Title
Leading with Equity at the Center: A Qualitative Study of a County-run School in Northern California

Author
Justus, Marianne

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Leading with Equity at the Center:
A Qualitative Study of a County-run School in Northern California

By

MARIANNE WOOD JUSTUS
DISSERTATION

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of the

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Approved:

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Dr. Elizabeth Montaño, Chair

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Dr. Kevin Gee

_____

Dr. Carolynne Beno

Committee in Charge

2023

Equity-Centered Leadership of a County-Run School

Abstract

Students in county-run schools have endured exceptional degrees of trauma and are, from an equity lens, amongst the most deserving of resources and services. School- and system-level leaders are uniquely positioned to provide students with resources to meet their needs and to take a whole child/person approach to create a school climate of warmth, respect, and student-centered learning. This qualitative study examined how leaders and student-serving staff work together to advance educational equity for students within a county-run school. For the purpose of this study, I defined educational equity as seeing and knowing each student as an individual, with specific assets and needs and determining and offering whatever is necessary for every student to thrive socially and emotionally and to meet their goals (Villani, 2020). I used a conceptual framework for equity-centered leadership to examine how leaders think, what they do, and where they focus their efforts to create the conditions for all student-serving staff to center equity in their daily work. This study demonstrated that leaders who center equity focus first and foremost on positive, values-driven relationships, which create a culture of trust and respect. In so doing, leaders in this study created the conditions for student-serving staff to build strong relationships with students and empower students to have agency over their own learning. The study also illuminated the ways that leaders who center equity use continuous improvement approaches that honor relationships with staff. Last, this study demonstrated that leading a county-run school by centering relationships and putting students' needs first poses unique challenges for leaders.

Keywords: educational equity, leadership, continuous improvement, whole child/person.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In reflecting on who to acknowledge for this work, I immediately realize how much my thinking about equity in education has evolved over the past three years. For this, I have my incredible CANDEL professors to thank, especially my advisor, Dr. Montano, my committee chair Dr. Gee, and my committee member, professor, and "rock" Dr. Carolynne Beno. Thank you, Dr. Gee for your wisdom and guidance as my committee chair, you helped me think through my definition of leadership and how it intersects with systems change. Thank you, Dr. Beno for always checking in on me and helping me prepare for my qualifying exam—I would have been lost without you! And last, thank you to my amazing advisor, Dr. Montano, for guiding me in the dissertation writing process, helping me determine which interview and focus group questions to use and why, and supporting my exploration of equity-centered leadership through a broad, qualitative researcher lens.

Thank you to my CANDEL cohort mates for teaching me how to think and talk about race and racial inequities in real and honest ways, for pushing me to confront my own positionality and challenging me to be uncomfortable as I grow to be a better person, and for modeling how to speak the truth without tearing up. Because of the 16 other members of Cohort 16, I now feel confident to speak truth to power and know that there are 16 other people out there who think like I do and have my back.

It is no exaggeration to say that this dissertation was a labor of love, born out of three years of blood, sweat, and the occasional tear (okay fine, lots of tears). I never would have possibly been able to write this without the continuous and unwavering support of my husband, Matthew, who took care of our two and then, in the winter of 2020, three, children while I read, wrote, debated, and expanded my understanding of educational equity.

Finally, this dissertation would not have been possible without the incredible generosity of one particular school leader whose heart and dedication to students is infectious. Likewise, the system leaders in the organization in which she works gave me countless hours of their time, helping me think through what it means to do the sometimes-messy work of leading for equity. Additionally, the student-serving staff who generously gave up their Friday afternoon to sit in a conference room and engage in open, honest conversation about what it means to center equity and empower students; you offered incredible insights into what it means to center students' needs and treat all students with the respect and humanity they deserve.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Betty Jane Wood, who was a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse during the depression, a working mother who continued to teach other people's children while raising her own, and a doctoral student at a time when few women were welcome in academia. Due to circumstances beyond her control, she was unable to achieve her dream of earning a doctorate in education. I am so grateful that the world has evolved to a point where I, a woman and mother, have had the support that she lacked to pursue my own dream.

I also want to dedicate this research to one of the most committed educators I have ever known, Gayelynn Gerhardt. Your persistence and dedication to students is inspirational. The world needs more people like you.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my three children. My two daughters, Estelle and Simone, thank you for understanding why I was still in college, and for supporting me along the way. I hope that someday you too will pursue your dreams, even when it's hard and the wind is against your face. Keep dreaming and do big things. And to my son, Roger, born at the end of my first quarter as a CANDEL student. May you understand your position in this world and use the gifts you have been given to make the world a more just and equitable place.

Last, this dissertation is dedicated to my younger brother and first friend, Spencer Wood. Perhaps if more adults had used a whole-child approach to discipline you and see you as the warm, sensitive soul you were, you would still be with us today. I dedicate this work to your memory in hopes that it helps others realize that approaching struggling adolescents with love and compassion can literally save lives.

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Students must have initiative; they should not be mere imitators. They must learn to think and act for themselves—and be free.

- *Cesar Chavez*

Introduction

In 2010, Dolores Huerta, a county-run school that serves students who have previously been incarcerated or are on probation, had a bad reputation. It was known throughout town as "an unruly disaster" and was used as a dumping ground for unwanted materials. County-run schools are small public schools run by county offices of education. While the state of California defines county-run schools as schools where students learn academic and life skills, these schools often struggle with discipline issues and can feel more like a prison than a place where learning occurs. In 2010, Dolores Huerta was the former—it was described by many as "a mess" and was generally not a place where students wanted to go.

When Amia Akba took over as the school leader, she had her work cut out for her. Six years into her tenure as a school leader, things could not look more different. Instead of stark government buildings resembling a prison, the school walls are now covered in beautiful, student-painted murals depicting struggle and emancipation. Students and staff play games, such as ping pong, and regularly eat lunch together at outdoor picnic tables, calmly discussing their interests and occasionally sharing a much-needed laugh. This dissertation tells the story of one incredible woman, her amazing staff, the system that both enabled and inhibited her, and the

students and families she touched. It describes how a school leader, with the support of her county office of education supervisors, “turned around” what was well known as a “failing” school and created a warm, positive learning environment in which students thrived. It also tells the story of a system so bogged down with rules and red tape that leaders and teachers battled with external rules and regulations daily. The is the story of a place where providing students with basic needs, like food and shelter, is often something that leaders and teachers do out of the goodness of their hearts and out of their own pocketbooks. This is the story of incredible commitment under some of the most challenging circumstances and the leaders and teachers who show up every day to serve students in an alternative education setting.

Background

Despite years of education reforms, policies, and initiatives, large inequities persist in California’s kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12) public schools. Efforts, such as school turnaround and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), have been aimed at improving low-performing schools and mitigating unequal access and outcomes for diverse student populations by emphasizing standards and shared assessment (NCLB, 2002), yet decades into these efforts the results are effectively the same (Rorrer et al., 2019). In places that had seen some gains amongst historically marginalized students prior to the pandemic, new research has shown that “within school districts that were remote for most of 2020–21, high-poverty schools experienced 50 percent more achievement loss than low-poverty schools’’ (Goldhaber et al., 2022). Improvement efforts at the state and national level that attended only to the developing knowledge and skills that “prepared students for college and career readiness in a twenty-first century, globally competitive society” (Common Core State Standards, 2010) and did not attend to what is truly needed to build more equitable schools—curriculum, pedagogy, and leadership

that empower young people—saw huge learning losses when schools went virtual in March 2020. Moreover, students living in low-income communities experienced the compounding effects of poverty; parents and caregivers were less able to work remotely than middle-class families, schools were less able to provide engaging, organized, and student-centered virtual instruction, and more family members were lost to the pandemic than in higher-income communities. As noted by Hough in April 2021:

> Due to inequitable access to health care, income inequality, and disproportionate employment in high-risk, 'essential' jobs, low-income, Black, Latino, and Native American communities have borne the brunt of the pandemic, with dire health and economic impacts that hinder their children's educational opportunities and learning. (Hough, 2021).

As Hough (2021) describes, societal inequities that existed before the pandemic were only exacerbated by the pandemic, which impacted children and families in a variety of ways.

In addition to a pandemic which disproportionately impacted children of color, our nation also experienced a racial reckoning that drew attention to the horrific ways in which Black and Brown people continue to be oppressed in America. The deaths of innocent young Black and Brown men and women, including George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, and Brianna Taylor, drew much-needed attention to the drastic disparities along racial lines in every sector of our country.

One issue that has been illuminated over the course of the pandemic and the racial reckoning is that school experiences and education, more broadly, are about so much more than just mastering a curriculum and getting good test scores. Although many have been advocating for the importance of relationships and a positive school climate for decades, the attention this issue is currently receiving is unprecedented. Legislators and policymakers are recognizing that

schools must be places where the needs of the whole child/person are addressed, students feel valued, and the invisible structures of oppression and bias that prevent students from feeling safe and welcome have been dismantled (Ramirez et al., 2021). Legislation in 2022, such as AB 2832 (R. Rivas), which aims to establish a Whole Child Community Equity Screening Tool (WCEST), would invest in California's underserved communities and emphasize that a child's well-being is rooted in the healthy functioning of their family and community. While such investments are necessary, strong leaders and organizational structures that attend to the interconnectedness of systems and community engagement are essential to implement real, lasting change.

Much has been written about how school leaders are uniquely positioned to transform school experiences for students; they are viewed as a key lever for school-based change (Bryk et al., 2010; Shaked et al., 2019). However, system transformation is incredibly difficult and requires establishing and maintaining clear organizational structures, developing deep trust, and shifting the mental models we use to change the conditions we seek to address (Kania et al., 2018). Doing this work in an ever-shifting political landscape poses unique challenges for school leaders who seek to both comply with external regulations and meet the needs of the students and teachers in the schools they lead (Yurkofsky et al., 2020). Despite a general acknowledgment that leading schools is incredibly important and challenging, scant research exists on how education leaders center equity, focusing on the two components described above—putting relationships first and navigating systemic complexities. The pandemic has shown us that school leadership is about so much more than achieving high test scores; now is the time for us to think differently about how we measure education, moving beyond standardized assessments to address the needs of the whole person.

Problem Statement

Transforming education systems, rife with centuries of oppression and unequal access to opportunities, to become places that more equitably serve our highest-need students is challenging and requires strong leadership. In addition to strong leadership, systems thinking offers an approach to improving outcomes for students and seeks to understand how the interconnectedness of various components within a system produces certain outcomes. However, much of continuous improvement was adapted from other industries, such as health care and automobile manufacturing, and is therefore not clearly applicable to complex, deeply contextual systems, such as schools (Kruse, 2019). Kania et al. (2018) describe systems transformation as maintaining clear organizational structures, developing deep trust, and shifting the mental models we use to change the conditions we seek to address. Much has been written on the creation and maintenance of organizational structures as a key component of systems change (Yurkofsky et al., 2020; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Bryk et. al., 2010). However, the role of strong relationships and deep trust that serve to empower students has not been explored thoroughly in research on systems change, particularly efforts that focus on improving outcomes for students by focusing on the whole person. Furthermore, leadership of schools that address the needs of the whole person by centering efforts on students' physical and mental health and understanding that these conditions are precursors for academic success is an essential component of systems transformation that has not been sufficiently explored.

Study Purpose

This study seeks to understand the latter two components of system transformation—developing deep, trusting relationships, and focusing on the needs of the whole person—and the

ways that leaders and student-serving staff enact these components in the aftermath of a two-year pandemic. If nothing else, this pandemic has taught us that we cannot go back to a way of educating students that snuffs out their innate curiosity and sidelines their identities in the name of mastering standards and achieving high test scores. As scholar Chris Emdin (2021) writes, "Any education that is disconnected from helping students understand themselves and the power structures that influence their worlds and how these structures operate to stifle or obfuscate young people's purpose is not education at all." This study uses an equity-centered systems change lens to explore how school leaders center relationships and take a whole-person approach to support and empower students.

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the field's understanding of how a school system, and specifically leadership within that system, focuses on the needs of the whole person to center equity in improvement efforts, as well as the successes and barriers that leaders encounter in doing this work. I began with a synthesis of current research-based knowledge of educational equity, including the promise of promoting educational equity and the equity challenges that continue to plague K-12 public schools in California. I also explored research on systems change and continuous improvement as strategies to make school systems more equitable. I identified tensions raised between the technical focus of continuous improvement and the need to build deep, lasting relationships by engaging students and community members in pursuit of educational equity. Last, I explored how research positions school leaders as key levers to address systemic inequities.

My study addressed the limitations of previous studies on leading for equity and leading systems change efforts, specifically studies that did not emphasize the role relationships play in empowering students and improving systems. My study included interviews with system leaders,

which allowed participants to elaborate on their perspectives related to county-run schools, continuous improvement, educational equity, the needs of the whole child/person, and student empowerment. This study also included focus groups for student-serving staff to share their perspectives on what is unique about working in a county community school, the role of relationships in advancing educational equity, tending to the needs of the whole child/person, and empowering students. I used a qualitative inquiry to (1) gather relevant background information on participants and determine which participants to follow up with in an interview, (2) through interviews and focus groups, deepen my understanding of how leaders, educators, and student-serving staff describe the role that they play in supporting students in order to make systems more equitable.

Research Questions

My study addressed the following research question: How does leadership of a county-run school in Northern California center equity in their work?" as well as these sub-questions

- How does leadership of a county-run school create the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity?
- To what extent does leadership of a county-run school utilize aspects of continuous improvement to gauge the effectiveness of efforts to address inequities?
- What conditions within the system make centering equity possible, and what systemic barriers make it challenging?

Organization of My Study

This study is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 2 outlines my conceptual framework for equity-centered leadership. Chapter 3 gives an overview of existing literature on educational

equity, schools as systems, systems change and continuous improvement, a whole child/person approach, and collaborative leadership. Chapter 4 articulates my research methodology for this study. Chapter 5 includes vignettes describing each of the seven participants in this study. Chapter 6 outlines the study findings and analysis. In Chapter 7, I conclude with a discussion of my findings, implications for policy and practice, and suggestions for future research based on my findings.

Terminology

There are several existing definitions of educational equity, systems change, and collaborative leadership. For this study, I used terminology that aligned with my conceptual framework and my understanding of what it takes to advance educational equity, largely based on my exploration of this topic as a CANDEL student. Table 1.1 displays definitions of terms used in this study. I define educational equity, a whole child/person approach, continuous improvement, county-run schools, and collaborative leadership because a clear understanding of each of these constructs is essential to interpreting the study's findings.

Table 1.1

Terminology Related to Educational Equity and Systems Change

Term	Operational Definition
Educational Equity	Seeing and knowing each student as an individual with specific assets and needs, determining and offering whatever is necessary for every student to thrive socially and emotionally and to meet goals (Villani, 2020).
Whole Child/Person	An approach that attends to students' physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Term	Operational Definition
Continuous Improvement	A systematic approach that seeks to advance educational equity by engaging those "closest to the problem" and working collaboratively to see, understand, and transform complex systems such as schools (Hough et al., 2017).
County Community Schools	Public schools run by a county office of education. They educate students in kindergarten through Grade 12 who are expelled from school or who are referred because of attendance or behavior problems. They also serve students who are homeless, on probation or parole, and who are not attending any school (California Department of Education, ongoing)
Collaborative Leadership	A culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility (Maier & Niebuhr, 2021).

Chapter 2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To frame this study, I synthesized relevant information regarding equity into a pre-existing leadership framework. The first, a *Framework for District-Level Leadership of Continuous Improvement,* was developed by Dixon and Eddy-Spicer (2019) to understand what motivates district leaders to drive improvement and address systemwide change. This framework was adapted from research in health care (Institute for Healthcare Improvement, n.d.) to the field of education and is based on three interdependent dimensions of high-impact leadership: leaders' mental models (how they think), leaders' behaviors (what they do), and how leaders enact change (where they focus their efforts). In an unpublished dissertation titled *A Framework for Executive Leadership of Continuous Improvement in K–12 Public School Districts: Learning from Research and Practice,* Dixon and Eddy-Spicer (2019) investigated two exemplary K–12 school districts to test and iterate on the *Framework for District-Level Leadership of Continuous Improvement.* This qualitative study included interviews with various members of two different school districts, including the leaders themselves (district superintendents), chief improvement officers (CIOs), and principals. The study's findings were largely consistent with the literature within the identified domains of how leaders think, what they do, and where they focus efforts. Specifically, this study found that leaders play an essential role in shaping the direction of an education system through their actions, their beliefs, and where they focus their efforts. While this study did include superintendents, CIOs, and principals, it did not include teachers or other members of the school community who interact directly with students on a daily basis.

Noticeably missing from Dixon and Eddy-Spicer's *Framework for District-Level Leadership of Continuous Improvement* is an explicit focus on how leadership works to make systems more equitable. To address this gap, I adapted this framework to include Biag's (2019)

Guiding Principles for Centering Equity in Improvement Efforts, which includes practicing self-reflection, examining system forces through an equity lens, promoting inclusion, and focusing on the whole person. For each of these guiding principles, Biag provides example equity-related questions that I reviewed in order to consider how they fit into a leadership framework, as well as where they align with these domains: how leaders think, what they do, and where they focus efforts. For example, in order to address the principle of "focusing on the whole child" within the first stage of improvement, understanding the problem and the system that produces it, Biag recommends asking, *In what ways does our understanding of the problem keep the needs of our most vulnerable students at the center of our improvement efforts?* To address this question, I included "Center the needs of the most vulnerable students" within the domain of *What Leaders Do*. Additionally, I modified each domain to describe what leaders who center equity do, think, and focus their efforts, as opposed to how Dixon and Eddy-Spicer structured their framework, which simply describes how leaders think, what leaders do, and where leaders focus their efforts; equity was not included.

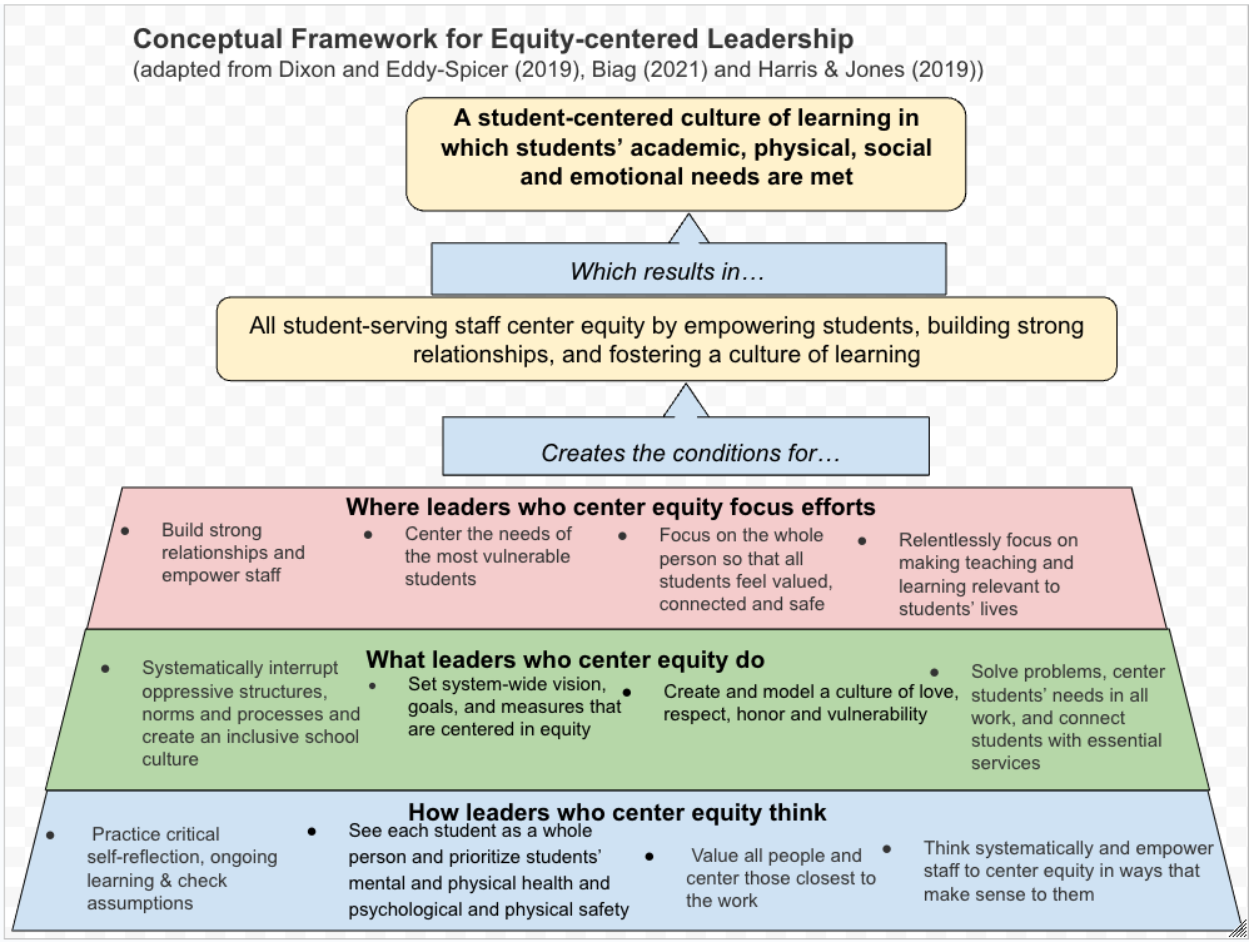
At the time of this writing, there have not been any studies conducted that investigate how leaders focus on the needs of the whole person in order to empower students and center equity in their continuous improvement efforts. However, several studies have investigated leading for equity. In a 2019 editorial by Harris and Jones, the authors define leading for equity as "a relentless focus on improving teaching and learning . . . valuing all pupils and making them feel part of the school family . . . sense of belonging . . . building positive relationships … creating an inclusive school culture. (Harris & Jones, 2019, p. 3). Each of the components described by Harris and Jones was integrated into my framework for leadership of equity-centered improvement. I synthesized Dixon and Eddy-Spicer's *Framework for District-Level*

Leadership of Continuous Improvement, Biag's principles for equity-centered continuous improvement (2021), and Harris and Jones' (2019) definition of leading for equity into the conceptual framework is below (Figure 2.1).

