disparities in student outcomes. Future studies could explore how PLC structures, protocols, and facilitation strategies might be redesigned to support more critical conversations about equity, including issues related to race, culture, access, and opportunity. Research examining schools that intentionally integrate equity-focused practices into PLCs may provide valuable insight into how these structures can support more transformative approaches to equity.

Third, the findings highlight the need for further research examining the distinction between instructional and systemic approaches to equity. While this study demonstrates that PLCs support instructional responses to student learning disparities, it remains unclear how schools can move beyond these approaches to address the underlying structural conditions that contribute to inequity. Future research could explore how school leaders navigate this tension, including the barriers and supports that influence their ability to engage in systemic equity work. Comparative studies across schools or districts with varying approaches to equity may help to identify conditions that support more transformative leadership practices.

Fourth, future research should examine the role of leadership preparation and ongoing professional learning in supporting equity-focused leadership. The findings suggest that

principals demonstrated strong instructional leadership skills but had limited engagement with transformative or justice-oriented dimensions of equity. Additional research is needed to explore how leadership development programs prepare principals to engage in equity leadership, particularly in relation to facilitating difficult conversations, addressing systemic inequities, and leading organizational change. Studies that examine the impact of targeted professional learning on principals' equity practices would be especially valuable.

Finally, future research should expand the contexts and methodologies used to study equity leadership and PLCs. This study focused on a specific group of elementary principals within a particular district context, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Future studies could examine secondary school settings, diverse geographic regions, or schools with different demographic compositions to better understand how context influences equity leadership practices. Additionally, incorporating multiple data sources, such as classroom observations, PLC meeting observations, or teacher perspectives, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how equity is enacted in practice.

Taken together, these areas for future research highlight the need to move beyond examining equity as an instructional concern and toward a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership practices can address the systemic conditions that shape educational opportunity and outcomes.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, this study relied primarily on self-reported data from principals through semi-structured interviews. While interviews provided valuable insight into participants' perspectives and

experiences, responses may have been influenced by social desirability or participants' perceptions of expected leadership practices, particularly regarding equity.

Second, although document analysis was used to triangulate findings, the availability and depth of documents varied across cases. While materials such as PLC agendas, Title I plans, and SMART goals provided important contextual evidence, these documents primarily reflected formal structures and planned practices rather than the day-to-day enactment of leadership and PLC interactions.

Third, this study was conducted within a specific district and focused on six elementary school principals, which may limit the transferability of findings to other contexts. Differences in district policies, student demographics, and organizational structures may influence how equity and PLCs are conceptualized and implemented in other settings.

Finally, this study focused on principals' perspectives and did not include direct observations of PLC meetings or perspectives from teachers or other stakeholders. As a result, the findings reflect how equity and PLCs are described and intended, rather than how they are fully enacted in practice.

Despite these limitations, the use of multiple data sources and cross-case analysis strengthens the credibility of the findings and provides meaningful insight into how equity leadership is conceptualized and enacted within PLC structures.

Conclusion

This study examined how elementary principals conceptualize educational equity, how they perceive the role of PLCs, and how PLCs are used to support equitable student outcomes. Findings across cases indicate that principals primarily understand equity as access to high-quality instruction and targeted support for student learning, with PLCs functioning as central

structures for collaborative instructional improvement. Through data analysis and coordinated instructional responses, PLCs supported the identification of learning disparities and efforts to improve student outcomes.

However, the findings also reveal that equity leadership, as enacted in practice, remains largely grounded in instructional improvement rather than in transformative or justice-oriented approaches. While principals demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting student success, there was limited evidence of leadership practices that engaged with systemic inequities, power dynamics, or broader sociopolitical conditions influencing educational outcomes. As a result, equity was most often operationalized through efforts to improve teaching and learning within existing structures rather than through efforts to critically examine or disrupt those structures.

