Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Action in Head Start Leadership: A Critical Consciousness Case Study of Head Start Leaders

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Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Action in Head Start Leadership: A Critical
Consciousness Case Study of Head Start Leaders

by

Christopher Pearce Agudelo

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
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Abstract

Diverse families with preschool-aged children are at an enhanced risk of marginalization in the United States. Whether they are of a different race, level of ability, gender, or socioeconomic background, they need early childhood leaders and educators who can focus on caring for their children. In this exploratory qualitative study, I conducted five open-ended interviews with Head Start education managers—a similar position to a preschool Director or a K-12 Principal. The objective was to understand better how Head Start Education Managers attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action. I utilized the three-element construct of critical consciousness as the study’s theoretical framework. I wanted to know how critical awareness and critical reflection influence critical action. The study found that education managers attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action on behalf of their children and families' general and immediate needs. The study also revealed that education managers have an integral role in Head Start that allows them to apply critical awareness, reflection, and action to practices, policies, and systems. However, they could use some professional development to establish, expand, and evolve their abilities to do so. I concluded with some policy approaches and a new graphic model for education managers to visualize their role concerning critical awareness, reflection, and action to adjust practices, policies, and systems.
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Chapter 1: Preschool Children at Risk

United States citizens face a threat to civil rights amidst a new wave of voter suppression bills proposed and enacted across the country (Epstein & Corasaniti, 2021a). This push to restrict voting comes from the conservative Grand Old Party (GOP), which has not “represented a majority of the U.S. population since 1996” (Kilgore, 2021, p. 1). The GOP has also gerrymandered district boundaries redrawing lines to include more of one type of voter and less of another—to hold onto the power afforded them by their recently-lost demographic advantage (Chang & Levine, 2020; Epstein & Corasaniti, 2021b). The 2016–2020 occupant of the White House and the GOP have refilled federal courts with a disproportionately high number of White judges (Gramlich, 2021; Seddiq & Hall, 2021). These actions reduced the representation of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) judges in our judicial system and holds much potential to harm marginalized communities. Families that attend Head Start are often amongst these marginalized communities.

Head Start families—families whose children attend Head Start—consist of people from different races and ethnicities, levels of ability, genders, sexual orientations, language proficiencies, and socioeconomic statuses. Frequently, such marginalized people are targets for bigotry as it spreads beyond its insular roots (USA Facts, 2019). More locally, Head Start educators in Oregon, by contrast, are “dedicated to improving the lives of children and families by providing early childhood education, care, and advocacy with unique and supportive services to enhance family growth and community success” (Oregon Child Development Coalition, 2021). Therefore, Head Start educators
are responsible for fulfilling the mission and vision of Head Start for the children and families they serve within their power and capabilities. This study explored how Head Start Education Managers support strong images of families and communities amid all that is happening locally and nationally.

It has become beneficial to understand whether the education and professional learning opportunities that Head Start provides their Education Managers prepare them adequately. I labored over the idea of the degree to which my participants can create and maintain an atmosphere of equity and inclusion for people of different races and ethnicities, levels of ability, genders, sexual orientations, language proficiencies, and socioeconomic statuses. Further, it is important to know how Head Start leaders grow and learn to improve their ability to be more critically active in the context of bigotry. As an educator, I place a great deal of emphasis on equity and inclusion. I can think of no better alternative than working with critical consciousness as a way to understand how Head Start Education Managers attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action.

**Researcher’s Position**

I have a great personal curiosity about critical consciousness. When I was in graduate school, I learned about Paulo Freire. I could not put down *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—his groundbreaking book. What I learned about the interplay of the oppressor/oppressed relationship changed how I see power dynamics. This victimization can take many forms, such as obligations to other, more powerful people, adherence to a doctrine, or some imposed or coerced oath (Freire, 1970). The concept of the student-
teacher/teacher-student relationship changed my relationship with and attitude toward teaching. The student-teacher/teacher-student dynamic shows that teachers are also students because the communication between the two results in growth for both parties, albeit the lessons are different for each (Freire, 1970). Also, Freire’s book helped me understand that education is truly the “practice of freedom” (1970, p. 93).

My resonance with Paulo Freire inspired me to be a better educator at a time in my life when there was no outlet for such a thing. I worked for an employer who took advantage of my coworkers and me, and this employer did not care about anything Paulo Freire said. The mere mention of equity or inclusion may have gotten me dubious stares and a target on my back, indicating a potential problem employee. To complicate matters, my pregnant wife almost died in childbirth during this time. Combine these with the absence of familial support and minimal friend support, and we were in a bad situation. Feeling on all sides like there would be little help for our family, we applied to the local Head Start program.

Fortunately, a Head Start program accepted my son and our family by their stated mission. Being good community members, my wife and I became Policy Council parents at our Head Start program. A policy council is a group of Head Start parents who assist the executive director in Head Start’s policy directions and are voted in by a majority vote every year. Year one was good, but nothing stood out as unique—we had positive interactions and did our best to contribute. Year two was different because our Head Start center hired a new executive director. The transition in leadership was stark. I went from barely knowing the executive director to being friendly in less than a year. Attitudes,
perspectives, enthusiasm to do extra work, and a wellspring of energy seemed to erupt from workers that previously seemed listless.

Suddenly, exciting new-person energy filled our policy council meetings—with inspiration and palpable positive energy. For example, when the new executive director assumed the role, the managers of this Head Start program became aware of the lack of communication with families. They then reflected on it as a group and implemented a new communications scheme. Witnessing the three aspects of critical consciousness coming together in such a short time with such positive results inspired me; however, I did not conceptualize it as such at the time. I wanted to know more about critical consciousness and our leadership at the local Head Start. I sought to see how their critical awareness and reflection influenced their critical action to create such a positive program. Thankfully, I had access to studying this Head Start program and took a beautiful opportunity to examine it with a critical consciousness lens.

I am no longer a policy council member at this Head Start. I do not have any personal stake in this Head Start program; however, I wish nothing more than to enhance future practices for the betterment of all Head Start communities. Hopefully, this research reaches beyond Head Start leaders and the engagement of critical consciousness. Looking back at the completed study, I hope this finds relevance with as many preschool programs as possible.

**Fighting Fire with a Thimble of Water**

Head Start programs “must integrate parent and family engagement strategies into all systems and program services to support family well-being and promote children’s
learning and development” (Family Engagement, 2016). This task is even more challenging because prejudice and bigotry in the United States are rising (Carless, 2021). Right-wing extremists continue to successfully spread discriminatory messages throughout the USA, placing diverse families at an enhanced risk of marginalization (Carless, 2021). Head Start has standards that respect cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds and support the family’s safety, health, and economic stability (Family Engagement, 2016); so does the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, n.d.). The NAEYC set 10 standards that indicate high-quality programs. NAEYC accredits these programs to guide early childhood schools on policy and practices (NAEYC, n.d.). “NAEYC promotes high-quality early learning for all children, birth through age 8 (sic), by connecting practice, policy, and research. We advance a diverse, dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children” (NAEYC, n.d.). When leaders exhibit these qualities, they can support teachers to engage their children and families to promote family wellness so the children can learn and grow.

In this section, I uncovered some of the difficulties of our current predicament. This world is not free from strife, nor will it be, until we examine our prejudices. Even then, there will be plenty of opportunities for conflict. The literature review includes a look at current-day right-wing authoritarianism, which threatens our relative peace in these times of globalization, COVID-19, and resource scarcity (Moghaddam, 2019). The review demonstrates an understanding of rising authoritarianism and an awareness of its impacts. The literature reveals that the rise of fascist authoritarian communities such as
the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer may cause significant societal disruptions, many of which will not favor any particular group. Now, a brief look at Head Start’s past.

**Head Start, Then and Now**

The United States Civil Rights Movement started in 1954 and continued through 1968. During this era, activists all over the country rallied to end the Jim Crow-era discriminatory practices, bigotry, and nationalist hate groups. Additionally, the American people protested and legislated for social, legal, cultural, and political changes. Influenced by research highlighting the deleterious effects of poverty and its impact on education, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced *The War on Poverty* (Office of Head Start, 2018). Shortly after the declaration, a team of experts began developing a program to address the needs of disadvantaged preschool children (Office of Head Start, 2018). This program became known as Head Start. In 1975, the first set of Head Start Program Performance Standards was published (Office of Child Development, 1975).

President Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, introduced his widely-known idea of Reaganomics, and sought to reduce taxes and government spending (Hacsi, 2002). Also, he sought to repeal the legislation that formed and authorized Head Start (Hacsi, 2002). Fortunately, activists mobilized with parent groups and teamed up to stop him from repealing the legislation, saving Head Start. Unfortunately, Reagan’s economic philosophy won the day, and his administration implemented it as a political policy in many government departments. His administration’s victory resulted in the disbursement of money toward existing departments and programs—not new ones—looking to stop
funding on programs that did not meet specific standards set by the administration (U.S. Congress, 1992, p. 4).

The United States federal government revisited the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) in 1994 to bring it up to date, add new topics, and expand services (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 1996). Then-president Bill Clinton signed the Head Start Reauthorization Act of 1994, marking a success for the families at Head Start. Fortunately for Head Start families, Bill Clinton “was probably the strongest supporter of Head Start to occupy the White House since its founder Lyndon Johnson” (Hacsi, 2002, p. 55). The 1994 Reauthorization Act expanded services and built systems to increase community support capacity.

The Head Start Reauthorization Act was again supported in 1999, allocating more funding for employee salaries. Legislators at this time needed to be shown that Head Start prepares children to enter kindergarten “ready to learn” (Hacsi, 2002, p. 56). The Head Start Reauthorization Act set the stage for future accountability measures. In January 2003, President Bush announced the Good Start Grow Smart initiative, dramatically cutting funds to Head Start (Mollison, 2003). In 2007, George W. Bush signed the Head Start Act (2007). Later, the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF), Ages Birth to Five (Office of Head Start, 2015), was released, and a year later, the newly revised Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS, 2016). The Head Start Act, the ELOF, and the HSPPS are essential documents that guide Head Start educators.

Along with the HSPPS and ELOF, Head Start has more guidelines to convey knowledge to its educators, such as the Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood
Educators (Office of Head Start, 2020). How well they do this will impact children across urban, suburban, and rural locations and could influence future outcomes of children and their families (Schanzenbach & Bauer, 2016; Schweinhart, L. J. (2016). These guidelines include the Head Start Act (2007), HSPPS (2016), Multicultural Principals for Early Childhood Educators (2020), ELOF, Ages Birth to Five (2015), the United States Code (U.S.C.), and the Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.). The programs' descriptions above are in this chapter's definitions section. The families served by Head Start comprise many ethnicities, identities, and orientations; therefore, Head Start leaders need to embody the institution’s professional development programs to help them meet their needs. Each marginalized community and person within the community are essential to a healthy functioning society. With this understanding, educators can recognize the importance of the child and their families and provide them with the best possible services.

The Head Start Act (2007), HSPPS (2016), U.S.C., and C.F.R. are the legal bases for Head Start. They provide the fundamental standards for Head Start employees and the legal boundaries of their activities. These laws work in conjunction with Head Start Act (2007), HSPPS (2016), Multicultural Principals for Early Childhood Educators (2020), and ELOF, Ages Birth to Five (2015). They also helped my study design and provided the necessary background to analyze the interview data better. Next, I discuss the lens through which we can better understand the experiences of Head Start Education Managers and how they make meaning of their struggles and successes.
Critical Consciousness and School Leadership

Critical consciousness was given form by Paulo Freire's work in Brazil, first in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and later in *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1973). Freire’s books are landmarks in humanity’s quest for a well-functioning society. He discovered that teaching marginalized individuals and communities to understand their sociopolitical environment improved their lives. *Conscientization*, or critical consciousness, is a thought-related process that can potentially result in personal liberation from oppression (Freire, 1970, 1973; Watts et al., 1999). Alternatively, newer models of critical consciousness have emphasized the action aspect more (Watts, 1999; Watts et al., 2011; Schneider, 2019).

Watts et al. (1999) made progress in understanding critical consciousness by observing how African American men understand and overcome their oppression. In the early 2000s, as Freire’s books were republished, more scholars entered the critical consciousness discourse. Much of the significant work that sets the groundwork for my study begins in this timeframe (Carlson et al., 2006; Diemer, 2020; Diemer et al., 2006; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). A few years later, Diemer and Ortega (2010) and Diemer and Li (2011) further studied critical consciousness in marginalized youth. Recently, Thomas et al. (2014), McWhirter and McWhirter (2016), and Diemer et al. (2017) contributed by developing tools to assess critical consciousness in marginalized communities. Critical consciousness is a pertinent issue due to diversifying demographics and the relentless oppression of many marginalized people in the United States. Indeed, it is apt for scholars such as Watts et al. (1999), Diemer et al. (2006), or Thomas et al. (2014) to study.
marginalized students and communities; however, there is a missing element mentioned as early as 1999 but not yet checked in the context of critical consciousness until 2016: intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Scanlan & Theoharis, 2016). “Intersectionality describes the co-relational forces of how oppressions such as (but not limited to) racism, sexism, and classism interlock, integrate, and intersect simultaneously within the lives of individuals” (Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Hancock, 2007; Collins, 2015, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2016, as cited in Carey et al., 2018).

Early on, Watts et al. (1999) recognized that an individual could be an oppressor in one context and oppressed in a different context (p. 258). The oppressor/oppressed dichotomy provides an opening for scholars to investigate critical consciousness in the context of the lived experiences of individuals spanning the entire spectrum between the contexts. To complicate matters, Diemer et al. (2015) ventured to state, “What little empirical work that has [been] examined suggests that CC [critical consciousness] is a more relevant construct for marginalized people than more privileged people” (p. 831). I have some feedback for this comment.

First, “more privileged people” is a vague way to describe not being marginalized. Second, Diemer’s comment implies that if a person is privileged, they are privileged in all aspects; therefore, critical consciousness would have limited application. Third, it ignores something Jemal (2017) and other scholars (Diemer, 2020; Jemal et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2016; Showunmi, 2020; Wallin-Ruschman, 2014, 2018) recently brought into the critical consciousness conversation: intersectionality.
Originally, Crenshaw (1991) studied the intersection of gender and race from an antiracist and feminist perspective. Now, intersectionality means someone has many identities, including “non-European heritage, of low socioeconomic status, non-Christian, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT), of limited proficiency in English, or with a special need or disability” (Scanlan & Theoharis, 2016). Intersectionality is a rapidly evolving field of study, and researchers continue to distinguish new identities and statuses included in intersectionality. When multiple statuses or identities meet, it is known as intersectionality. For example, intersectionality may refer to a Black male Veteran with posttraumatic stress disorder. The privilege of being male and a Veteran—a protected class—also intersects with his Blackness and mental disability, meaning that this individual may have competing needs within their mind and body.

According to Schneider’s (2019) theory, based on much of the previous critical consciousness scholarship, there are three aspects of critical consciousness: critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action. Critical awareness is a person’s cognizance of oppression and their societal position relating to others (Freire, 1970; Schneider, 2019). Someone with high critical awareness will be able to classify oppression accurately and understand their relationship with society (Schneider, 2019). Critical reflection is recognizing and identifying the advantages and disadvantages afforded to representatives of various privilege levels (Diemer et al., 2017). Individuals who practice critical reflection will be able to understand where and how they are positioned within society. Critical action is “engagement in social and political activity and advocacy intending to disrupt and change perceived inequalities” (Schneider, 2019).
People with high critical action are quick to confront people whose actions cause exclusion, advocate for marginalized populations, protest unfair legislation, and offer suggestions to upper management to improve work conditions. I interviewed Head Start Education Managers in this study to examine critical action.

This case study was exploratory. The purpose of an exploratory case study “is to identify the research questions or procedures to be used in a subsequent research study” (Yin, 2014, p. 238). I interviewed education managers in a Pacific Northwest Head Start program to see how their critical awareness and reflection influence critical action. This study is descriptive, as I attempted to obtain real-world context, and exploratory, as I am setting up a future research study.

Critical consciousness has been referred to as both a state and a process (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Wallin-Ruschman, 2018; Watts et al., 1999). It is a state because after a person has developed critical consciousness regarding an action damaging to a person with disabilities, for instance, they will always be aware of the impact of that action. Also, the newly critically conscious person now has a sense of efficacy in dealing with similar situations in the future. It has been referred to as a process because understanding damaging actions towards others requires reflection, and action may be required to address the detrimental incident.

However, the matter of highest interest for this study is the critical action aspect of critical consciousness. It is one thing to be aware and reflective, but Freire (1970, 1973) placed high importance on action. Action is how one liberates oneself—not by simply thinking. Awareness and reflection are how individuals conceptualize and
organize potential future actions and actions already conducted. Next, I discuss the research questions I used to guide my study.

**Purpose of the Study**

This exploratory case study aimed to understand better how Head Start Education Managers attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action. Critical consciousness addresses all of a person's marginalizing conditions, identities, or perspectives. Evidence of this is in Bott’s (2013) work with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) clients, Radd and Kramer’s (2016) experience with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and Diemer and his colleagues’ work with marginalized racial communities (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer et al., 2006; Diemer & Li, 2011; Diemer & Ortega, 2010). Also, Watts and colleagues work with ethnic communities that have been marginalized (Watts et al., 1999, 2011), and Schneider (2019) and Wallin-Ruschman’s (2014, 2018) perspectives regarding gender and feminism showed how critical consciousness could address these marginalized conditions. For example, a person adept at advocating for marginalized people may lack the knowledge to do so for disabled people and vice versa.

Conducting a case study in a Head Start district allowed me to study the critical consciousness orientation of their education managers and how well they attend to equity and inclusion in their schools. The study provides meaningful feedback for Head Start leaders and educators at the local Head Start and potentially provides information to Head Start leaders and educators nationally. For future research, I generated knowledge and information for other scholars interested in school leadership, critical consciousness,
and equity and inclusion. I intend to apply this knowledge in my educational practices and conduct interventions in future research.

**Research Question**

How are the critical actions of Education Managers in a Pacific Northwest Head Start program influenced by critical awareness and critical reflection?

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Below, I discuss my assumptions coming into the study, the limitations of my study, and the delimitations.

**Assumptions**

I entered this study assuming that Head Start Center-Based Teachers and Education Managers throughout the country try their best to give their children the care and attention they need. The HSPPS (2016), Teaching and the Learning Environment (2016), the Head Start Act (2007), the U.S.C., and the C.F.R. set their workplace standards, so I assumed they try their best to meet them. I assumed the employees were encumbered more than usual because COVID-19 had placed additional burdens on their classrooms’ operations. I also assumed that my positionality as a researcher and the participants could have triggered self-censorship by the participants.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

This study was conducted by interviewing Head Start Education Managers in a county with some urban areas, many sprawling suburbs, and a vast rural backcountry. Generally, teachers tend to lean politically left, and I assumed this was the case before the interviews (Ward, Bagley, Lumby, Hamilton, Woods, & Roberts, 2016). I was limited by
time, scope, funding, and institutional support. I am a graduate student with a faculty advisor and a committee; therefore, the size of my study was small. Below, I define the terms relevant to my topic. I limited my research to Head Start Education Managers in Oregon.