I used this conceptual framework to investigate how leaders of equity-centered continuous improvement within a county community school describe their work and create the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity by building strong relationships, focusing on the needs of the whole person, and empowering students.

Figure 2.1

Conceptual Framework for Equity-Centered Leadership



Chapter 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Background and Context

By exploring literature across the areas of educational equity, systems change, continuous improvement, educational leadership, and the whole child/person, this literature review presents information relevant to how leaders of a county community school center equity and create the conditions for all student-serving staff to do the same. I begin by unpacking the concept of educational equity and explaining why and how our systems do not meet the needs of historically marginalized students. I then examine schools as systems to both contextualize schools within the larger context of a district, a county, a state, and a nation and to explore the complexities of leading equity-centered improvement work within school systems. I also explain how continuous improvement, which takes a systems approach to creating change, is a methodology employed to improve educational contexts and ideally, advance educational equity within the school system. I explore the nontechnical or "below the green line" components of leading continuous improvement work—core values, mental models, and relationships—to understand how these dimensions work together to support real, lasting change. I look at the role leaders play in enacting equity-centered continuous improvement, examining how leaders within schools develop deep, trusting relationships and create the conditions for members of the school community to advance equity-centered improvement work. Lastly, I explore how a focus on the needs of the whole child/person is essential for advancing equity, particularly in the aftermath of a two-year pandemic.

Educational Equity

For the purposes of this study, I build on a definition of educational equity from Villani (2020), writing on behalf of the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium (MAEC), which defines educational equity as "seeing and knowing each student as an individual, with specific assets and needs"; and "determining and offering whatever is necessary for every student to thrive socially and emotionally and to meet [their career goals]" (p. 1). Focusing on making schools more equitable, instead of simply making schools better across the board, is fundamental to addressing past inequities; however, many approaches to school improvement fail to focus their efforts on ways that truly work towards equity. Villani (2020) points out that equity, unlike typical improvement, means providing each student with whatever they need to succeed, acknowledging that improvement will then look different for each unique student in the system. This definition includes not only academic success as an indicator of success but also students' social and emotional needs, which until recently have been downplayed in schools and undervalued amongst measurement systems.

Despite decades of reform efforts, we consistently fail to attain educational equity for all students in California's public school systems. Claims are often made that to achieve educational equity, we must close what Coleman (1966) identified as the "achievement gap," which Coleman describes as a gap in performance between different groups of students. (Coleman, 1966). For several decades, education researchers referred to (and continue to refer to) the achievement gap in a way that "blames the historically marginalized, under-served victims of poor schooling and holds whiteness and wealth as models of excellence" (Royal, 2012, para. 2). This type of deficit-based thinking only serves to exacerbate systemic disparities, running counter to the cause of making education systems more equitable. Instead, the term "opportunity gap" describes how

larger systemic factors outside of students' control, such as the quality of the schools students attend or the racial attitudes of teachers and administrators, impact students of color's opportunity to succeed (Royal, 2012). Eddy-Spicer and Gomez (2022) argue that "strong equity" is needed and define it as the "collaboration among diverse stake-holders to first recognize and then confront the reproduction of inequities through the everyday structural and systemic aspects of schools, school systems, and the society in which they have come to be embedded." Striving for strong equity requires a deep understanding of the historical inequities that resulted in the systemic and structural disparities present today.

Historical Inequity

Instead of focusing our efforts on the achievement gap, Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that the issue should be reframed as a loss of opportunity, thereby rendering inequitable systems responsible for disparate outcomes instead of students and families. Ladson-Billings (2006) also points out that we must consider the "education debt," consisting of historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debt over hundreds of years. As Ladson-Billings illustrates, the debt to traditionally oppressed students is comprehensive and complex. One manifestation of this is historical debt, ranging from and not limited to historical atrocities stemming from the enslavement of African peoples over centuries and lasting well into the twentieth century. One example of historical debt is that it was not until 1968, over a century after the end of the Civil War, that Black students in the South had the opportunity to experience universal secondary schooling (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Ladson-Billings also describes the economics of education debt, in which Black and Latinx students attend schools that are less well-funded than schools attended by White students, despite policies to make systems more equitable, such as California's Local Control Funding Formula (Furger et al., 2019).

Addressing Inequities

Of particular importance to this study is Ladson-Billing's (2006) notion of sociopolitical debt, which reflects the degrees to which communities of color have been excluded from the civic process. Kruse (2019) points out that "inequalities in schools fall along racial and socioeconomic lines, including lack of access to experienced teachers, advanced curriculum, lack of funding, discipline disparities, and deficit perspectives about low-income families and students of color" (p. 39). According to race and equity scholar Pedro Noguera (2001, this is not an accident. Instead, Noguera (2001) argues that communities of color must fight against the "perception that advances in educational equity would necessarily come at the expense of the educational interests of affluent white students" (p. 21). Noguera cites examples of allegedly well-meaning liberal White parents ultimately preventing schools from becoming more equitable by using their political power to make sure their own children are not denied any resources. As Noguera notes, often, the reason that school systems don't become more equitable is because efforts to address inequities become politicized. Thus, school and system leaders must not only contend with the internal improvement of their systems but also with the external political climates in which they are leading. Given the wide-ranging and ubiquitous forms of inequities within our school systems, it is no surprise that issues of equity persist.

Researchers and education scholars have long searched for the solution to addressing inequities. One argument is that to address the historical debt, we must adjust admissions policies to institutions of higher education to account for historically exclusionary practices (Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2019). Another approach to addressing the education debt is financial. Scholars propose that by providing financial incentives for historically marginalized students to attend college, we can address the financial barriers that prevent students from

achieving the social mobility that they can obtain with a four-year degree (Advancing Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education, 2016). However, many argue that providing financial incentives is not enough to make up for hundreds of years of practices rooted in the systematic enslavement and oppression of people of color. In addition to addressing the economic gap, educators at all levels must work to create a school culture that empowers students of color to see their place and worth in American society.

Positive, Inclusive School Culture

Nasir et al. (2021) argue that one way to address the opportunity gap is by altering the educational experiences of students through a shift in school culture. As Kirkland (2018) explains, "Culture is a fluid space of practices influenced by shared knowledges, values, beliefs, and desires that channel and get channeled through and performed by a cast of human actors" (p. 45). Taking a sociocultural approach to education, a shift in the culture of a school is essential to improving the educational experience of historically marginalized students. Nasir et al. (2021) explain that "culture is the medium through which humans adapt to the various conditions of life" (p. 559). Drawing on a sociocultural framework of culturally sustaining pedagogy, I maintain that a shift in school culture is foundational to all other improvements within schools. At their core, schools must maintain a culture in which every voice is valued, all people are treated with respect, and relationships are paramount.

Build Strong Relationships and Empower Students

Essentially, relationships are at the core of learning, and to learn, students must feel safe and socially connected to others (Nasir et al., 2021). Masten and Reed (2002) describe how resilience amongst children and adolescents stems from bonds with caring, competent adults who

are not necessarily the child's parents (Masten & Reed, 2002). Students, adolescents in particular, who have strong positive relationships with supportive adults in a school setting can have increased motivation, achievement, feelings of belonging, and affect in school (Roeser et al., 1996). Schools, then, must prioritize connection and relationships at all levels, including relationships amongst students, between students and teachers, and between school leaders and all other members of the school community (Fournier et al., 2019). In a 2004 study on whether the closeness and quality of relationships between intervention staff and students was associated with improving student engagement in school, Anderson et al. found that relationships with adults had a positive impact on students who were at high risk of dropping out. Furthermore, research on student empowerment has shown that schools that approach teaching as a "banking" model of education (Freire, 2000) serve to disempower rather than empower students. By applying Ford's factory model of schooling and seeing students as objects to whom techniques are applied, students become disconnected from learning, and enthusiasm and curiosity can be destroyed. Conversely, teachers who actively work to empower students understand that their job is not to control or micromanage students but, instead, to trust their students and gradually build students' capabilities and self-confidence (Broom, 2015). By empowering students through trust and strong relationships, rather than disempowering students with strict rules and micromanagement, student-serving staff within schools foster a learning environment of positive support, respect, and empowerment.

Disrupt Existing Patterns of Inequality and Oppression

In addition to creating a school culture of inclusivity and belonging to address the education debt of traditionally oppressed students, schools must also actively disrupt existing patterns of inequality and oppression (Nasir et al., 2021). Educators and administrators alike

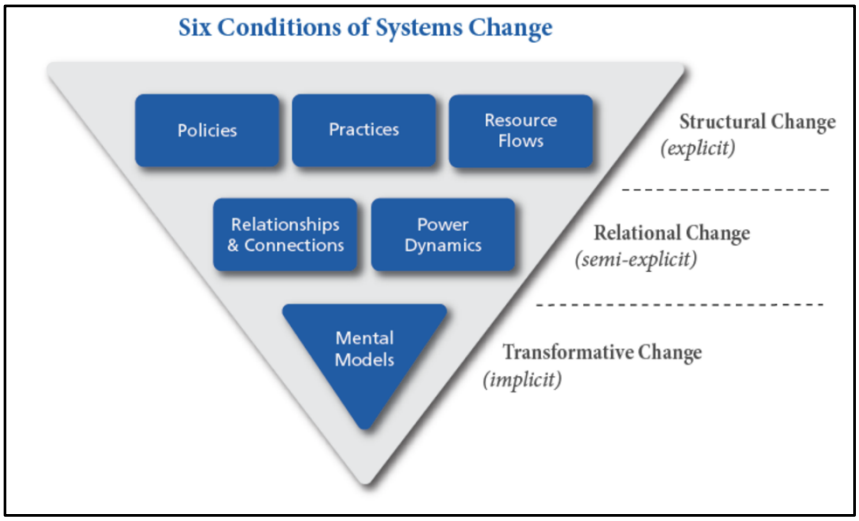
must engage in continual emotional and intellectual work to create a school culture in which all students feel valued, connected, and safe (Nasir et al., 2021). School leaders must engage in ongoing work to build a culture of equity-centered leadership and teaching (Radd, 2021). Schools must also actively integrate and maintain student-centered practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014) so that students see connections to the world beyond school and are empowered to learn skills and competencies that interest them and can be applied outside of school.

Schools as Systems

To understand how and why schools function as they do, it is essential to view

Figure 3.1

Six Conditions of Systems Change



(Kania et al., 2018)

schools as complex, interconnected systems (Shaked et al., 2019). Peter Senge (1990) defines "systems thinking" as a "discipline for seeing wholes… a framework for seeing relationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static 'snapshots'" (p. 59). Additionally, Kania, Kramer and Senge (2018) define the six conditions for systems change as

including the explicit, including policies, practices, and resource flows; the semi-explicit, including relationships and connections and power dynamics; and the implicit, mental models. According to Kania et al., (2018) mental models are the most challenging to shift. Educators and education leaders must "see the system" they wish to change and consider how factors outside of the school system impact students, as well as how their own interactions and mindsets about students come into play.

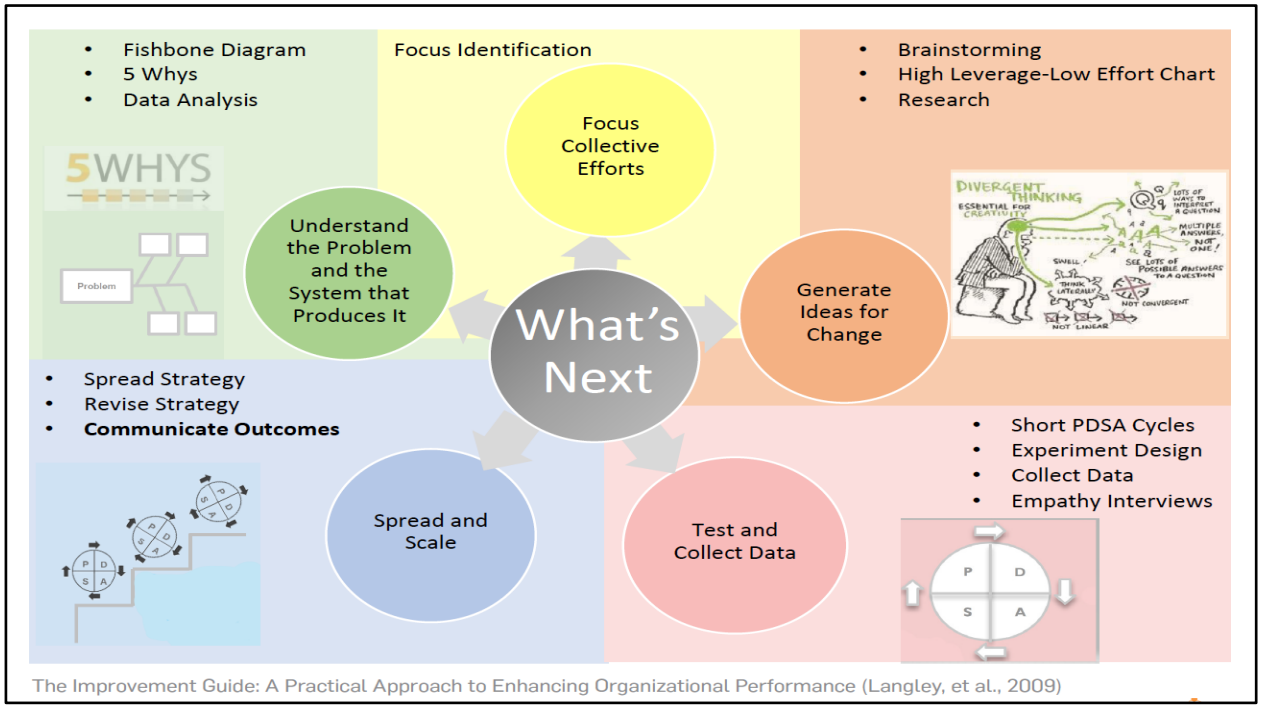
There are various approaches to seeing and improving systems, many of which are technical or what Yurkofsky et al. (2020) refer to as "above the green line" (p. 415). Some examples of the technical components of systems improvement include crafting a theory of improvement, generating change ideas, using tools and protocols to organize and structure thinking, and collecting data to test change ideas. Importantly, many scholars have noted that there is much more to improvement work than simply the technical use of tools and protocols. As noted in a study of a remarkably successful turnaround district in the Central Valley, Sanger Unified, leaders of real change efforts not only attend to system structures and operations but, more importantly, pay attention to fostering relationships to support change (David & Talbert, 2013). Specifically, leaders attend to the relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models of those working within schools to truly enact change. As Kania et al. noted in 2018, these conditions:

> Are the most challenging to clarify but can have huge impacts on shifting the system . . . changemakers must ensure that they pay specific attention to the relationships, power dynamics, and especially the underlying mental models (such as racism and gender biases') embedded in the systems in which they work (p. 5).

In 2022, Milligan et al. took it one step further to note that "relationships are the essence and fabric of collective impact" (p. 2). For real, sustained systemic change to occur, the importance of strong, trusting relationships cannot be overemphasized.

Continuous Improvement as an Approach to Improving School Systems

Continuous improvement is a methodology for enacting systems change that has become popular in recent years and has been adopted in many educational spaces. There are several definitions of continuous improvement, all of which have different implications. One common definition of continuous improvement is "an ongoing effort over time that leads to higher levels of performance" (Hough et al., 2017); it involves using disciplined inquiry to understand and solve problems by engaging those "closest to the problem" (e.g., teachers, students, and parents) to understand why inequities persist and generate ideas for how to address system failures. Figure 3.2 shows the cycle of continuous improvement. It typically entails five phases:



The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance (Langley, et al., 2009)

Figure 3.2

The Cycle of Continuous Improvement

understanding the problem and the system that produces it (causal system analysis), focusing collective efforts (Langley et al., 2009), generating ideas for change (design and prototyping), testing and building confidence (building improvement knowledge), and spreading and scaling learnings (dissemination of improvement efforts) (Park et al., 2013). Central to each of these phases is the collection and analysis of local data to inform a larger theory of improvement, which I will take up later.

As Yurkofsky et al. (2020) explain, continuous improvement draws from a variety of sectors and disciplines, including manufacturing and health care. Certain features of continuous improvement, such as organizational learning, span disciplines and are used in a range of industries, including business, whereas other approaches to continuous improvement, such as lesson study, are directly embedded within the education context. The most widely recognized origin of the term "continuous improvement" stems from automobile makers in Japan, who, after World War II, adopted a philosophy referred to as "Kaizen" to apply the scientific method to engage in team-based problem-solving (Miller et al., 2014). Central to this philosophy, which is credited with making Toyota the successful company that it is today, is that it is not just a set of tools to improve performance but also a *fundamental shift in the culture of the organization*. Specifically, Kaizen culture is adaptive, has a built-in moral compass, and has a focus on the long term (Miller et al., 2014). Importantly, Kaizen also includes several core beliefs that are purportedly responsible for sustained change. These core beliefs include humility, alignment, security, service, respect, process, and urgency.

While schools and school systems more broadly have been engaging in improvement efforts for decades, it was not until recent years that continuous improvement became a popular term in education. Park et al. (2013) define continuous improvement in education as "the act of integrating quality improvement into the daily work of individuals in the system" (p. 5). Park et al. (2013) describe continuous improvement as involving regular, ongoing organizational learning in which individuals in an organization are open to adaptation and change according to local contexts and new knowledge. In *Learning to Improve*, Bryk et al. (2015) argue that continuous improvement work is different than other ways of approaching improvement because it is user-centered and involves "observ[ing] and consult[ing] those on the ground who know the most about the problem" (p. 26). Drawing on the work of Langley et al. (2011), Bryk et al. (2015) argue that the principles of scientific inquiry should be applied to enacting school change. Notably, continuous improvement also entails the employment of specific and coherent methodology to improve system *services* and *processes*, as well as the regular collection of data or "process measures," and entails providing timely feedback on whether a change idea is showing improvement (Bryk et al., 2015). Several large-scale projects, such as the Carnegie Math Pathways, have shown great improvements by applying this methodology.

Critiques of Continuous Improvement

In recent years several critiques of continuous improvement have emerged within the field of education. Writing in 2020 about the complexities of managing educational change through a continuous improvement lens, Yurkofsky et al. argue that

> Continuous improvement methods as a whole are still too steeped in ideas from their forebears in industry, and if they are going to be successful in transforming educational systems, they need to more consciously attend to the political and relational dimensions

> of systemic change. Doing so would make these methods more human; more attentive to issues of race, gender, and power (pp. 404–405).

Yurkofsky (2020) describes the importance of attending to the political and relational dimensions of systemic change, which are components of continuous improvement that are often overlooked in lieu of attending to the more technical components, such as regular data collection.