Taken together, this study highlights an important tension between the promise of equity and the structures through which it is pursued. While PLCs provide a strong foundation for collaboration, data use, and instructional improvement, their potential as mechanisms for advancing equity depends on the extent to which leaders intentionally expand their focus beyond instructional outcomes to include systemic and justice-oriented dimensions of equity. Addressing this gap may require a more integrated approach to leadership, one that bridges instructional practice with critical reflection on the broader conditions that shape educational opportunity and student success.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Demographic Questions

1. How many total years have you served as a principal?
2. How many years have you served in your current school?
3. Have you worked in more than one school as a principal? (Yes/No – If yes, how many?)
4. What grade levels are served at your current school?
5. How many students are enrolled in your school?
6. What is the approximate percentage of students in your school who qualify for free or reduced-price meals?
7. How would you describe your school's level of staff turnover in recent years?
   - Low
   - Moderate
   - High
8. How many years have PLCs been in place at your school?
9. Have you received formal training on leading or facilitating PLCs?

(Yes/No - If yes, briefly describe)

10. Have you participated in any equity-focused professional development in the past 3 years?

(Yes/No - If yes, briefly describe)

Interview Questions

1. How do you personally define educational equity, and what role, if any, do you see it playing in your work as a principal?

   Probes: How does this understanding (or lack thereof) influence decisions or priorities at your school?

2. How would you describe the purpose of professional learning communities (PLCs) in your school?

   Probes: What do you hope PLCs accomplish?

3. Can you describe how PLCs are structured and operate in your school? Who participates, and what kinds of topics are typically discussed?

4. To what extent, if any, have conversations or actions related to student needs, inclusion, or fairness emerged within your school's PLCs?

   Probes: Are there any examples where differences in student experiences or outcomes have been addressed?

5. What types of data or evidence are commonly used in PLC discussions, and how are those data used to inform instructional or school decisions?

   Probes: Are any student groups or patterns ever highlighted?

6. How, if at all, do PLCs contribute to identifying or addressing disparities among student groups in your school?

   Probes: If these topics haven't come up, why do you think that might be?

7. What supports or structures are in place, formally or informally, that shape the focus or direction of PLC work in your building?

   Probes: Are there any guiding values or expectations for what PLCs should focus on?

8. When thinking about the goals you set for your school, how do PLCs support, or not support, those goals?

   Probes: Are there specific priorities that PLCs are expected to focus on?

9. How do you decide what topics or issues are addressed within PLCs? Who influences that focus?

   Probes: Do teachers have flexibility, or are there district/building-level expectations?

10. Looking back, are there any ways PLCs have evolved in your school over time? If so, what influenced those changes?

    Probes: Were any shifts related to student outcomes, staff needs, or broader school initiatives?

Appendix B

Document Inventory

Appendix B presents the inventory of documents collected and analyzed across cases to support document analysis and triangulation with interview data in this qualitative case study.

Table B.1

Documents Collected and Analyzed by Case

Principal	PLC Structure Documents (RQ2)	School Priorities / Goals Documents (RQ1, RQ3)	Student Data / Intervention Documents (RQ2, RQ3)	Contextual / Guiding Documents (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
Principal A	2nd Grade PLC Agenda	Title I School Plan	CFA Data Tracker & "WIN" Intervention Groups (Embedded in 2nd Grade PLC Agenda)	NPS Tight Elements of a PLC
Principal B	PLC Agenda Template	Title I School Plan	PLC Guiding Coalition Agenda	2024-2025 Site Climate & Culture Summary
Principal C	5th Grade PLC Agenda	School SMART Goals	CFA Data Tracker (Embedded in 5th Grade PLC Agenda)	Staff Handbook
Principal D	PLC Agenda Template	School SMART Goals	Title I School Plan	NPS Tight Elements of a PLC
Principal E	5th Grade PLC Agenda; Team Norms, Roles, and PLC Expectations	Title I School Plan	School SMART Goals	2024-2025 Site Climate & Culture Summary
Principal F	PLC Agenda	Title I School Plan	School SMART Goals	NPS Tight Elements of a PLC

Note. This table summarizes the documents collected for each case to support document analysis and triangulation with interview data. Not all document types were available for every principal. Some documents contained multiple forms of evidence and were categorized according to their primary analytic purpose.