**Definition of Terms**

The following section includes definitions of terms in critical consciousness literature and Head Start. Below, I have translated into my own words the various definitions found in critical consciousness literature and throughout my document. In a couple of instances, I utilized my understanding of widely understood terms I have worded specifically for this research study. For this paper, the following positions were referred to as educational professions: education manager and center-based preschool teacher.

- **Center-Based Preschool Teacher**: An educator whose main responsibility is teaching a classroom of preschool students (Staff Qualifications and Competency Requirements, 2017 (e)).

- **Critical consciousness (CC)** – The ability to recognize oppression and privilege as it relates to their status or the status of others, reflect upon the impact of oppressiveness and/or unfair advantage or benefit, and act to end oppression through humanizing behaviors and advocacy (Freire, 1970).

- **Critical awareness**: The ability to identify oppressed status and oppression, including one’s relationship between self and society (Freire, 1970).
CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN HEAD START LEADERSHIP

- Critical reflection: The ability to perceive inequalities and recognize dominant culture privilege (Diemer et al., 2017). Critically reflective people understand oppression in terms of systems (Watts et al., 2011, p. 46).

- Critical action: Engagement in social and political activity and advocacy with the intent to disrupt and change perceived inequalities (Diemer et al., 2017). The actions of people or groups when participating in protesting, organizing, advocating, and volunteering (Watts et al., 2011).

- Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five: This framework outlines what children should be able to do through preschool. It is bolstered and grounded by extensive research (Office of Head Start, 2015).

- Education Manager: The equivalent of a K-12 principal in Head Start who manages a Head Start school location (Staff Qualifications and Competency Requirements, 2017, (d)(2)).

- Head Start Act (2007): A bill signed into law by President George Bush that made many sweeping institutional changes at Head Start, some positive, some negative.


- Marginalization: To relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

- Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders: A professional development tool that “provides recent research and perspectives on key multicultural principles
and offers guidance to staff on how to implement these principles in their programs (Office of Head Start, 2020).

- **Oppressed:** Members of a general population who have been historically marginalized by the dominant culture (Freire, 1970).

- **Privileged:** Members of the dominant culture that benefit from social advantage, immunity, and association with the culture of power (Case, 2013).

**Summary**

I introduced a brief history of Head Start’s social justice mission. I noted that there is scant scholarship regarding critical consciousness in Head Start leadership. Educational leadership and its relationship with critical consciousness have also been underexamined.

I conducted an exploratory case study to understand better how urban, suburban, and rural Head Start leaders attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action. I improved my understanding of the dynamics of Head Start educators that work in urban, suburban, and rural locations. I described, analyzed, and juxtaposed Head Start laws, policies, and guidelines to determine how well Education Managers attend to equity and inclusion in their schools. Critical consciousness, educational leadership, and Head Start are the literature gaps addressed. Lately, educational leadership at Head Start is a subject of concern; however, to my knowledge, critical consciousness has not been systematically studied within Head Start frameworks. Next, I review the prevailing literature on critical consciousness, educational leadership, and Head Start.
Chapter 2: Evaluating the Existing Evidence Through the Literature

Critical consciousness is the ability to be aware, reflect, and act to overcome adversity and oppression (Freire, 1970, 1973; Schneider, 2019). Diemer and his colleagues have shown that when people are faced with adversity and learn critical consciousness, they make better life decisions with better results (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016).

Below, I present my chronological literature review on critical consciousness and all related topics relevant to my study. The first section is my theoretical framework for the study I conducted. This section uncovers critical awareness, reflection, and critical action. The second section centers on leadership in education from a critical consciousness lens. I discuss general issues and some contemporary perspectives in modern educational leadership. In the third section, I cover the Head Start policy from its inception. Lastly, I focus on Head Start leadership, what governs them, the kind of professional development opportunities these leaders have, and the influence of policy on leadership.

The critical consciousness section has three parts: 1) Critical consciousness and marginalized communities; 2) New quantitative measurements for critical consciousness, where we find more attempts to measure critical consciousness with a new wave of quantitative research; and 3) New perspectives on critical consciousness, where I unpack the major contributions to critical consciousness from 2014 to date. Although there were some significant advances in this era for the quantitative measurement of critical consciousness, they were all limited by a significant factor—the perception that the
privileged have no business with critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2016). I end this section with new insights from scholars attempting different approaches to studying critical consciousness. Some of these scholars introduced new topics to be addressed by critical consciousness, such as feminism and intersectionality. Next, I share my theoretical framework for this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Various attempts describe the process and elements of critical consciousness throughout the literature. Early on, Watts et al. (1999) identified five stages of critical consciousness development discussed further in the *critical awareness* section. Watts et al.’s (1999) research are essential because it forms many of the following conceptualizations of critical consciousness. The first two—acritical and adaptive—can easily fall within Schneider’s (2019) understanding of awareness (Figure 1). The following two—precritical and critical—align with her conceptualization of reflection (Figure 1). The fifth is behavioral or action (Figure 1). I based my study on Schneider’s (2019) three-element model of critical consciousness; therefore, I have related Watt et al.’s (2011) early work to Schneider’s (2019) study.

For my investigation, I considered critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action as the three fundamental aspects of critical consciousness, despite the various existing conceptualizations—see Figure 1 (Schneider, 2019). I explain in detail some of these conceptualizations later in the chapter. Furthermore, Schneider adapted the multiple notions of critical consciousness to the profession of educators in her 2019
study. This three-element adaptation of critical consciousness is apt for educators, and I will discuss it next.

**Figure 1**

*Schneider's Three-Element Model of Critical Consciousness*

I selected Schneider’s theoretical framework because few theoretical frameworks exist to study the critical consciousness of educators, let alone predominately White participants. Also, Schneider (2019) has recently conducted her study, making it a more salient and current framework. Regarding awareness, one needs to identify oppression and be aware of consciousness and how it changes over time (Freire, 1970; Houser & Overton, 2001; Schneider, 2019). Concerning critical reflection, one must be aware of the perceived inequalities and know how to recognize privileges (Case, 2013; Diemer et al., 2017; Schneider, 2019). Critical action requires “participation in individual or collective social action to effect social change” (Diemer & Li, 2011, p. 1815) for the general
population. “Sociopolitical activity and advocacy by educators to eliminate academic disparities experienced by CLD (culturally and linguistically diverse) students” is a form of critical action on behalf of educators (Schneider, 2019, pp. 22-23). Next, I discuss critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action in more detail.

**Critical Awareness**

Critical awareness is a person’s aptitude to recognize various categories of oppression (Freire, 1973). It is also a common element throughout critical consciousness literature. Watts et al. (1999) elaborated on aspects of awareness. They said there are acritical, adaptive, precritical, critical, and liberation stages. A lack of awareness of asymmetry in society defines the acritical stage. The adaptive stage is where inequity is acknowledged but seen as unchangeable leading people to employ strategies that uphold the status quo (Watts et al., 1999). The precritical stage is where complacency becomes awareness, and concerns arise about the differences in equity and equality (Watts et al., 1999). The critical stage is when individuals recognize their inequities but cannot act on them for various reasons. Watts et al. (1999) identified a precritical stage, which aligns well with Schneider's (2019) critical awareness in her theoretical framework.

There are two elements of critical awareness in Schneider’s (2019) theoretical framework: identification of oppression and awareness of one’s consciousness. People need to be aware of their marginalization by analyzing the many overlapping systems of oppression in their environment (Freire, 1970; Shin et al., 2016). Too often, representatives of the status quo, such as educators, underestimate their role in maintaining the marginalizing conditions of their students. With reflection, these social
elements can understand how their position in life affects marginalized communities in their municipalities. Houser and Overton (2001) showed that critical consciousness has a more profound element regarding awareness: awareness of consciousness. As people develop over the years, their consciousness changes and they must be mindful of these changes. As Houser and Overton indicated, unfortunately, one cannot simply be aware of oppression and then be free from it. Awareness of oppression naturally leads one to reflect, and reflection is necessary to understand oppression further and formulate prospective engagements with persecutors.

**Critical Reflection**

The following commonly discussed stage of critical consciousness is important because we can analyze, discuss, understand, and plan to organize, protest, vote, or run for political office through reflection. Critical action often requires reflection for precision, but critical action does not always arise out of critical reflection. Diemer et al. (2006) stated that “critical consciousness represents the capacity to critically reflect and act upon one’s sociopolitical environment” (p. 445). They conducted a study that showed teachers are a good influence on students’ critical reflection but do not influence critical action as much. In three different studies, Diemer and Li (2011), Diemer et al. (2006), and Watts and Flanagan (2007) showed that peers and parents have a more substantial influence on critical consciousness development than teachers do.

Schneider (2019), supported by Case (2013) and Diemer et al. (2016, 2017), identified perceived inequality and recognition of privilege as elements of critical reflection. Perceived inequality is defined by Diemer et al. (2017) as “a critical analysis
of perceived social inequalities, such as racial/ethnic, gendered, and socioeconomic constraints on educational and occupational opportunity” (p. 2). The perception of inequality comes hand-in-hand with recognizing privilege (McIntosh, 2012). Identifying inequalities is a crucial aspect of critical reflection because without this ability, how can a person recognize privilege?

Wallin-Ruschman (2014) asserted that “critical reflection involves the unveiling of oppression” (p. 92). Wallin-Ruschman and a colleague demonstrated that collective reflection with varying viewpoints leads to more robust understandings that may unveil more than just individual reflection or reflection in a gathering of like-minded individuals (Wallin-Ruschman & Patka, 2016). Diemer et al. (2006) and Diemer and Li (2011) showed that critical reflection could be facilitated amongst teenagers. The literature has shown the remarkable abilities of teenagers to be critically reflective (Baker & Brookins, 2014; Diemer et al., 2006;), and if they practice the action-reflection cycle, more of these teenagers may act (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). It is fascinating to note that while teenagers are generally less developed than adults, these studies suggest they possess a powerful inclination toward critical reflection. Critical reflection and critical action can create a virtuous cycle—indeed, the critical consciousness practitioner vacillates between critical reflection and critical action. Next, I discuss critical action because people, communities, societies, and civilizations do not change without action.

**Critical Action**

Critical action is what citizens do for liberation (Diemer et al., 2016; Freire, 1970; Jemal, 2017). Watts et al. (1999) called their action component the liberation stage, and
later Watts et al. (2011) revisited the stages of critical consciousness and said that critical action “is the action of a person or groups when they participate in protesting, volunteering, voting, and organizing” (p. 46-47). “Sociopolitical activity and advocacy by educators to eliminate academic disparities experienced by CLD (culturally and linguistically diverse) students” (Schneider, 2019, p. 22-23) are critical actions. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), educators can help students legitimize their lived experiences, become class leaders, work to change systems to benefit them, and help improve their awareness and reflection abilities.

**Summary**

Examining the literature on critical awareness, reflection, and action, I have become increasingly curious about the intertwined nature of these three layers of criticality. I asked educational leaders to share their stories about critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action. Further, I explored the dynamics of awareness-reflection and reflection-action. The body of literature helped me find a central point of curiosity from which I interviewed Head Start Education Managers. I explored and examined what leadership looks like in a Head Start program. In the next section, I discuss educational leadership.

**Leadership in Education**

Education leaders must consider the various elements of the human experience and act upon them to create a safe learning environment for all stakeholders in a school setting. These elements include disability, poverty, race, English learners, the LGBTQ community, gender, family and community engagement, and the intersectionalities of the
elements above (Baily & Katradis, 2016; Bender-Slack, 2010; Lyons & Drew, 2006; Place et al., 2010; Theoharis, 2007a; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). Indeed, the onus is upon educational leaders to establish a safe environment for everyone to learn and grow (Larrabee & Morehead, 2010).

It takes many people to operate a school; one could say that everyone in the school assists in its operation, if not always formally, then at least informally—including faculty, staff, and students. Although students teach their teachers a great deal, students are not paid to lead in a school setting. Indeed, teachers have the most direct impact on students due to their close relationship with one another in the classrooms (Birky et al., 2006; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015), with educational leaders coming in a close second place (Theoharis, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). Educational Administrators, including principals, as educational leaders, influence their teachers’ working conditions, moods, desires to continue growing in their craft, and other aspects that foster a congenial learning environment.

Creating a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for all school participants includes educational leaders empowering their teachers. Suppose educational leaders impact students as strongly as Theoharis (2007a, 2007b, 2008), Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) suggested. In that case, it should be a goal of all schools to be engaged in implementing equitable programs. Researchers have recognized that school leaders must use their power to advocate for their students and families (Larrabee & Morehead, 2010; Murray, 2010; Ratts & Wood, 2011, Santamaria, 2014; Sarid, 2019; Shaked, 2019;
Theoharis, 2007a, 2007b). If they do not engage in critical action on behalf of their students, it would be difficult to make advances to support them better.

Leaders must also build anti-bias in early childhood programs (Derman-Sparks et al., 2015a, 2015b). “Building an anti-bias ECCE program requires shifting the dominant-culture core of a program’s thinking, organizational structures, and practice” (Derman-Sparks et al., 2015a, Sec 1). Implementing such a shift in the status quo can be challenging because “anti-bias work does generate disagreements and dissonance” (Derman-Sparks et al., 2015a, Sec 3). Still, it is part of the process, and leaders should prepare themselves. Quintero et al. (2015) viewed storytelling as a viable method of teacher preparation and empowerment to engage in anti-bias discussion. They stated, “using stories as teacher preparation is vital, serving as a means of teacher empowerment. Higher education students of today will be teaching children of diverse histories and cultures tomorrow, and their own experiences will guide them” (p. 39).

Like any public education system, Head Start has a set of professional standards to which it must adhere. Below, I review the purpose, history, and current circumstances under which Head Start now operates. I also examine whether and to what degree Head Start aligns with critical consciousness in its teaching and leadership practices.

**Head Start Policy**

Instituted towards the end of the civil rights movement, Head Start aimed at addressing the disparities of families in poverty. Starting the same year of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Head Start set the foundation for its mission—to help children and families experiencing poverty by working to address generational destitution. After the
Civil Rights Act of 1964, the US government designated Head Start as an agency with the Designation of Head Start Agencies (1965), enabling the secretary to allow Head Start to be a government agency. Research-informed and part of the civil rights movement, Head Start began helping more than 560,000 children and families during the summer of 1965 (Head Start Timeline, 2019).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 established a baseline where employers could not hire, fire, discriminate, limit, segregate, or classify “in any way which would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect his (sic) status as an employee, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin” (Sec. 703). It was not until 1975 that Head Start published its performance standards (Office of Child Development, 1975). The original Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) did not directly address employees' rights; therefore, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 de facto covered employee civil rights. Some language regarding children and families can be found in the performance standards to “provide enrollment of eligible children regardless of race, sex, creed, color, national origin, or handicapping condition” (Office of Child Development, 1975, p. 58). Further, the Office of Child Development document states that Head Start programs should reflect the racial composition of the families attending (p. 66), avoid stereotyping based on sex, race, or ethnicity (p. 7, 66), and provide resources that reflect the race and ethnicity of the children (p. 12). When combining the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the mission of Head Start to address poverty, and the HSPPS, a well-rounded approach to addressing exclusion and inequity was developed (Office of Head Start, 2016; Equal Employment Opportunities
Act, 1964). It was suitable for its time; however, race, sex, skin color, disability, and religion are not the only topics applicable to critical consciousness.

Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 explicitly barred employers from discriminating against their employees or prospective employees, there was no mention of this in the original HSPPS. The new Nondiscrimination Provisions (1981) were published. They stated that the secretary would not provide financial assistance to projects, programs, or activities wherein people discriminate based on race, creed, color, national origin, sex, political affiliation, beliefs, and disability (Office of Child Development, 1975). In 1981, the Office of Head Start had not yet provided any guidance regarding the nondiscrimination of employees. Children and families are to reflect the demographics of their constituent enrollees and not engage in stereotyping (Office of Child Development, 1975). Finally, in 2007, Head Start added the language from the Nondiscrimination Provisions (1981) that covers nondiscrimination of employees in their official policies (Head Start Act, 2007). It was not until 2016, when the Office of Head Start published its new program performance standards, they updated their language regarding children and families (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Timeline for Head Start's Evolution of Rights and Actions Taken*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline of Civil Rights at Head Start</th>
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<td>Civil Rights Act, 1964</td>
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- Bars employers from discriminating against their employees or prospective employees.

**Head Start Program Performance Standards, 1975**

- Provide enrollment of eligible children regardless of race, sex, creed, color, national origin, or handicapping condition.


- The secretary would not provide financial assistance to projects, programs, or activities wherein people discriminate based on race, creed, color, national origin, sex, political affiliation, beliefs, and disability.

**Head Start Act § 654, 2007**

- Attempted to measure teacher effectiveness, increase the educational requirements of teachers, and improve school readiness. Also, implemented the Designation Renewal System.

**Head Start Early Learning Outcomes: Ages birth to five, 2015**

- Provided guidelines on setting up programs to “guide choices in curriculum and learning materials, to play daily activities, and to inform intentional teaching practices.”

**Head Start Program Performance Standards 2016**

- Guides staff, consultants, contractors, and volunteers respect and promote the unique identity of each child and family and do not stereotype on any basis.

**Multicultural Principals for Early Childhood Leaders 2020**
- Offers guidance to staff on implementing recent research and perspectives on key multicultural principles in their programs.

Moving into the modern era, the 2016 HSPPS added many parts to how the organization will address its operations and services. Personnel Policies (2016) states that employees shall conduct themselves to ensure that they “respect and promote the unique identity of each child and family and do not stereotype on any basis, including gender, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or family composition” (c)(iii). It took 51 years for Head Start to protect the civil rights of its employees and the children and families they serve.

Law and policy comprise the foundations of any well-functioning organization and set the tone for how it will engage with its employees and target clientele. It was long before the Office of Head Start took the initiative to write its policies to be more inclusive. Although it could be argued that Head Start was utilizing existing statutes to guide its operations, it did not apply such regulations directly until the 1975 performance standards (Office of Child Development, 1975). Regarding social justice, Head Start focused on reflecting its constituent demographics in Head Start’s workforce, not stereotyping based on sex roles or racial and ethnic backgrounds, as noted in the Office of Child Development (1975, pp. 7, 10). They ensured enrollment was not biased regarding “race, sex, creed, color, national origin, or handicapping condition” (p. 58). Recently, however, the Head Start Act of 2007 and the updated HSPPS published in 2016 added stronger language and expanded its scope.
The 1975 performance standards indicated that “classroom materials and activities which reflect the cultural background of children” are necessary to ensure that the curriculum is “relevant and reflective of the needs of the population served” (Office of Child Development, 1975, p. 12). The quote above can be construed to mean that they are working towards the stated goal in the 2016 performance standards to “foster trust and emotional security” with Head Start children (Teaching and the Learning Environment, 2016, sec (b)(i)). This interpretation is apt because reflecting children's cultural background lets them know they are welcome and acknowledged (Office of Head Start, 2020). In this regard, Head Start has been effectively working towards this goal, although not explicitly stated until 1975. There are Head Start reports on how to improve leadership, child attendance, family engagement, and many other topics. The ELOF guides the development of children in the program up to age five. The Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders (2020) is a valuable tool for childcare educators to understand and serve children and families from various cultures, races, and ethnicities. Combined with United States law (U.S.C. & C.F.R.), the Head Start Act (2007), and the revised performance standards of 2016 (HSPPS, 2016), practitioners have a solid foundation to apply critically conscious educational leadership nationwide.