Datnow and Park (2018) question whether the type of regular data collection and analysis that is typical of most improvement efforts is truly equitable, especially since data analysis can sometimes serve to confirm educators' implicit biases and assumptions about students, thereby compounding inequities that already exist in schools. In addition, Yurkofksy found in a 2022 study that continuous improvement initiatives can be viewed by school staff as another reform initiative that prioritizes compliance over leaders' perceived needs of their schools. By analyzing continuous improvement through the lens of institutional complexity, Yurkofsky (2022) noted that "schools can be infused with norms that are in tension with the goals of continuous improvement, including that conversations about data are linked to (rather than protected from) evaluation and accountability" (p. 304). They also noted that leading continuous improvement efforts is particularly challenging for school leaders who may experience concerns for external legitimacy and internal needs as being in tension with one another (Yurkofsky, 2022). Yurkofsky also notes a commonly occurring tension between external compliance and strong relationships that are essential for systems transformation.

Concern About Data Use in Continuous Improvement

Champions of continuous improvement in education argue that the regular collection of many types of data, including data about how long processes take, student survey data, interview data, and test score data, allows for a better understanding of how systems are performing and

enables educators to refine their understanding of the system and eventually make lasting change. Implicit in this notion is that regular use of data is universally beneficial; however, studies by Datnow and Park (2018) question if regular ongoing data use truly serves to make systems more equitable or, in fact, on occasion, does the opposite. Questions about whether continuous improvement practices, such as regular data collection and analysis, actually make systems more equitable are essential to understanding the benefits and drawbacks of this approach to systems change. As Datnow and Park point out in their 2018 study, certain types of data collection, such as regularly displaying student test scores or amount of time it takes students to engage in activities, might make school systems less equitable in that they damage the trust that is at the core of relationships between teachers and students, teachers and administrators, and so on. Thus, data use, in and of itself, is not a solution to making systems more equitable and should be carefully considered through an equity lens before decisions are made.

Leadership of Continuous Improvement

Dixon and Eddy-Spicer (2019) describe the overarching categories of essential leadership of continuous improvement efforts in education as being comprised of three interdependent dimensions of leadership: the mental models that leaders use, the behaviors that make a difference, and where leaders focus their efforts. Using a framework that they adapted from the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), Dixon and Eddy-Spicer studied two high-performing districts and found that leaders think about challenging situations by valuing learning, respecting every individual, thinking systematically, and embracing personal responsibility. Regarding what leaders do to make a difference, they identified the following practices: set a vision, purpose, and strategy focused on results for students; develop capability; create a culture of improvement; and

span boundaries. In terms of where leaders need to focus their efforts, they promote organizational alignment and create an effective infrastructure. Doing these things creates the conditions for continuous improvement to be embedded in the daily work districtwide, which in turn produces sustained, accelerated improvement towards districtwide goals for improving student outcomes (Dixon & Eddy-Spicer, 2019). Although components of equity are embedded in some of these areas (e.g., respecting every individual), a specific equity focus was not central to the design of this study. There is a growing consensus that these components alone are not sufficient to enable school leaders to make their systems more equitable; in fact, much is missing from the scholarship about leadership of continuous improvement efforts regarding the integral role of relationships in equity-centered improvement work.

Leadership Practices and Organizational Conditions That Enable Continuous Improvement

A 2019 study led by PACE and the CORE districts explored the leadership practices and organizational conditions that enable continuous improvement within one elementary school in Fresno Unified School District (Kennedy & Gallagher, 2019). The three main lessons derived from this study are that a range of resources and external supports laid the foundation for the work; the principal's commitment and the leadership team's approach created a culture that nourished continuous improvement; and leadership and improved culture led to a stronger sense of teacher agency, which allowed teachers to focus on how to address systemic inequities. It was clear from this study that the culture of the school and the cultural conditions that enabled educators to try out new things were essential to lasting change. However, this study did not explore how leadership centered equity in their improvement efforts, an area that needs further exploration.

Shifting Continuous Improvement to Center Equity

In order for the field of continuous improvement to evolve, many argue that there is a need for greater emphasis on equitable practice and anchoring values to drive the work, alongside attention to systems and processes. Eddy-Spicer and Gomez (2022) note that "the act of inquiry, far from being value-free, is freighted with the surrounding social milieu, normative premises, absolute rights and relative power, and values that practitioners of inquiry bring to their practice" (p. 90). As such, Spicer and Gomez (2022), along with Biag (2019), propose the use of an equity-focused compass to guide improvement efforts. As Biag (2019) explains, the purpose of equity-centered continuous improvement is to systematically interrupt the structures, norms, and processes that make it difficult for underserved groups to access opportunities and experiences. Biag goes on to state that to truly advance educational equity, continuous improvement must be thought of as "not merely a technical enterprise but as a complex endeavor that demands keen attention to systemic oppression and the different ways it manifests and influences students' opportunities to learn and grow" (p. 91). Continuous improvement is an approach to improving systems that must take into greater consideration the oppression within systems that prevents students from meeting their full potential. Equity-centered continuous improvement seeks to not only disrupt oppressive practices but, more importantly, to empower historically marginalized students to meet their full potential by adopting a whole-person approach that attends to students' physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Equity-Centered Leadership

Leaders of school improvement work must have an equity orientation to truly effect change within the multidimensional settings of contemporary schools (Kruse, 2019). In writing

about educational leadership, Kruse (2021) describes how leaders who "do not intentionally embrace understandings and practices that foster equitable and inclusive practices may end up unintentionally making their systems less equitable" (p. 50). Several researchers have analyzed what it means for school leaders to center equity in their work or have an equity orientation to leading schools, though none have looked explicitly at the role that relationships play in leaders' ability to advance continuous improvement efforts. In a study led by Stone-Johnson in 2021 that analyzed how leadership preparation programs can foster an equity mindset, researchers found that addressing issues related to deficit thinking was central to preparing school leaders to lead equity-centered work. In addition to deficit thinking as a barrier to equity-oriented school leadership, researchers have also identified external factors that make it difficult for school leaders to enact equity-oriented school improvement. A 2013 study by Pollack and Zirkel examined the contextual and political factors that pose barriers to school leaders enacting greater educational equity for underserved students. In this study, the researchers used a Critical Race Theory (CRT) frame to examine resistance to a change effort that aimed to address the "structural, pedagogical, curricular or procedural change initiatives intended to correct identified disparities in educational opportunities or outcomes between groups of students" (p. 291). Pollak and Zirkel posit that using a CRT lens enables "school leaders [to] engage in critical race praxis by surfacing, honoring, and making central the stories and counter-narratives of socially and politically marginalized people of color" (p. 308). Importantly, Pollak and Zirkel also found that efforts to enact more equitable outcomes within schools are often thwarted by political dynamics (in this case, privileged White parents) when leaders do not anticipate resistance to change. While Pollak and Zirkel did focus on how leaders worked to address disparities in educational opportunities or outcomes between groups of students, this study did not explore the ways in

which leaders created the conditions for student-serving staff within schools to center equity in their daily work with students.

Leading From the Heart

One component of effective leadership for equity that does not come up in the continuous improvement literature but is widely noted in literature on equity-centered systems change is the notion of leading from the heart. Crowley's 2001 book *Leading from the Heart* outlines four components that leaders use to improve systems: building a highly engaged team, connecting on a personal level, maximizing employee potential, and valuing and honoring achievements. Moreover, in a 2020 interview, Crowley also described how leaders who "lead from the heart" actually emit an aura of peace and calmness, stating, ". . . the heart creates an electromagnetic field that extends outside the human body and is tangible. It's not an aura or something metaphysical. It's just like every electrical system (e.g., transformers) that creates fields." This research supports the notion that leaders who center equity and form authentic relationships both with staff and students have the capacity to impact outcomes in ways much greater than previously imagined. In fact, the very act of caring deeply for students and the community and approaching others with love can create invisible fields that can be sensed by others and are possibly even contagious. Likewise, writing about school leaders as agents of culture change, Fullan (2002) describes how moral purpose is a hallmark of leaders who inspire staff towards closing achievement gaps between groups of students. By appealing to the heart, a leader with strong moral purpose can situate systems change not only as a technical endeavor but, more importantly, as a human necessity that is deeply important.

Measuring Equity-Centered Leadership

One approach to enacting educational equity found in the literature is Harris and Bensimon's Equity Scorecard (2007), which combines features of continuous improvement, such as regularly collecting and analyzing data to better understand how your system is or is not meeting its goals with an equity stance, including disaggregating data by race and having the courage as well as the structures, tools, and processes in place to take action to address inequities surfaced in the data. Although the equity scorecard was originally created for higher education, the tenets of such a practice certainly apply to leading equity-centered improvement efforts in K–12 schools.

Braun et al. (2017, 2021) conducted two studies in which they analyzed a method of leadership development designed to "enable educators to see and understand systemic inequities, as well as their own and others' beliefs and assumptions, in order to implement strategies that address the underlying causes of inequities to transform both learning and schooling systems" (Braun et al., 2021, p. 20). These studies explored and assessed how facilitative leadership, operationalized as Core Leadership Practices (CLPs)—operationalized as Setting Direction, Monitoring Progress, Building Capacity to Teach, Building Capacity to Collaborate, Building Capacity to Lead, and Reorganizing Systems—increased equity in student learning (Braun et al., 2017). Preliminary findings indicate that "through the implementation of the model, educator practices and beliefs are transformed toward those that support the reorganization of systems and practices that drive high and equitable outcomes" (p. 20). This study was primarily quantitative and looked at student test scores on the STAR assessment of ELA, math and survey data to gauge the effectiveness of leadership practices. As such, this study did not explore in-depth the

specific role that a focus on the needs of the whole child/person and, specifically, developing strong relationships play in advancing improvement efforts.

Collaborative Leadership: A Strategy for Making Systems More Equitable

According to the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), collaborative leadership entails a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility (Maier & Niebuhr, 2021). The UCLA Center for Community Schooling describes collaborative leadership as "enabling educators, students and families to work together to define and co-create learning environments that allow everyone to learn, grow, and thrive" (Kang et al., 2021). Ultimately, engaging in a collaborative leadership model puts students and families at the forefront and positions all other student-serving staff to work together to meet their needs.

Equity-Centered Leadership of Continuous Improvement

Writing in 2021, Biag highlights ways that leaders can apply an equity lens to organize their practice at each stage of the improvement process and notes that understanding how this work unfolds at each stage in the process needs further exploration. Citing several pertinent studies, Biag explains that while the theory behind continuous improvement and tools, such as plan, do, study, act (PDSA) cycles, are well understood, many leaders find it difficult to enact continuous improvement in consistent and effective ways (2021). Moreover, enacting equity-centered continuous improvement is not well understood. Beyond simply applying continuous improvement approaches adopted from other industries, it is critical that the way the work is conducted at each stage of the journey addresses the causes of long-standing inequities (Biag, 2021). Biag puts forth three equity principles that can serve as guideposts for an equity-centered

improvement journey: *Practice Critical Reflection Through an Equity Len, Promote Inclusio,* and *Focus on the Whole Child* (2021). As Biag explains:

> These principles seek to help leaders treat continuous improvement not only as a technical enterprise composed of testing and iteration but as a multifaceted endeavor that demands deep understanding of systemic oppression and the different ways it manifests and shapes students' learning and healthy development (p. 111).

As Biag and many others argue, this multifaceted endeavor extends beyond the school and into the communities in which students live and includes addressing not only the academic needs of students but rather takes a whole child/person approach, which entails ensuring that each student is "healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged, [and in turn] sets the standard for comprehensive, sustainable school improvement and provides for long-term student success" (Wise & Saddiqi, 2022, p. 3). Addressing the needs of the whole child as a core component of continuous improvement efforts is new to the field of continuous improvement and needs further exploration.

A Whole Child/Person Approach

Much attention has focused on the needs of the whole child, or in the case of older students, whole person, in light of the mental health crisis and widening disparities amongst subgroups of students resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, I used the definition of a whole child/person put forth by Linda Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, (2018), which is one that attends to students' physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. According to the *Integrated Care Field Guide* (Breaking Barriers et al., 2022), key elements of taking a whole child/person approach include positive developmental relationships;

environments filled with safety and belonging; rich learning experiences and knowledge development; development of skills, habits, and mindsets; and integrated support systems.

Figure 3.3

The Whole Child Framework

(Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, 2023)

A whole child/person approach is crucial to addressing the numerous challenges that young people face because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative's 2023 Whole Child Framework outlines six essential components of a whole child approach: mental health, physical health, social emotional development, identity development, academic development, and cognitive development (2023). A 2022 study of over 2 million students nationwide found that remote instruction was a primary driver in widening achievement gaps by race and school poverty (Goldhaber et al., 2022). This study primarily analyzed test score data, finding that the consequences of remote and hybrid instruction on communities of color were generally more severe than in other areas. Additionally, mental health was a major concern for

all students during COVID, especially students living in poverty. A 2021 study by Gazmararian et al. highlighted a concerning impact on the stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness that students are feeling. Now more than ever, there is a pressing need for school leaders to enact Biag's principles of equity-centered leadership by specifically focusing on the needs of the whole child/person.

Conclusion

In sum, this literature review has established that school leaders are uniquely positioned to center equity in their leadership by focusing on the needs of the whole child/person. Leading this work is complex and requires school leaders to be reflective and intentional about creating a culture of learning and inclusivity that leads to positive experiences and outcomes for students. Leaders must engage in systems thinking and continuous improvement that both attends to the technical components of improving systems and is keenly aware of the role that relationships, power dynamics, and mental models play in educational spaces (Kania et al., 2018). While several studies have explored how leaders center equity in their work, and others have examined how leaders use particular components of continuous improvement, such as data-driven decision-making or feedback loops, to improve outcomes for students, there is a need for research that examines how leaders enact equity-centered systems change that moves beyond the technical to focus on the role of relationships in tending to the needs of the whole child/person. This study sought to fill the gap by expanding upon Biag's principles of equity-centered continuous improvement to explore how leaders enact these principles and create the conditions for others to do the same within a county-run school.

Chapter 4 METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This qualitative study sought to understand in-depth how leaders and student-serving staff within a county office of education and a county-run school make sense of their role in serving and supporting students. It also sought to understand the role that systemic structures play in supporting or hindering this work. My research advanced my "understanding of how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5), specifically as these components relate to advancing equity within an organization. To this end, I collected information from participants that helped me understand how they make sense of their unique positions within a school system. This study used qualitative methods because I am interested in "how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (Merriam, 2009, p. 13), specifically the meaning of advancing equity for various members of a school system.

In addition to exploring how leadership practices serve to support students, this study also explored how leadership creates the conditions for student-serving staff to empower students. As such, this study used a critical research frame to explore who has power within the system, how power is negotiated, and how leadership works to transform and empower students (Merriam, 2009). This critical research frame is reflected in my conceptual framework, which explored how leadership creates the conditions for all student-serving staff to "systematically [interrupt] oppressive structures, norms and processes" as well as "[create] and [model] a culture of learning and ongoing reflection about positionality and power structures" (see Conceptual Framework, p. 12).

I conducted interviews with system leadership, focus groups with student-serving staff within the school, interviews with the school leader, and an interview with the school guidance counselor. I used my conceptual framework (p. 12) to guide the creation of interview questions that advanced my understanding of my research questions.

Study Setting and Sample

Setting

This study took place in a semi-rural county community school in Northern California. According to California County Superintendents, students in county-run schools may be incarcerated, expelled, or suspended; wards of the court; habitually truant; credit deficient; students with one or more disabilities are overrepresented (2023). Commonly, the goal of county-run school programs is to rehabilitate students, which often means that the student population is transient (California County Superintendents, 2023). Many of the students in county-run schools are medically fragile and need intensive support, which can lead to high rates of absenteeism (California County Superintendents, 2023).

The school centered in this study consists of one school leader, who works closely with administrators from the county office of education, as well as six teachers, five paraeducators, one youth advocate, one school counselor, and an average of 70 students at a time. Students who attend this school come from five districts throughout the county. As described on the school website, the school "provides a small learning environment, counseling and other social services as well as opportunities to make connections between what is learned in school and the world of work. Expelled students are welcome. All students attending the [school] are on formal or informal probation" (https://cccs-ycoe-ca.schoolloop.com). By welcoming expelled students and

students on probation, the school provides a safe haven for students who have not had success in traditional schools or for whom traditional schooling experiences have not been positive. As such, the school's enrollment numbers are constantly fluctuating; in June 2022, the school enrolled 71 students. Of these 71 students, 71.8% were socioeconomically disadvantaged, 18.3% were English learners, and 11.3% were designated as foster youth. The student demographics are as follows: Hispanic 75%; White 18%; Black 4%; two or more races 3%. The school serves students in Grades 7–12 and has a teacher-to-student ratio of 20:1 (https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/57105790113787/2022).

Unlike a traditional community school, which is a term loosely used to describe a school that partners with families and community organizations, this school is also a county community school as designated by the California Department of Education (CDE) (https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/cc/). As such, it "aims to meet students' individual needs, which may include academic skills, life skills, and/or social and emotional skills" (https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/cc/). According to CDE, county community schools are "characteristically student-centered and adapted to meet individual needs." Furthermore, "students are provided with learning opportunities in academic skills, independent life skills, positive self-concepts, and effective relationships with others." Given that county community schools, by definition, focus on the importance of strong relationships to support student growth, this context was the ideal environment in which to conduct this study.

In addition to the physical setting of the school, it is important to note that this study took place in the aftermath of a two-year pandemic that disproportionately impacted students of color. This school, along with schools around the world, physically shut its doors to students in March 2020. The school had to transition to a 100% virtual model literally overnight. In interviews and

focus groups, I explored how the school continued to support struggling students throughout the pandemic, the impact that the pandemic had on students' mental, physical, and emotional health, and how leadership and student-serving staff maintained an equity focus over a two-year period of uncertainty and fear.

Sampling/Participants

This study explored how educators at various levels of the system center equity in their improvement efforts. I used purposive sampling to identify two leaders within the county office of education who led equity-centered continuous improvement at the county level, were involved in the creation of the school, and helped to maintain its core focus on equity. I also conducted two hour-long interviews with the school leader to better understand how she centers relationships and deep trust to foster a learning community where students are empowered, and their social, emotional, and academic needs are met.

I used findings from the first phase of my study, in which I interviewed system and school leaders, to determine which student-serving staff to include in a focus group. During the focus group, I explored the experiences of student-serving staff who work within a school in which leadership is creating conditions for equity-centered continuous improvement to occur. The focus group included three student-serving staff—two teachers and one paraeducator. I also conducted an interview with the guidance counselor, who was able to speak about how the leader creates the conditions for student-serving staff to address students' social and emotional needs. I used my position as an education consultant at WestEd, leading the California Department of Education in providing differentiated assistance support to county-run schools to recruit participants in this study.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of two parts: five one-on-one interviews and one focus group. I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight to ten questions and follow-up probes to further participants' thinking about each question. I used different interview protocols depending on whom I spoke with and whether it was the first, second, or third time we were conversing (see protocols in the Appendices for more information). Importantly, this style of interacting with interviewees required me to reflect on my own reflexivity and how my own experiences might have influenced my interpretation of data (Patnaik, 2013). I piloted my interview questions with school leaders working in schools with similar demographics.

By engaging in interviews and focus groups with educators and systems leaders, I was able to develop a fuller picture of how educators and leaders enact equity-centered improvement within a community school. Additionally, by engaging a range of participants from throughout the county office of education and the school itself in this study, I was able to gather a wide range of perspectives on what it means to center equity in leadership of improvement efforts and how leadership creates the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity in their own work with students. Table 4.1 provides an overview of study participants.

Table 4.1

Overview of Study Participants

Name	Role	Race or ethnicity	Years in education	Years working in the school or at the county office of education
Dasan	County Superintendent	Black or African American	20 more	6–10
Eli	Assistant Superintendent of Equity and	More than one race	16–20	4–5

	Supports			
Amia	Site Principal and Director	White	20 or more	6–10
Ramiro	Teacher	Chicano/a	16–20	6–10
Santi	Teacher	Asian	16–20	1–3
Sam	Guidance Counselor	White, more than one race	0–5	1–3
Dalia	Paraeducator	White	20 or more	4–5

Interviews and focus groups

In order to get at the mindsets and dispositions described in my framework—understanding how leaders who center equity think, what leaders who center equity do, where leaders who center equity focus their efforts, and how leaders who center equity create the conditions for others to engage in this work—it was necessary to engage in a qualitative study that allowed for participants, including system leaders, school leaders, teachers, and other members of the school community to share openly and extensively about their experiences engaging in equity-centered improvement work and how they perceived of leadership's role in advancing this work. To this end, I asked open-ended interview and focus group questions that invited participants to describe their own experiences working within this context and their unique understanding of ways in which leadership works to advance equity. I piloted my interview protocol for school leaders with a former school leader and revised questions based on the feedback of the interviewee.