Appendix C

Document Analysis Rubric

Appendix C presents the Document Analysis Rubric used in this qualitative case study to guide the systematic analysis of school-based documents related to principals' leadership practices and PLC implementation. The rubric was designed to assess the extent to which documents reflected evidence of equity-focused leadership, including references to educational equity, the use of disaggregated data, collaborative practices, and actions intended to address barriers affecting historically underserved student groups. Grounded in Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2016) and key principles of professional learning communities (DuFour et al., 2016), the rubric provided a structured and consistent approach to document analysis. Used alongside interview data, the rubric supported triangulation and strengthened the rigor of the study by deepening understanding of how equity was represented in both principals' perspectives and school documentation.

Table C.1

Document Analysis Rubric

Indicator Category	Specific Criteria	Score (0–3)	Evidence / Notes
Transformative Leadership (Shields, 2016)			
Commitment to Equity	References equity, inclusion, opportunity gaps, or efforts to address disparities in student learning or access to resources.		

Social Justice Orientation	Explicit strategies or action steps designed to support historically underserved or marginalized student groups (e.g., economically disadvantaged students, multilingual learners, students with disabilities).
Inclusive Decision-Making	Evidence of shared leadership or engaging diverse stakeholder voices
Critical Reflection	References to examining biases, power dynamics, or systemic inequities
PLC Structures (DuFour et al., 2016)	
Focus on Learning	Clear focus on improving student learning outcomes
Collaborative Culture	Structures for regular team collaboration, shared norms, and mutual accountability
Use of Data to Inform Practice	Use of disaggregated data to guide PLC discussions, planning, or intervention
Results-Oriented Approach	Evidence of goal setting, monitoring progress, or adjusting practices based on results
Total Score	/24

Note. Document Analysis Rubric that includes a 0–3 scoring scale for each criterion, where: 0 = Not present, 1 = Minimally present, 2 = Moderately present, 3 = Strongly present. Total scores were used to compare documents within and across cases to identify patterns related to equity leadership and PLC implementation.

Appendix D

Sample De-Identified School Artifact

Appendix D presents a sample de-identified PLC agenda spreadsheet collected as part of the document analysis in this qualitative case study. This artifact is included to illustrate the type of school-based document reviewed to examine evidence of collaboration, instructional focus, use of student data, and attention to equity-related practices within PLC structures. All identifying information has been removed or masked to protect the confidentiality of participants, staff, and schools.

Grade Level							
Today's Meeting Date & Time:	**Next Meeting Date & Time:**	**Role**	**Team Member**	**Others in Attendance**	**Team Norms**	**PLC Question Addressed**	**Big Ideas**
8/8/2025	2025-08-21	Facilitator	Teacher Name		1. We will begin at 9:15 and end at 9:57. 2. We will discuss educational student data and not student behavior. 3. We will come to the table with grade-level expectations for every student. 4. We will be constructive, supportive, and respectful. 5. We will hold each other accountable. 6. We will end each meeting with a positive reflection.	1. What do we expect students to learn?	1. A Focus on Learning
		Note Taker	Teacher Name			2. How do we know that they are learinng it?	2. A Collaborative Culture
		Data Analyst	Teacher Name			3. How do we respond when they do not learn?	3. A Results Orientation
		Focus-Keeper	Teacher Name			4. How do we respond when they already learned?	

TODAY'S ITEMS			
ITEM	**Action Steps**	**Who is responsible?**	**Status:**
Review PLC Agenda + CFA tracking tool	Formative CFA data tracker.	Grade Level Team	Complete
Review Action Steps			Complete
Share with admin once action steps are complete			Status Updated Needed

PLC Cycle		
Focus Standard	**CFA Created**	**Status:**
Math: 3.N.1 Compare and represent whole numbers up to 100,000 with an emphasis on place value and equality.	3.N.1 pg 8.pdf CFA's are in active links under Formative	Complete
Reading: 3.3.R.3 Students will find examples of literary elements: • setting • plot • characters • characterization	3.3.R.3	In Progress
Writing: 3.2.PC Students will correctly form words in print and cursive and use appropriate spacing for letters, words, and	3.2PC 3.2PC Handwriting Checklist	

Note. This artifact is presented as a representative example of the documents analyzed in this study. Identifying details were removed or masked to maintain confidentiality. The artifact was included to illustrate the nature of the documentary evidence reviewed alongside interview data.