Even though the organization helps children and families with vital societal issues in the United States, Head Start is not mentioned with critical consciousness in the prevailing literature and government reports because of how new the concept is. The performance standards published by the Office of Child Development (1975) stated that Head Start programs should reflect the demographics of their neighborhoods. They
should also provide and present resources and class materials that reflect student demographics (p. 12, 66) and avoid stereotyping based on sex, race, or ethnicity (p. 7, 66). It took ten years for Head Start to publish performance standards for its employees, leaving a wide array of applications of its services that may or may not serve its mission to address poverty in the United States.

George W. Bush signed the Head Start Act in 2007 to measure teacher effectiveness, increase the educational requirements of teachers, and improve school readiness. The Designation Renewal System—was established to make schools compete for funding if they fall under specific criteria (Head Start Act, 2007). In 2016 the revised Head Start Program Performance Standards were published, consolidating the language of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1975 performance standards into one document that provides guidelines for all Head Start. The revised Head Start performance standards were the first time Head Start officially provided protections under its banner using its policies. A year prior, the Office of Head Start (2015) published the ELOF: Ages Birth to Five, which provided guidelines on how to set up programs to “guide choices in curriculum and learning materials, to play daily activities, and to inform intentional teaching practices” (p. 2). On their website, Head Start also published culturally responsive guidelines called Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders (Office of Head Start, 2020). Head Start currently protects its educators under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The act ensures “staff, consultants, contractors, and volunteers respect and promote the unique identity of each child and family and do not stereotype on any basis”
(Head Start Program Performance Standards, 2016, p. 61431) and has robust guidelines for cultural responsiveness. In the next section, I discuss Head Start and its leadership.

**Head Start Leadership**

Head Start’s treatment of children and families could make the organization synonymous with critical consciousness because of the new HSPPS, the Head Start Act, Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders, workplace culture, and legal statutes such as the U.S.C. and C.F.R. There are, however, many reports, dissertations, and peer-reviewed articles on Head Start leadership, which were important in this literature review and informed my study. Head Start did well from the beginning to genuinely care for children and their families and want to provide the best possible services to them. The Head Start Act (2007), the U.S.C., the C.F.R., Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders (2020), ELOF, Ages Birth to Five (2015), and passionate educators are how Head Start maintains its vision. Head Start has maintained its vision despite scant written policies directing employees to be equitable and inclusive in their roles until 2007. To understand Head Start and its educational leadership, one must consider Bloom et al.’s (1991) assessment of Head Start’s professional development program.

Participants expressed satisfaction with a program format that encouraged the expression and acceptance of diversity. Specifically, they seemed to feel that they had become more open and more tolerant of differing positions and ideas. Such involvement appeared to move them in the direction of more abstract, generalized thinking. In class discussions, instructors witnessed, over time, more assertive
attempts to problem solve and consider alternative solutions to situations. As the program progressed, the exchange of ideas and the active debate of issues became more pronounced. This same perception was shared by the students and reflected in their personal statements. Overall, it seemed apparent that this training model was effective in facilitating the exchange of meaningful dialogue in a supportive environment. (p. 64)

Bloom et al. also noted that the study participants became more confident in their ability to advocate for their staff, children, and parents (p. 64). Two findings in this report concerned how the leadership program improved leader self-efficacy in 28 areas of knowledge and skills and reduced the gap between theory and practice. Two other findings report that program participants were happy about expressing and accepting diversity. The program increased confidence to advocate for their staff, children, and families—the critical action aspect of critical consciousness. Judging by Bloom et al.’s report, elements of critical consciousness are practiced widely in Head Start. It may be safe to say that most Head Start educators did not know about critical consciousness at this point; however, they worked for an organization that integrated its elements unbeknownst to them at the time. Significantly, as a next step, I must review Head Start’s latest leadership practices according to government reports, their leadership professional development website that is free to view online, and some recent scholarly work on Head Start leadership.

Thompson et al. (2016) showed in their photovoice study that stories helped “promote change by empowering and engaging partners as well as creating outreach
possibilities” (p. 314). Photovoice places research in the hands of the participants and researchers. Participants can capture images with cameras representing the stories they wish to tell researchers, thereby providing richer data at more profound levels. The project had tangible impacts on the indigenous communities that researchers worked with. The partners—the indigenous participants in the study—left the project empowered. They shared their story with their larger communities and were pleasantly surprised by “how much change and social action resulted from their (italics in original quote) story.” They improved the physical facilities they interacted with and transformed how they teach by incorporating indigenous stories.

Castelloe and Watson (1999) wrote about the importance of participatory education. They distinguished between the banking method of pedagogy and Freire’s dialogic approach to learning. Their study looked at participatory education and juxtaposed it with the banking teaching method—a less-effective mode of instruction. The dialogical nature of the Freireian education model helped Family Resource Managers develop a vision, which the authors touted as “an untapped resource in the struggle against poverty and injustice” (p. 87). They went on to state that “these lessons were profoundly valuable. Thus, in participatory education, it may be that the most significant lessons are learned not by the ‘students,’ but by the ‘teachers’” (p. 87). When educational leaders have a vision combined with stories from the community, there is coherence regarding effecting change at the institutional level. The two studies above showed how involving the community in education and storytelling leads to institutional and potential community change.
Next, I discuss two reports from Arabella Advisors (2018, 2019) regarding Head Start and early childhood leadership. Arabella Advisors is an organization that conducts work on behalf of other professional businesses and organizations seeking improvements in specific areas. One of the reports showed research to determine appropriate funding for leadership development at Head Start (2018). The other attempted to build on this to resolve challenges and potential professional development solutions the budget can address (2019). The 2019 study also discussed professional development courses that leaders could take. Hooker (2012) stated that “Head Start directors are life-long learners seeking PD [professional development] relevant to professional goals and objectives” (p. 84) and that they pursue knowledge in their professional competency areas. Like Arabella Advisors (2018, 2019) and Hooker (2012), Gonzales (2014, 2015) has recently written about leadership practices at Head Start. However, Gonzales conducted research from the perspective of transformational leadership—a leadership style conducive to critical consciousness. “This type of leadership style involves the leader being able to identify needed change, create a vision, and inspire followers to meet that vision” (Gonzales, 2015). Arabella Advisors (2018, 2019), Hooker (2012), and Gonzales (2014, 2015) all wrote about Head Start leadership. Still, none of them focused on topics and issues addressed by critical consciousness—aside from Arabella Advisors (2018) identifying that some colleges and universities require at least one social justice course for early childhood educators.

Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) identified nine areas of concern regarding equitable and inclusive leadership: intersectionality, disability, poverty, race, English learners,
LGBT status, gender/feminism, religion, and community and family engagement. Similarly, critical consciousness inherently requires the analysis of the above aspects to understand and analyze one's place within interlocking systems of oppression within society (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Watts et al., 1999, 2011). Whether a practitioner focuses on educational leadership, such as Theoharis and Scanlan (2015), or transformational leadership, such as Gonzales (2014, 2015), critical consciousness can provide the underlying structure for what is necessary to achieve either leadership style.

I interviewed Head Start leaders to discover the strategies they have employed to meet the needs of their families in such a tumultuous time. A safe learning atmosphere is a critical aspect of the HSPPS for teaching and the learning environment (Teaching and the Learning Environment, 2016, sec (b)(i)). This atmosphere is in line with what equitable and inclusive pedagogical practices attempt to achieve (Theoharis, 2007a, 2007b; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015; Scanlan & Theoharis, 2016), and hopefully, a natural conclusion to practicing critical consciousness in school settings.

**Summary**

Critical consciousness and educational leadership are rarely mentioned together. The discussions around critical consciousness have concerned the same kind of communities that Paulo Freire worked with during his original research in Brazil—rural low-income workers. Critical consciousness has been quantitatively researched, with a few studies exploring qualitative inquiry, but mostly with school-aged children and adolescents. Below, I discuss, analyze, and review the prevailing critical consciousness literature related to the nine areas of equitable and inclusive educational leadership.

**Critical Consciousness**

Below, I have analyzed critical consciousness chronologically, starting with Paulo Freire’s seminal work (Freire, 1970, 1973). Research into this topic began with many quantitative studies and a few qualitative reports. In the mid-2000s, work on critical consciousness favored quantitative studies of marginalized classes due to the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy (see Carlson et al., 2006; Diemer et al., 2006). The next decade witnessed researchers attempting various methods of measuring the critical consciousness of the marginalized and non-marginalized (e.g., Diemer et al., 2017; Schneider, 2019) with various levels of success. Finally, the new era of critical consciousness included novel perspectives from Wallin-Ruschman (2014, 2018); Wallin-Ruschman and Patka (2016); Schneider (2019)—which is my theoretical framework. Other views include Jemal’s work (2017, 2018), Jemal et al. (2020), and Watts et al. (1999). They all have in common the notion that each of us can develop critical consciousness, regardless of our backgrounds, which is difficult to measure and relies heavily on context.

**Critical Consciousness and Marginalized Communities**

Freire (1970, 1973) did much of his work in Brazil around the same time as the civil rights movement in the USA. There he laid the groundwork for critical consciousness in schools as a method of liberation, recognizing that schools are often institutions of oppression (1970, 1973). Some scholars such as Watts et al. (1999),
Diemer et al. (2006), and Jemal (2018) agree that oppression is an affliction to which the antidote is critical consciousness. Freire’s (1970, 1973) accomplishments in the conscientization of marginalized people in Brazil were groundbreaking. Freire (1970, 1973) worked with illiterate adults and found that education practiced in a dialectic gave them profound power. They began questioning their place in society and became critical of their political establishment. His foundational research showed that people could think from a more critically conscious perspective, becoming aware of their oppressed situation (Freire, 1970). Once aware of their oppressed status, they can reflect upon what is necessary to change their position, and after they reflect, the idea is that they would be motivated to act on behalf of their convictions. It took three decades after Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) was published for large-scale data collection in critical consciousness to begin beyond Freire’s original research. Luckily for earth’s oppressed citizens, the past two decades have seen a steadily building library of research into critical consciousness.

Picking up where Freire (1970, 1973) left off, Watts et al. (1999) worked with young African American men in the Young Warriors program. As discussed earlier, I outlined what Watts et al. (1999) showed in their study. Watts et al. (1999) also mentioned something important about oppression: “Although one may be oppressed in one context, that same individual may be the oppressor in another” (p. 258). The dichotomous nature of oppression is essential to understand if someone thinks of oppression as only happening to one social, cultural, or ethnic community. Watts et al. (1999) also put forth the idea that oppression is “a state and a process” (p. 257). It is a
state because oppression is what someone is immersed in; it is a process because the oppressor must continue the injustice for it to work.

Many scholars continued their work with young marginalized communities. Diemer et al. (2006) investigated whether adolescents higher in critical consciousness decided to react to social injustice based on their familial support. Diemer and Blustein (2006) and Diemer and Ortega (2010) studied whether critical consciousness is a factor in career development, and Carlson et al. (2006) conducted a photovoice ethnography with adolescent students to see whether the students could move from a state of helplessness to a state of empowerment. Photovoice is a qualitative research method where “participants use cameras to visually document their lives and are discussed by the group to engage in critical analysis of the issues they mutually encounter and collectively discuss potential solutions” (Baker & Brookins, 2014, p. 1019). Also, Diemer et al. (2006) found that student or familial support systems did not influence the action component of critical consciousness; rather, the reflection component was affected. The lack of influence is vital, and Diemer et al. (2006) indicated three possible reasons for this situation. First, there are constraints on adolescents’ capacity for action due to their inexperience and not being old enough to vote or run for office. Second, there is a lack of meaningful guidance for youth on being effective at sociopolitical action (Diemer et al., 2006). The third reason is that the school context may hinder or bolster their perceived efficacy to influence change in their environments (Diemer et al., 2006). Although Diemer et al.’s (2006) study did not increase willingness to act on injustice, it found that peer, family, and community support fosters meaningful reflection.
The studies by Diemer and Blustein (2006) and Diemer and Ortega (2010) explored the role of critical consciousness in predicting the career development of high school students, and career development amongst Australian aboriginal peoples, respectively. They revealed that critically conscious community members have better career development outcomes than those less critically conscious (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer & Ortega, 2010). Maintaining a view of one’s sociopolitical environment and position within that environment enables one to maneuver better throughout society. Like Watts et al.’s (1999) perspective of oppression being a state and a process, Diemer and Blustein (2006) introduced critical consciousness as a state and a process. For Carlson et al. (2006), photovoice has proven to be a valuable tool when engaging youths in critical consciousness development. They found that photovoice as a social process increased participants' critical consciousness, even though the authors complained that doing so required “active facilitation” (p. 850).

As scholarship expanded, more scholars attended to the action component of critical consciousness (Diemer & Li, 2011; Tunstall, 2011; Watts et al., 2011). Reflecting upon the work of Freire (1970, 1973) and other critical consciousness researchers, Watts et al. (2011) identified three elements of critical consciousness: critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Critical reflection is when people analyze society while rejecting social inequities. Political efficacy is how people and communities think about their ability to affect social change. Critical action is people acting to influence social change (Watts et al., 2011). This conceptualization of critical consciousness contrasted with Watts et al.’s (1999) thinking that identified five separate stages of critical
consciousness and was closer to Freire’s (1970, 1973) perspective of critical consciousness.

Tunstall (2011) demonstrated that it is possible to create change agents via critical consciousness development when she investigated 19 students attending the Los Angeles Mentoring Program (LAMP). Utilizing a phenomenological approach, she studied the critical consciousness development of African Americans in LAMP. She found this approach succeeded in developing their critical consciousness, but the students developed into change agents. Although the students grew their critical consciousness and became change agents, they experienced heavy resistance from students and teachers to their newfound perspectives—remarkably, like the principals studied by Theoharis and colleagues (Theoharis, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). Nevertheless, many LAMP participants persisted in their critical action behaviors into college.

In a quantitative study in which African Americans, Latinos, and Asians were purposely oversampled, Diemer and Li (2011) gathered important data regarding the role of social support networks in critical consciousness development. They measured people’s attitudes about government and sociopolitical issues with 1,674 respondents. Additionally, they wanted to see how critical action modified traditional voting behavior. They found that family and peer support is more influential than support from teachers or educational leaders (Diemer & Li, 2011). Although their data supported the idea that teachers allowed open discussion regarding sociopolitical issues in class, they also noted that teachers rarely addressed social injustice, if at all—the same goes for educational leaders (Diemer & Li, 2011). They proposed some possibilities for why teachers may not
be as impactful as peers and family. Diemer and Li (2011) thought the teachers did not emphasize social inequality in the classroom. They are too far removed from the experiences of their students to influence critical action or simply that teachers are only influential on critical reflection. If teachers and educational leaders could emphasize topics of social injustice in the school and classrooms and find a way to connect meaningfully with students, we would have a more solid answer regarding what precisely a teacher or educational leader can influence. Perhaps, educators can engage in storytelling with their students to bridge these societal gaps (Quintero et al., 2015). Many students would be surprised to know that many teachers have had barriers in their lives.

Shifting to social work, Turner-Essel (2013) studied the critical consciousness of Black women in the social work field. These researchers explored the perceptions of the circumstances that contributed to their critical consciousness development. Turner-Essel showed that Black women in social work must resist oppression from many directions. Their critical consciousness development is an essential aspect of how they resist marginalization. Social workers are also on the front lines of how to treat the various individuals and communities under their purview.

Bott (2013) studied social workers' engagement with LGB clients via a quantitative study of 220 social workers. She found that social workers engaged in critical action—advocacy being a critical action component of critical consciousness—had increased engagement in productive LGB interactions. The study also found that increased critical consciousness positively correlates with social worker knowledge, skill, and ability to serve the LGB population. Unfortunately, when asked about what activities
they viewed as the action component of critical consciousness, they mentioned research and knowledge about laws and legislation instead of participation in rallies, volunteering, or collecting petitions (Bott, 2013). This example provides the necessary evidence that there is still much work to be done when conceptualizing and engaging in critical action.

Baker and Brookins (2014) studied Salvadorian youths—continuing the work with marginalized communities. In a mixed-method study, these researchers used photovoice—similar to Carlson et al. (2006)—to explore sociopolitical development dimensions with two groups of rural adolescents in El Salvador. The themes derived from the qualitative data resulted in a questionnaire administered to 682 Salvadorian high school students from five high schools in three regions of El Salvador. In the qualitative portion of the study, Baker and Brookins (2014) identified five themes: (1) awareness of their sociopolitical situations, (2) understanding inequities, (3) social responsibility, (4) efficacy to make changes in society, and (5) the actions to do so (p. 1029). These five themes are close to what Watts et al. (1999) proposed; however, it is more in line with the common themes found in Watts et al. (2011), Diemer et al. (2006), and Diemer and Li (2011). These researchers have all identified critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action as the primary components of critical consciousness.

Thus far in my review of critical consciousness, I have found studies that focus primarily on marginalized youths, except by Turner-Essel (2013), who studied Black women professionals working in social work. Another noteworthy piece is by Roy et al. (2019), who examined marginalized youths via a mixed-methods study. They found that community violence, prejudice and intolerance, world issues, and economic disparities
are the most important topics. They showed that “greater exposure to violence and neighborhood income inequality were related to an increased likelihood of engaging in critical action” (Roy et al., 2019, p. 1). Critical consciousness research gained momentum in the mid-2000s when more articles were published, including those not focusing on marginalized communities.

Although much of the research has taken place in marginalized communities, the era of looking at critical consciousness as an issue that only marginalized people could relate to has ended. Heeding to Watts et al. (1999), researchers such as Borow (2015), Wallin-Ruschman (2014), Radd and Kramer (2016), Shin et al. (2016), and Diemer (2020) recognized that there is virtue in understanding, measuring, and developing the critical consciousness of non-marginalized individuals and communities as well. Next, I discuss the subsequent evolution of critical consciousness research: recognizing that this skill can help everyone—not just what conventional wisdom refers to as marginalized communities.