This study sought to understand how educators think about equity-centered school improvement and how they make sense of it in their settings. As such, I used an emergent design, knowing that "all phases of the process may change or shift after [I] enter the field and begin to

collect data" (Creswell, 2018, unknown). During my interviews with system leaders, I learned about documents related to my study, specifically the organization's equity statement and the school's LCAP, that spoke to how the organization approaches advancing equity and empowering students, the organization's values, and approach to empowering students, including addressing the needs of the whole person and supporting each student in reaching their individual goals. I reviewed these documents to better understand the organization's core values and commitment to equity. Some of my findings from this analysis are shared below. Generally, findings from the LCAP and the equity statement reflected what was shared during the interviews.

Data Analysis

I coded and analyzed the results of my qualitative research, which included interviews and focus groups. Data analysis for this phase of the study involved multiple rounds of coding and analyzing the data collected. I used the "voice memo" function on my phone to record interviews, and then I had interviews transcribed using Rev.com. I generated analytic memos after each interview, focus group, or document analyzed because "when [I] reflect and write about data analysis and [my] thinking with the coding process, it increases [my] critical thinking and challenges [my] own assumptions" (Rogers, 2018, p. 890). Additionally, by generating analytic memos shortly after the data was collected, I was better positioned to see "emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in [my] data . . . possibly leading toward theory" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 42). My analytic memos, in part, reflected my initial takeaways from the interview and also included questions I still had and connections to my research questions. For example, after my first of two meetings with the school leader, I wrote:

It's interesting that she talks about leading with the heart and the importance of love and relationships. I hadn't operationalized this as a code, and I am curious what other researchers think about this. How does this fit into my framework? How are love and equity connected?

I used my reflections in my analytic memos to help me revise my conceptual framework.

After my data was collected, I engaged in electronic coding and used Delve.com to assist me in the coding process. Using this software enabled me to efficiently code, analyze, and store information gleaned from interviews and focus groups (Saldaña, 2013). In my first round of coding, I used codes from my initial code book and also generated new codes based on my findings. My initial coding included a synthesis of the code book in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Initial Code Book for School and System Leaders

Theme	Code
How leaders think	• Practice critical self-reflection and ongoing learning. • Value all people and center those closest to the work. • Think systematically and embed an equity focus at all levels of the system.
What leaders do	• Build trust, center/leverage relationships, and model vulnerability. • Set systemwide vision, goals, and measures that are centered in equity and clearly communicate the why for doing equity work. • Create and model a culture of ongoing reflection about positionality and power structures. • Systematically interrupt the structures, norms, and processes that make it difficult for underserved groups to access opportunities and experiences.
Where leaders focus their efforts	• Focus on the whole person systematically. • Center the needs of the most vulnerable students. • Ensure that all students feel valued, connected, and safe. • Relentlessly focus on improving teaching and learning.

Table 4.3 includes the codes that emerged during my analysis.

Table 4.3

Emergent Codes for School and Systems Leaders

Theme	Code
Context	• Unique about county-run schools • Tensions
Challenges	• Pandemic • Barriers
Equity	• Connecting students with essential services
Leadership	• Leading with love • Empower staff • Change agent
Culture	• Openness, honesty, and respect • Experimentation • Center students' needs above those of adults

I used my preset codebook as well as my emergent codes to engage in open-vivo coding, highlighting specific phrases as they related to the themes in my codebooks.

Likewise, I used the codebook that I developed for student-serving staff to analyze findings from the focus group. Because the subjects of the second research question, "How does leadership create the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity?" are in a different part of the school system than the leader and are impacted by the school leader's efforts to center equity, I modified my codebook for student-serving staff so that it adjusts for this shift in research subjects. Table 4.4 displays the preset codes that I used to code data from interviews and focus groups with student-serving staff.

Table 4.4

Initial Code Book for Student-Serving Staff

Theme	Code

Relationships	• Building strong relationships • Modeling vulnerability • Developing deep trust
Empower students	• Reflect on own positionality • Center students in learning whenever possible • Anchor school in students' own interests and curiosities
Focus on the needs of the whole person	• Provide emotional support • Attend to students' mental health needs • Support students' development of identity • Create a safe space both physically and psychologically • Foster a culture of learning
Leadership	• Creates the necessary conditions for strong relationships, empowering students, a focus on the needs of the whole person • Empowers student-serving staff to make decisions in the best interest of students • Values all people and centers those closest to the work

As I coded data from the focus group with student-serving staff, I again reflected on how accurately my codebook captured findings from participants and added new codes for ideas that were not present in my initial codebook. Emergent codes from the focus group with student-serving staff are included in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

Emergent Codes for Student-Serving Staff

Theme	Code
Empower students	• Honor students' individuality and humanity • Treat students with the respect they deserve
Model vulnerability	• Share personal stories of struggle • Normalize imperfection
Trauma-informed practices	• Art as healing • Social–emotional support

Once I began analyzing my data using my codebooks, two things happened: first, I realized that there were several essential themes that were missing from my codebook. Second, I realized that some of my original codes weren't quite right and needed to be modified or collapsed with other codes.

In reflecting on the ideas being presented in the data, I noticed that, within the domain of how leaders think, I needed to add that leaders who practice critical self-reflection also check their assumptions; so, I added "check assumptions" to this subtheme. I also noticed that the idea of "leading with love" or "she led from the heart" came up consistently in the data, and yet I didn't have anything about love or leading from the heart in my frame. To address this discrepancy, I modified the subtheme "create and model a culture of learning and ongoing reflection about positionality and power structures" to read "create and model a culture of love, respect, honor, and vulnerability." I felt comfortable omitting "ongoing reflection about positionality and power structures" from my framework because this didn't come up in my data. I also modified "build trust, center/leverage relationships, and model vulnerability" to read "Solve problems, center students' needs in all work, and connect students with essential services" for two reasons. First, I realized that one component that came up repeatedly in the data was that effective leaders have a problem-solving orientation. Also, part of leading for equity is connecting students and families with essential services outside of the domain of education, such as housing and mental health services. I also collapsed two codes within the domain of "where leaders who center equity focus efforts." I collapsed "focus on the whole person systematically" with "focus on the whole person so that all students feel valued, connected, and safe" since I found that these two codes often occurred together. Within this domain of "where leaders focus their efforts," I added "leverage relationships to support and empower staff" since I learned from

my data that an essential component of leadership within this school was empowering staff to make decisions about how to center equity in ways that made sense to them, particularly since they had the closest relationships with students. Finally, I modified the theme "relentlessly focus on teaching and learning" to read "relentlessly focus on making teaching and learning relevant to students' lives" since several student-serving staff and leaders mentioned empowering students by making learning about students and their own lives.

The second round of coding focused on refining the codes and recategorizing data to reflect emergent findings. As Merriam (2009) notes, "devising categories is a largely intuitive process, but it is also systematic and informed by the study's purpose" (p. 183), so I returned to my purpose and research questions after the initial round of coding to ensure I was grounding my codes appropriately. As I returned to my transcripts for the second round of coding, I was more focused on quotes that answered my research questions, in addition to supporting my framework. Once I felt confident that my codes accurately reflected my research questions and my framework, I began to categorize my codes, which allowed me to analyze my codes and build meaning. One important realization was that my initial conceptual framework was missing some key codes, so I modified my framework to include codes that emerged from my research. Finally, after I had distilled my categories to both reflect my findings and align with my revised framework, I grouped my categories into overarching themes that reflected my new understanding of leading for equity. I decided to organize my analysis according to the themes and sub-themes presented in my framework and also added themes to address my third sub-research question, what conditions within the system make centering equity possible and what systemic barriers make challenges? To address this question, I added the theme "challenges and barriers" as well as the sub-themes of challenges, systemic barriers, and the pandemic.

Positionality

As Creswell (2018) notes, "qualitative research is interpretive research, with the inquirer typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants . . . inquirers explicitly identify reflexively their biases, values, and personal background . . ." (Creswell, 2018, p. Unknown). As such, it was essential that I use member checks to ensure that my interpretation of the data accurately reflected the opinions and ideas shared in the interviews and focus group. To address any potential issues that might have stemmed from my limited understanding or bias, I shared my findings with each of the study participants to ensure that I had not accidentally misinterpreted any of the information they shared.

Reflecting on my own potential biases, I note that I am a White, middle-aged female researcher working in a large well-known research organization, which makes me different from my participants in many ways. I grew up in middle-class, predominantly White suburbs in both the Midwest and Southern California.

The participants in my interviews came from a range of backgrounds, as noted in the demographics table and each brought their own unique experiences and perspectives to the conversation, which undeniably were influenced by their race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The students in the schools these educators work come from low-income families and are not White themselves. Additionally, none of the participants work at an education research organization for a living; instead, they experience the work I seek to understand daily and often in a visceral and all-encompassing way.

Chapter 5 VIGNETTES

These participant vignettes help to paint a fuller picture of the various leaders and student-serving staff who work together to support the students in the county-run school. These vignettes illustrate the unique skills and dispositions that each participant brings to this space and also highlight how they center equity in their daily work. In addition, these vignettes portray participants as real people grappling with their own challenges and struggles, who nonetheless work together to center students' needs every day.

Amia

The school leader for over six years and a committed educator for over four decades, Amia is as deeply committed to students as it gets. She describes herself as a "lead with the heart kind of person," which enabled her to create a safe, nurturing environment for students at multiple school sites. Amia was described by her staff as "a true leader, who's like beneath your wings and helps you to be a better you." Staff went on to describe how Amia takes the time to get to know each student-serving staff member at Dolores Huerta School as an individual and to understand each person's unique strengths. Staff shared that they knew they could take problems to her and that she would always keep students at the center while also considering the well-being of the student-serving staff ("which is a delicate balance!").

One trait that came up many times was that Amia was a reflective practitioner who showed deep respect for every person on the Dolores Huerta campus. Staff noted that Amia was good at taking criticism and was open to feedback. She also was able to provide feedback in a gentle, supportive way. By holding respect as a core value, Amia was able to "create a unified environment" in which staff have deep respect for one another and also for the students. Staff

also mentioned transparency and honesty as traits that were core to Amia's success as a leader. They noted that Amia made them "feel comfortable and safe, which they passed on to the students." They described her as "a role model of respect and honesty," which empowered staff to become role models of the same traits (respect and honesty) for students. Another strength of Amia's was that she created clear boundaries and expectations for students and staff that were all rooted in mutual respect. As one staff member described, she "created a culture without hindrances where everyone knew what was expected."

When asked about her approach to leadership, Amia mentioned her mom and the way that she was raised several times. She shared that her mom instilled in her the importance of "breaking bread" together, so this became a tradition at Dolores Huerta School. Amia started a program called "community breakfast," where "we had a girls' group and a boys' group, and we brought leaders in just to sit at the table with them." Amia and other student-serving staff regularly ate meals with students, a ritual that built community and showed the kids that staff cared about them as people. As Amia noted, "We just tried to make 'em feel like it was an extended family." Amia also shared that she referenced her mom when describing the school environment, telling students that, in her mom's home, everyone treats each other with respect. She would tell students. "When you cross that gate, this is my home. you're part of my family now." She was proud of the fact that students also showed respect for the Dolores Huerta campus, stating, "We never had any tagging. I didn't have any vandalism in the six years I was there. Because it became their place." In reflecting on what she was most proud of in her time at Dolores Huerta, she stated, "We took Dolores Huerta at the time of, it was considered a rough and tumble nobody wanted to be there to [a place] where people were standing at our door."

Dalia

A paraeducator with a background in special education, Dalia was new to working in alt-ed when Amia hired her years ago. Now, she jokes, “You can’t get rid of me!” Dalia described how, prior to working at Dolores Huerta School, she had worked with medically fragile students who tended to be very affluent and had stable families, so working with a population of students who came from a different socioeconomic background was different for her. She admitted that when she first started at Dolores Huerta School, she had a steep learning curve and often questioned herself, saying, “I'm not sure I know what I’m doing.” She described feeling overwhelmed by the challenges students faced and attributes her success at the school to Amia’s open-door policy, which allowed her to admit when she felt overwhelmed and take breaks as needed. She described how Amia listened to her and really got to know her as a person, which helped her get to know students on an individual level and support them appropriately.

Santi

Known at the school for being “zen,” Santi currently oversees a highly valued extension program and is one of the main teachers at Dolores Huerta School. As she described it, the extension program is “so needed in the community. Every day students share, this is what we need.” She came to the United States in 2005, when she found a position as a long-term sub at an alt-ed school. She was quickly hired on as a full-time teacher, most likely as a result of her calm, peaceful demeanor and her ability to connect with students. In reflecting on working in alt-ed, she stated, “I never knew this was my strength. But it is, And I love it.”

Santi consistently empowers students by encouraging them to “step into adulthood” through small tasks. She has students set their own goals, and then she holds them accountable

for meeting those goals. One of Santi's greatest strengths is her openness and honesty about the fact that "everyone struggles, and it's okay to feel things." She shares with the students of "being mindful of the fact that we all struggle, we all have pain. And that's the beauty of being alive." When asked how she supported students, she stated that she just listens to them, shows them quiet, calm energy, and tells them, "it's okay. We accept you as you are."

Ramiro

Ramiro started teaching at a language academy in Mexico at the age of 19 and has been a teacher of one sort or another ever since. He first started working in the county teaching art at juvenile hall, where he developed a program that he later brought over to the Dolores Huerta School. Known for his "knowledge of the community, knowledge of art and just healing and the importance of it," Ramiro and the work he does at Dolores Huerta School embodies student empowerment that meets the needs of the whole person. When asked how he empowers students in his teaching, he described how, in his art class, students design a project that is unique to them. He stated, "The goal is for each student to create a project that is *just theirs*." He acknowledged that doing this was a lot of extra work for him as a teacher, but it was worth it to see the pride on students' faces when they present their final projects. His colleagues described how "he did such a beautiful job of connecting with those students on a level that was so real, he met them where they were at." He's also known for his "spidey senses," which enable him to read how students are really feeling, despite students saying they are okay.

In addition to overseeing an extensive arts program and being a part of the local arts council, Ramiro also teaches Career Technical Education (CTE) classes, which "provides an important pathway to success for high school students and offers each student opportunities to personalize his or her education based on their career interests and unique learning needs" (US

Department of Education website). Instead of teaching several different, disconnected subjects throughout the day, Ramiro works hard to integrate subjects in ways that are meaningful and relevant to his students. As he described it, “there is a fluidity of academics and creativity” in the way he approaches teaching and supports students to take ownership of their education. He described how, over the years, he has learned to balance giving students freedom with holding them accountable so that they are able to complete a project and reflect on their work. He noted that, in some cases, the work students do in his classes is the first time they have worked hard on something and finished it, such as a painting that took them twelve hours to complete. He noted that this then gives students the confidence that they can take on other hard things.

Sam

Sam took the role of guidance counselor at Dolores Huerta School in the spring of 2021, just as the school was reopening its doors to students after nearly a year of being virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She shared that she worked quite closely with the school leader and that “if there was ever any kind of warning signs with any of the kids, I was one of the first to find out just so I could go in and make sure they were okay.” She was close with every student at Dolores Huerta and checked in with each student every morning with a text or a face-to-face greeting. She was often the go-between for students and teachers, responsible for notifying teachers if something was going on with a student, saying “Hey, if you're noticing any, like if this student is shutting down more or becoming more disruptive, let me know cuz there's a lot going on there.”

She also converted her office to a space where students felt safe to come talk to her about anything, with bean bags, art, and other elements of a calm, soothing environment. Students came to her regularly to vent, get advice, or just talk about what they were going through. She

shared that she appreciated that Amia respected that she couldn't always share everything that was going on with a student and trusted her as a professional to determine what students needed.

She also shared that she knew students were thriving when they had things they found joy in and activities and interests that made them happy. She also noted that she knew students were thriving when "they would find hobbies or interests that were healthy and that weren't them doing illegal activities that were putting themselves in danger." When asked what she's most proud of, she responded, "I'm proud mostly of the strong relationships I was able to build with those students."

Eli

Eli served as the Assistant Superintendent of Equity Services at the county office of education for over three years. In his role there, he was responsible for many things, including the direct supervision of Amia, the principal at Dolores Huerta county-run school. He was also responsible for helping to craft the county's equity statement and writing the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) for the school, which is "a tool for local educational agencies to set goals, plan actions, and leverage resources to meet those goals to improve student outcomes" (CDE website).

Self-described as "phenotypically, I'm 6'4", 300-pound White male, to the world, uh, I'm a model of class and privilege." He readily admits that when he was hired for the job, he had an "academic" understanding of what equity was, but two days into the job had an existential crisis because he looked in the mirror and realized he wasn't who he would associate with doing equity work. Fortunately, he had a friend who helped him understand that "equity work at its core is matching need with resource." He described how he was able to match needs with resources by knowing who within the system could support students. For example, he had a good working

relationship with the foster youth and homeless coordinator at the county office, so when students started at Dolores Huerta, he was able to make sure that students experiencing homelessness or foster youth had resources, such as housing and food. He also shared a story of the family of a student at Dolores Huerta calling him over the holiday break because their car broke down on the freeway, and they had nowhere to go. Eli used his connections at the county level to help the family find food and shelter.

Regarding his role within the system, Eli shared that "when you're looking at, what does it mean to lead a complex system? There's a significant return on investment in empowering and cultivating shared leadership where people have the right balance of agency to problem solve and support youth at varying levels." He also shared that he worked with the school principal on a weekly basis, helping to chart the course and "find a place of financial stability." He also reflected that Dolores Huerta was a place where students who had previously disconnected from school "found their freedom of expression and that safe place, and they were gold."

Dasan

Dasan started his career in education as a paraeducator several decades ago. He also served as a teacher, site principal, district leader, and now as the superintendent of the county. He first became involved with Dolores Huerta School in 2015 when he participated in the school improvement effort of this county-run community school. From the beginning, he and other leaders knew that they wanted Dolores Huerta to be a school where "students were made to feel valued." In reflecting on the goals of the school, he described a continuum of student growth that includes engagement, empowerment, and agency.

Dasan described his leadership style as a "constant commitment to continue to develop and to demonstrate value to others." He noted that "I have to lead by valuing our staff, valuing

the children and the families that we serve, and also continue to get better." Although he is the superintendent of a large county and has myriad responsibilities, Dasan is deeply committed to the success of Dolores Huerta School and has been from its conception. He frequently visits the school, acts as a thought partner to the school leader, and takes the time to get to know students on an individual level by eating meals with them and even playing games.

Summary of Participant Vignettes

This study investigated how people at different levels of the system both support and describe school leadership and also center equity in their own work. The vignettes describe each participant's unique take on equity and leading for equity, as well as their own place within the school ecosystem. Based on my reflections from the interviews and focus group, I distilled four main themes. These themes are reflective of my research questions and conceptual framework, which I describe in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I present key findings and analysis of my research through the lens of my research questions and theoretical framework. This study used semi-structured interviews and a focus group with a total of seven participants to examine how leaders center equity in their leadership of a county-run school and create the conditions for others to do the same. This study included one main research question: "How does leadership of a county-run school in Northern California center equity in their work?" as well as the following sub-questions:

1. How does leadership of a county-run school create the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity?
2. To what extent does leadership of a county-run school utilize aspects of continuous improvement to gauge the effectiveness of efforts to address inequities?
3. What conditions within the system make centering equity possible and what systemic barriers make it challenging?

This chapter shares my findings through five emergent themes based on participant responses and my conceptual framework.

Organization of Themes

I organized my themes according to my findings in the data and loosely aligned them with my conceptual framework, which posits that thoughts, actions, and focused efforts by leadership creates the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity by empowering students, building strong relationships, and fostering a culture of learning. This, in turn, results in a student-centered school culture in which students' academic, physical, social, and emotional needs are met. I began by analyzing how leaders who center equity think*;* I then analyzed what

leaders who center equity do, and last, where leaders who center equity focus their efforts. Finally, I analyzed how student-serving staff attend to the needs of the whole person, empower students, build strong relationships, and foster a culture of learning.