Appendix E

Codebook

Appendix E presents the codebook used to guide data analysis in this qualitative case study. The codebook included deductive codes informed by Transformative Leadership Theory and Professional Learning Community (PLC) principles, as well as inductive codes that emerged through analysis of interview transcripts and school documents. Codes were refined during the analytic process and organized into categories and subcodes to support the development of themes and cross-case findings.

Table E.1

Codebook

Related RQ	Category	Code	Definition
RQ1	Conceptual Definition of Equity	Access	Access to curriculum or resources
RQ1	Conceptual Definition of Equity	Differentiated Support	Giving students what they need
RQ1	Conceptual Definitions of Equity	Outcomes	Closing achievement gaps; improving subgroup performance
RQ1	Depth of Understanding	Instructional Level	Focus on pedagogy, classroom differentiation, teacher practice and/or intervention focus
RQ1	Depth of Understanding	Structural-Systemic	Discussion of policies, tracking/ program placement, resource distribution such as staffing, funding, etc.
RQ1	Scope of l Equity	Academic Achievement	Limited to achievement only

Related RQ	Category	Code	Definition
RQ1	Scope of Educational Equity	Whole-Child	Includes discipline, belonging, identity, social emotional, etc.
RQ2	PLC Purpose and Intent	Collaboration/ Professional Learning	PLCs are spaces for peer learning and professional growth, building capacity, professional dialogue, etc.
RQ2	PLC Purpose and Intent	Achievement Focus	PLCs are framed as vehicles to raise test scores, increase reading/math scores, close gaps
RQ2	PLC Purpose and Intent	Improve Instruction	PLCs are focused on refining teaching practices, sharing teaching strategies, lesson planning, curriculum alignment, etc.
RQ2	PLC Purpose and Intent	Data-Driven Decision Making	Analyzing student data, monitoring progress, using formative assessments
RQ2	Depth of PLC Work	Climate and Culture	Promoting teacher emotional support, psychological safety, burnout prevention
RQ2	Depth of PLC Work	Instructional Inquiry	Analysis of student work and which teaching strategies produced higher student outcomes
RQ2	Principal Role in PLC	Facilitator of Learning	Principals actively participate in PLCs and help guide the conversations, model inquiry, ask reflective questions, etc.
RQ2	Principal Role in PLC	Accountability Monitor	Principals observe PLCs, reviews PLC minutes, or checks of compliance, follow up on commitments, ensures fidelity

Related RQ	Category	Code	Definition
RQ2	Principal Role in PLC	Capacity Builder	Provides PD, coaching support, resource allocation, etc.
RQ3	Disparity Identification	Disaggregated Data	Subgroup data analysis
RQ3	Disparity Identification	Pattern Recognition	Across grade levels
RQ3	Equity-Oriented Actions	Instructional Adjustments	Changed teaching strategies targeted to better support or instruct student groups
RQ3	Equity-Oriented Actions	Schedule Alignments	Redesigning the schedule, intervention time, etc. to address subgroup access/ disparities
RQ3	Equity-Focused Discussions	Opportunity-to-Learn Discussions	Access to Tier 1 instruction
RQ3	Equity-Focused Discussions	Access	Access to intervention, resources, etc.

Note. This appendix presents the final codebook used in analysis. Preliminary and overlapping codes developed during early phases of coding were refined and consolidated as part of the iterative analytic process.

Appendix F

Sample Analytic Memo

Appendix F provides a sample analytic memo written during data analysis. Analytic memos were used throughout the study to document emerging patterns, reflect on interpretations, examine relationships across data sources, and support the development of categories, themes, and findings. Identifying details have been removed to protect confidentiality.