**New Quantitative Measurements for Critical Consciousness**

From 2014 to 2020, at least four teams of researchers (Thomas et al., 2014; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016; Shin et al., 2016, Diemer et al., 2017), a Ph.D. student (Schneider, 2019), and a social worker (Jemal et al., 2020) each attempted to develop a scale to measure critical consciousness. Thomas et al.’s (2014) Critical Consciousness Inventory (CCI), Shin et al.’s (2016) Contemporary Critical Consciousness Measure (CCCM), and Jemal et al.’s (2020) Transformative Consciousness of Oppression and Privilege could be utilized to assess general critical consciousness—although Jemal et al.
(2020) never had her highly effective instrument validated. McWhirter and McWhirter’s (2016) Measure of Adolescent Critical Consciousness (MACC) scale can be used to measure the critical action of Latinx youth, and Diemer et al.’s (2017) Critical Consciousness Scale (CCS) focused on marginalized communities. Schneider (2019), however, specifically studied the critical consciousness of educators.

The CCI was developed and validated with a diverse sample of students from a White postsecondary institution and a historically Black university utilizing a quantitative method (Thomas et al., 2014). This scale is tuned to interpersonal interactions and probing sensitivity to interpersonal discrimination. The questions on the inventory ask for responses to jokes about social groups, reactions to witnessing prejudice or oppression, and the like. The scores from this scale were juxtaposed with scores from Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). The SDO is the opposite of critical consciousness. It is an orientation where people believe that social status is hierarchal and not based on equality (Thomas et al., 2014). Although this scale addresses a lack of critical consciousness measurement, it relies on self-reporting to gather the data. Since critical consciousness can be viewed as a skill developed over time, perhaps assessing critical consciousness could be accomplished with skills-based questions instead.

Like the work done by Diemer and colleagues (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer & Ortega, 2010), McWhirter and McWhirter (2016) conducted a quantitative study examining critical consciousness and vocational development in Latinx high school students. They developed the MACC to study Latinx students. It measures critical motivation, an adolescent’s self-reported agency to make a change, and motivation to
work towards social change. The MACC has two subscales, the first—critical agency—shows to what degree a person is concerned with inequality and inequity, their willingness to do something about it, and whether a person thinks they will be successful doing so (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016). The second subscale—critical behavior—is the same as critical action—the action component of critical consciousness that Watts et al. (2011), Bott (2013), Diemer et al. (2006), and other critical consciousness researchers have identified. Critical behavior, in this case, is the educational persistence and career development of Latinx high school students. McWhirter and McWhirter (2016) advanced toward a measurement of critical consciousness that focuses on the action component, arguably the most critical element.

Diemer et al. (2017) recognized that critical consciousness had not been consolidated into a united field of scholarship. They noted that there have been fragmented measurements and that a measure could unify the study of critical consciousness. Diemer et al. (2017) studied the critical consciousness of marginalized communities working with poor and working-class Black youth attending high schools. The CCS has two subscales for critical reflection: perceived inequality and egalitarianism. There is also one subscale for critical action: sociopolitical participation. Perceived inequality involves how a person views social groups concerning their status with other groups, and “egalitarianism is the endorsement of societal equality” (p. 462). Sociopolitical participation is the action component of critical consciousness and is vital if marginalized individuals want to change their destiny in society. As a quantitative instrument, the CCS would be valuable for understanding how marginalized communities
develop their critical consciousness. The authors noted that the measure used for this study could be adopted into a qualitative inquiry into critical consciousness and yield rich data.

Continuing with quantitative research into critical consciousness, Shin et al. (2016) designed the CCCM. They created a short and psychometrically sound measure of critical consciousness to assess racism, classism, and heterosexism. Their instrument identified relationships between the CCCM and items in existing measures of critical consciousness. The relationships validated their instrument when assessing racism, classism, and heterosexism and provided another scale to understand critical consciousness. The sample for this study was generated by a program called Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which selected people with an average age of 33.7 years. Of the chosen sample, participants self-reported that 71.2% were Caucasian/European American, 85% were heterosexual, 46.6% were liberal to very liberal, 30.8% were working class, and 49.8% were middle class (Shin et al., 2016). Instead of focusing on marginalized individuals and communities, the MTurk software gathered a representative sample of the general population. This sampling gives this measure an advantage other tools do not have; however, it measures based on self-reporting, which does not accurately measure a person’s actual critical consciousness. The previous four articles have strengths, weaknesses, and limitations, some of which I unpack in the following paragraphs.

The CCI, MACC, CCS, and CCCM were all formulated roughly simultaneously. Diemer et al. (2015) noted that it was timely that three measures of critical consciousness developed simultaneously, each with its measure for assessing latest critical
consciousness research critical consciousness. The CCI relies on self-reporting and self-identification questions to gather respondents' critical consciousness data. At the same time, the CCS, CCCM, and the MACC utilize questions that help the participant identify racial inequalities in their environment. The CCI is designed to assess awareness of oppression or marginalization. The CCS identifies two subscales regarding reflection: perceived inequality and egalitarianism. The two subscales allow the CCS to differentiate between two types of critical reflection: one based on the awareness of social inequities (perceived inequality); the other based on acceptance of equitable social situations amongst various groups in society (egalitarianism). The CCI, CCS, and MACC measured marginalized communities where the CCCM derived its sample from a software program that selects a general population-representative sample. Although Diemer and colleagues (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer & Li, 2011; Diemer & Ortega, 2010; Diemer et al., 2017) did not necessarily contradict Watts et al.’s (1999, 2011) assertion that privileged classes can benefit from critical consciousness, Diemer et al. (2015) suggested that “critical consciousness is a more relevant construct for marginalized people than more privileged people” (p. 831).

McWhirter and McWhirter (2016) addressed critical behavior and sociopolitical participation using the MACC, and Diemer et al. (2017) used the CCS. The study by McWhirter and McWhirter (2016) and their instrument, the MACC, identified general critical behaviors that participants could select (e.g., “I support organizations that promote justice and equality”) while the CCS solicited more specific responses (e.g., “I participated in a political party”). Another important distinction between the two studies
is that the CCS asks participants about the frequency and different forms of sociopolitical action (Diemer et al., 2015, 2017). The CCCM has two distinct advantages compared to the other three studies: 1) It did not rely on self-reporting questions; and 2) It was tested utilizing MTurk, which gathered a representative population sample—as opposed to the CCS, CCI, and MACC, which were tested with various marginalized communities.

Diemer et al.’s (2015, 2017) contradiction of Watts et al.’s (1999, 2011) assertion that non-marginalized individuals should develop their critical consciousness is challenged by Shin et al.’s (2016) study. Finally, the idea that marginalized people are the only beneficiaries of critical consciousness begins to fade.

Jemal et al.’s (2020) Transformative Consciousness of Oppression and Privilege is noteworthy progress in developing instruments to measure critical consciousness, although her instrument was not validated. Like Diemer et al.’s (2017) CCS, Shin et al.’s (2016) CCCM, and McWhirter and McWhirter’s (2016) MACC, Jemal et al. (2020) decided not to measure critical consciousness from a self-reporting perspective. Jemal et al. (2020) utilized a unique method of revealing a person’s critical consciousness development. Jemal et al. (2020) used vignette-style questions to get respondents to demonstrate their critical consciousness acumen. The content-specific questions “1) allow situations in specific contexts to be explored; 2) apprise or clarify people’s thoughts, beliefs, judgments or attitudes; and 3) provide a less personal or threatening method of exploring sensitive topics” (Jemal et al., 2020, p. 38). Jemal also argued that we must consider everyone’s privilege because people have multiple personal statuses and identities. A Black man has an oppressing condition of being Black and a privileged
position of being a man. Jemal et al. (2020) contended that to fully understand a person’s critical consciousness—if such a thing were possible—one must consider another person’s intersections of their various conditions, statuses, and identities.

Thus far, in my review of the research, I have discussed quite a few quantitative measures of critical consciousness. Although these measures are important for exploring critical consciousness, they cannot completely picture what critical consciousness truly is. Shin et al. (2016) and Jemal et al. (2020) have profoundly shaped my thinking on critical consciousness. Shin et al. (2016) have me thinking about how to reveal an individual’s critical consciousness, and Jemal et al. (2020) took it one step further with her vignette-style questions. The structure and method of Jemal et al.’s (2020) inquiries could help strengthen critical consciousness qualitative inquiry beyond what self-reporting designs may accomplish. This research helped me determine that qualitative inquiry in critical consciousness is indispensable and should be conducted more often.

In agreement with Watts et al. (1999, 2011) and later Diemer (2020), Schneider (2019) recognized the need for critical consciousness in more privileged individuals and communities. Her quantitative study examined teachers' critical consciousness in a PreK-12 public education program. She utilized a model highlighting three aspects of critical consciousness—critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action. She developed a quantitative instrument that can measure critical consciousness in the general population and is an effective measure for educators (Schneider, 2019). Like every other tool developed to study critical consciousness, numerous factors, contexts, and populations play a vital role in its measurement. Since this scale was tested on a predominately White
population, it would need to be replicated with marginalized individuals and communities to be more valid (Schneider, 2019). Perhaps rephrasing the questions to fit the context and the population may be necessary to yield similar positive results. Overall, this measure is a useful quantitative tool to assess what Diemer and Blustein (2006) considered a privileged population—White educators. But are White educators all privileged? Are educators in the LGBT+ Community privileged? Could some of them have a disability? Or maybe they are a part of a marginalized religion? The convergence of these statuses and identities can be viewed as intersectionality.

Humans are multifaceted entities with many interwoven statuses and identities. One, two, or any of these statuses and identities may be marginalized. For example, a White person with no prior marginalizing status or identity becomes a double-amputee. This person is now in a protected class—disabled. The individual experiences no oppression as a White person, but as a disabled person, they do. Within one individual, there are two statuses: a White citizen and a disabled person. Where the two statuses meet is the intersection of white privilege and marginalization. As critical consciousness scholarship evolves, so does the conceptualization of what it entails. The following section uncovers the latest critical consciousness research and the new perspectives researchers have brought to the science table.

**New Perspectives in Critical Consciousness**

For many years it seemed like Diemer and his colleagues (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer et al., 2017) did not see the virtue in critical consciousness development in so-called privileged classes the way Watts et al. (1999, 2011) and his colleagues did.
Finally, in an article published recently, Diemer’s (2020) concluding remarks included paths for future research that could operationalize critical consciousness amongst the privileged—marking a change in perspective from a leading researcher in critical consciousness. Further, Diemer (2020) mentioned intersectionality and how that might be integrated into critical consciousness scholarship. His previous perspective on critical consciousness would have a tangible impact on marginalized communities, shifting towards a more complex understanding of critical consciousness.

These increasingly complicated understandings come in the era of research where scholars are delving into critical consciousness and feminism (Neumeister, 2012; Rondini, 2020; Stauber, 2017; Wallin-Ruschman, 2014; Wallin-Ruschman & Patka, 2016; Watson, 2016), critical consciousness and intersectionality (Jemal, 2017, 2018; Jemal et al., 2020; Wallin-Ruschman, 2014, 2018; Watson, 2016), critical consciousness in privileged communities (Borow, 2015; Diemer, 2020; Schneider, 2019; Watts et al., 1999, 2011), and tolerance of conflict, ambiguity, and ambivalence as important aspects of critical consciousness development (Wallin-Ruschman, 2014; Wallin-Ruschman & Patka, 2016). In the new era of critical consciousness research, all individuals are potential beneficiaries of this way of analyzing society’s machinations.

Critical consciousness had been studied from almost every angle until feminism was considered—applicable to at least half the population. Wallin-Ruschman’s (2014) dissertation brought feminism into the critical consciousness discussion and showed that female perspectives had been largely ignored thus far. Similarly, Stauber (2017) showed that feminism gives a different view of how critical consciousness develops in human
beings. Each author described how a woman develops her critical consciousness but runs into cognitive dissonance (Stauber, 2017; Wallin-Ruschman, 2014). The silence that enraptures many women when confronted with aspects of critical consciousness should not be surprising, however. Women must exist in societies that adhere to “patriarchal social norms, compulsory heterosexuality, and compulsory heterogenderism” (Rondini, 2020, p. 229) and are intolerant of deviations from social norms—including the expression of emotions other than joy or happiness. As postulated by Wallin-Ruschman (2014, 2018), emotions play an important role in developing critical consciousness. The role of emotions in critical consciousness development should not be surprising because when an individual is the subject of oppression, feelings such as frustration and anger are natural. When an individual becomes angry about a perceived injustice, they have an opportunity to analyze it. For example, consider Osgood (2012), who commented on oppression systems affecting early childhood education. Osgood (2012) mentioned that Head Start is highly gendered and has meager pay compared to similar jobs. Low-income conditions impose undue burdens on employees in this field and simultaneously marginalize teachers and children. If individuals take this opportunity to find the reason, they may examine their agency to change the situation. If they determine they have the agency to act upon the injustice, they may act upon it.

Future researchers should consider intersectionality concerning critical consciousness research because of its relative importance. Just as feminism helps people understand the female perspective regarding critical consciousness, intersectionality assists in understanding the various dimensions of a person’s identity and how they are
affected by society’s oppression (Diemer, 2020; Jemal, 2017; Wallin-Ruschman, 2014, 2018). Unlike Freire’s (1970, 1973) diametric oppressor/oppressed conceptualization of critical consciousness, Wallin-Ruschman (2014, 2018) posited that one must consider all the various identities to practice critical consciousness. These identities include disability status, socioeconomic status, race, English learners, LGBT status, gender, and religion. Jemal (2017) went slightly further by saying that one must not only look at the various intersections of oppression but also privilege. In the example above, if the Asian LGBT person was male, then the intersections of privilege and oppression must also be considered (p. 16). Luckily Diemer (2020)—a preeminent researcher in critical consciousness scholarship—has accepted the importance of intersectionality.

Going forward, nuanced and multi-dimensional conceptualizations of critical consciousness are necessary (Diemer, 2020). Recent research has revealed that previous understandings of critical consciousness as being dichotomous—that a person is either oppressed or an oppressor—is inadequate to grasp its complexity fully. Intersectionality adds many layers of intricacy to a field of scholarship that has largely conceptualized the world in terms of the privileged and the non-privileged (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer et al., 2017; Freire, 1970,1973; Stauber, 2017; Wallin-Ruschman, 2014, 2018). As if these complications did not add enough to critical consciousness calculations, Wallin-Ruschman and Patka (2016) proposed another vital aspect of critical consciousness: tolerance of ambivalence and conflict.

Along with her feminist critique of the prevailing literature, Wallin-Ruschman (2014, 2018) identified what could be the most fundamental aspect of critical
consciousness. Tolerance of conflict, ambiguity, and ambivalence is crucial if anyone wants to liberate themselves from a marginalizing situation (Wallin-Ruschman, 2018).

Being critically conscious is not easy and often involves dealing with opposing perspectives, emotions, and realities (Freire, 1970, 1973). Suppose a researcher has difficulties being in the same space as another person experiencing negative emotions, saying negative words, and acting negatively. In that case, they may miss crucial clues that could aid in understanding various experiences. Tolerance of ambiguity and ambivalence is essential when reflecting on critical consciousness, and the ability to tolerate conflict is essential when making decisions in group settings (Wallin-Ruschman, 2014, 2018).

In combination with Houser and Overton’s (2001) assertion that one must be critical of their own consciousness and of its changes over time, Wallin-Ruschman’s (2014, 2018) proclamation that to be critically conscious, one needs to practice tolerance of conflict, ambiguity, and ambivalence is one of the most important ideas in this field of study. It has vastly shaped my thoughts concerning critical consciousness. Liberation from oppression will be a winding path. One must be able to engage in conflict positively and fruitfully because negative conflict is destructive, but a positive attitude will yield better results. There will be times of ambiguity that individuals and communities must tolerate while venturing towards liberation—to the frustration of many individuals and communities.

Similarly vexing and thoroughly infuriating to people with a burning desire for change is ambivalence. Although the ambivalence of the masses can be an impediment,
there is solace in the wise words of anthropologists Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” (Mead, 1978). In short, everyone does not need to be a freedom fighter to address oppression. All that is required is the right people, in the right places, with the right frame of mind.

Liberation Psychology

Unfortunately, one cannot think themselves to liberation, despite what Watts et al. (1999) hoped was possible (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Reflecting upon oppressive conditions allows one to further understand and facilitate their movement within civilization (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer et al., 2015; Diemer & Ortega, 2010; McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016). However, the sense of agency or efficacy does not necessarily translate to critical action. Whether low or high, each person has a sense of self-identified agency. Each can develop a psychology of liberation but will find much more support and power if they build upon their sense of agency with others. The process of liberation—not just liberating people’s minds—will require the co-construction of a new reality (Laperriere, 2018; Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Watts and Flanagan (2007) called for teachers to engage in robust action research to investigate how adults and youths can form partnerships for liberation. The liberation struggle is not an academic exercise nor a complicated thought experiment (Yosso & Burciaga, 2016). The liberation struggle is happening for millions, if not billions, of people worldwide and millions in the United States. The process of liberation needs tangible outcomes, one of which is the re-obtainment of diverse types of capital extracted
from oppressed communities. Yosso and Burciaga (2016) identified six items of capital that communities of color must reclaim: aspirational capital (ability to maintain hopes and dreams), linguistic capital (skills attained through communication in multiple languages), social capital (community networks), navigational capital (maneuvering through social institutions), familial capital (family), and resistant capital (knowledge and skills obtained via protesting the status quo; p. 2).

Oppression can result from honorable and rational behaviors over time by people who think they are acting for the benefit of themselves and society. It can also be imposed by individuals, groups, or communities exhibiting unscrupulous behavior to obtain power and influence. Perhaps Gandhi and Dr. King were correct in their contexts where peace and harmony win the day, and liberty and freedom may be established. However, some ways to obtain liberation are not always comfortable for those wielding the power of the status quo. Wallin-Ruschman and Patka (2016) did not stray away from discomfort. They recognized the importance of community regarding liberation psychology and criticized the idea of safe spaces. Noting the benefits of safe spaces, such as creating virtuous cycles, Wallin-Ruschman and Patka (2016) also recognized that safe spaces can be bastions of groupthink where critical reflection is hindered and homogenous thinking is promoted. They proposed critical collective spaces—essentially renaming safe spaces, so there is no presumption that a person is safe (p. 327). Wallin-Ruschman and Patka (2016) did not appear to want unsafe environments; however, one cannot presume the safety of an individual if they are racist toward another group member. Such a situation is when a critical conversation about racism should happen.
These spaces do not provide pleasant or safe feelings during a confrontation about a group member's racist actions. A critical collective space is a place for people to have conflict and work through their problems. Hopefully, people get to a point where they can co-create a new paradigm that is less threatening to marginalized individuals and communities to establish peace and harmony.