I also analyzed my findings through the lens of my third sub-research question, what conditions within the system make centering equity possible and what systemic barriers make it challenging? Within this theme, I explored the challenges brought on by the pandemic since this was an essential component of the context in which this study took place.

Theme 1: How Leaders Who Center Equity Think

All of the participants in the study reflected on what it means for leadership to center equity in their work. According to Amia, the school leader, "Equity was that everybody walked on that campus and felt they were valued, they were wanted and felt they could identify and they wanted to be there. So if nothing else, they finally had a school where they trusted the system." While this quote embodies how leaders who center equity think, it also begins to get at deeper issues related to equity, which have to do with trust, or a lack of trust, in a system that has historically failed students. Eli, a systems leader, described equity as a "commitment not only to providing additional opportunities and removing barriers." I will take up systemic challenges, such as "removing barriers," in my discussion in Chapter 7. The following themes illustrate how leaders think about equity.

Reflect and Collect Regular Input

An essential attribute of equity-centered leadership is that leaders are able to reflect on their own practice, including if their efforts are working and how their assumptions are factoring into their decision-making. Likewise, equity-centered leaders engage in ongoing learning. These

attributes were reflected by Dasan, a systems leader, who stated, “We had to check our assumptions and check our thinking against what the students were prioritizing.” Likewise, he shared the importance of understanding “where, from the perspective of those that we intend to serve, where we're falling short. Taking that into account to adjust our practice.” In describing Amia, the school leader, staff shared that “she's good with taking criticism, like she is good with listening to positive critique.” Amia demonstrated the ability to reflect on her practice and give and get feedback from her staff, and by doing so, she kept herself in check and also modeled for staff how to be reflective as a way to make systems more equitable.

Engaging in ongoing learning is also a key component of how leaders who center equity think. By reflecting on how their actions are or are not making the system more equitable, leaders are constantly checking themselves to make sure they are acting in the best interest of the most vulnerable students. In describing how she created the conditions for staff to support students, Amia shared that she “made experimenting celebrated.” Enabling staff to try things out without fear of repercussions from leadership creates the conditions for staff to adopt a continuous improvement mindset and “learn by doing” about what works for their students.

Whole Child/Person Approach

In addition to reflecting on their own assumptions and how these influence the way they lead, leadership at this school made a point to view students as “whole people” and to prioritize students’ mental and physical health and psychological and physical safety. As Biag (2021) describes, leading continuous improvement efforts through an equity lens “can encourage leaders to care for the whole child and take on a system-wide approach in dismantling the marginalizing structures and practices that prevent young people from accessing important learning opportunities.” (p. 101). Several examples of leaders and student-serving staff taking a whole

child/person approach to advancing equity appeared in the data. One area in which leaders and student-serving staff took a whole child/person approach was in thinking about the trauma that students had endured and how this trauma was impacting students' ability to focus and learn in school. For example, Dasan stated, "There's a tremendous amount of complex trauma that they've experienced." Likewise, Santi shared, "We, when some of our check-ins, I kind of reiterate like, if you're having a rough time today, it's okay to text me, to email me to come over and say, Hey, I'm not really feeling that today. And it's a hundred percent valid that you feel that." This notion of validating students' feelings and giving them permission to "not feel okay" is one way to prioritize students' mental health needs and ensure that students feel psychologically safe at school. Another example was a description of Amia's leadership style, which Dalia described as "This isn't all a big love fest, we need to educate, but let's keep in mind what this kid may have gone through this weekend . . . before we hit 'em with the books." Again, leadership prioritized students' needs by urging staff to think about what else is going on in students' lives before moving forward with academics. By centering Biag's third principle of equity-centered improvement, focus on the whole child, leaders and student-serving staff provided the students with a safe environment that enabled them to thrive.

Values

Several staff described how they perceived leadership valuing them. For example, Sam stated, "We were able to come to an agreement on and it felt like everyone's voice was really heard. And I think that's part of where [this school] thrives because everyone felt like their voice matter." Also, when describing leadership of the school, Dalia stated that the school leader used the metaphor of "hats," stating, "I'm going to look at this from a parent view, put the

administrator hat on me and say, look at it from my point of view" to illustrate how leadership considered different perspectives.

Empower Staff

Since collaborative leadership includes shared responsibility, it follows that leadership would give staff opportunities to center equity in ways that make sense to them. This theme came up in discussion with a systems leader, Eli, who stated, "when you're looking at what does it mean to lead a complex system, um, there's a significant return on investment in empowering and cultivating shared leadership where people have the right balance of agency to problem solve and support youth at varying levels." Student-serving staff also shared that leadership empowered them. Sam commented that "I think one of the things that our school also did a really good job on is we gave our teachers a lot of voice too." Dalia, a paraeducator, shared, "The leadership style that we were given, um, allowed us, connected us to people at [other county offices of education] and other programs that were established to help us get what we need so that we can best support those students and what they need." By providing staff with opportunities to take ownership of their teaching and professional learning, the school leader expanded the possibilities of the school and also empowered staff to take ownership of centering equity in ways that made sense to them.

Theme 2: What Leaders Who Center Equity Do

The section below describes what leaders do to center equity in their work. I organized the sub-sections according to new themes that came up in the data as well as the themes in my codebook, which are aligned with my framework.

Interrupt Oppressive Structures, Norms and Processes

An essential component of educational equity is interrupting historic systems of oppression (Equity Collaborative, n.d.). Along these lines, Amia, the school leader, shared, "Dismantling would be kind of putting the adopted old curriculum aside and we could create what we need and bring in art and do all that." She also shared that "we really put the kid first and the, and the curriculum secondary, which in other conversations that would be frowned upon." Additionally, Amia shared that to her, centering equity meant "continuously fighting the business office structure." She noted repeatedly that it took funding to provide the services that students needed, and the business office made it difficult for her to do this by putting restrictions on the ways in which she could use funding. She also shared that equity meant "asking the hard questions, breaking the rules, and pushing back if we had to" because it was really all about getting kids what they needed.

Equity-Centered Goals

Systemwide goals that are centered in equity and clearly communicate the purpose of the work came up in several of the interviews as well as the documents that I reviewed. Regarding communicating the why for centering equity, Dasan, a systems leader, shared that "the concentration of students, um, who by traditional standards have multiple, multiple risk factors, and our staff is very committed to seeing that, as opposed to shying away from that or somehow pretending as though that isn't part of our charge." He also shared that they have "developed indicators for success for the school, and also make a point of helping students think about their place in the community and to think about ways to change policy and outcomes." When asked to describe what indicators for success for the school were and how often they measured progress

toward these indicators, Eli shared that they didn't collect and analyze data as often as they should have in order to be able to measure progress toward goals.

Regarding how leaders used continuous improvement to advance equity-centered goals, Eli, a systems leader, shared that the theory of improvement was to "provide more social emotional support and attendance will improve." However, Eli noted that using continuous improvement tools and methodologies was challenging due to the small number of students at the school and the external factors that influenced the success of continuous improvement endeavors. Specifically, Eli shared, "When you've got less than a hundred kids, pull on any one string, the whole thing unravels." Regarding external factors that made it difficult for continuous improvement efforts to be effective, Eli shared, "It's not that simple. We need to have more robust social–emotional support . . . we need to have access to countywide services . . . there just wasn't a good linear line." External factors, such as fluctuating attendance and access to countywide services, made it challenging for systems leaders to utilize traditional continuous improvement tools and methodologies to advance equity.

Eli also referred to their equity statement, which states that "we believe equity is achieved when the full range of learning opportunities is accessible and meaningful to every student, and when every student feels a sense of connectedness and belonging at school." It is telling that the equity statement includes students feeling a sense of connectedness and belonging at school since this is also reflected in how staff define success for students. Likewise, the equity statement reads, "Students flourish when educators develop strong relationships with students and learn about and build upon their strengths." The emphasis on strong relationships and building on strengths is part of how this system defines equity. Regarding systemwide goals, the LCAP includes the following goal:

> Develop and implement a multi-tiered system of support in collaboration with partner agencies and families that improves student social-emotional health and overall well-being. The strategies implemented as a part of this system of support will be rooted in: Student Agency and Empowerment; Family and Community Engagement; and Restorative Practices.

This equity-centered goal acknowledges the importance of addressing the needs of the whole person and grounds teaching practices in developing student agency and empowerment.

Culture of Love

One of the most frequently occurring themes in the interviews and focus groups was how the school leader, Amia, created and modeled a culture of love. Dasan, the county superintendent, described Amia as "her genius was her heart." Likewise, Amia described herself as "I have no ego in the game. I just have a lot of heart in the game." When describing a time when she modeled a culture of love, Amia shared, "They'd walk up and say, can I have a hug? And they would just tuck in and hold on tight sometimes and I'd be like, oh you poor baby. Well you haven't been hugged in a while." In reflecting on her leadership, she stated, "I can't say I did any one thing except love 'em. Just truly put my heart out there." Amia showed students and staff that she genuinely cared about them, which created a culture of love.

As a result of modeling and creating a culture of love, student-serving staff were open to treating each other with love and kindness. Santi shared that "we are each so very different from one another and our love and respect for each other is unquestioned." Additionally, Sam, the guidance counselor, shared that "We will always care about each other. And I think that was such a key truth that we all really held. It wasn't something that was just verbalized of like, we care about each other. Like we all really did, students and staff included." By creating and

modeling a culture of love, the leader created the conditions for staff to create and model a culture of love, which created a space for students to thrive.

Culture of Respect

In addition to creating and modeling a culture of love, leadership also created and modeled a culture of respect, honor, and vulnerability. When describing the students, Amia shared, “They knew to call, they knew to ask for help, but they never took advantage of it. There was just that respect.” She also shared, “I didn't see tagging, I didn't see trash on the ground. They took pride in being there.” According to Amia, students showed respect for both her and the school community. She also shared about being honest with students by saying, “I would be very honest with the kids and say, I don’t live your life.” By acknowledging that students may be experiencing challenges that she didn’t understand, Amia modeled respecting students’ unique circumstances.

Participants also shared that they felt safe to be vulnerable with one another. Dalia stated, “I have cried on all three of their shoulders. They've cried on mine, but we laugh a lot.” Likewise, Dalia acknowledged that

> There is no cookie cut solution here. You really have to be creative. You have to listen before you speak. You can't just show up and we're gonna do this. You kind of have to take the temperature of the room. And, Amia did that consistently and, and, and that became just kind of normalized on campus.

Santi shared that Amia created an “open culture where we felt it was so fluid and there were no hindrances.” Santi went on to reflect that “the culture that was created with Amia at the helm. I think the transparency, the accessibility that’s what was modeled and that is something I think is very valuable to me.” Santi also shared that, because of the conditions that Amia created,

“we feel like we can be honest with the kids.” Likewise, Santi shared that “she made me feel comfortable in whatever I’m feeling. I pass it on to the students—transparency and honesty—that’s the environment that was set for me anyway.” Leadership created and modeled respect, honesty, and vulnerability, which created the conditions for staff to do the same for and with students.

Leader as Problem-Solver

One notion that came up in the interviews and the focus groups was that an effective leader is one who often acts as a problem-solver and facilitates problem-solving amongst her staff. Amia was described by her staff as a “solutions-based leader” who “works towards a resolution.” One staff member stated that Amia “knows the students and staff as well as she does was really helpful and always looking, um, like to us about being solution based, always looking for what's best.” As the leader of the school, Amia was constantly working with both staff and students to solve problems while maintaining a culture of respect and honesty.

Center Students’ Needs

Several of the participants emphasized that Amia made it clear that the work was about students, not adults, and that students’ needs should be the top priority. In describing how she created the conditions for staff to center equity, Amia stated that she “made it a very clear expectation to the adults that it wasn't about them, it was about the kids.” Another piece of this was resolving issues amongst staff away from students so that students would not witness discord amongst staff members. Amia shared that she told her staff, "It's okay to have an off day, but don't blame the kids for it.” Likewise, Eli, a systems leader, described this as “let's not have the adults be the roadblock for what kids need . . . when you're talking about leading for equity . .

. you will know if an organization's committed to equity by how the adults in the system behave." Ramiro, a teacher, described how Amia centered students' needs:

> I think we're presented with problems that I think are very specific to our school, to our students, to our population. And so you have to, in a sense, be creative all the time in solving problems. And what I really appreciated with Amia was that it was always centered around the student. But it was also centered around us.

Staff described Amia as someone who was able to creatively solve problems while at the same time centering the needs of both students and staff.

Connect Students With Essential Services

Along these lines, a core component of leadership is connecting students and families with essential services outside of school. Several staff members mentioned that centering equity meant doing things like providing students with food or shelter when they realized that students didn't have access to such things. Eli, a systems leader, stated,

> We got a call from a family, broke down on the Causeway, and they're homeless. Okay, here's what we need to do, hotel, gas cards. What do we need to do? How do we make sure they're safe and we got it done? Why is that important? Because we are able to, because at that level, you're connected with so many different people.

Leaders were able to leverage their connections "with so many different people" to help students and families get access to essential services. Staff also described how they connected students with essential services, such as when Sam shared, "whether that's like trying to help with housing or food stamps or anything that we could do to just take some of the stressors off." Leaders and staff understood the importance of connecting students with the services they needed as a way to combat systemic oppression and advance equity.

Theme 3: Where Leaders Who Center Equity Focus Their Efforts

A third component of equity-centered leadership is where leaders focus their efforts. According to Dixon and Eddy-Spicer's framework for district-level leadership of continuous improvement, successful leaders of continuous improvement efforts focus their efforts on promoting organizational alignment and building infrastructure to support improvement (Dixon and Eddy-Spicer, 2019). This study did not surface examples of how leaders did either of these things. What it did surface, however, were components of equity-centered leadership that align with the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine's environmental features that promote positive youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002), which include physical and physiological safety, supportive relationships, and opportunities to belong, amongst other things. Likewise, leaders in this study focused their efforts on key components of a whole child/person approach, such as positive developmental relationships; environments filled with safety and belonging; rich learning experiences and knowledge development; development of skills, habits, and mindsets; and integrated support systems (Breaking Barriers et al., 2022). Because a core tenet of equity-centered continuous improvement is taking a whole child/person approach (Biag, 2019), leaders and student-serving staff in this study did focus their efforts in ways that exemplify equity-centered continuous improvement, even if they did not focus on areas of traditional leadership for continuous improvement efforts, such as promoting organizational alignment and building infrastructure to support improvement.

Build Strong Relationships

This code initially focused on leveraging relationships, but I realized in coding the data that leaders didn't leverage relationships as much as they built strong relationships. Amia described the way she supported staff as "having those gentle conversations about what they're

teaching and their fresh frustrations," demonstrating how she supported staff lovingly as opposed to how some leaders might approach giving staff feedback. Amia also described the way she supported staff to center equity in ways that made sense to them:

> The freedom for . . . teachers to be able, you've been given, you've been allowed by your admin to pivot. Like, you'll have a lesson plan completely made up and a kid will say something to you in the morning . . . I've watched this so many times, and all of a sudden you're over redoing your whole prompter, your, your question of the day prompt.

Because Amia gave staff the freedom to make decisions in the moment about what students needed, staff were empowered to modify lessons to meet students' needs. Staff also shared that they "felt heard with [their] questions and, and she took the time to explain." Amia centered relationships when she took the time to listen to questions and explain things to staff instead of brushing them aside as she could have done.

Support Vulnerable Students

A core component of equity is centering the needs of the most vulnerable students. Dasan, a systems leader, described how Dolores Huerta School staff centered students' needs by describing how Amia and staff would "resolve any differences that are there . . . for the benefit of our students." This was described by several staff as acknowledging the challenges that students were facing in their lives and giving students and staff permission to take breaks as needed as a result of these challenges. Sam, the guidance counselor, described this as, "I would say, Hey, if you're noticing any, like if this student is shutting down more or becoming more disruptive, let me know cuz there's a lot going on there." Sam communicated with teachers and leadership when students were especially vulnerable. Along these lines, Amia shared that "for the most needy, it was not academic. It was getting them to feel safe." Several staff described

students' experiences at this school as the “last house on the block,” which led them to believe that they needed to center students’ needs before they left school and the support system that came with it.

Students Feel Valued, Connected, and Safe

Along the lines of “getting students to feel safe,” as Amia described the purpose of school for the most needy, and several staff described how they focused on the needs of the whole person so that all students feel valued, connected, and safe. Sam described how she “was able to really build those relationships with them and their families. I think that was the important piece too, of really supporting them as a whole person and not just a student on campus.” When Amia reflected on how she and the staff supported students, she shared, “We took care of their whole student. We took care of their heart.” She also described how she encouraged staff to “stay in tune with their moods and who they were as people” and to “give them the freedom to opt out when they needed a break.” In describing how staff centered students' social and emotional needs, Amia shared that “This isn't all a big love fest, we need to educate, but let's keep in mind what this kid may have gone through this weekend before we hit 'em with the books.” As a school leader, Amia was balancing supporting students to feel valued, connected, and safe with the broader aim of educating students and preparing them for college or careers.

Make Teaching and Learning Relevant to Students’ Lives

Making teaching and learning relevant to students’ lives is well recognized as an effective strategy for engaging students in academic content (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Amia described this:

> So that's where we went into the reading for relevance and bought every title they had and spent a lot of PD time on how to teach a novel. And really, you don't teach a novel. How do you appreciate a novel so that you instill in them that love of reading and love of learning and getting them to read topics that they're not comfortable with maybe. You know, *The Hate You Give* talks about, you know, police violence.

In addition to finding books that were relevant to students' lives, the school also offers an arts program that is clearly centered in students' interests, and moreover, serves to empower students and give them agency. When describing the arts program, Ramiro stated that "My goal is for each student to kind of create a project that they're interested in." Likewise, he shared that the work "it's theirs. It's just theirs. And they take ownership of it and they're proud of it." He shared, "So we have a student that wants to do a commercial [because] she wants to do lashes, and so we're writing a script for a commercial that will be shooting. And so that will be tied into her English credits." Instead of starting with the curriculum and making students adjust accordingly, staff started with students' interests and adjusted the curriculum to fit instead.

Theme 4: Student-Serving Staff Center Equity

As illustrated by my conceptual framework for equity-centered leadership, the previous three themes, how leaders who center equity think, what leaders who center equity do, and where leaders focus their efforts, create the conditions for all student-serving staff to center equity. The following theme explores more specifically how staff center equity by empowering students, building strong relationships, and fostering a culture of learning.

Empower Students

The theme of empowering students came up in almost every interview I conducted. Dasan, a systems leader, spoke about "A continuum of student growth… from engagement, to empowerment, to agency has been a big part of our process and undergirds a lot of the decisions that we've made [at the school]." Likewise, Sam, the guidance counselor, shared that "We all kind of tried to meet the kids at their level a lot of the time and really encouraged them to voice when they disagreed with us." Santi, a teacher, described how she knew students were thriving and empowered as the following: "Most of the times they're showing up for you first. And then slowly as they take ownership of their own success, they show up for themselves". Another teacher, Ramiro, described how, when students are creating art, "in that process they're able to problem solve and experiment and, and it's, they're chasing their own, their own creativity." In discussing what this looked like in the classroom, Dalia, a paraeducator, remarked, "if you give them that agency and that freedom, the freedom…they'll do it. They will absolutely, absolutely do it." Staff repeatedly described situations in which they empowered students to take agency over their own lives and saw positive results.

Build Strong Relationships

In addition to empowering students, staff spoke repeatedly about the importance of strong relationships in contributing to student success. Eli, a systems leader, described the importance of relationships as, "in working with county populations, is typically, um, youth have a person, that one person, and one of the key things in leadership is helping them plug in with that one person they resonate with." Likewise, Sam, the guidance counselor, shared that "I'm proud mostly of the strong relationships I was able to build with those students" as well as, "I think building those relationships and opening those doors and saying like, this isn't just four years of

your life. Like Dolores Huerta is kind of forever. Like we will be here." According to Sam, the relationships that students formed at the school were so strong that it is viewed as "forever." Sam also shared that success wasn't necessarily about academics but instead the building of strong relationships when she stated:

> Even if they were coming to school but weren't really meeting academic expectations, they were still building those relationships. They were still showing up, they were still, you know, emotionally taking care of themselves. And that was when I really viewed them as thriving.