Memo Title: Post-Coding Memo: Principal E

Stage of Analysis: Post-coding within-case analysis

Analytic Focus: Instructional access, PLC collaboration, and equity-oriented leadership

Data Sources Referenced: Interview transcript, coded data, and supporting school documents

Overview

Principal E presents as a relationally grounded and systems-aware instructional leader who views PLCs as collaborative structures for improving instruction, strengthening teacher capacity, and protecting student access to meaningful learning opportunities. Across the interview, equity was consistently framed as ensuring that students receive consistent instruction, balanced learning experiences, and opportunities for both intervention and enrichment regardless of classroom assignment. PLCs function as collaborative spaces where teachers analyze data, refine instructional practices, coordinate intervention and enrichment supports, and examine emerging patterns in student learning. Through practices such as flexible grouping, coordinated scheduling, and distributed leadership structures, Principal E leverages PLCs to improve instructional responsiveness and promote collective responsibility for student success. At the same time, the work of sustaining PLC effectiveness depends heavily on relational trust, balanced teacher teams, and the gradual development of collaborative capacity across grade

levels. While equity-oriented actions are evident through instructional adjustments and expanded learning opportunities, equity conversations within PLCs remain primarily focused on instructional access and responsiveness rather than explicit examination of broader structural inequities.

Research Question 1

Principal E's conceptualization of educational equity centers on instructional consistency and equitable access to curriculum and learning opportunities. When asked to define equity, the principal emphasized the importance of ensuring that students receive the same core instructional experiences regardless of which classroom they are assigned to within a grade level. This concern emerged from early observations that instructional practices varied significantly among teachers, resulting in inconsistent learning experiences for students. In response, the principal prioritized structures such as common planning time, curriculum alignment, and shared instructional expectations to ensure that all students receive access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

This framing reflects a differentiated access orientation to equity, in which equitable outcomes are understood to emerge from consistent instructional foundations paired with responsive support for diverse learners. Although the principal acknowledged that students require different levels of support, equity was primarily operationalized through ensuring that all students begin with the same instructional opportunities before additional interventions or enrichment are layered on.

The principal's understanding of equity appears primarily instructional and organizational rather than explicitly sociopolitical. Equity is discussed in terms of instructional alignment, access to enrichment opportunities, and fairness across classrooms rather than in

direct relation to systemic inequities, historical marginalization, or power structures. However, the principal's experience working across multiple schools in the district suggests a broader awareness that students in different schools may have unequal access to opportunities. This awareness appears to motivate advocacy for comparable enrichment experiences and learning opportunities within the principal's own school. In this case, equity is framed as a leadership responsibility to ensure that students receive high-quality instruction and meaningful learning experiences comparable to those available elsewhere in the district.

Research Question 2

Principal E perceives PLCs as collaborative professional learning systems designed to improve instruction, strengthen teacher capacity, and coordinate responses to student learning needs. PLC structures at the school have evolved over time from formalized meeting structures into embedded collaborative routines integrated within teachers' weekly planning and instructional cycles. Teachers regularly analyze benchmark data, program data, and teacher-created formative assessments to determine how students are performing and how instruction should be adjusted to support learning.

A defining feature of PLC work at this school is the use of flexible grouping and formative assessment cycles. Teachers frequently pre-assess students, group them according to learning needs, provide targeted instruction, and reassess progress to determine whether instructional adjustments are needed. These cycles of inquiry allow teachers to respond dynamically to student learning rather than waiting for end-of-unit assessments to identify gaps.

PLC functioning varies across grade levels depending on team experience and stability. Principal E describes some teams as highly developed collaborative groups that operate with significant autonomy, while other teams, particularly those experiencing turnover or less

familiarity with PLC practices, require more structured guidance from leadership. The principal intentionally differentiates leadership support based on these variations in capacity, recognizing that PLC development is a gradual process.

Another key feature of PLC development at this school involves intentional attention to team composition and relational trust. Principal E describes the importance of balancing teacher teams so that leadership, experience, and collaborative capacity are distributed across grade levels. Building trust among teachers has been critical in enabling honest conversations about instruction and student learning. As collaborative capacity has grown, teachers increasingly challenge one another to refine instructional practices and improve outcomes for students. In this way, PLCs function not only as structures for analyzing student data but also as spaces for ongoing professional learning and peer-driven improvement.

Research Question 3

Within this collaborative PLC structure, efforts to advance educational equity emerge most clearly through protecting instructional access, coordinating intervention systems, and expanding learning opportunities for diverse learners. PLC conversations frequently involve examining patterns in student performance and considering how instructional practices, scheduling structures, and intervention models influence student learning experiences.