The psychology of liberation is not just about one’s agency or ability to reflect on onerous government policy. It is about the willingness to apply constant pressure on the machinations and individuals that serve to oppress others (Montero & Sonn, 2009). It is the recognition that the oppressors are also victims, as Freire (1970, 1973) repeatedly stated. Montero and Sonn (2009), Tuck and Yang (2012), and Wallin-Ruschman and Patka (2016) each recognized that the process of liberation would not be easy or comfortable. The actions toward liberation would be distressing for those in positions of privilege (Montero & Sonn, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Tuck and Yang (2012) mentioned enacting an ethic of incommensurability as a method to decolonize the dominant White culture from the minds of marginalized communities. In their own words,

To fully enact an ethic of incommensurability means relinquishing settler futurity, abandoning the hope that settlers may one day be commensurable to Native peoples. It means removing the asterisks, periods, commas, apostrophes, the whereas’s, buts, and conditional clauses that punctuate decolonization and underwrite settler innocence. The Native futures, the lives to be lived once the settler nation is gone—these are the unwritten possibilities made possible by an ethic of incommensurability. (p. 36)
More generally, they mean there is no hope for liberation from society’s oppressors without serious upheaval. They make no qualms or excuses about their words. Like Wallin-Ruschman and Patka’s (2016) recognition that meaningful dialogue will include discomfort that may make people unsafe, Tuck and Yang (2012) recognized that a certain amount of societal disorder is inevitable to break from oppression.

Thus far, I have uncovered research and literature related to Head Start, social justice, and educational leadership. I also looked at modern and historical research in critical consciousness theory and research. Next, I examine my research study’s focus on critical consciousness, social justice, and Head Start. Head Start has been scantly studied in the context of equitable leadership—not enough researchers have examined educational leadership support for the critical consciousness development of Head Start Education Managers to create inclusive and equitable learning environments.

My Study and Rationale

I conducted an exploratory case study to understand better how Head Start Education Managers attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action. I conducted qualitative exploratory case study interviews on one Head Start program in the Pacific Northwest. I completed a single case study, meaning I treated the entire program as a single case (Gorski & Pothini, 2018; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). I explored educators’ critical consciousness development. I hoped to understand better how Head Start Education Managers attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action.
I studied a contemporary set of situations and attempted not to influence participants before the interview because I wanted to capture their perspectives before any of my viewpoints became known. Such elaborate entanglements between the researcher, participants, and theories, ideas, and questions researched are often part of the natural workflow in a qualitative study (Iorio & Parnell, 2020). Yin (2014) explained that case studies are best for such situations.

I did not conduct observations for two reasons. 1) Head Start did not allow for observations due to ongoing COVID-19 precautions; and 2) it was prohibitive for me to do so because of existing COVID-19 precautions, the new Delta and Omicron variants, and sensitivity to children not being vaccinated. Therefore, I interviewed five Head Start Education Managers.

I conducted a qualitative study because there is a dearth of research in this regard, while quantitative studies have propagated the breadth of critical consciousness literature. Less explored are open-ended qualitative studies into critical consciousness. Further, I was very interested in the recent sociopolitical events and how these have influenced the realm of early childhood education. As of 2016, Ward et al. (2016) showed that teachers were still largely politically and socially liberal. Has this changed? The literature review covered the legal environment in which Head Start exists. This review gave me the fundamental underpinning of how Head Start is supposed to operate.
Due to personal limitations and the intended scope of the study, I opted for a single case study instead of a multiple case study (Gorski & Pothini, 2018; Yin, 2017). This decision allowed me to focus on fewer interviewees—which was within my capabilities as a researcher in this context and resulted in more depth of data and findings. Interviews were the tool I utilized to understand better how Head Start leaders attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action. The interviews were the crux of my case study.

**Summary**

The beginning of critical consciousness development involves individuals or communities being aware of and understanding what subjugates them (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer et al., 2006; Schneider, 2019; Watts et al., 1999). Next is the action to make the changes necessary to suppress oppressive forces, reduce oppression, and empower liberation. When analyzing Nietzsche’s quote, it seems apparent that he would be a proponent of critical consciousness if he lived now. Indeed, critical consciousness is the art of taking unfavorable circumstances and making them favorable for oneself, one’s family, and community.

I based my work on Schneider’s (2019) theoretical framework because of the common themes she identified that I agree with and contrast with other critical consciousness frameworks. Other frameworks utilized efficacy as the interim element between awareness and action (Diemer et al., 2016; Watts et al., 2011; Watts & Flanagan, 2007), while others conceptualized it as a state and a process (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Wallin-Ruschman, 2018; Watts et al., 1999). Regardless of what the authors above have
written, I have decided to follow the lines on the critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action threads of thought.

Educational leadership is complex in modern times. All educational leaders must adhere to their work standards but be able to positively interact with as many demographic groups as possible to promote equity and inclusion. I drew upon the work of Theoharis and Scanlan (Theoharis, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015) to show what sort of work they did to address marginalized communities within schools. Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) handled all the areas critically conscious educators need to focus on to move a school closer toward the equity and inclusion of all individuals and communities. I then focused on Head Start’s policy history.

I gave a historical review of Head Start from the announcement of its inception in 1964 through 2021. I showed how the Head Start policy has elements of critical consciousness throughout. I also showed that Head Start and its leadership have a critical consciousness mission and appear to work toward inclusion and equity. Head Start grows its leaders and conducts professional development to improve their skills. This professional development means they have mechanisms to prompt leadership to focus on inclusion and equity.

Next, I discussed the literature surrounding critical consciousness. Its history starts with Paulo Freire (1970, 1973) and continues in my research today. Critical consciousness has been conceptualized in several ways at this point in its evolution. Still, three elements have stood out the most to me in the prevailing literature—critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action. I wrote in detail about the critical
consciousness inquiry and scholarship in marginalized communities and how quantitative studies have dominated the field of critical consciousness. I also examined some of these studies and the measures proposed to assess critical consciousness. Then, I detailed the new wave of critical consciousness research and how it brings new elements into consideration, such as feminism (Wallin-Ruschman, 2014, 2018) and intersectionality (Diemer, 2020; Scanlan & Theoharis, 2016; Showunmi, 2020; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015; Watson, 2016).

Theories on Liberation Psychology remind readers that critical consciousness is not simply an academic topic but a life-and-death struggle for many. The interlocking systems of oppression within any given society create real threats that could cause harm to citizens. For example, an army general recently imposed a dictatorship in Myanmar in 2021 and jailed a democratically elected president after a staged coup d'état (Peters, 2021). I argue that knowing these things and being prepared to follow critical consciousness to its logical ends requires liberation psychology from a population that is not afraid to do what must be done to obtain economical, societal, and ethnic justice.

I conducted a case study based on interviews and my literature review, which has detailed the legal framework in which Head Start operates. A Pacific Northwest Head Start program provided me with five interviewees—all of whom are Head Start education managers equivalent to school principals. I interviewed Head Start Education Managers about their critical consciousness. Specifically, I asked them to reveal their levels of critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action—with a major focus on critical action. I was most interested in the action aspect of critical consciousness.
I am a brave soul who believes in living critical consciousness every day. I want to make a higher level of critical awareness, reflection, and action available to any individual. Critical consciousness is applicable everywhere, regardless of socioeconomic background, disability status, LGBT status, gender, and language. Next, I detail my qualitative explorative case study of Head Start leaders at a Pacific Northwest Head Start.
Chapter 3: Methods

I restate the purpose in this chapter and then explain my study's design. Subsequently, I discuss my research questions, context, research participants, instruments used to collect data, interview guide, data collection and analysis procedures, research design limitations, validation, and the ethics of my study.

Purpose of the Study

In this exploratory case study, I aimed to understand better how Head Start leaders attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action. I delved into education managers' critical awareness, reflection, and action at a Pacific Northwest Head Start Program. This study's intended outcome was to learn what it takes for leaders to move from awareness to reflection to action. I explored their views of oppression and how educational leaders conceptualize what they are aware of regarding the oppression of their marginalized children and families.

I also explored how these conceptualizations form into action on behalf of educators. Did they take action? What sorts of action? Is there inaction? Because society is fraught with oppression directed at marginalized communities, I wanted to see how Head Start Education Managers act based on their critical awareness and reflection. Knowing and understanding how childhood teachers and leaders educate and care for the most vulnerable is essential.

Research Design

I designed this study to explore how critical awareness and critical reflection influence the actions of Head Start Education Managers. This single case study was

The research question examining education managers’ abilities to conduct critical actions based on their critical awareness and critical reflection benefited from open-ended interviews that allowed the education managers to reveal much about their feelings, perspectives, and activities. Yin (2014) explained that case studies work well in this scenario. In this case study, I did not conduct observations for two reasons. 1) Head Start does not have a plan to allow such observations due to ongoing COVID-19 precautions, and 2) the Delta and Omicron COVID-19 variants threaten our ability to socialize again. Therefore, I interviewed five Head Start Education Managers, via Zoom, in the comfort of their home or office.

Researchers use case study research designs to contribute to the body of knowledge to understand individuals, groups, organizations, social groups, political parties, or other complex social entities or phenomena (Yin, 2012). The “case” in a case study refers to researchers holistically analyzing the real world. The case could be the study of individuals, small groups, organizations and management, neighborhoods, municipalities, industries, and so on (Yin, 2012). Case studies are not simply a precursor to more extensive studies; exploratory case studies can be rewarding (Yin, 2012).

There are single and multiple case study designs, each with its purpose. A multiple case study could be a researcher studying a school that treats each department as
an individual case (Stake, 2006). The researcher would examine each independently and analyze it based on what is being studied (Stake, 2006). If the same scenario were a single case study, the researcher would investigate the school as a single case, and the departments would be aspects of the case (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2012).

I drew upon Gorski and Pothini’s (2018) work to guide me in my case study. Their book has given researchers opportunities to reflect on case studies regarding equity and inclusion. Gorski and Pothini (2018) are social justice-oriented and have provided many case studies to analyze their impact on equity. Their book speaks to the phenomena I examined in my case study—oppression, racism, and bigotry. They provided the equity literacy framework (Table 1), which offers seven steps to “strengthen in educators the four [five] abilities of equity literacy” (Gorski, 2020; Gorski & Pothini, 2018, p. 12).

**Table 1**

*The Seven Steps in the Equity Literacy Case Analysis Approach*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Name of Step</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Identify biases or inequalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Take stock of various perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Consider possible challenges and opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Imagine equitable and just outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>Brainstorm immediate-term solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Brainstorm long-term solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>Craft a plan of action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Table 2, one can reference the five abilities of equity literacy educators. This process does not produce a correct set of outcomes or action plans; the authors noted that ten researchers might study the same phenomenon and create ten different strategies for action (Gorski & Pothini, 2018). The equity literacy process ensured I stayed on track regarding my analysis of the case study and assisted in keeping me in the mindset to understand better how Head Start Education Managers attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action.

Table 2

The Five Equity Literacy Abilities for Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abilities of Equity Literacy Educators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next, I review the research question.

Research Question

How are the critical actions of Education Managers in a Pacific Northwest Head Start program influenced by critical awareness and critical reflection?
Context of the Study

This study was conducted in an Oregon Head Start that services Rondo County, Oregon. The program's name is the Rondo County Head Start (RCHS), a pseudonym for the Head Start program I studied. Their governing bodies are the Board of Directors, Policy Council, and the Advisory Council for Healthy Families. They have ten locations spread across the large and geographically diverse Rondo County. This Early Head Start program services families with children ages birth to three, and the Head Start program services “families with children ages three to five” (Rondo County Head Start, 2021). The White Center, Ocean View, Root Center, Oceanside School, Community Fairgrounds, and Grand Alley Center exist inside populated cities within the Metro District. The Side Valley Center, Mountain Center, Breckenridge Center, and Massif Center exist outside the Metro district. The White, Root, Ocean View, and Grand Alley Center are urban locations; Community Fairgrounds, and Ocean Park, are suburban locations; Breckenridge, Eagleridge, Massif, and Side Valley Center are rural. Each of their ten locations operates like an early learning center with an executive director and staff. The education managers run each site like a director does in a typical early childhood center. The center-based teachers teach a small class of preschool children

Purposeful Selection of Research Participants

I conducted this research in a Pacific Northwest state via Zoom interviews. The population in my research state is predominately White—73%, 13.3% Hispanic or Latinx, and the remaining 13.7% are distributed amongst the African American/Black, Asian, Pacific Islanders, and Native American populations. I conducted these interviews
amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the upsurge of a new COVID strain—the Omicron variant. My participants were five Head Start Education Managers in Rondo County, Oregon—a neighboring county to the largest city in the state where I researched. After discussions with scholars and colleagues, I determined that five interviews would yield sufficient data from the participants to make an in-depth and meaningful exploratory study. This study aimed to explore, so there were no precise or accurately predictable outcomes (Yin, 2017).

The managers ensure national Head Start standards are being met in their schools, assist in the professional development of their teachers, and have a bachelor's or advanced degree. They supervise about five center-based teachers per location—depending on community needs and funding. Each teacher maintains an appropriate student-to-teacher ratio in their classroom. A total of 10 Education Managers work at RCHS, and I interviewed five of them—which I explain in more depth in the participant section below.

Education managers supervise a small number of center-based teachers. They are responsible for implementing curriculum, delivering professional development sessions, supporting teaching staff with planning and implementing education services, and ensuring that their location's day-to-day operations proceed as usual. Education Managers must have a minimum bachelor's degree with an advanced degree preferred. The education managers in the RCHS have a relatively small number of center-based teachers—usually under six. Each center-based teacher has at least one assistant teacher
assigned to them. Child care providers also work for the education managers, meaning that the education managers at RCHS supervise between four and 12 people.

I used a purposeful sample from a participant pool small in number, high in expertise, and further in professional development, implying more thoughtful, experienced, and consequential data. Fortuitously, I have a great relationship with the Head Start program director; thus, selecting my participants was relatively simple.

**Instrumentation**

I conducted open-ended qualitative interviews and constructed meaning as we engaged (Mishler, 1991). I approached my interviews with an interpretivist, also known as a constructivist, perspective instead of a reductionist one. I used this approach because reductionist thinking attempts to pare items down to quantifiable units of analysis that can explain a phenomenon (Guyon, 2019; Parnell & Iorio, 2016). Reductionism would not have helped me construct meaning from intricate human communication; however, constructivism did. It allowed me to take in more than just the raw data and make meaning from the information and stories (Guyon, 2019; Parnell & Iorio, 2016). Earlier, I mentioned that I studied in collaboration with education managers, meaning I participated in generating knowledge. I listened closely and created meaning with my participants through a constructivist lens, making it a collaborative effort to gain understanding (Guyon, 2019; Parnell & Iorio, 2016).

My role as a researcher was to learn how critical awareness and reflection affect critical action. I now understand more about Head Start, its leaders, and its professional development. This approach as a learner-interviewer allowed me to engage a
constructivist or interpretivist approach to my research. Instead of being there as an administrator of tests, I assumed the role of a curious learner to explore critical consciousness with Head Start Education Managers (Ryan, 2006). I, as the researcher, and the interview questions were the study instruments.

For my interview questions, I drew upon the work of Mishler (1991) and related authors. Mishler's interviewing method is open-ended and meaning-generating, highlighting a constructivist approach that helps generate considerable reflection. I also drew upon Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000), Rivano Eckerdal (2013), and Roberts (2020) for guidance in writing my interview questions. They all cited Mishler (1991) and provided further insight into writing open-ended interview questions. It is important to note that Mishler (1991) is a post-positivist researcher (interpretivist or constructivist is the proper terminology in qualitative research) and conceptualizes interviews as speech events where all the data is essential—including utterances, personal notes, and the like. However, I cleaned up the language and phrases to make them more complete statements for my interpretive needs. I did not dispose of those documents; however, I adjusted them for a clearer personal understanding.

For the interview technique, I adopted a narrative—or stories—approach to dyadic interviews (Anderson, 2014; Parnell & Iorio, 2016; Domingues, 2019; Guyon, 2019). Each pairing of individuals results in a unique dyad, and it is from this dyad that collective meaning is constructed and annotated (Domingues, 2019). Included in the data collection process during the interviews, I ensured notetaking of utterances, body posture, eye contact, periods of silence, discomfort, and the totality of the meaningful repartees
with my participants, to the best of my ability. The interviews took place on Zoom, with
the participants interviewing with me wherever it was most convenient—their home,
office, or somewhere comfortable. I urged that the participant be available where and
when they had time.

Utilizing narratives to tell stories from which I can derive themes is an excellent
way to generate meaningful interview data (Anderson, 2014; Guyon, 2019; Parnell &
Iorio, 2016). This method tells the participant they are the expert in their sphere of
influence and that the researcher can depend on them for valuable information—thereby
building trust from the start (Guyon, 2019).

In addition to the above, I also kept a reflective journal. I designed a word
document for my journals and secured them with my research documents. A reflective
journal in qualitative research allows the researcher to annotate the various aspects and
events during the research process (Choi, 2020). I kept a reflective journal because it is
an excellent way to examine my assumptions, goals, personal subjectivities, mental state,
and belief systems (Russel & Kelly, 2002). Choi (2020) stated that “keeping reflective
journals consciously acknowledges (sic) the values and experiences of the researcher
rather than attempting to control their values through methods” (p. 1). Also, a reflective
journal provides a trail for other researchers to follow and understand a researcher’s
discovery (Jasper, 2005). The ability to follow and understand a researcher’s findings is
significant because Smith (1999) showed that these journals could be used as primary
data. Further, journaling increases rigor, adds to the study's trustworthiness, and provides
more transparency for the entire process (Choi, 2020). I watched out for confidentiality
when keeping notes, and hindsight bias was not an issue due to the nature of my exploratory case study.

**Interview Guide**

I conducted my interviews over Zoom. I provided my participants with the link to the meeting 24 hours before the scheduled interview, and I completed the interviews from my private home office, a quiet and private space. I prepared for my interviews by having my computer open with my word document containing my journal for note-taking, writing any questions I may have, discussing the topic, and annotating my thinking during the interview. I logged into my computer five minutes before the interview to ensure I was the first person on Zoom and allowed the participant in when they arrived. From this point, I asked whether the participant had any questions before we started. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, with 11 queries. During the interviews, I took notes in my journal—a Word document on my computer—and asked clarifying questions to understand better the participant’s meanings. I audio and video recorded each interview session. Also, I structured the questions closely to how I asked them conversationally and did not apply conventional APA grammar to them. Below is the interview guide.

Preliminary questions for context:

1. Please share with me how you became an Education Manager at Head Start.
2. Could you describe for me a typical day as an Education Manager? (Impromptu follow-up questions were added to gain fuller context, such as by prompting, “tell me more about that”).
3. Would you feel comfortable disclosing what motivates you day to day? What do you believe is your purpose in this work? Overall, how do you see yourself as an Education Manager?

Questions about equity and inclusion:

4. Could you share with me what you think the primary responsibilities of a family child care provider are? Also, the same with your role, Education Manager.