Additionally, Santi, a teacher, commented on how strong relationships are the foundation on which other components are built, sharing, "building relationships on those small things… and they lead to something bigger." Likewise, Dalia, a paraeducator, shared that "build the relationship and then they're willing to complete not just one assignment, but maybe 10 of those for you because they're doing it for you." Additionally, Santi, a teacher, made a connection between strong relationships and equity, stating, "Building the relationships, I think brings everybody at the level where they are served equally and get what they need. It speaks to their individual needs." Several staff members spoke to the integral role that relationships played at Dolores Huerta School.

Culture of Learning

Staff spoke in different but consistent ways about how leadership created the conditions for them to foster a culture of learning. Dalia, the paraeducator, described how leadership was accessible, "had an open-door policy" and helped her "see the population for who they are and, and helped guide me to be where my students needed me to be." Amia supported Dalia, which then enabled Dalia to create a culture of learning that met her students' needs. Santi also spoke

about how leadership supported her to foster a culture of learning when Amia helped her understand different ways that she could support students to get their emotional needs met so that they could engage in academics. Santi shared that when students seemed disengaged, she would "pull them aside and nonchalantly ask them, how are you doing? we're working on this today…. giving them choices…. An acknowledgment that I see that you are having a hard time today. In this nontraditional setting, staff often used non-traditional approaches to creating a culture of learning that entailed tailoring learning experiences not only to students' unique interests but also to each student's ability to engage with academics at any given time. Santi also shared that she told students, "We will struggle, we will have pain. And that's the beauty of being alive" and "I'm glad you're here. It is so nice to see you, but today is your struggling day. Just sit with it. It's okay. Paint or draw or just sit or breathe." By being flexible and giving students space, students were able to take a moment for themselves before they engaged in the academic work of school.

Theme 5: Challenges and Systemic Barriers

In addition to sharing about the components of success and how leadership helped to create the conditions for student success, interviewees also shared openly about challenges and barriers to improving student outcomes.

Challenges

Staff spoke often of the challenges of working with students who had experienced so much trauma in their short lives. Amia shared that "You gotta know going into it that you're gonna love them, but be prepared, they're gonna break your heart too." She also spoke about a favorite student of hers who:

> Had trauma beyond belief . . . she had a child, in foster care, ended up addicted. We got her clean, got her over the finish line, and then she overdosed and died three weeks after graduation. And that feeling of, what did we miss?... And I was not equipped for that.

The toll of losing loved ones and students was indeed a challenge for Amia. She also shared about the challenges of "fighting the emotional piece. Yeah. The trauma piece, the academic piece." Trying to address students' emotional needs and use trauma-informed practices while also pushing academics created tension for several staff within the school.

It is worth noting that after six years of leading the school "with nothing but love," Amia, the school leader, left in the summer of 2022. She shared that:

> It was really just kind of being that mama bear . . .even for them . . .so that they felt safe. And that's what I think at the end, when I left, I felt like I was struggling providing for them. I couldn't, I couldn't be that person for everybody.

The pressure of making all of the staff and students feel safe in an often precarious and unpredictable environment ultimately contributed to Amia stepping down from her position as leader.

Staff also shared about some of the challenges that arose around collaborating to support students. Sam, the guidance counselor, shared that "I did have some that were like, nope, they don't need to know that it's anything big. Like, no, I don't really want them to know a lot. So that kind of limited my collaboration." Due to privacy constraints, Sam was limited in her ability to share with other staff about challenges that students were experiencing, which made it difficult for other staff to understand where students were coming from.

Systemic Barriers

In addition to challenges stemming from various relational dynamics, participants also shared about challenges that arose from within the system in which they worked. Amia shared about the challenges of getting funding for basic necessities, such as food and clothes, sharing, “I shouldn't have to fight to buy my kid sweatshirt. I shouldn't be putting it on my Visa card cuz I don't wanna deal with a purchase order and eight weeks later.” She also recounted that she was “continuously fighting the business office structure.” Amia felt like she had no choice but to pay for things with her own money and also that she was constantly at odds with “the system” in the form of the business office, which wore her down over time.

Other systems leaders shared about systemic barriers, such as system design and funding requirements. Eli, a systems leader, shared that from his perspective, “the system is not designed to serve certain students. And that’s why kids disengage with our system.” Eli made the connection between a system that was not designed to serve the needs of students who had endured a great deal of trauma and students disengaging with school.

Staff also shared that funding and reporting requirements were a huge hindrance to their ability to serve students’ needs. Sam, the guidance counselor whose position was funded by a short-term grant, reported that:

> I think that's kind of what's hard about all these grants are amazing with mental health, but when they start then putting the stipulation of you're gonna need to fund yourself in the future, figure out how to fund yourself, it makes it a lot harder to then stay focused just on the students.

As a guidance counselor at Dolores Huerta, Sam was not employed by the school but instead by an external partner. Thus, she struggled with funding and having to spend countless hours

completing paperwork. She also shared that “we're having to do all this billing. It has to look a certain way. We have to have all these forms. And as a system that makes it very challenging when you want to just support students where they're at.” Amia, the school leader, shared a similar story regarding Sam’s position, stating that she “felt it was just an over burden in terms of what she had to do in data and paperwork and reports and started missing days of work cuz she had to get their paperwork in. And I'm like, but you're here to serve kids, not do paperwork.” Because Sam was employed by an external partner but was working within the school, tension arose between Sam’s obligations to her employer and the students and staff at Dolores Huerta. Amia also shared that there was a lack of systemic support for leaders of county-run schools, which she experienced as a “lonely place to be.” As a leader, Amia was fighting the business structure at the funding while also feeling unsupported in her position.

The Pandemic

The pandemic was undeniably a challenge to the school’s ability to center students’ needs. Several staff spoke about how the pandemic put a pause on the relationship-centered programs that they had built to meet students' needs. Eli, a systems leader, shared, “We're seeing marked improvement, but then again, with Covid and everything else during my tenure, you're building that on shifting sand.” Likewise, Sam shared that when counseling moved to virtual, she was no longer able to make the same connections with students and build strong relationships. She shared that “I was just some random person on the screen. Why would they trust me?” Sam recognized that it was challenging for students to trust and build relationships with her over Zoom. Sam also spoke about the community that had been built on campus was not the same during the pandemic. She shared:

> I think having everyone on our campus made such a big difference. So we had a foster and homeless youth outreach specialist who used to be on our campus at least once a week. And then when that position became more remote and they weren't on our campus as much, I noticed a huge decline in the number of students who were comfortable with that like support because they didn't know who that person was and there wasn't that relationship.

The shift during the pandemic to virtual learning led to a decline in the quality of the relationships between students and adults.

Amia also shared that the pandemic made it difficult for her to do the side of her job that she loved most - nurturing students and staff. She shared that "the pandemic took all of that nurturing piece away, and I think that's, that's gonna be real hard to get that rhythm back." She went on to state, "They were never quite the same. Plus you had the mask, you weren't hugging them." For a community that was built on love, relationships, and strong connections with students, the pandemic had a serious impact on how the leader was able to create the conditions for staff to meet students' needs. This was also evident from the documents analyzed, including the LCAP, which stated:

> A core of our support strategy is connecting students with caring adults who build a rapport with our students. When COVID occurred in March, many of these in-person supports were placed on hold as our external service providers needed time to pivot to a virtual platform. Even on a virtual platform, many of our students struggled to maintain the same level of connection with the support providers as they navigated multiple challenges, such as food and housing insecurity, access to learning spaces, and family

> care needs. These challenges led to less frequent points of contact with our youth and decreased participation in the supports designed in this goal (LCAP p. 16).

The pandemic made it very challenging for staff to meet goals that were predicated on strong relationships with students.

Summary of Major Findings

The findings presented in this chapter explore how leaders who center equity think, what leaders who center equity do, and where leaders who center equity focus their efforts, which creates the conditions for all student-serving staff center equity by empowering students, building strong relationships, and fostering a culture of learning. A cross-cutting theme across all of these areas was a whole-person approach to education that centers relationships. This section \ surfaced new themes that were not in my original codebook, such as leader as problem solver and leading from the heart. It also highlighted how leaders anchor their thoughts, actions, and focus areas in core values of respect and empowerment, which in turn enable student-serving staff to anchor their work with students in these same core values. This chapter also explored the challenges that participants encountered, including empathic distress, burdensome paperwork, and virtual learning as a result of the pandemic.

Chapter 7 CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how leaders of a county-run school in Northern California center equity and create the conditions for others to do the same. It also explored how leaders and student-serving staff focus on the needs of the whole person as a way to center equity, as well as the successes and barriers that leaders and student-serving staff encounter in doing this work. Drawing on research by Kania et al. (2018), which posits that systems transformation is made possible by strong leaders who build trust and maintain strong relationships, and this study demonstrated that leaders who built strong relationships with both staff and students saw improvements not only in students' academic performance but also (and perhaps more importantly) in students' well-being. Building on a whole child/person approach, which emphasizes the importance of attending to students' physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development (Slade & Griffith, 2013), this study explored how leaders and student-serving staff attended not only to students' academic success, but also to students' physical, social, and emotional needs. Likewise, this study confirmed prior research by Jones (2019), which purported that leaders who center equity "place a firm emphasis on valuing all pupils and making them feel part of the school 'family' " (p. 3), as leaders in this study demonstrated repeatedly how they equated equity to connecting with students and making them feel safe and loved, as one would with their own family. This study also examined how leaders utilized core tenets of equity-centered continuous improvement, which, according to Biag (2021), include practicing critical self-reflection, promoting inclusion, and taking a whole-child approach. Finally, this study examined the systemic challenges to advancing equity and demonstrated that

certain systemic structures make it difficult for leaders to advance equity due to external constraints.

Summary of the Study

This study used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to explore how leaders and student-serving staff center equity in their work at Dolores Huerta county-run school. Dolores Huerta school is a small, suburban high school in Northern California in which students are all on formal or informal probation. The semi-structured nature of the interviews and focus groups allowed participants to share anecdotes that illustrated the points they were making and, in the focus groups, to build on others' ideas. The seven participants in this study were from a range of roles within the school system, including a county superintendent, a (former) county assistant superintendent of equity services, a (former) school site leader, a (former) guidance counselor, a paraeducator, and two teachers.

This study explored how leaders center equity in their work and used my conceptual framework for equity-centered leadership as its guide. Building on the framework, it explored how certain ways of thinking, actions, and areas of focus by leadership created the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity by empowering students, building strong relationships, and fostering a culture of learning. To understand how leadership centered equity in their work and created the conditions for student-serving staff to do the same, the study focused on one primary research question: "How does leadership of a county-run school in Northern California center equity?" and three sub-questions

1. How does leadership of a county-run school create the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity?
2. To what extent does leadership of a county-run school utilize aspects of

continuous improvement to gauge the effectiveness of efforts to address inequities?

3. What conditions within the system make centering equity possible and what systemic barriers make it challenging?

Discussion of the Findings

To explore how leaders of a county-run school in Northern California center equity in their work and create the conditions for student-serving staff to do the same, I used my main research question as well as my sub-questions to guide my analysis. This discussion analyzes my findings as they relate to my research questions and through the lens of my conceptual framework. I begin by discussing my findings of my primary research question, "How does leadership of a county-run school in Northern California center equity?" I then explore the sub-research question, "To what extent does leadership of a county community school utilize aspects of continuous improvement to gauge the effectiveness of efforts to address inequities?" Next, I explore an additional sub-research question, "How does leadership of a county-run school create the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity?" Finally, I address the sub-research question, "What conditions within the system make centering equity possible and what systemic barriers make it challenging?" by discussing the enabling conditions as well as the barriers that leaders and student-serving staff faced in centering equity in their work.

How Leadership of a County-Run School in Northern California Centers Equity in Their Work

My primary research question "How does leadership of a county-run school in Northern California center equity?" includes several dimensions of equity-centered leadership. I used the

domains within my conceptual framework of how leaders who center equity think, what leaders who center equity do, and where leaders who center equity focus their efforts to answer this research question. This study surfaced several practices that are aligned with well-established equity-oriented practices related to what leaders who center equity do.

As Biag (2019) writes in his description of equity-centered continuous improvement practices, equity-centered continuous improvement seeks to not only disrupt oppressive practices but, more importantly, to empower historically marginalized students to meet their full potential (Biag, 2019). To illustrate this, my conceptual framework articulates that leaders who center equity systematically interrupt oppressive structures, norms, and processes and create an inclusive school culture. Leaders at Dolores Huerta School gave numerous examples of how they engage in the systematic interruption of oppressive structures. As Amia, the school leader, described, this often entailed putting students' needs before districtwide or statewide mandates or adopted curricula. According to Amia, “We really put the kid first, and the curriculum secondary, which in some conversations would be frowned upon.” In this case, the oppressive structures were the curriculum that was adopted by entities external to the school and was oppressive in that it did not inspire students but instead required them to engage in rote tasks that they found boring. Additionally, Amia described how sometimes, as a leader, she had to “ask the hard questions, break the rules, and push back if we had to.” Amia and others at Dolores Huerta systematically interrupted oppressive structures, norms, and processes by always asking first, “What do our kids need?” and starting there instead of asking, “What does the system require of us?” Leaders and staff centered equity by regularly putting students’ needs first. They interrupted oppressive practices by breaking rules that they found were not in service of students’ growth.

Additionally, leaders in this study centered equity by questioning practices that could potentially harm trust and relationships, such as data collection and analysis. Datnow and Park (2018) articulate concerns about universal data use that may inadvertently impact the trust and relationships between and amongst students, families, and schools (Datnow & Park, 2018). While Amia openly shared that she and her staff didn't "look at [test score] data as much as they should have, "she was constantly collecting qualitative data on the school environment. Amia centered equity by focusing on ensuring that students felt safe and supported, which was essential, especially for the most vulnerable students. Amia chose to center the needs of the whole person over systemic needs for academic data. She was using alternative forms of assessment; instead of looking at ELA or math data, she looked at "tone and body language. And are they including everybody when they walk in the door? Some of those non-measurable gut things. Do they seem happy?" Amia did not apply traditional continuous improvement methodologies, such as regularly analyzing quantifiable data. However, she did collect data on how well staff were centering the needs of the whole person daily.

Leaders who center equity take a whole child/person approach, which means that all students feel valued, connected, and safe. According to the *Integrated Care Field Guide* (Breaking Barriers et al., 2022), key elements of taking a whole child/person approach include positive developmental relationships; environments filled with safety and belonging; rich learning experiences and knowledge development; development of skills, habits, and mindsets; and integrated support systems. Amia took a whole child/person approach by first thinking about the role of relationships and creating a school environment filled with safety and belonging and then thinking about what data she could collect that would be in service of students.

According to Nasir et al. (2021), to learn, students must feel safe and socially connected to others (Nasir et al., 2021). Feeling safe and connected to others is also part of a whole child/person framework, which entails ensuring that each student is "healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged" (Wise & Saddiqi, 2022, p. 3). Participants in this study gave many examples of how they made students feel valued, connected, and safe. For example, Sam, the guidance counselor, shared that "we would spend time with them, not necessarily just professionally, but we would hang out with them just kind of like playing handball or ping pong or whatever it is they were doing . . . I think that just making it a safe kind of fun space." Amia, the site leader, also shared that from her perspective, the reason the school was successful was "just that relationship that we created for kids to feel safe for the first time." Additionally, Amia shared that "I am most proud that kids felt safe. Kids graduated when they were told they never would." Because leadership focused efforts on making students feel safe, valued, and connected, students were then able to thrive academically and graduate against great odds.

Equity-centered leaders also create and model a culture of love, respect, honor, and vulnerability. Amia and others also worked diligently to create an inclusive culture. For instance, she and several other staff described how often they would eat lunch with students and include them in their conversations. Amia and others intentionally shifted the school culture from one that did not welcome all students and was, therefore, oppressive to one that disrupted patterns of inequality by centering students' needs. As Nasir et al. (2021) describe, educators and administrators alike must engage in continual emotional and intellectual work to create a school culture in which all students feel valued, connected, and safe (Nasir et al., 2021). All of the participants in this study described the subtle everyday ways in which they created such a

culture. By creating an open and inviting school culture, leaders and student-serving staff set up the conditions for students to thrive.

This study found myriad examples of how leaders' focus on relationships and efforts to empower staff helped advance equity. Notably, my original framework included this subdomain within "what leaders who center equity do" and did not include empowering staff. However, several examples of how leadership empower staff emerged as I was analyzing my data, which caused me to modify this domain to its current iteration. Regarding "building strong relationships," Kania et al. (2018) emphasize that developing deep trust, which results from strong relationships, is critical to systems transformation. Additionally, Harris and Jones (2019) include building positive relationships as one of the key components of leading for equity. Throughout my interviews and focus group, the importance of strong relationships came up repeatedly. For example, Sam shared that "I'm proud mostly of the strong relationships I was able to build with those students." Likewise, when asked how she centered equity, Amia shared, "I think it's just that relationship that we created for kids to feel safe for the first time." Also, Santi noted that "building relationships on those small things…they lead to something bigger." The data confirmed that, according to participants in this study, strong relationships are paramount in making school systems more equitable because when students form strong relationships with adults, they are better positioned to learn and thrive.

Empowering staff is also a key component of how leaders center equity in their work. This study uses a definition of leadership that is built on collaboration because collaborative leadership entails a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility (Maier & Niebuhr, 2021). However, leaders within this study did more than share responsibility, they empowered student-serving staff, including teachers, paraeducators, and guidance

counselors, to make decisions about students' needs that were centered in equity. In the book *Empowering Teachers: What Successful Principals Do,* Blase (2001) describes empowering teachers as including, amongst other things, teacher involvement in school governance, granting new respect to teachers and improving their work conditions, and increasing teacher autonomy and professionalism (Blase 2001, citing Carnegie Forum, 1986). Likewise, Blase credits Bolin (1989) as defining teacher empowerment as "investing in teachers the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and the right to exercise professional judgment about the content of the curriculum and instruction" (p. 11). Leadership at Dolores Huerta exemplified this definition of empowering staff. For example, Eli shared, "What does it mean to lead a complex system? There's a significant return on investment in empowering and cultivating shared leadership where people have the right balance of agency to problem solve and support youth at varying levels." As a systems leader, Eli recognized the need for distributed leadership in which school leaders, teachers, paraprofessionals, and guidance counselors were all empowered to support students in ways that made sense to them. Likewise, Sam shared that "one of the things that our school also did a really good job on is we gave our teachers a lot of voice too." Sam describes how, from her perspective as a guidance counselor, she observed that leadership excelled at empowering teachers by giving them a voice. Likewise, Amia shared that, as a leader, she knew that "I had to empower my teachers . . . As long as the results are what they are, do it how you need to do it." Amia exemplified investing in teachers the right to exercise professional judgment within their classrooms because she was confident that staff were centering students in their decisions. By empowering student-serving staff, leadership advanced equity because student-serving staff had the support that they needed to see and know each student as an individual, with specific assets and needs, in ways that made sense to them.

Leaders who center equity solve problems, center students' needs in all work, and connect students with essential services. Leaders in this study centered equity by focusing their efforts on the needs of the most vulnerable students. This component is an essential part of making education systems more equitable since equity entails "determining and offering whatever is necessary for every student to thrive socially and emotionally" (Villani, 2020, p. 1). Interestingly, most of the students at this school could be considered "the most vulnerable" relative to their peers since they have often not had success with traditional school systems and are considered "at-risk" of not graduating from high school. Participants in this study repeatedly gave examples of focusing their efforts on the needs of the most vulnerable students, evident by statements such as "there's a tremendous amount of trauma that [the students] are carrying" and "they helped us get what we needed so that we can best support those students and what they need, because at the end of the day, that was what's most important." The emphasis on "what's most important" in concert with "getting these students what they need" exemplifies how leaders focus their efforts on the needs of the most vulnerable students, which is a core component of educational equity.