One area in which PLC discussions influenced equity-related decisions involved protecting students' access to core instruction. Early in the principal's tenure, the school's scheduling structures resulted in students receiving multiple services being pulled from core instruction for interventions and specialized supports. Through collaborative analysis of student learning patterns, staff recognized that these scheduling patterns were limiting students' access to grade-level instruction. In response, the school redesigned the master schedule to reduce

unnecessary pull-outs and ensure that students receiving additional services remained engaged in core learning experiences.

PLC conversations also supported the identification of patterns in student learning across grade levels and instructional practices. For example, when second-grade data revealed significant skill gaps among incoming students, PLC discussions prompted closer examination of instructional routines and time allocation in earlier grades. Teachers and intervention staff collaboratively analyzed how instructional time was being used and began considering adjustments to schedules and practices in order to increase effective instructional time.

Equity-related conversations also extended to ensuring that students receiving interventions were not limited to remediation alone. Principal E emphasized the importance of balancing intervention with enrichment opportunities so that students receiving support services also experienced engaging learning opportunities that build background knowledge and academic vocabulary. PLC discussions increasingly emphasized the need to ensure that all students, regardless of learning level, had access to meaningful and stimulating learning experiences.

Additionally, PLC processes helped staff recognize more complex learner profiles, including students identified as both gifted and receiving special education services. The emergence of these twice-exceptional students broadened teachers' understanding of student ability and challenged assumptions that students receiving special education services could not also demonstrate advanced learning potential. In this way, PLC conversations contributed to expanding teachers' perspectives on student strengths and learning needs.

Preliminary Analytic Conclusion

Principal E's case reflects an equity orientation grounded in instructional access, collaborative responsiveness, and relational trust among educators. Equity is framed as ensuring that all students experience consistent instruction, meaningful learning opportunities, and coordinated supports that respond to their diverse learning needs. PLCs function as collaborative systems through which teachers analyze data, refine instructional practices, and coordinate interventions and enrichment opportunities.

Over time, PLCs at the school evolved from administrator-directed meetings into more autonomous professional learning communities in which teachers took increasing ownership of collaborative inquiry and instructional improvement. Trust-building, balanced team composition, and distributed leadership played significant roles in supporting this evolution.

While equity-oriented actions within PLCs frequently addressed disparities in instructional access and learning opportunities, conversations remained largely focused on instructional responsiveness and skill development rather than explicit critique of systemic inequities or demographic disparities. Principal E therefore exemplifies a form of instructional access-centered equity leadership in which equity is advanced through collaborative problem-solving, protection of instructional time, and coordinated support structures that expand learning opportunities for diverse learners. This case illustrates how relational trust and collaborative capacity can enable PLCs to function as responsive systems for addressing student needs, even when broader structural inequities remain less explicitly interrogated within routine PLC dialogue.

Note. This memo is presented as an example of the analytic reflections used during coding and interpretation. It illustrates how interview and document data were synthesized during within-case analysis to support category development and cross-case interpretation.

Appendix G

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: August 04, 2025 **IRB#:** 18811

Principal Investigator: Holly C McKinney

Approval Date: 08/04/2025

Exempt Category: Category 2

Study Title: Collective Effort, Equitable Outcomes: A Case Study of Elementary Principals and PLCs

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Kendra Williams-Diehm, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

Eric Pennello, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

Appendix H

Norman Public Schools Research Approval Letter

Research Study Request

NORMAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

I hereby request permission to conduct a research study in the Norman Public School District during the period_August 1, 2025___ to_December 31, 2025_.
Topic:__Collective Effort, Equitable Outcomes: A Case Study of Elementary Principals and PLCs.

Date Submitted__7/28/25_____ Daytime Phone Number (405)802-4059____
Reason for Request:
_____Class Requirement _____Master's Thesis ___x__Doctoral Dissertation _____Other

If this request is granted, I agree to abide by the Board of Education Policy and administrative procedures.