5. When I say ‘equity and inclusion,’ what does that mean to you? What comes to mind?

6. Can you think of some examples of how equity and inclusion are practiced at your center?

7. Describe to me how you practice equity and inclusion on a typical day caring for children.

The final questions were intended to obtain a deeper understanding of how critical awareness and reflection influence critical action:

8. I am curious about when you might have noticed an unfair school practice here or in other school environments. How did you approach the situation? What did you do?

9. Do you have (an)other colleague(s) with whom to speak when you notice an unfair school practice?
   a. If not: How do you reflect on the unfairness? What do you do when you reflect? How does it feel not to have someone to talk to?
b. If so: How do you and your colleague(s) reflect on the unfairness, what do you all do when you reflect?

c. Is there a difference between how you reflect in your personal and professional time?

10. When you think about the unfair school practice, do you typically come up with strategies for advocacy? Do you reflect with the intention to advocate? What actions did you end up taking? What actions did you end up wanting or hoping to take? What were the barriers?

11. Have you ever witnessed someone in your personal or professional life be the target of bigotry?

   a. How did you react to it when you found out? If you were there, did you do anything in the moment?

   b. What are your thoughts on your response to them and their situation? Do you wish you could have done something differently? Like what?

After the final question, I asked whether they had any comments or questions. Then I reminded them that if anything came up that they would like to explain in more detail, they could do so when I provided them with the interview transcript for review.

**Data Collection**

I conducted an exploratory study with early childhood educators with whom I have positive professional relationships. I secured authorization from Portland State University, the Institutional Review Board, and my dissertation committee to collect data. Also, I obtained site authorization from the Head Start program I studied. The nature and
purpose of my research study did not require collecting in-depth data from multiple sources to converge in triangulation (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2017). Instead, I explored the influences of critical awareness and reflection on critical action with Education Managers.

I began my research by emailing the Rondo County Head Start executive director that it was time to begin interviews. She emailed her Education Managers to inform them that I was ready to commence the interviews and reach out to me. Within two days, I received four emails from Education Managers who were ready and willing to conduct the interviews. Over the next week, I received another email from an education manager and scheduled them for the fifth interview. I completed my interviews between January 13, 2022, and February 23, 2022.

On the second week of January 2022, I met with my first participant, whom I call Beatrix (I used a pseudonym for privacy in all cases). On the third week of January 2022, I met with my second participant, whom I call Condoliza. On the third week of January 2022, I met with my third participant, Annabelle. On the third week of January 2022, I met with my fourth participant, Danielle. On the fourth week of January 2022, I met with my fifth participant, Eleanor. I connected with my participants via Zoom. I commenced the meeting by welcoming and thanking them for an opportunity to reflect during our discussion. Then I reviewed the request for consent to participate in the research with them (Appendix A), to clarify or open for discussion the confidentiality aspect of the interview. They signed their copies digitally or physically and sent them via email, which I printed out and signed. I then scanned and uploaded the signed copy of the request for
consent to participate in the research to an encrypted folder on my computer. I also captured the audio of them verbally consenting to the interview upon starting the discussion. Then we began the interview.

I recorded the interviews utilizing the record function in the Zoom software program. During each interview, I asked each participant questions intended to solicit how educational managers attend to equity and inclusion in their centers. These interviews comprised my data collection to understand better how education managers attend to equity and inclusion in their early childhood education centers.

After I completed each interview, I accessed the recording from the encrypted folder to which Zoom records (I encrypted the folder so that each recording was automatically encrypted). I immediately transcribed the recording using Sonix transcriber (Https://sonix.ai/). When transcription was complete, I reviewed the document and redacted all names or places that could compromise the confidentiality of my participants. Then, I sent the transcript to the participants to ensure it accurately represented their ideas, thoughts, and words. After the participants reviewed and approved the transcript, I began the next step in my analysis.

I read the transcripts while I listened to the audio. I read through and took notes on each interview in the order I interviewed them. I began with a participant and highlighted or annotated comments that emerged as interesting to me. I also referred to all the notes to see what I thought during the interview. During this phase, I created an Excel spreadsheet to place the most salient comments from the participants and my most
persistent thoughts. Overall, I stuck to digitally organizing my work because it worked best for me and how my process worked (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Excel Spreadsheet of Data Analysis Organization

- **Participant**: [Name]
- **Institution**: [Organizational Name]
- **Theme 1**: [Type of Theme]
  - [Sub-Theme Description]
  - [Data Entry]
- **Theme 2**: [Type of Theme]
  - [Sub-Theme Description]
  - [Data Entry]
- **Theme 3**: [Type of Theme]
  - [Sub-Theme Description]
  - [Data Entry]
- **Theme 4**: [Type of Theme]
  - [Sub-Theme Description]
  - [Data Entry]
When I read the transcript a second time, I did so without the audio recording. Then I labeled and placed all the participant's comments into themes. The first three questions were introductory; I created custom themes for them. I broke the following eight questions into three themes based on Schneider’s (2019) model for critical consciousness. Then, I took the notated transcripts and entered the data into an Excel spreadsheet. In the Excel sheet, I entered my transcript notes, interesting highlighted comments, and categorizations for each statement made during the interview (Figure 3 and Figure 4). Essentially, I took all notes and categories for my themes, quotations, and thoughts about the participant and the discussion and entered them into Excel. Next, I present the results of each discussion, one participant at a time.

Figure 4

Thematic Analysis and Transcript Annotation

Speakert: [00:00:19] Thank you very much. Ok, well, without further ado, I'm going to start up with some warm up questions and then increase the level of intensity as we go. So first, please tell me how you became an education manager at Head Start.

Speakert: [00:00:34] So I was actually a head start parent. I've got four kids that I put through head start, all while I was going to college. Once I finished my master's degree in education, I became a head start teacher. After my first year it was really challenging class and I left head start and I went to both the public and the private sector. And I just I just knew one day I was like, That's where I need to be, That's where that's where I should be. So I ended up going back as a teacher and taught for about a year and a half before I was promoted to education supervisor at one of our sites. And I've been doing that for about a year and a half.

Speakert: [00:01:16] Ok, so you put you put four kids through school and you're doing college and you got a master's degree. Yes, that must have been really intense. How what inspired you to do that?

Speakert: [00:01:29] I was working as a I was working for a homebuilder and it was great, but it was a lot of repetitiveness doing the same thing every day. And at the time when I was, you know, twenty two and all my friends were graduating college and here I was just doing the same thing that I didn't have any passion about. This is right when the housing market crashed and I lost my job and I just I went home and I said, That's it, I'm going back to school I need to be a teacher. And I did, and I never looked back.

Speakert: [00:02:02] Wow, that's amazing. How is that like when you when you had the
Data Analysis Procedures

The quantity of data seemed immense and cumbersome as it came from open-ended case study interviews. I used this data to understand better how urban, suburban, and rural Head Start Education Managers attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action. I recorded, transcribed, pattern matched, and member-checked for accuracy (Yin, 2014). I uploaded each interview transcript to an individually encrypted, highly secure folder. Also, I interpreted the data utilizing clusters of ideas, themes, and any unique characteristics that arose during the interview.

I worked back and forth between the various themes from the interviews and the database to establish a comprehensive set of themes. I linked the folder to the participants via email to review the transcript. I made all edits and redactions requested by the participants and ensured I deleted all recordings when they were satisfied with the transcripts. Most of the modifications were to protect the names of people or organizations mentioned in the interviews.

As used in research by Guest and McLellan (2003), I manually clustered my themes. I took personal notes during the interviews, analysis, and writing of my findings (Miles et al., 2020; Yin, 2014). When analyzing the data, I considered my theoretical perspectives on how critical awareness and reflection influence critical action (See Table 2). This process did not end until I began writing my analysis, interpretations, and findings from the interview data because of the evolving nature of case study analysis. I used Yin’s (2014) approach from a theoretical perspective because of the open-ended
nature of my exploratory case study and because my objectives and research design point
toward information-gathering to make sense of critical action.

I analyzed the interview data from an equity literacy framework. Gorski and
Pothini (2018) defined this as “the knowledge and skills we need as educators to be a
threat to the existence of bias and inequity in our spheres of influence” (p. 10). When
analyzing this framework (see Table 2), I paid extra attention to noticing subtle biases,
reflected on possible actions, and advocated against inequity (Gorski & Pothini, 2018).
According to Gorski and Pothini, there are seven steps to equity case analysis. I used that
as a guide to draft my interview questions' content and analyze the data as follows: 1) identify biases and inequities, 2) take stock of various perspectives, 3) consider possible
challenges and opportunities, 4) imagine equitable and just outcomes, 5) brainstorm
immediate-term solutions, 6) brainstorm long-term solutions, and 7) craft a plan of action
(p. 13). The idea was to slow down and prepare for deep analysis—not guide me towards
a set of “correct” strategies. My study required an open-ended and exploratory mindset
that did not settle for quick answers and was willing to dig deep for complex and nuanced
data (Gorski & Pothini, 2018). Indeed, I was eager to explore and search to find the heart
of how critical awareness and reflection affect critical action. I now conclude my data
analysis section, but what are my research design limitations?

Research Design Limitations

A study's limitations and delimitations often limit conclusions drawn from
research findings. Limitations are usually beyond the control of a given researcher;
delimitations, on the other hand, are manipulated by the researcher. I describe my study's pertinent limitations and delimitations in the section below.

**Limitations**

I had a few limitations that constrained my study findings.

- The selection of Education Managers focused on one Head Start program in Oregon and one specific county—Rondo. The idea is to understand the social intricacies at Head Start to provide a rich contextualized understanding of how critical awareness and critical reflection influence critical action.

- I had ten sites to choose from; however, I sought only five participants. Such a limited pool hindered the potential for a more diverse group of people to interview. Because I researched a single county’s Head Start program, I limited the demographics of this study.

- Each education manager answers to the program director. Our ability to obtain the fullest answers was reduced because of potential retaliation, leading to self-censorship and limiting the study. Therefore, I minimized this power dynamic by openly acknowledging our power differential and communicating to the participants that they were participating in voluntary activity and could leave any time they wished. Further, the participants could remain anonymous, review, and redact any portion of their interview they wanted.

- Subjectivity is present in all qualitative research (Gorski & Pothini, 2018; Yin, 2014). I have been a grassroots non-profit and government worker since 2011 and have worked with marginalized communities since I received my undergraduate
degree. Since graduating with my undergraduate, my work in politics and government via non-profit organizations has shaped my view of critical consciousness within an oppressive society. My subjectivity is antidisestablishmentarian, so I reduced it and focused on the crucial tasks. An antidisestablishmentarian is against an established political party, an outsider.

**Delimitations**

My research did not include student, teacher, assistant, staff, or non-education manager administrator perspectives. Their perspectives did not inform my study; however, significant data and insight may be extrapolated by researchers capable of doing so. My focus was on the education managers and how their critical awareness and reflection influenced critical action. I did not conduct a quantitative or mixed-methods study, which I think could yield useful data, but the resources for something I want to do are beyond my scope at present. Most importantly, my research question was appropriately addressed qualitatively and not quantitatively.

I selected not to review the documents, observations, archival records (aside from the Head Start information in this paper), or physical artifacts. I solely conducted interviews because I chose an exploratory narrative regarding the influence of critical awareness and critical reflection on critical action to construct a case study with a single case design. I was more concerned with what is inside the heads of Head Start education managers to see if I could draw rich data from the interview process with no other prompting.
Validation

I used different strategies to ensure validity as follows:

1) I engaged with the content within a prolonged timeframe (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Instead of jumping to conclusions based on isolated moments that may seem significant, reflecting on the interview data for extended timeframes allowed the information to permeate my thinking about the subject.

2) I also provided detailed descriptions so other researchers reading my study could make similar conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3) I shared my study findings and conclusions with the participants to determine whether I accurately documented their comments in a process known as member-checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4) My subjectivities were well-documented, so it was easy to tell where they influenced the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Credibility

The thick and rich data descriptions from interviewing five participants from various school locations provided me with unique stories and salient data. I reduced the other types of evidence to examine my subjectivity and other extraneous complications that may shade the participants’ perspectives. My investigation was an exploratory case study that recorded some experiences of Head Start Education Managers. I have a good relationship with the program director and many teachers and leaders, and the data I obtained is important, fascinating, and informative.
**Dependability**

I ensured pristine data treatment at each point in the process and kept everything secure. My notes and writings on the interviews were kept secure and cross-referenced with transcripts to protect data integrity and accuracy. Also, I ensured that all aspects of my study aligned with my purpose, design, and research questions. Regarding my positionality, I ensured that I maintained solid attention on my subjective understandings and opinions and reflected purposefully on them as I interviewed to stay on task. Simultaneously, I kept notes to annotate any emotional triggers due to personal bias to stay on task. This awareness allowed me to remain objective while my subjectivity and experience ensured a peaceful flow during the interviews. Next, I discuss the potential ethical issues of my study, including a conflict-of-interest statement and the researcher’s positionality.

**Ethical Issues in the Study**

To protect human subjects and maximize research benefits, I aligned with my ethical principles of doing no harm, respecting the individual, and orienting towards justice. In the following section, I discuss my ethical considerations for the research design.

I provided a consent form for the interviews. The informed consent document apprised the participants of the potential benefits and risks of participating in the study. Because I conducted interviews via Zoom and was not geographically close to my participants, I also digitally presented the informed consent form. I discussed consent with each participant just before beginning the interview. The sample was small but
comprised over half of their education managers. I had these discussions because of the small sample size and close relationship with the director. The director is the manager of the education managers; thus, it is always a risk to discuss such work-related topics.

As discussed above in the limitations section, the data from the interviews, including notes and any other pertinent information surrounding the interview, are kept in password-protected folders to maintain data integrity and confidentiality. The confidentiality aspect is vital to this section because my participants may have revealed something that could get them in trouble or passed up for a promotion. Personally identifying information remains secure because any information, demographic or otherwise, could be used to identify participants directly or indirectly. I coded the participants’ data with pseudonyms to make it impossible for others to determine any possible identification.

According to federal law, Portland State University Institutional Review Board policies, best data management practices, and personal concern for data integrity, I gathered and stored the data on my computer and various memory drives. The data is encrypted, password-protected, and locked when I am not using it. Further, my notes are kept in password-protected folders before, during, and after the interview. After de-identifying all written or oral information, I performed my data analysis. I did so with a strongly encrypted and highly secure internet connection when I transcribed my interviews. As mentioned above, I deleted all audio recordings after reviewing all transcripts. Finally, to ensure long-term protection for my participants, the Head Start
program, and any involved parties, I will destroy all data by the end of three years by deleting the data from my secure computer file folders.

Summary

This exploratory case study aimed to understand better how Head Start leaders attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action. I developed a research design that aligned with my research question and the purpose of my study. I yielded rich enough data to explore how critical awareness and reflection influence critical action. Although other research designs may depend on various strategies to gather valid data, I explored this contemporary issue with educators to inform future studies.

By delving into the issues with aware and reflective Education Managers, I unearthed much data from a less-studied group in a field full of the perspectives of marginalized communities. This chapter outlined each phase of my research study: research population and sampling methods, data collection and analysis procedures, interview guide, ethical issues, limitations, and validations. Examining critical consciousness in a time fraught with peril towards the marginalized communities is essential if lesser represented groups maintain a crucial role in our society.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

I conducted this research study to understand how Head Start leaders attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action. Using an exploratory case study design, I collected data by collaborating with the participants, generating and constructing meaning as we conducted the interview. The interviews uncovered powerful stories that offered insights that helped me connect their storied lives to critical consciousness and equity, and inclusion. Gorski and Pothini (2018) and Mishler (1991) each inspired the questions I developed for our discussions. Mishler (1991), Gorski and Pothini (2018), Gorski (2020), Yin (2009, 2014, 2017), Schneider (2019), Freire (1970, 1973), and Creswell and Poth (2013) all gave inspiration and guidance to the collection and interpretation of the data. Utilizing Schneider’s (2019) three-element model for critical consciousness (Figure 1), I incorporated Gorski and Pothini’s (2018) Equity Literacy Framework, which gives guidance in understanding the equity literacy abilities of educational leaders (Table 2).

Gorski and Pothini (2018) employed a seven-step process “assembled to strengthen in educators the four abilities of equity literacy,” which I used to assess the education managers (Table 1). I also utilized Theoharis and Scanlan’s (2015) findings to help identify marginalizing conditions or groups regarding equity and inclusion. They classified intersectionality, disability, poverty, race, English learners, LBGT, gender, and religion as marginalizing conditions or groups. I interviewed five Education Managers at Rondo County Head Start, each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. My participants were women who identified as White—by circumstance and not purposeful
selection. They were all Education Managers as delineated by Head Start’s policies. I interviewed three Education Managers from urban locations, one in a suburban and one in a rural area.

**Presentation of Findings**

I drew upon the work of Mishler (1991) for my interview questions and methods. Mishler’s (1991) method includes open-ended and meaning-generating questions. I engaged in this constructivist approach because it helped generate reflection about the contents of the question. Constructivist-style interviews are conceptualized as speech events where all data are essential, including nonverbal communications and notes. During the interviews, I identified important aspects of what the participants shared and asked them to elaborate on a specific subject if I noticed it as interesting or remarkable. I made very few alterations to the transcript document because the transcript was very accurate, and I could clearly understand the words being communicated. I conducted the interviews first, took notes, read the transcripts, and labeled and themed all the comments.

Below are the interpretations, findings, and meanings derived from the interview data, one participant at a time. In the following sections, I discuss the data analysis, interpretations of the findings, limitations of the study, and chapter summary. I introduce and give context to quotations from my participants. I present their comments in single-spaced block quotes for over 40 words and standard quotations for statements shorter than 40 words.
The first three questions of the interview were introductory. They have loosely generated themes, which I created upon reviewing the interview documents. I developed those themes to find similarities in the stories of the education managers. I themed the remaining eight questions—four through 11—according to Schneider’s (2019) three-element model of critical consciousness, but with some modifications. I found that awareness and reflection occurred in a dynamic exchange, and so did reflection and action. Understanding inspires thinking, and reflection often encourages more awareness (see Figure 5). It is also true that thought can inspire action, and acting leads to reflecting on the activity that has just occurred (see Figure 6). I based the third theme on how frequently the participant connected the topic to awareness, reflection, or action of institutional practices or policies. I provide comments from the participants to illustrate how they discussed each theme at the end of each section and before the next question.

**Figure 5**

*Critical Awareness and Critical Reflection*
Next, I discuss the findings in each interview, beginning with my first interview session, Beatrix.

**Beatrix**

Beatrix seemed excited to meet with me, alert, attentive, and energetic. I believe she was an education manager while I was still on the policy council; however, we never met. Beatrix is an education manager in her late 30s with a master's degree. We began our discussion with the story of how she started working at Head Start.