One of the core findings of this study was that, in addition to solving problems and centering students in all work, another key component of equity-centered leaders at a county-run school was to connect students with essential services. This facet was not originally included in my framework, but upon analyzing my findings, I realized that sometimes schools cannot provide all the services that students need, so a core task of leaders is to connect students and families with services external to the school that will enable students to thrive in school. A systems leader described connecting a family with the food and shelter they needed when their car broke down, accessing essential services that were available within the county but that might

not have been known to families without leaders to connect them. Much was written about the role of leaders in connecting students with essential services during the pandemic since this became an essential role of schools overnight (Price & Mansfield, 2021). However, educators who took a whole child/person approach knew long before the pandemic that students' basic needs must be met in order for students to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, C. M., 2018). Writing in 1943, Maslow developed a framework that describes how students' physiological needs, such as food, water, warmth, and rest (also referred to as "basic needs"), must be met in order for students to achieve their full potential. When leaders work to meet students' basic needs, they are providing the foundation for students to be able to reach their full potential. School and systems leaders both described how often students would "come to school on Monday, and the last thing they had eaten was lunch at school on the Friday before." Leaders and student-serving staff described how they made sure students were fed on a regular basis. Leaders centered students' "basic needs" (Maslow, 1943), such as food and shelter. Both leaders and student-serving staff often bought students food out of their own pockets, which is an issue I will take up in my discussion of challenges and systemic barriers. In sum, leaders centered equity by taking a whole child/person approach that builds on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, ensuring that students' basic needs were met and that they had access to essential services, such as housing and food.

Finally, leaders centered equity in their work by ensuring that teaching and learning were relevant to students' lives. Initially, my framework included "relentlessly focus on improving teaching and learning" and did not include making teaching and learning relevant to students' lives. However, several participants in the study gave examples of how important it was that what students were learning in school was relevant to their lives, so I added "make learning

relevant to students' lives" to the framework. The notion of culturally relevant pedagogy, first coined by Ladson-Billings in 1995, posits that teachers should be inclusive of the cultural backgrounds of students in order to be effective facilitators of learning. (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Participants in this study described how they would often pivot in the moment to make lessons relevant to students' lives, or if they learned about a topic that students were interested in, they would rewrite their lesson plans to align them with students' interests. Participants described "having a lesson plan completely made up and a kid will say something to you in the morning . . . and all of a sudden you're over redoing your whole prompter, your, your question of the day prompt." By making lessons relevant to students' lives, student-serving staff were advancing equity because they were determining and offering whatever was necessary for every student to thrive.

How Leaders Create the Conditions for Student-Serving Staff to Center Equity

This section elaborates on my first sub-research question, "How do leaders create the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity?" Building upon my framework, when leaders think, act, and focus their efforts with equity at the center, then student-serving staff are well-positioned to center equity by empowering students, building strong relationships, and fostering a culture of learning.

A core component of addressing systemic inequities is countering oppressive narratives about students of color, in particular, by empowering students and giving students agency (Freire, 2000). According to Broom (2015), teachers who actively work to empower students understand that their job is not to control or micromanage students but, instead, to trust their students and gradually build students' capabilities and self-confidence (Broom, 2015). Sam, the guidance counselor, described how "we all kind of tried to meet the kids at their level a lot of the

time and really encouraged them to voice when they disagreed with us." Encouraging students to voice their opinions when they disagreed with staff served to empower students to take agency over their own lives. Santi, a teacher, described empowerment as "if you give them that agency and that freedom, the freedom I think is the main part. The time to discuss amongst each other . . . they'll do it. They will absolutely, absolutely do it." Santi demonstrated how she empowered students by giving them the time and space to interact with assignments in ways that made sense to them and that by believing in students, she empowered students to complete their assignments.

Student-serving staff are best positioned to build strong, meaningful relationships with students, which has great value for students (Anderson et al., 2004). Participants in this study as well as the documents analyzed for this study, confirmed the importance of strong relationships between students and their teachers, paraeducators, and guidance counselors. The organization's equity statement specifically states, "Students flourish when educators develop strong relationships with students and learn about and build upon their strengths." Likewise, Sam, the school guidance counselor, shared that "even if they were coming to school but weren't really meeting academic expectations, they were still building those relationships. They were still showing up, they were still, you know, emotionally taking care of themselves. And that was when I really viewed them as thriving." Drawing upon a whole-person framework that emphasizes the importance not only of academic success but of students taking care of themselves socially and emotionally, Sam's description of students demonstrates the importance of relationships between students and staff. Additionally, Dalia demonstrated the power of strong relationships when she shared, "Build the relationship and then they're willing to complete not just one assignment, but maybe ten of those for you because they're doing it for you." Dalia describes how strong relationships between students and staff are the foundation upon which

further growth and development, socially, emotionally, and academically, can occur. Participants in this study confirmed that when student-serving staff enter equity by focusing on strong relationships, students can thrive.

Student-serving staff also center equity by fostering a culture of learning. According to Palmer (1993), "good teachers bring students into living communion with the subjects they teach . . . they also bring students into community with themselves and with each other." (Palmer, 1993, p. unknown). Fostering a culture of learning entails bringing students into community with content, themselves, their teachers, and each other; it also denotes a psychologically safe environment, open conversations and feedback, and learning not just in classrooms but throughout the organization (Trovas, 2022). Participants described how they created a culture of learning by "making safe conversations that they felt like could participate in and yet making sure everybody else was treating them equally with respect." Leadership empowered staff to create a culture of learning that was truly student-centered by giving staff and students the freedom to design lessons and express themselves in real and authentic ways.

A learning culture is also a component of continuous improvement, which Park et al. (2013) describe continuous improvement as involving regular, ongoing organizational learning in which individuals in an organization are open to adaptation and change according to local contexts and new knowledge. In the example above, leadership was open to adaptation and change according to local context, in this case, the classroom, and new knowledge, in this case the interests of students.

How Leaders Use Aspects of Continuous Improvement to Gauge the Effectiveness of Efforts to Address Inequities

Continuous improvement is an approach to systems transformation that has the potential to make school systems more equitable. Biag (2021) describes equity-centered continuous improvement as not only a technical enterprise but also a multifaceted endeavor that demands deep understanding of systemic oppression and the different ways it manifests and shapes students' learning and healthy development (p. 111). One aspect of equity-centered continuous improvement is certain mindsets, such as curiosity, humility, vulnerability, and growth (Dixon, 2020). Likewise, a core mindset of continuous improvement is practicing critical self-reflection and engaging in ongoing learning. As Hough (2017) articulates, continuous improvement involves using disciplined inquiry to understand and solve problems by engaging those "closest to the problem" (e.g., teachers, students, and parents) to understand why inequities persist and generate ideas for how to address system failures (Hough 2017). Several of the leaders in this study demonstrated critical self-reflection and exemplified ongoing learning. For example, Dasan, a systems leader, noted, "We had to check our assumptions and check our thinking against what the students were prioritizing." Dasan exemplified "engaging those closest to the problem" (Bryk et al., 2015) by checking leaders' assumptions against what students were prioritizing. In this case, those closest to the problem were the students, so by checking his assumptions against what students were prioritizing, Dasan was learning from those closest to the problem, the students themselves.

One of the findings from this study was that leaders used some continuous improvement practices, such as learning from those closest to the problem and not others and regular collection and analysis of data. Leaders did not engage in continuous improvement efforts in a disciplined

and systematic way, which would have entailed developing a theory of improvement and testing change ideas through regular data collection and analysis. While such systemwide continuous improvement efforts did not occur regularly, Amia, the school leader, did share that she "made experimenting celebrated." She encouraged teachers to "do something outside of the box," telling them, "It's not always going to work, but it may, and you don't know." Amia did not elaborate on what experimenting looked like aside from encouraging teachers to do things outside of the box. Experimenting is a core component of disciplined inquiry, which is the foundation of continuous improvement. By encouraging her staff to experiment, Amia implemented a core continuous improvement methodology.

Another component of how leaders who center equity use aspects of continuous improvement is to reflect on whether attempts to meet students' needs are working by collecting regular input in the form of data. Much has been written about the place of data in equity-centered systems change and continuous improvement. For example, Yurkofsky (2022) describes how "schools can be infused with norms that are in tensions with the goals of continuous improvement, including that conversations about data are linked to (rather than protected from) evaluation and accountability" (Yurkofsky, 2022, p. 305). This dynamic of data collection creating tension due to evaluation and accountability efforts came up in this study. Amia, the school leader, shared that serving in the role of evaluator made it difficult for students and staff to engage openly with her about their challenges. Amia stated, "I would just participate in their discussions. So I tried to become just a part of [the discussion], and not just the evaluator." Amia's actions align with Yurkofsky's observation that certain types of data collection create tension due to evaluation and accountability processes.

While both the school leader and the systems leaders who participated in this study gave strong examples of the continuous improvement mindset of engaging those closest to the problem, they openly admitted that they did not engage in a core tenet of continuous improvement, regular data collection and analysis, as much as they would have liked to. When asked how they used continuous improvement and data specifically to advance equity, Dasan responded that "this is a place where we need to grow . . . in the area of use of quantitative data." Likewise, Amia shared, "I can't really give an excuse. We didn't go deep into . . those reports . . .I think we could have done a lot better as we should have trained our instructional assistants better to help with the reteaching." When asked if she looked at data with teachers, Amia responded, "Not as much as I probably should have." Leaders also discussed using attendance data as a continuous improvement approach to advance equity but noted that this was challenging because of the transient nature of the student population at county-run schools. Amia shared:

> Continuous improvement was just embedded in those conversations because . . .it was just a constant conversation as kids ebbed and flowed. And we thought we had a good thing going and then three new kids come in whose needs are so different whether behaviorally or academically or social–emotional needs. So we'd be like, okay, let's pause. What do they need? So it's just, it's just messy. It's not clean. It's not right. It's not predictable.

Amia described how using continuous improvement methodologies with students at a county-run school was challenging because the population was always changing, which made it difficult to work within a continuous improvement framework that requires consistent and stable efforts or

time. I will take up the challenges of working with a transient student population in my discussion of challenges and systemic barriers.

In essence, leaders in this study demonstrated certain continuous improvement mindsets, such as encouraging experimentation, and not others, such as regular use of quantitative data. Leaders did, however, implement the continuous improvement approach of regular data analysis, however, in this case, the data leaders collected was qualitative (observations) and rooted in the core whole child/person tenet that positive developmental relationships and environments filled with safety and belonging lead to all kinds of positive outcomes for students.

Conditions Within the System That Make Centering Equity Possible

This study demonstrated that there are certain conditions within the public education system that make it possible to center equity and others that make it challenging. I will begin by discussing conditions that made centering equity possible. Several leaders cited partnerships with other agencies and groups within the community that gave students opportunities to take agency of their own learning, which aligns with the core tenet of equity-centered leadership of student empowerment. Specifically, Amia described a partnership with the Yolo County Career Program, YCCP, which "is a partnership between the Yolo County Office of Education and Yolo County Probation. Students in the program . . . explore a variety of relevant careers and prepare for success in the workforce" (Yolo County Career Program, 2023, para.1). According to Amia, in this program students "would do a presentation of learning . . . talk about their goals . . . and show examples of their work." Community partnerships are a way to advance equity by connecting students with local assets and giving students opportunities to grow socially, emotionally, and academically and prepare for the workforce.

In addition to partnerships, this school also created an extension program that allowed students who had not graduated to come back and earn a high school diploma until the age of 21. Alternative programs, such as this extension program, serve to advance equity because they are meeting the definition of equity, which is to "determine and offer whatever is necessary for every student to thrive socially and emotionally and to meet [their individual] goals" (Villani, 2021, p.1).

Last, the mindsets of leaders at the school and at the county level created the conditions to advance equity within the system. Specifically, all the leaders interviewed in this study shared an asset-based mindset about students, which, according to the California Department of Education, includes "viewing the diversity that students bring to the classroom, including culture, language, disability, socio-economic status, immigration status, and sexuality as characteristics that add value and strength to classrooms and communities" (CDE, 2023, para. 2). For example, Dasan, the systems leader, described how Dolores Huerta needed to be a place that is "culturally responsive and [staff] really understand what it means to honor, incorporate and to represent a space [where] students can arrive with their whole selves and be celebrated." By having this mindset as the system leader, Dasan modeled the type of mindset that he wanted all student-serving staff to adopt. This mindset is reflected in the school's Blueprint, which states "every student is known, valued, and empowered to develop their unique strengths in a safe, academically-rich learning environment "(CCSS Blueprint for Student Success, 2022). In sum, partnerships, alternative programs, and asset-based mindsets created the conditions to advance equity within this system.

Systemic Barriers That Make Centering Equity Challenging

My third and final sub-research question asks, *What conditions within the system make centering equity possible and what systemic barriers make it challenging?* The above discussion portrays how conditions within the system make centering equity possible through an asset-based, whole-person approach that offers alternative pathways to career preparation and workforce. The following discussion illustrates the systemic barriers that make centering equity challenging.

Within large public school systems, such as a county office of education that is funded by both state and federal initiatives, there are myriad challenges that prevent leaders and student-serving staff from being able to center equity in ways that make sense to them. Namely, funding and paperwork were repeatedly named as hindrances to advancing equity, with examples such as staff having to spend several hours each day completing paperwork or leaders having to submit for supplies months before teachers needed them for lessons. Another study finding related to systemic challenges was the pandemic, which forced the school into remote learning for over a year. The challenges of remote learning are myriad, but, in this case, it took the greatest toll on the strong relationships that were integral to student success. One final barrier was the emotional toll of making students and staff feel safe despite often precarious and unpredictable external conditions. This barrier is the most personal and, therefore, the most impactful since the school leader was one single person who, despite her daily efforts to lead from the heart and shower students and staff with the love she felt they so badly needed, was not able to take care of her own emotional needs.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that leaders who center equity focus first and foremost on positive, values-driven relationships, which creates a culture of trust and respect. In so doing, leaders in this study created the conditions for student-serving staff to build strong relationships with students, address the needs of the whole person, and empower students to have agency over their own learning. This study was centered on five main themes: how leadership of a county-run school centers equity in its work; how leadership creates the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity; the extent to which leadership used aspects of continuous improvement to gauge the effectiveness of efforts to address inequities; conditions within the system that made it possible to center equity; and barriers within the system that made centering equity challenging. When analyzed together, these five themes explored how leaders of a county-run school center equity in their work, create the conditions for student-serving staff to do the same, utilize how leaders use continuous improvement tools and methodologies and examine the systemic barriers to centering equity.

The study's data demonstrated that when leadership creates a culture of respect that centers on relationships, they create the conditions for student-serving staff to do the same. It also illustrated how certain continuous improvement mindsets, such as taking an inquiry stance and practicing self-reflection, are compatible with centering relationships and taking a whole-person approach, while other more technical aspects of continuous improvement are not compatible with an approach to leadership that centers relationships in order to advance equity. Regarding the conditions within the system, this study illustrated that certain conditions, such as asset-based mindsets by leaders, community partnerships, and creative approaches to alternative educational pathways, make it possible for leaders to advance equity within their systems. The

study also demonstrated that certain systemic factors make it challenging for leaders to advance equity. Such factors include archaic sources of funding that do not take into consideration the uniquely transient nature of the student body, bureaucratic systems that require funds to be requested for minute sums of money months in advance, and the unnecessary division of labor between education and mental and behavioral health services that led to staff spending half of their time completing paperwork instead of working with students.

This study illustrated that when leaders and student-serving staff lead and teach by focusing on the needs of the whole person, recognizing that students cannot succeed academically if they do not feel valued, safe, and connected, students can thrive. As described by Darling-Hammond's (2018) framework for whole-child education, students' physical, social, emotional, and cognitive needs must be met for students to thrive academically. This study confirms the importance of a whole child/person approach, particularly when working with youth who have experienced great trauma in their short lives.

Last, this study illustrated that much of the success of a single school, in this case, a county-run school for students who have not had success in the traditional public school system, rests on the school leader's ability to impact change by forming strong, trusting relationships which in turn creates the conditions for student-serving staff to provide students with the emotional and academic support they need to thrive. While this model worked for a time, ultimately, it created too great an emotional burden for the leader, who left the school after six years, demonstrating that one person alone should not be expected to create the conditions for success; instead, the system should support school leaders to do this challenging and incredibly important work.

Limitations

My study was limited by the fact that I am only researching one school within one county. As a result, I had the opportunity to go deep with one group of leaders and educators to understand how they perceived leaders to center equity and create the conditions for staff to do the same. The limitations of this single site are that I only got a window into one school and one county, which may be an anomaly compared to other similar schools in the state or the nation, for that matter. Scant data exists on the overall performance of county-run schools in California, which made it difficult for me to contextual this school relative to other schools for previously incarcerated youth. In addition, from a systems perspective, I was limited in my understanding of how the county office supports the school, given that several founding members of the school are no longer working at this site.

Another limitation is that the person who ran the schools for the past seven years is no longer the school leader. Fortunately, she was willing to participate in the study. However, she spoke in the past tense about her experiences as the school leader, so the "halo effect" (Thorndike, 1920) may have been in effect. Specifically, the school leader may misremember events or remember them more positively than she may have felt about them at the time that they occurred. Likewise, staff may have focused primarily on positive memories of the leader's tenure at the school and may have forgotten some of the less positive experiences.

Another potential limitation was that the school leader was present during the focus group. While having her there did add to the discussion about centering equity across the school, it may have limited what staff was willing to share. Likewise, I framed my research questions through an asset-based lens, so the responses given by participants were all positive. Had I framed questions from a deficit perspective, such as "What could this leader have done

differently to center equity?" or "How did the leader fall short in her endeavors to center equity?" I would have gotten very different answers.

Additionally, this study did not use a racial frame, which could have added to the complexity of the analysis. According to 2022 data, students attending Dolores Huerta school are 3% African American, 74% Hispanic, 6.5% two or more races, and 16% White (California Dashboard, 2023), The majority of the student population is Hispanic, and yet only one of the participants in the study identified as Hispanic, and the primary school leader identified as White. Further studies should explore how racial dynamics might impact leaders' ability to advance equity or how leaders of county-run schools center equity through a critical race lens, which could illuminate additional findings not put forth by this study. Such studies could use a CRT lens to engage in "critical race praxis… to surface, honor, and make central the stories and counter-narratives of socially and politically marginalized people of color" (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013, p. 308). While this study did illustrate how student-serving staff use art to empower students, it did not explore the extent to which race, or a critical race lens, could further empower students of color.

Last, an important limitation of this study is that my positionality as a technical assistance provider supporting the California Department of Education (CDE) in monitoring continuous improvement efforts at county-run schools may have influenced the responses I got, particularly from systems leaders. It is impossible to ignore the fact that I coach CDE in understanding and implementing continuous improvement practices at county-run schools. In fact, I visited this very school as part of a site visit with CDE to better understand the progress of continuous improvement efforts at the site. Likewise, one of CDE's roles is to monitor county offices of education and make sure that they comply with state and federal policies which mandate

continuous improvement to address persistent inequities. As such, CDE is often viewed as a rule enforcer and is also theoretically in the position to penalize county offices of education or specific schools that are "out of compliance." Because of this dynamic, county offices of education and the leaders at county-run schools may have been hesitant in sharing facts or data that suggest that continuous improvement is not being implemented with fidelity. As such, it is possible that participants in this study viewed me as a proxy to CD, and, therefore, may not have shared as openly as they would have with a different researcher about the challenge of implementing particular components of continuous improvement, particularly cycles of inquiry that include regular data collection and analysis.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study aimed to expand the way equity-centered leadership that focuses on relationships and an approach to leadership that attends to the needs of the whole person is understood, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic. As Kruse (2019) aptly states, "addressing equity within schools and school districts presents problems that do not exist independent of school leaders, teachers or students and their families . . . [these problems] are deeply contextual and situational, and open to interpretation. In short, they are complex" (p. 40). The findings from this study confirm Kruse's claim that issues of equity do not exist independent of school leaders; in fact, according to the data, most of the challenges to advancing equity stemmed from issues outside of the school. As such, one implication from this study is that system and policy leaders reexamine the extent to which certain policies are or are not making systems more equitable, such as policies that are rooted in punitive approaches to working with students and families, and realign policies to use an asset-based approach that attends to the needs of the whole person.

This study found that leadership centers equity in their work by elevating the importance of relationships and attending to the needs of the whole person. Leaders focused first on ensuring that students' basic needs were met and that students were both physically and psychologically safe, which is a core component of a whole-person approach. Findings should be shared at the policy level to inform future school reform considerations; policies, such as AB 2832 (R. Rivas) which aims to establish a Whole Child Community Equity Screening Tool (WCEST), should be implemented more widely. Additionally, school and systems leaders must understand that an emphasis on academics alone will fail to advance equity; leaders must also center relationships and focus on the needs of the whole person if they are truly to make systems more equitable.