_Holly McKinney_____ _____
Typed Name of Researcher Signature of Researcher

_Holly.C.McKinney-1@ou.edu_____ __University of Oklahoma_____
E-mail for Main Contact Person Institution of Higher Education

__Educational Leadership & Policy
Sponsoring College or Department

__Dr. Curt Adams_____
Typed Name of Faculty Member

_____
Signature of Faculty Member

Norman Public Schools is interested in the outcome of your research. Please submit a copy of the research report at the conclusion of the study to the Norman Public Schools Executive Director of Teaching & Learning and/or designee

Submit approval letter from the IRB_____

Endorsement:

This request was ____Approved ____ Disapproved _____
(Date)

_____
Educational Services Staff Member

Revised – April 2014

Appendix I

Recruitment Email

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Dissertation Research on PLCs

Dear Elementary Principal (add his/her specific name),

My name is Holly McKinney, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for my dissertation. This study titled "Collective Effort, Equitable Outcomes: A Case Study of Elementary Principals and PLCs" has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and it is being carried out in my role as a graduate student, not in my professional capacity within the district.

I am seeking elementary principals in Norman Public Schools who:

- Have at least one year of experience in their current role, and
- Facilitate Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at their school.

If you meet these criteria, you may be eligible to participate in a 45- to 60-minute interview exploring how you lead and support PLCs to promote equitable learning outcomes.

Your participation is completely voluntary and all responses will be kept confidential.

If you are interested or would like more information, please contact me at **Holly McKinney, Holly.C.McKinney-1@ou.edu (405)802-4059.**

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to research that aims to support and strengthen school leadership practice.

Sincerely,

Holly McKinney

Doctoral Candidate

University of Oklahoma

The University of Oklahoma is an equal opportunity institution.

Appendix J

Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in Research

University of Oklahoma

You are invited to participate in research about **Collective Effort, Equitable Outcomes: A Case Study of Elementary Principals and PLCs.**

If you agree to participate, you will complete a 45 - 60-minute Zoom interview that will be recorded and transcribed. After your interview is transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the transcript to ensure that your responses are accurately captured. You may clarify, correct, or withdraw any part of your input before it is included in the final analysis.

Also, as part of this study, you may share school specific documents relevant to this research study (e.g., PLC agendas, improvement plans, SMART goals, MTSS plans, behavior matrixes, climate & culture, meeting notes, etc.). Sharing documents is entirely voluntary. You may choose which documents, if any, to provide. Any identifying information will be redacted to maintain confidentiality. Shared documents will be securely stored and used only for research purposes within the scope of this study.

You may experience these risks by participating in this research:

Audio & Video recorded data collection: This interview will be recorded using Zoom (video and audio). While all data will be securely transferred and stored on a university-approved platform, there is a small risk of accidental data release. If this occurred, your identity and responses could potentially become known to individuals outside the research team. To protect your privacy, only the researcher will have access to recordings, and any identifying information will be removed during transcription. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

Collection of demographic or geographic location data that could lead to deductive re-identification: You will be asked to provide demographic information that describes you. We may also gather information about your geographic location in this research. Different combinations of personal and geographic information may make it possible for your identity to be guessed by someone who was given, or gained access, to our research records. To minimize the risk of deductive re-identification, we will not combine identifying variables, nor analyze and report results for small groups of people with specific demographic characteristics.

Documents or records shared with the researcher: You will be asked to transfer documents, images, or other personal records to the researchers. There is a risk that someone who is not part of the research team may gain access to this data during the transfer process. We will give you information about transferring data to the researchers to minimize this risk. When we receive your data, we will transfer the data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office.

There are no benefits for participating in this research.

Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be confidential.

We might share your de-identified data with other researchers or use it in future research without obtaining additional assent from you.

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse any that you do not like without any penalty.

Do you agree for data records to include identifiable information? ___ Yes ___ No

Do you agree to being quoted directly, without the use of your name? ___ Yes ___ No

Do you agree for your data to be archived for scholarly and public access? ___ Yes ___ No

Do you consent to audio recording? ___ Yes ___ No

Do you consent to video recording? ___ Yes ___ No

Your photographs and audio or video records may be used in university research reports unless you tell me not to do this.

Even if you choose to participate now, you may stop participating at any time and for any reason.

If you have questions about this research, please contact:
Holly McKinney, Holly.C.McKinney-1@ou.edu, Principal Investigator and Dr. Curt Adams, curtadams@ou.edu, Faculty Advisor

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.

Do you agree to participate in this research? ___ Yes ___ No

Finally, would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed? _____ (note response)

Date of interview: _____ Name of Interviewee: _____

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____