I have structured the following section by introducing the question as a heading. Then, I begin with a brief description of the participant in my own words. After this, I share each participant's questions and responses about what they said and some of their most poignant words quoted. I also shifted from describing the participant's quotes to giving a fuller idea of what they shared. The themes that emerged in Beatrix’s interview include a strong focus on awareness and reflection, a high aptitude for reflecting and
acting on behalf of her children and families, and a lesser focus and ability on awareness, reflection, and action to affect practice policies and systems.

**From Parent to Education Manager.** Beatrix was enrolled in a university, but her situation changed; she became a mom at a very young age and had to drop out of school. Because of their family’s situation, she could not send her child to preschool. Fortunately, their status earned her son a spot at the local Head Start agency. Later, she initiated an early intervention process with her second son. When her second son turned four, Head Start recommended he attend as well. At this point, she began considering her future as a worker. She admitted that she always enjoyed being with children, so she enrolled in an early childhood education program. The program allowed her to complete her practicum at her place of employment. She had positive experiences with Head Start, so she applied to the local Head Start agency. Then, she was accepted as an infant-toddler teacher while obtaining her associate's degree.

She worked and went to school until she obtained a bachelor’s degree. In the meantime, she had worked for Head Start for five years, teaching infants and toddlers in English and bilingual classes. She immediately went for her master’s degree after her bachelor’s and became a professional development and quality improvement specialist. She worked there for four years and shared with me,

> Then I decided that I really wanted to get back to Head Start; that Head Start was really kind of where my passion lies and really get back to working closer to the children because I was so far removed from it in my other role. And so, I saw this education manager position open up, and I had finished my master's a couple of years before I applied. And so, I applied and fortunately was selected to be the education manager.
I selected the comments below to share a little more of her story. She discussed what led to her working at Head Start, “I could not afford to send my four-year-old to preschool. So, I applied for a Head Start program, and my son was accepted.” She also shared, “I was pregnant with my first son; I was supposed to go to school like I was all registered and accepted to the University of Oregon.” Unfortunately, she “ended up choosing not to go because of the situation.” Next, let us look at what she said about her position.

**A typical Day as an Education Manager.** Beatrix started by saying, “Oh boy. There is no typical day.” Her days begin with receiving text messages early in the morning regarding staffing levels. Her supervisors communicate with her to manage the staff's needs in the morning. After sorting out the staffing needs, she is ready to start the day. Throughout the day, she answers emails. She insists that if she could delegate addressing emails to another worker, it could be a 40-hour workweek. She also attends weekly meetings with her teachers, supervisors, and program management staff. She updates policies to ensure they align with practices. She places a firm emphasis on monitoring and its importance. She insists that conducting her site visits is vital because,

> “The data tells us one part of the story, but it’s not the entire story. And so, until I actually see the teachers in the classroom and see the interactions that they’re having with the children and the interactions that they’re having with the families, I really don't feel like I can fully assess the quality of our classrooms, which is of highest importance to me. I want to make sure that our children and families just walk into our sites, and it just feels good.

The data she discussed is the observation and assessment data provided by the teachers. She emphasized making her site feel good, which results from deep thinking
about the data and what she hears from her coworkers. She knows the data presented to her and her teachers' anecdotes are not the whole picture. She even explains how observations can be skewed because of the Hawthorne Effect, i.e. people who know someone is watching them modify their behavior. She finished the answer to this question by saying,

I think when we don't have that in the back of our minds, it tends to be easier to just be a little bit more checked out or a little bit less aware of what you're doing and how you're doing it.

I selected the quotes below to show her busyness as an education manager. When she discussed her working conditions, she said, “I sleep with my work cell phone next to my bed.” She also mentioned, “I could honestly make an entire forty-hour job out of just responding to email. I actually really could.” Beatrix discussed observing, assisting, and supervising her teachers: “So, until I actually see the teachers in the classroom and see the interactions that they’re having with the families, I really don’t feel like I can fully assess the quality of our classrooms.” Next, let us see her motivations and how she views herself in her position.

**Motivation, Purpose, and Self-Image as Education Manager.**

What motivates me day to day is knowing the very real impact that we can have on the children and families within our program and knowing that we might not see it, and that's the hard part about early childhood.

Beatrix was particularly passionate about what motivates her. I could tell that she fully understood her role at Head Start when she talked about “the very real impact.” Every day she is prepared to do work for which she is confident the children will probably not thank her. “You know, we don’t get the letters from our former students telling us how
we changed their lives.” She sees herself as someone working to improve the lives of her colleagues and children at her center. She also takes pride in giving kudos or promoting coworkers. She shared an example of when she was having difficulty getting her child to the bus for school. Her story is as follows:

But there's a morning where I was like five, four, or five months pregnant with my daughter. My middle one was 18 months. My oldest one was four. I woke up feeling awful, just sick and gross, and everything (cold/flu) was going around, and the four-year-old overslept. And I was trying to rush to get him out the door, and the toddler was throwing tantrums. And I was like, I was so tempted to just be like, we're just not going to school today, right? We're just not going to do it. We're not going to go. It's not worth it. And I was like, no, he needs to go. And so, I still somehow managed to get them out to the bus stop. And I'm just like near tears. And I had grabbed a hairbrush on the way out because my four-year-old has like very fine white blond hair that just turns into a puffball. And it was sticking out every which way. And I'm like, So I grab a hairbrush, I'm like, We're going to miss the bus. But I grabbed the hairbrush, and I got the boys out to the bus stop, and I'm brushing his hair as the bus is like, seriously pulling up, and I'm feeling like the worst mom feel ever. I'm feeling like just garbage, right? Like, I don't know how I'm going to do this. This is what I'm feeling. And she opens up the door. She was the bus driver at the time, too, and she opens up the bus door, and she looks out, and I'm like again, near tears at this point, and she's like, you are such a good mom. She's like, ‘It's such a great thing, like you brushing his hair.’ She's like, ‘You have no idea how many parents just send us with their kids, their hair every which way, which is, which is totally fine.’

Beatrix used this story of the bus driver giving her positive affirmations as an example of her dedication to her work. She sees herself as someone who uplifts people’s emotions so that the staff at her centers feel great because that was what she was and is given. Beatrix believes that other teachers and managers will do the same if she continues setting the example. Since Head Start was such a huge help in her life, she feels motivated to help others similarly. She utilizes her position and strengths to empower and motivate her teachers to be the best they can be. Beatrix also recognizes the dangers of
burnout, especially during the COVID pandemic, and the reality of low compensation for many professions. Overall, Head Start employees were kind and helpful to her family, and she sees her work as an opportunity to do the same for other families. She also likes to develop and promote others who see her work similarly.

I think that my purpose in this field is to use those skills to keep our teachers motivated and inspired and to keep our educators and our classroom staff feeling like they’re making a difference so that they don't get to this path where they feel burned out.

I selected the quotes below because they show Beatrix’s intrinsic motivations for the well-being of everyone around her. Beatrix shared, “What motivates me day-to-day is knowing the very real impact that we can have on the children and families within our program and knowing that we might not see it.” She suggested supporting, inspiring, and motivating coworkers, children, and families: “I believe my purpose is to use my strengths to empower educators.” Then giving back to the community, “I got to promote her to be one of our supervisors.” Next, let us look at Beatrix’s thoughts about the responsibilities of a childcare provider.

**Primary Responsibilities of Family Care Providers and Education Managers.**

Beatrix starts, “To care for and support the development and growth of a child in a way that recognizes who that child is as an individual.” When she expounded on the answer, she mentioned taking particular care of each child based on their individual needs. They need to have a solid and positive relationship with the child and family. They can better provide the care they require when they have a strong relationship with the child and family. She offered an example of a child afraid of loud noises like buzzers or school
bells. Her team employed various means of helping the child acclimate to the school noises until her reactions were less intense. Beatrix communicated that Head Start is good at helping children with their ability levels, trauma, and family issues,

I think that we are really good when it comes to levels of ability of meeting individual needs. So, some examples of that are like when we have a child who maybe has a trauma background, and they get really triggered by a fire drill, like what can we do to make that easier for that child?

However, many educators struggle with their children and families’ cultural and linguistic differences.

I don't think people truly understand it until they see it. I don't know that our teachers have had the experience of going on a home visit and showing up to the home visit and finding it to be a shack that has no actual flooring. It’s just like plywood. And it's a two-bedroom, one giant, one like one great room, two-bedroom place, and there are three families living there. And they have a sink, a mini-fridge, and a hot plate. And mats on the floor. And there's one plastic laden chair, and you go into this house to do this visit, and these people who just worked a 12-hour day outside in the elements are sitting there telling you that you will sit in the chair because you're the teacher. And I'm sitting here like, I sit on the floor all day with preschoolers, totally fine, I can sit on the floor, and they're like, No, Maestra, You know? Going with that is honoring their wish to respect you and to show you what they believe you deserve as a teacher, which is a different thing in that in that particular culture.

Beatrix indicated great awareness and reflection regarding subcultures within Head Start. She reflected on a situation where Head Start educators helped start a Spanish-speaking support group for families learning English.

I think that there’s like, I think, you know, again, a program establishes the culture, and they use the dominant culture to establish it. Yeah, the culture there is not the dominant American culture, but they still create a culture based on the dominant culture of that school.”

In her view, this group became exclusive and unwelcome to outsiders.
Next, I share initial comments to show how Beatrix’s answers reflect the themes being generated throughout the iterative writing of the findings. She made numerous comments about awareness and reflection of a family child care provider’s primary responsibilities. One such comment was, “If you’re truly inclusive and equitable, it's talking about the ways we’re different, right, and acknowledging that’s actually a really cool thing.” She displayed her thoughts and actions about the awareness and reflection of a childcare provider’s responsibilities, “Like we say, we want to be linguistically and culturally inclusive.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems in the following quote.

I think it's largely institutional. And I think that there are, and to be very frank, I worked the first Head Start program that I worked for was a migrant Head Start. So, 70 percent of the staff and ninety-nine percent of the children and families were monolingual Spanish-speaking families from Mexico or Central America.

Next, let us look at what she feels about equity and inclusion.

**Equity and Inclusion.** Beatrix defined equity and inclusion as “Recognize and celebrate every child and person that comes in for exactly who they are.” Beatrix provided a deep and insightful reflection regarding inclusion.

I have to find the ways that you're like me to be able to like you. Right? And so, I think we tend to want to talk about the ways that we're all the same. And I think that if you're truly inclusive and equitable, even though it can be very uncomfortable, it's talking about the ways we're different, right, and acknowledging that that's actually a really cool thing.

The heart of what she is saying is that inclusivity should not be dependent on the similarities between people but also on the differences. She views individual differences as strengths, not weaknesses. Regarding awareness and reflection on equity and
inclusion, she said, “There’s no way this child can’t come to school because they have this medical need, right?” Emphasizing how far the scope of their job goes—reflection and action—she said, “We have a teacher right now who does a catheter once a day for a child because of a special need.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems when she said, “We do not expel or suspend students for any reason.”

Beatrix is proud that Head Start does not suspend or expel children. She believes that there is no way a child cannot be in her program because of a medical need that gets expressed in various behaviors. Some accommodations for the children in Head Start involve care plans: a child needing a catheter installed, giving heart medicine at the appropriate times, or having written materials and verbal instructions in English and Spanish. She placed much emphasis on including the family in any particular plan,

I think that's another way that we're very inclusive and equitable is that we really don't do any kind of special plan or services for a child without including the family in that conversation, and the family has to be involved in creating that plan.

Beatrix also mentions that her center does tangible things to be more inclusive.

I think we're making progress towards, but we are really looking at how do we provide materials and how do we ensure that every family can get the materials in a language that they understand? And because it's true, we're not likely to find staff that can speak every language that comes through our program. So, we do partner with an interpretation service. So, when we are doing a home visit or a conference or even just a phone call with those families, we make sure that we have a legit interpreter who can have those conversations with those families.

Beatrix dedicates herself to providing her children with the most equitable conditions her team can create in every possible realm.
I share comments below to show how her answers reflect the study's themes. She commented a few times about the awareness and reflection of how equity and inclusion are practiced at her center, “The parent has to agree that this is the best plan for their child.” She said, “We do sometimes come up with plans where if a child is really struggling and the parent is feeling that their child isn't successful” about her thinking and actions regarding equity and inclusion. She mentioned the following about awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems, “How do we ensure that every family can get the materials in a language they understand?” Looking forward, Beatrix wants solutions that become practices, policies or the foundation of a new system. Next, we see what Beatrix said about unfair school practices.

**Unfair School Practices.** Beatrix talked about the underrepresentation of BIPOC people who work at Head Start and White people who do not speak different languages—Beatrix being multilingual.

I think that our students and our families need to see people who look like them in our program, right? They need those positive role models’ examples, just because we know that's important. The other thing I will say is that I do think it's important that sometimes children see someone who's looking like me speaking a language that's not English and speaking it with respect.

Head Start has a history of hiring parents of children who attended their program.

Because many Head Start families are in the program because of poverty or other marginalizing conditions, many parents cannot begin working there. Her response to this problem is,
I think that I would never want to devalue education. I think education is really important. What I would like to see us do more of is working with applicants to hire them while they achieve those kinds of certifications. That kind of proficiency in English or that kind of certification, GED, whatever it is, I would like us to have a path where we hire them and then help them reach the qualifications whenever possible.

Beatrix believes everyone, even English language learners, should have a chance regardless of their starting level. “In America, People of Color graduate from high school at far fewer percentages than their white peers.” Regarding reflection and action, “They need to see people respecting their language and acknowledging their language and not making it feel like it's wrong or less than.” She continues, “I think in our agency, we have the power to make that change in some instances. And I will say that I think we're moving in that direction.” She seemed assured that Head Start would work to involve parents more.

Beatrix frequently speaks with her counterparts about the various issues she is dealing with at any given time. One of her counterparts is also fluent in Spanish and has lived in other countries. She spends time discussing equity and inclusion with her colleagues. When she and her colleagues discuss an unfair practice, it is usually to advocate against or correct the unfair aspect. The awareness/reflection cycle quickly gives way to the reflection/action cycle. If they are in the reflection/action dynamic, they will advocate unless further action is needed.

When asked how she reflects personally and professionally, she said, “I get really fired up, and I’m much less likely to want to see it from both sides.” She said that this happens when reflecting on a personal level. She seems to moderate her behavior at work
and attempts to see situations from various viewpoints. “I'm much more likely to try to see it from all sides to acknowledge the pragmatic piece of it, right? If we're looking at true equity, we're looking at full inclusion.” Her work seems to demand her to slow down and take in the various viewpoints so she can meet everyone's needs.

I share comments below to show how her answers reflect the study’s themes. She commented several times on awareness and reflection of whom to speak to when she notices an unfair school practice. She discussed how she would approach an uncomfortable situation with a colleague. “Professionally, I'm much more likely to try to see it from all sides to acknowledge the pragmatic piece of it, right? If we're looking at true equity, we're looking at full inclusion.” She also referenced knowing whom to speak to when she notices an unfair school practice and being confident the issue will be addressed: “I don't foresee having that kind of a conversation with [redacted] and having her be like, nah, we're not doing that.” She often referred to awareness, reflection, or action on whom to speak to when she notices an unfair school practice, “If we're looking at true equity, we're looking at full inclusion. It's very expensive to do it well, and we don't have the funding.” Beatrix seems confident about advocating for change but is aware of some of the limitations of implementing them. Next, let us talk about her advocacy for school practices.

**Unfair School Practices and Advocacy.** “It’s my role if I see something to say something.” Beatrix’s sense of self-efficacy became evident in her responses. She was adamant that identifying inequity is essential but that she may “not be the best person to offer solutions because I’m seeing it as an outsider.” She said that she does not have
personal experience with the impact of inequity. She somewhat reverses her comment above by saying, “It is my responsibility to be willing to say I see this is a problem. It is not my job to know it or fix it, and that’s where I have to be a little more careful.” It seems like she is uncertain about her power and ability to make a tangible impact, but she recognizes that she needs to say something.

Her following comments reflected the study’s themes. She displayed awareness and reflection of advocacy in school practice when she candidly admitted, “I think that I try my best to advocate…having to have that kind of awareness…I might not be the best spokesperson.” She commented about the reflection and advocacy in school practice, but her resolve was not as firm,

“\text{I think where I need to be aware of is that I am not the best person to offer the solutions because I'm seeing it as an outsider. So, I don't know the internal struggle or the internal issues that are happening, and I don't have personal experience with the impact.”}

She did not mention awareness, reflection, or action about the awareness and reflection of advocacy in the context of school practice. This section was short because she kept reiterating that she fell short regarding advocacy as she stated, “I might not be the best spokesperson.”

**Witnessing Bigotry.** Beatrix immediately responded with what she perceived as prejudice directed at her because of her specific physical traits. She was aware that even she, a White blonde woman, was the subject of bigotry and discrimination from time to time. Then, after some prompting, Beatrix revealed a situation involving discrimination. She spoke of a city in Rondo County known for having many bigoted people. The Head
Start program in that city began construction on an affordable housing project, which the residents vociferously opposed.

Their protestations were abusive and demeaning to the would-be residents, the Head Start staff, and the construction workers doing their jobs. An employee at the local grocery store recognized her as a Head Start employee and confronted Beatrix. The store clerk was angry at the migrants getting free stuff from the government and yelled at Beatrix for encouraging such a thing.

There were people going to meetings trying to protest, saying not to build our site there, not to build the housing. It was bad enough that at one point, I was just wearing my badge that had [redacted] right on it. And, you know, I'm at the grocery store in [redacted], and I'm just getting my groceries, and the cashier like sees my badge, and she's like, how can you encourage those people like how can you give free things to those people who aren't even citizens? And I'm just like, they pick your fruit. It's so frustrating to me, so I mean. That's where I saw it get like again, like get the nastiest where people were just really being awful.

Beatrix confessed that there was nothing else to say because this person already had their mind made, and she had no power to change it. However, she mentioned the abusive language to the grocery store employee’s manager.

She said that her conflict was not with the person who confronted her and that her efforts were better spent not engaging in a verbal argument at the grocery store. Her conclusion from this painful moment is that, from her view, “There’s only one cure and its exposure like, you have to be in a situation where you can, where you have no choice but to see them (migrants) as people.” To elaborate, she told a story about her coworker who learned to accept Mexican people because a Mexican family moved in next door. She said,
It’s only because they built this relationship with these people and saw that, like a lot of the things I thought were true, aren’t true. And so, I think that that's where the biggest challenge is like, how do we create opportunities for that kind of exposure and connection?

Her solution for different cultures to be copacetic is to expose them to each other healthily and positively. This exposure could help dispel individuals' prejudices and lead to more peaceful interactions.