This study also addressed how leaders create the conditions for student-serving staff to center equity in their work. Building upon the recommendations outlined above, leaders must focus on creating the conditions for student-serving staff to use a whole-person approach and center relationships to create the conditions for student-serving staff to advance equity in their own interactions with students. Policy and practice implications include leadership and principal training programs that prepare leaders to see schools as systems and understand the interconnectedness not only of the technical components of leading schools but also the relational aspects of leadership. In particular, school and systems leaders should reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, and values create a certain culture within a school or larger educational system because when leaders create a culture of respect, honesty, and kindness, they pave the way for others within the system to do the same. By modeling the behaviors, they hope to see throughout education systems, but most importantly in classrooms, leaders are well positioned to advance equity at a systemic level.

This study also surfaced some of the challenges that leaders face in implementing aspects of continuous improvement to gauge the effectiveness of efforts to address inequities. Building on Datnow and Park's (2018) assertions that certain types of data use may, in fact, make school systems less equitable, as well as Yorkofsky's (2022) assertion that continuous improvement norms can create tension between school leaders and student-serving staff, this study found that leaders of equity-centered improvement recognized the need to center relationships over data use and hold central the foundation of deep trust upon which lasting change is built.

One implication from this study is that it is difficult to enact continuous improvement efforts in county-run schools for several reasons. First, the transient population of students makes it very challenging for leaders to successfully enact the cycles of inquiry that are a cornerstone of continuous improvement because, as one leader described it, they are "working on shifting sand." Leaders described focusing on a particular area, only to have the student population change, which then impacts or even changes the problem they are working to address. Additionally, system- and school-level leaders of county-run schools are supported in doing continuous improvement by the CDE, which also monitors the effectiveness of their efforts to address inequities through LCAP review. Often, the staff from CDE who provide support in utilizing continuous improvement tools and methodologies are the same people who monitor progress on the LCAP, which creates an inherent issue with trust. An implication of this dynamic is that leaders at county-run schools may not fully trust CDE staff who provide continuous improvement support and may not fully engage with CDE in continuous improvement efforts, particularly when doing such work involves looking at data that may reflect poorly on county-run schools.

Regarding how leaders utilize continuous improvement tools and methodologies to gauge the effectiveness of efforts to address inequities, additional studies are needed. Additional studies should take place in systems where leaders regularly use more traditional continuous improvement tools and methodologies, such as cycles of inquiry (e.g., PDSAs), in concert with a culture of deep trust and strong relationships. While this study set out to explore this dimension of equity-centered leadership, the findings did not provide specific examples of how leaders use traditional methods of continuous improvement within this particular setting. The findings did, however, convey the importance of the relational dimensions of continuous improvement, such as humility and learning from those closest to the work. Additional studies should explore how leaders employ both traditional improvement methodologies and the relational dimensions of improvement to the extent that this is possible.

This study also found that leading a county-run school is uniquely challenging and emotionally taxing, described by the school leader as "a lonely place to be." As such, a support system should be provided for leaders of county-run schools throughout the state of California. Such support could include a community of practice through which school leaders can discuss some of the challenges they are facing, such as the bureaucratic issues related to attendance-based funding or the limited resources available to support students with high degrees of trauma.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Policymakers and education leaders need to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of school systems and the importance of relationships and taking a whole-person approach in improving school systems. This study found that, from the perspective of school and system leaders, certain systemic barriers make it difficult to advance equity. Policymakers need to be aware of how certain policies are incompatible with advancing equity and should therefore

be rewritten through an equity lens. Specifically, policies that require that education systems engage in "ongoing continuous improvement" need to reconsider the shortcomings of this approach when it does not specifically attend to the components addressed in this study—developing deep relational trust, centering the needs of the whole person, and anchoring leadership practices in equity and core values. Also, when determining who should support county offices of education and county-run schools in implementing continuous improvement, policymakers should consider separating continuous improvement support providers from those who evaluate continuous improvement efforts (currently, the support providers and the evaluators are often one and the same).

Additionally, policymakers must develop a deeper understanding of how the unique context of county-run schools makes them incompatible with metrics for success, such as attendance. Due to the fluid nature of the student body at county-run schools, other metrics should be employed to measure the extent to which leaders are advancing equity within county-run schools, namely metrics that center school climate and the extent to which students feel safe, supported, and valued.

Additionally, policies that put pressure on schools to compete for student enrollment should be reevaluated, particularly since students and leaders of county-run schools are often at the whim of the court system regarding student enrollment. Likewise, policies that focus only on summative assessments as measures of success instead of addressing the underlying, often invisible, forces that contribute to the educational successes or failures of certain sub-groups of students must be reevaluated. Particularly considering the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that policymakers think about funding formulas and sources of measurement beyond test scores

and student attendance; mental health and the social and emotional well-being of students must be prioritized.

Last, several participants spoke about the need for more funding for county-run schools, specifically funding that is not tied to student attendance. Recognizing the need for an individualized, student-centered approach to teaching and learning within county-run schools, policymakers need to reconsider funding formulas for schools with students who have endured high levels of trauma, such as those who attend the school featured in this study.

Future Research

There are several directions that future research might take, building upon the findings presented in this paper. First, future research could consider the role of relationships and trust at the apex of continuous improvement and equity, and could explore how leaders both use traditional continuous improvement methods such as regular data collection and equity-centered approaches such as focusing first and foremost on relationships and creating a strong and inclusive community. While this study touched on this intersection, I did not explore in great depth how continuous improvement and equity intersect at a county-run school, primarily because leaders within the county and at the school did not regularly use what are considered traditional continuous improvement approaches (although they certainly did demonstrate several continuous improvement mindsets). Further research may find new ways that leaders are able to make sense of equity and continuous improvement methods in ways that leaders in this study did not think about.

Additionally, future research could explore common challenge that schools (or specifically, county-run schools) face in engaging in continuous improvement, focusing on the tension between the necessity of strong trust relationships and the requirement to regularly

analyze data, which may erode trust. Such research could explore how county-run schools (or low-performing schools more generally) learn about continuous improvement as a methodology that purposefully aims to advance equity and the support such schools receive to implement continuous improvement practices. Analysis could include whether support providers are connected to the evaluation of such schools or if support providers are a third party that is in no way connected to the evaluation of the school's performance. Research could also explore specific continuous improvement metrics that align with the unique needs of students, teachers, and leaders in county-run schools. For example, instead of using attendance (a common continuous improvement metric) as an indicator for student success, such research could explore how continuous improvement efforts at county-run schools focus solely on metrics that support the whole person, such as school climate and student connectedness surveys.

Future research could also explore how other child-serving agencies, such as foster care and the juvenile justice system, are impacting leaders' ability to advance equity within county-run schools. An analysis of the intersection between several child-serving agencies could elucidate how agencies could work together as part of integrated system of care to serve students' needs, as well as how the disparate policies and approaches of different child-serving agencies create unnecessary challenges and barriers for students and staff at county-run schools. Such research could also explore the role of leadership in brokering the relationships necessary for an integrated system to flourish and the impact that this has on students and families. Likewise, an exploration of how students of county-run schools are impacted by the fickle nature of the court system, which seems to prioritize legal mandates over education, could portray how students' relationships with staff and leadership are impacted by court mandates and the ensuing implications.

Conclusion

Now, more than ever, it is imperative that equity-centered leadership is anchored in a whole-person approach that centers relationships and tends to students' social, emotional, cognitive, and academic needs. Fortunately, the need for a systemwide approach to education that centers the needs of the whole child/person is gaining popularity both statewide and nationally. Governor Newsom noted in his August 2022 unveiling of California's *Master Plan for Kids' Mental Health (Master Plan)*, "Mental and behavioral health is one of the greatest challenges of our time" (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2022), and the U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called the increase in youth mental health needs "the defining public health crisis of our time" (Peetz, 2023). Similarly, the Biden administration secured $150 million in federal funds for the Full-Service Community Schools program, doubling the administration's investment in community schools from the prior year (The White House, 2023), signaling a focus on supporting not only students' academic needs but also student health and well-being. While these large-scale efforts are promising, students at county-run schools have likely already experienced great trauma and may not be reached by these funding sources.

This study illustrated the need for educators and school leaders to reflect on how they interact with students and how the subtle ways that they communicate with students can make a huge difference. Educators everywhere should reflect on their own demeanor, their understanding of power, and how their own implicit biases may be preventing students from reaching their full potential. Educators can also learn from amazing teachers such as those showcased in this study, who resist the urge to control students and instead find ways to empower students by giving them opportunities to explore their own interests creatively within a

structured system that holds students accountable and supports their growth authentically, and most important, lovingly.

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APPENDICES

(Adapted from Carolynne Beno's Dissertation Proposal, 2016)

Appendix A: Demographics and Background Form

(To be filled out by participants at the beginning of the interview/focus group)

1. **Name:**

2. **Role:**

3. **Which of the following best describes you?**

a. American Indian or Alaska Native

b. Asian

c. Black or African American

d. Hispanic/Latino

e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

f. White

g. More than one race

h. Other

4. How long have you worked in education?

a. 0-5 years

b. 6-10 years

c. 11-15 years

d. 16-20 years

e. 20 years or more

5. How long have you worked in this county community school/ office of education?

a. Less than one year

b. 1-3 years

c. 4-5 years

d. 6-10 years

e. More than 10 years

6. Which positions have you held (past or present) at this school site? Select all that apply.

a. Teacher

b. Paraprofessional

c. Guidance counselor

d. School leader

e. Probation office or other affiliation with the court system

f. Other

Appendix B: Interview Protocol with School Leaders

SECTION	CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS
Welcome, General Housekeeping Items, and Forms	*Thank you for taking the time to share your views and experiences with me today. My name is Marianne Justus, and I am a graduate student at UC Davis studying how leaders think, act, and focus their efforts in order to advance equity.* *Before we begin, I want to make sure all the necessary forms have been completed. I have three forms for you to sign:* ● *Consent Form* ● *Demographics Form* ● *Agenda and Interview Questions* *Please take a moment to complete the consent and demographics forms. Since I will be audio recording this interview for research purposes, I need your informed consent before we begin. Please let me know if you have any questions.*

Consent and Ground Rules	*Please remember your participation today is voluntary and you should only discuss things you feel comfortable discussing with me. I will keep all information you provide today confidential. To protect your confidentiality, your comments will not be linked with personally identifying information. I will be audio taping our discussion so I can listen to your comments later. These tapes and my notes will be destroyed at the end of the study. To protect your confidentiality, please use your first name only.* *Additionally, your personally identifying information will not appear when I present this study or publish its results. I will do my best to keep your participation in this study confidential. However, I cannot guarantee complete confidentiality. Do you have any questions before we begin?*
Purpose of the Interview	*For my doctorate in educational leadership at UC Davis I am studying school leadership and equity. I'm interviewing you today because I would like to understand your role as a leader. Do you have any questions before we begin?*

Interview Questions	1. *How did you come to lead a county community school? What past experiences led you to work in this school?* 2. *What is unique about leading a county community school?* 3. *How would you describe your approach to leadership? (Probe if the leader brings up examples of centering students: How do you work to create a student-centered school culture? Can you tell me a story about a time that you helped to create a student-centered culture?)* 4. *What are you most proud of in terms of your leadership at this school? (Probe: Why do you think that happened? Do you think it was because of the things you were doing intentionally to support those students? How do you create an inclusive culture?)* 5. *In your opinion, what does it mean to center equity in your work as a leader? (Probe: How do you ensure that every student is getting what he or she needs to thrive every day? How do you center the needs of the most vulnerable students? What does that look like?)*

	6. *Yolo County Office of Ed's equity statement reads "We are committed to dismantling the structures and practices within our system that create disparate opportunities and outcomes". Can you tell me about a time when you witnessed something inequitable or oppressive? What did you do? (Probe: What was your approach? What were the results?)* 7. *Additionally, the equity statement says that "we believe educational equity is achieved when every student feels a sense of connectedness and belonging at school". Can you tell me about a time when you worked to help a student or a group of students feel valued, connected, and safe?* 8. *How do you support teachers, counselors etc. within your school to center equity in their work? Probe: What do you do to promote reflection?* 9. *Have you identified a problem of practice to focus on as a staff? Probe: If so, how do you gather input and feedback on whether your attempts to meet each students' needs are working? Are there processes in place for measuring student progress or growth?*

	10. In thinking about your time at this school, what are you most proud of in terms of making the school more equitable? Who was important to work with to get there? In what ways? *11. What challenges have made it difficult to lead this school?*
Last word and closing	12. *Is there anything else you'd like to share today?* *I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me and share your experiences. Your input and participation are critical to this project, and I value your perspectives, insight, and experiences.* *Here is a card with my contact information. Please feel free to contact me if you think of anything else you would like to add.*

Appendix C: Interview Protocol with Student-Serving Staff

SECTION	CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS
Welcome, General Housekeeping Items, and Forms	*Welcome. My name is Marianne Justus, and I am a graduate student at UC Davis and will be moderating today's discussion. Thank you for taking the time to share your views and experiences. Before we begin, I want to make sure all the necessary forms have been completed. Upon arrival, you received a name tag and the following forms:* ● *Consent Form* ● *Demographics Form* ● *Agenda and Focus Group Questions* *Please take a moment to complete the consent and demographics forms. Since I will be audio recording the focus group discussion for research purposes, I need your informed consent before we begin.* *Please let me know if you have any questions.*

Consent and Ground Rules	*Please remember your participation today is voluntary and you should only discuss things you feel comfortable discussing with me and the rest of the group. You may leave the focus group at any time.* *I will keep all information you provide today confidential. To protect your confidentiality, your comments will not be linked with personally identifying information. I will be audio taping our discussion so I can listen to your comments later. These tapes and my notes will be destroyed at the end of the study. To protect your confidentiality, please use your first name only.* *Additionally, your personally identifying information will not appear when I present this study or publish its results.* *Please respect the following Ground Rules:* · *Confidentiality – what is said in this room, stays in this room; don't share what anyone said with others who are not here* · *Only one person talks at a time* · *Be respectful of others; it is OK to have different opinions* · *Use first names only* · *Cell phones off or on silent*

	I request that each of you keep what is said during the focus group confidential. However, I cannot guarantee complete confidentiality. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?
Purpose of the Focus Group	*The purpose of this focus group is to learn from staff who work with students in this school about working in a county community school. I would be happy to answer any questions before we start. Our discussion will last approximately 1 hour.*
Introduction of Focus Group Members	***First, we will start by having you tell me about your professional context.*** *What is your role at this school, and how long have you been at this school? (Probe: what is unique about this school?)*

Interview Questions	1. *In your daily role, how do you engage with school leadership? (Probe: Can you tell me about a time when you felt supported by school leadership?)* 2. *How would you describe your relationship with leadership? (Probe: How does your school leader support you? From your perspective, how does leadership demonstrate that they value all members of the school community?)* 3. *How do you collaborate with the school leader and other members of the school community?* 4. *How would you describe leadership's approach to working with and supporting all students? (Probe: how do teachers and leaders in this school differentiate instruction or other supports to meet students' unique needs?)* 5. *In your opinion, what does it mean to center equity in your work? (Probe: How do you ensure that every student is getting what he or she needs to thrive every day? How do you center the needs of the most vulnerable students? What does that look like?)*

	6. *Can you tell me about a time when you built a strong, trusting relationship with a student? (Probe: how did you build a trusting relationship? What did it take?)* 7. *How do you work with students who are struggling? (Probe: What systemic barriers or challenges make it difficult to support students the way you believe they need to be supported?)* 8. *How do you know if students are thriving? (Probe: Can you tell me about a time when a student was thriving at this school? How do you and your colleagues empower students? How do you support students as learners? What did it take to get that student the support he or she needed in order to thrive? Who was important in that work?)* 9. *In thinking about your time at this school, what are you most proud of in terms of making the school more equitable? (Probe: Who was important to work with to get there? In what ways?)*

Last word and closing	*10. Is there anything else you'd like to share today?* *I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me and share your experiences. Your input and participation are critical to this project, and I value your perspectives, insight, and experiences.* *Here is a card with my contact information. Please feel free to contact me if you think of anything else you would like to add.*

Appendix D: Interview Protocol with Leaders at the County Office of Education (System Leaders)

SECTION	CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS
Welcome, General Housekeeping Items, and Forms	*Thank you for taking the time to share your views and experiences with me today. My name is Marianne Justus, and I am a graduate student at UC Davis studying how leaders center equity in work.* *Before we begin, I want to make sure all the necessary forms have been completed. I have three forms for you to sign:* ● *Consent Form* ● *Demographics Form* ● *Agenda and Interview Questions* *Please take a moment to complete the consent and demographics forms. Since I will be audio recording this interview for research purposes, I need your informed consent before we begin. Please let me know if you have any questions.*

Consent and Ground Rules	*Please remember your participation today is voluntary and you should only discuss things you feel comfortable discussing with me. I will keep all information you provide today confidential. To protect your confidentiality, your comments will not be linked with personally identifying information. I will be audio taping our discussion so I can listen to your comments later. These tapes and my notes will be destroyed at the end of the study. To protect your confidentiality, please use your first name only.* *Additionally, your personally identifying information will not appear when I present this study or publish its results. I will do my best to keep your participation in this study confidential. However, I cannot guarantee complete confidentiality. Do you have any questions before we begin?*
Purpose of the Interview	*For my doctorate in educational leadership at UC Davis I am investigating how school and system leaders center equity and create the conditions for others to do the same. I'm interviewing you today because I know both you and your county office of education believe strongly in educational equity, and I would like to understand more about how you understand your role as a leader. As part of my research, I am interested in learning what it means to you to be leading equity-centered continuous improvement efforts at the county office of education. I expect that both interviews will last*

	no more than sixty minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?
Introduction and professional experiences	*In this first portion of the interview, I am seeking to understand your role at the County Office of Education.* *Briefly describe your role at the COE.*
Interview questions	1. *How would you describe your approach to leadership?* 2. *What is different about leading at a county office of education, relative to other places you've worked?* 3. *How does your organization support and interact with _____School?* 4. *What are you most proud of in terms of your leadership as it relates to this school? (Probe: Why do you think that*

	happened? Do you think it was because of the things you were doing intentionally to ensure students were supported?) 5. *In your opinion, what does it mean to center equity in your work as a leader? (Probe: How do you ensure that every student is getting what he or she needs to thrive every day? How do you center the needs of the most vulnerable students? What does that look like?)* 6. *Yolo County Office of Ed's equity statement reads "We are committed to dismantling the structures and practices within our system that create disparate opportunities and outcomes". Can you tell me about a time when you witnessed something inequitable or oppressive? What did you do? (Probe: What was your approach? What were the results?)* 7. *Additionally, the equity statement says that "we believe educational equity is achieved when every student feels a sense of connectedness and belonging at school". Can you tell me about a time when you worked to help a student or a group of students feel valued, connected, and safe?*

	8. *Does your office use continuous improvement tools or methodologies to address inequities in your system? (Probe: can you tell me about a time when you used continuous improvement to help you address an inequity in your system?)* 9. *In thinking about your time working with this school, what are you most proud of in terms of making the school more equitable? Who was important to work with to get there? In what ways?* 10. *What systemic barriers or challenges make it difficult to advance equity?*
Last word and closing	*Is there anything else you'd like to share today?* *I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me and share your experiences. Your input and participation are critical to this project, and I value your perspectives, insight, and experiences.* *Here is a card with my contact information. Please feel free to contact me if you think of anything else you would like to add.*

Appendix E: Member Check Communications

Dear _____,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my study. Your contributions were extremely useful in helping me understand how leaders center equity in their work and create the conditions for student-serving staff to do the same. As I shared during the interview/focus group, as part of my research process I am engaging in "member checks", which entails sharing my research with you so that you have the opportunity to correct any inaccurate information and provide feedback on my initial findings.

Attached you will find 3 documents:

- **Participant demographics table:** please review and make sure I captured your demographic information accurately.
- **Participant vignette:** A brief description of each participant in the study and a description of your connection to leadership and the school. Please read and review the vignette, which was written based on information you shared during the interview/focus group. Please let me know if there are any changes or edits you would like me to make. Also, I chose a pseudonym for you based on your connection to the school; please let me know if there is a different pseudonym you would like me to use.
- **Findings:** These findings were based on my coding of the interview/focus group. Please let me know if any of the findings are not accurate or if you would like me to omit a quote for any reason.

Please send your feedback to me by April 7. If I do not hear back from you by that time, I will assume that I have accurately represented you in the study.

Please let me know if you have questions about any of this. My top priority is that you feel comfortable with the information I include in my study, so please do not hesitate to reach out if there is any information you would like me to correct or omit. Thank you again for participating in this study; your contributions were essential to the research.

Warmly,

Marianne Justus