Further, Beatrix mentioned a situation when she worked for a previous Head Start employer. Her answer was very nuanced when discussing dominant and non-dominant cultures. The situation was that she was a teacher for various migrant families. She served Somali, Central American, and Mexican people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

It was really hard for these families who spoke Somali to come into a school where it was almost all Spanish speaking, and there wasn't anyone who could speak their language. And so, I think that a program establishes the culture, and they use the dominant culture to establish [a group]. Yeah, the culture there is not the dominant American culture, but they still create a culture based on the dominant culture of that school.

In other words, despite Central American, Mexican, and Somali families sharing similar ongoing experiences in the American system, the Central American and Mexican families had created an exclusionary group around their shared language, essentially omitting the Somalis. By cultivating a group exclusively for Spanish speakers, the group became less inclusive of non-Spanish speakers.

Next, I share some comments to show how her answers reflect the themes. She commented on the awareness and reflection of bigotry repeatedly. Once she remarked about prejudice directed at her, “If we want to talk personal experience, and this is very
minimal, and I know that, but I'm petite, I'm blonde, I had my kids young. I have an outgoing personality, so I'm a dumb cheerleader.”

Often, she commented about her thinking and actions regarding bigotry. If the reader recalls the story of migrant housing, she remarked, “Yes, for the love of all that’s holy, please [build migrant housing].” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems. One statement to this end,

My biggest argument point is if you are truly worried about the immigration aspect of the situation, then don't take it out on these families who are just trying to provide for their families, just trying to find a better life. Take it out on the corporations who exploit them because they can.

Her identification of “the corporations who exploit” is apt because the corporations hold a lot more power than individual migrant families. The migrant families are just trying to exist. Beatrix feels strongly and negatively about the corporations that use bigotry for their means and ends.

**Summary**

Beatrix started as a young mom motivated to improve her family’s situation. Her typical day includes monitoring, meetings, and assisting her teachers. Head Start has inspired her to give back in any way possible because of the opportunities she has received from Head Start. She is bilingual and sees herself as an advocate for migrant families, regardless of their language. Beatrix practices awareness, reflection, and action on her families and students' behalf with ease but has yet to flourish in her agency regarding changing practices, policies, and systems.
How does Annabelle feel about these questions? Next, let us view her responses to the questions above.

**Annabelle**

Annabelle’s demeanor was calm, collected, and steadfast. She is an Education Manager at the Ocean View location, an urban setting. She is 64 years old with a bachelor’s degree. We began the discussion with the story of how she started to work at Head Start. Her interview was shorter than Beatrix’s and her answers were generally more straightforward. Annabelle’s interview included a strong focus on awareness and reflection, a high aptitude for reflecting and acting on behalf of her children and families, and a lesser focus and ability on awareness, reflection, and action to affect practice policies and systems.

**From Parent to Education Manager.** “So, I started out as a bus driver.” Her credentials as a home child care provider were not enough to start teaching at Head Start. “I wasn't able to teach right away because I didn't have a degree or anything.” She worked for six months as a bus driver and then moved to an assistant teacher position, where she worked for another six months. After being an assistant, she was offered a lead teacher position in a therapeutic classroom which she worked until she earned a regular classroom. “I did that for about seven years and then worked my way up into a regular classroom after the therapeutic classroom.” She stepped into the temporary managerial role when one of her supervisors was on vacation. “They asked me if I would step up into that role temporarily, and I did, and I loved it, and I felt like I was able to kind of show
them what I was able to do.” She loved it so much that she applied to be a manager when it came open.

I selected the comments below to share a little more of her story. We discussed her experiences with early child care or Head Start; remember that she started as a bus driver. She remarked about her motivation to improve in life, early childhood education, and education in general. After talking about being a bus driver, she continued, “I did that for six years, went to a teaching position, and after doing the assistant position. Maybe another six months, and then I was a lead teacher.” She spoke about how Head Start has inspired her and loves working with children, “I love the philosophy that Head Start has.” She also discussed the hardships or barriers she experienced that led to her working at Head Start. I was doing home child care at that time and wanted out of that into something different.” Annabelle’s love of children and her growth mindset allows her to adapt where others may not. Next, let us look at Annabelle’s typical day at her center.

**A typical Day as an Education Manager.** "Oh gosh, I feel like you wear many hats.” Annabelle describes chaotic days that start at six in the morning. "I believe in servant leadership, and I will do whatever task needs to be done on-site to help children and families and staff be successful in the day." She discussed her responsibilities in ensuring each classroom has a teacher, which COVID precautions have complicated. After settling the teachers and children into their respective tasks, she goes to her office to plan her day. She is concerned with ensuring that the classrooms are operating well, so she conducts observations of teachers daily. In alignment with Head Start's guidelines, she observes the teachers and children, assessing how well the teachers are doing. After
monitoring her teachers, she follows up with them to reflect on and bolster their teaching practices. Annabelle’s answer to this question had a feeling of being systematic and procedural.

Annabelle proclaimed that “I’m an advocate for children. That’s been my whole belief, and I get really emotional around that.” She continued, “I have such a passion for serving children and families. That’s the work that we do.” Annabelle is very warm and wants the best for everyone around her. She ensures that any issues around trauma are explored and attended to. “I don't know if you know much about Circle of Security and implementing that, but we use that, and we're trauma-informed.” Annabelle seems to think that many of her families should get trauma-informed services because they are on the margins of society.

I selected the quotes below to show her busyness as an education manager. She commented, “I get there at 6:00 am, some days at 6:30 am.” She indicated conducting administrative tasks such as updating policies and procedures or answering, reading, drafting, and sending emails. “And then once the classrooms are settled in, and they are eating breakfast, I go back to my office and look at the tasks that need to be done in front of me.” Annabelle discussed observing, assisting, and supervising her teachers, “And so, there is monitoring that has to happen. So, I look at licensing to make sure that we're kind of following what needs to be done for our licensing. And so, I do that monitoring piece.” Observations are critical to education managers; Annabelle’s impression is no exception. Next, let us see what motivates Annabelle in her day-to-day.
Motivation, Purpose, and Self-Image as Education Manager. Annabelle said, "Well, I'm an advocate for children. That's been my whole belief, and I get really emotional around that. So, I apologize for that. But I have such a passion for serving children and families." She believes that no staff thinks or feels differently. Annabelle has an exceptionally soft and kind affect when she speaks. It also comes through with her word choices. She firmly believes that “this is such important work to support our families and support the children and their needs.” She also discussed the circle of security and trauma-informed practices and how they are integral to their work with Head Start families. “When we look at families coming in, I help and support teachers around what trauma has this child been through.” Other services include health and wellness referrals for the family, including mental health. She recognizes and embraces the need for self-improvement. She focuses on improving her capability for reflection and thinking better about how to help her center thrive.

Annabelle’s intrinsic motivations for the well-being of everyone around her were clearly evident in the interview. Returning to the prior quote, the Circle of Security is essential to influencing children and their families. She displayed support, inspiration, and motivation for her colleagues and their children/families. She said, “I don’t have one person who doesn’t believe the same way I do, that this is such important work to support our families and support the children and their needs.” Another theme is giving back to the community, and she said, “That’s my passion, that’s what drives me, is supporting the kids and being an advocate for children.” Most of all, Annabelle focuses on ensuring that
Head Start children and families are being cared for. Next, let us see what her thoughts about childcare providers are.

**Primary Responsibilities of Family Care Providers and Education Managers.**

Annabelle’s response was lengthy and robust,

I think that we have to lead. We have to take we have to reflect on our own biases, and; that's where we have to start. Like, what will get in our way of being able to support every gender, every, you know, ethnic background, all of it, and what are our beliefs behind it? And so, I think, you know, as long as you're willing to take a look at that and inclusion, I believe in inclusion for everyone. Disabilities, race, gender, whatever it is, inclusion is the most important piece and that children and families feel like they belong. So, that's kind of where I'm at with that.

She also discussed how she ensures the families feel like they belong in the program.

Annabelle recognized that it would be a very beneficial strength if she spoke Spanish, but she has methods to overcome the language barrier. “I think that there are other ways to communicate than besides just verbally.” She said, “You can show that you care for families by your body language, tone, and showing them that you really want to understand where they're at and what their needs are.” She shows interest by asking families “about their culture and things that are important to them.” She likes to be “asking families what would you like your child to learn around your culture?” After all, “they know their children the best.”

Annabelle shared an example of how she practices inclusion with Spanish-speaking families. Annabelle said the “Hispanic population really wants their children to learn English.” Sometimes this conviction “takes priority over their own family language.” The loss of Spanish as a language spoken at home is profound. Annabelle thinks it is her responsibility to respect the family’s home language, “It's so important to
keep that going, that heritage going in your family, you know.” She believes that the teacher, parents, and children should respect the family language and keep it alive with the children. “I just think it's so crucial to be able to communicate for the children, to be able to communicate with their grandparents and their great grandparents, you know, in their native language.”

Annabelle’s answers reflect the study’s themes. She commented about awareness and reflection on the primary responsibilities of a family child care provider when she said, “I think that we have to lead. We have to take we have to reflect on our own biases.” She remarked a few times about reflection and action on the primary responsibilities of a family child care provider. “I think just making families because they're the first educators, we want their input. They know their children the best.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems when she said, “I feel like an area of growth for me, and I think for me as a provider, it's taking a look at my own stuff and my stuff in my family, like, how did I play a part or how did my family play a part in oppression?” Annabelle is willing and capable of taking such an introspective look at herself. Next, let us see what Annabelle said about equity and inclusion.

**Equity and Inclusion.** Annabelle continued with the example of how she engages families who speak different languages. She stressed the importance of exposing children to multiple languages, especially in families whose primary language is not English. She is focused and concerned with her children holding onto their primary language. Annabelle struggled with this question, and it was apparent that she was thinking
extremely hard about her answers. Once she did, she could share her concerns honestly and openly.

"So, for me, it's a little bit of a fear because I wouldn't ever want to hurt or offend someone in a way that it would make them feel bad about who they are.” This remark showed her sensitivity to awareness of equity and inclusion. She openly recognized that she had much to learn to navigate equity and inclusion adeptly. “I think it’s my responsibility to learn more about [equity and inclusion], and we are doing that at Head Start. She continued, “Sometimes, I’m afraid of saying the wrong thing, you know because I don’t always know.” Although her fear is intense, she shows that she pays deference to essential topics such as language, culture, and family.

Regarding discrimination, she said, “I think that's a big piece being able to look at [oppression] because sometimes that's kind of hard, and it's kind of scary.” She commented about her thinking and actions relating to her ideas of equity and inclusion, “I think there's just a lot more work that needs to be done. I'm not sure where it's going to go, but I know that we're headed in that direction.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems when she said, ”our bathrooms are gender-neutral, and we work with families around that as well.” Her mentioning the bathrooms was so nonchalant that it barely registered at first. It appeared to be a non-issue, and no parents or children had any problems.

Reflecting on how equity and inclusion are practiced at her center, her prominent example was how they bring “different languages into the classroom.” She spoke about introducing languages that represent the families attending her program. For example, “I
know that there’s Arabic in there, and there’s Spanish, and then there’s Russian in the classroom because [those were the languages spoken by our families] at the time.” She also discussed gender-neutral bathrooms as a practice in equity and inclusion. This policy applies to the children and is going well, without complications. Finally, she mentioned that she obtains literature and playthings such as dolls representing different cultures, especially those at her location.

She also discussed a macro perspective of how educators can better practice equity and inclusion,

It's an area of growth for me, and I think for me as a provider, it's taking a look at my own stuff and my own stuff in my family, like, how did I play a part or how did my family play a part in oppression? And I think, I think that's a big piece being able to look at that because sometimes that's kind of hard, and it's kind of scary.

She focused her answer on her awareness of how her background impacts the people she works with. Annabelle even recognized that she must be attentive to how and what she communicates because sometimes, “I’m afraid to say the wrong thing because I don’t always know.” She says, “So, I think it’s my responsibility to learn more about that, and we are doing that at Head Start.”

When she discussed how she practices equity and inclusion, she first said, “I’m just kind of a natural nurturer.” She also mentioned, "I just don’t see people by their differences or by the color of their skin. I just see them as people, and I respect them where they’re at in their culture and their, you know, race.” She discussed having solid relationships with her families and focusing on acting with love toward her families. “I
think just being caring and being attentive and meeting their needs, whatever they are, just being available to families.”

When Rondo County Head Start practices awareness and reflection of equity and inclusion, they “bring different languages into the classroom. Our teachers are really good at including written language.” She seemed to rely on relationships to provide the necessary support to discuss controversial topics, “I just treat them like, you know, having the conversation with them.” She commented about her thoughts and actions to address the child and family’s needs, “Like, if families talk to me about that (issues regarding culture), then, of course, I will talk to them about that. And if there’s needs that they have, then I will address those.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems, “We also bring a variety of books into the classroom that kind of look at those pieces, whether it be having two dads or two moms, or books about culture.” Annabelle recognized that she sometimes falls short, but her willingness to overcome adversity with her family allows her to engage in trickier conversations and actions. Next, let us look at how she responded to unfair school practices.

**Unfair School Practices.** Annabelle’s answers became more guarded during this part of the interview. It became apparent that the question made her a little uncomfortable. She struggled for an example and generally spoke about inclusion for about three minutes. Then Annabelle recalled a racial joke that was unkind towards a specific group of people Head Start serves. We delved deeper when she shared a general issue that I identified as microaggression. I provided the term microaggression when I
made the recognition. When we discussed microaggressions for a minute, I noticed her acknowledgment of it being an issue regarding equity and inclusion. “I didn’t even realize that was like a microaggression, and I didn’t realize it was slander towards someone else’s race, you know, because it was so subtle, and they kind of slid right in.” It is not easy to recognize, address, and redress microaggressions at the moment because of their fleeting nature. She is aware that she reflects on it better afterward but is less able to be mindful of it at the moment. She continuously works on her awareness of microaggressions and still finds them tricky to spot.

Annabelle remarked on the awareness and reflection about unfair school practices when she said, “I think when I first started, I was pretty green and naive, and inclusion meant to me children who had disabilities.” She asserted her thinking and actions regarding unfair school practices, “I think that's the biggest piece is keeping that growth attitude and knowing that I'm going to screw up somewhere along the way. And it's okay because I'm going to learn from it.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems,

Do some problem-solving around it and go to my supervisor or one of my leads in the classroom, you know, like and trying to find out what's getting in the way of this, you know, like why, why is it happening number one? And like, what can we do to remedy it? What can we do to fix it? What solutions can we come up with?

She was talking about how to address an unfair school practice with colleagues. It showed her thinking of problem-solving and potential permanent solutions to her problems.
Annabelle has two primary colleagues to talk about unfair issues at work. Her supervisor and mental health team provide her with a sounding board for unfair things. “Most of the time, I can share my feelings and thoughts openly and have conversations around them without feeling like I'm going to be restricted or something that they're going to make me work on.” She also said that she feels comfortable discussing topics that affect the education managers with the management team, “I can freely go to her and say, you know, wow, this has been a tough week. This is what I'm kind of dealing with this week at work.” She feels like Rondo County Head Start is inclusive enough for the education managers to share their difficulties, “I think I have a pretty good relationship with most of my peers, and I'm really happy that most of them are really open to like most conversations, and so, I would just approach them with it.” Annabelle tends to be emotional and not as open-minded when reflecting alone but more strategic when reflecting with colleagues, “Sometimes, I get more emotional when I'm doing it personally. I'm just an emotional person. So, I try not to do that when I'm being more professional.” She finished by saying, “I want to be able to represent my center and myself as competent.”

I share comments below to show how her answers reflect the study’s themes. She commented about the awareness and reflection of the child and family’s needs when she mentioned microaggressions. She remarked about her thinking and actions about unfair school practices,

I'm still working on the moment saying something. And it doesn't happen. I have to tell you; it doesn't happen very often at my work. And when something like
that does happen, the person that says it immediately goes, Oh my gosh, I can't believe I just said that.

She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems when discussing strategic meetings management holds regularly. “I wasn't able to make the last one, but we have, like some of my peers and [redacted], would run a meeting with all of us and be able to share some of those same kinds of things.” The strategic meetings involve discussions regarding practice, policy, and systems. Next, let us see what Annabelle thinks about advocacy and unfair school practices.

**Unfair School Practices and Advocacy.** Annabelle responds to unfairness based on who the target is and how the practice impacts them. She mentioned that it “depends on the severity of it.” She said that if it seems like something that happens agency-wide, she will discuss the issue with her lower-level employees. If they see the same thing, she will take it to her chain of command, one step at a time. “Let’s take it to our supervisors and talk about it, see where we can go from there, whether it be forming a committee to take a deeper look at it and do some problem-solving.” If someone caused an unfair practice or situation, she would address and redress it with that individual or those people.

Annabelle expressed frustration with following the chain of command at every step when addressing an issue. “I feel like we have to kind of stay within that command, you know, like that chain of command.” She wishes there could be more flexibility in escalating organizational problems, but this is the system with which she must work.
Annabelle also recognized that she works at an institution, and some institutions evolve slower than people. She accepts the system she works in and strives to improve it the best she can. Overall, Annabelle came off as very advocacy-minded and spent much of her reflective time in the realm of reflection-action.

Annabelle remarked about the awareness and reflection of school practice when she said, “If it’s about children in the classroom and it's an unfair practice, that's something that I would bring to my supervisor's immediate attention.” She commented on her thinking and actions to address the child and family’s needs when she declared,

I would say, Hey, I've noticed, and others have noticed, like if my peers noticed as well, and that might be something that we would bring up at an ease meeting and then ask our supervisors to take it to management.

She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems. She said, “Let's take it to our supervisors and talk about it and see where we can go from there. Whether it be forming a committee, taking a deeper look at it, and problem-solving.” It is good to know that Rondo County Head Start has systems to implement lasting change. It is also good to know that advocacy can change practices, policies, or systems. Next, let us see what Annabelle has to share about bigotry.

**Witnessing Bigotry.** Annabelle began by recognizing the bias and prejudice directed her way because of her size. Immediately after her brief introspective analysis of discrimination pointed in her direction, she discussed her granddaughter at length. “I also see it in my granddaughter who is non-binary, and she's they/them. And so, I see that in her life.” She told me the story of how she is struggling to accept her granddaughter as
non-binary and non-heterosexual. “It's been harder for me to do that—they/them—just because of grammar. I'm just like, it's really hard. So, I'm working on that piece.” This emotional exchange was simultaneously heartwarming and inspiring. She reflected on her difficulties regarding her size and how people ridiculed her and realized that what her granddaughter faces is much more challenging.

And so, there's this struggle, this internal struggle within me that says, well, the Bible says one thing about that, and then I have my granddaughter. So, I'm trying to balance that piece, and I'm working closely with my granddaughter. And at times, it's been a struggle. It's been a true struggle. For me, it's the internal struggle with my faith and with the love that I have, the unconditional love that I have for her. So, it's a growing process.

Annabelle is engaging her granddaughter in a bold way. She struggles with accepting things she was taught to be wary of as a child, but she persists anyway. Even though it is difficult and does not make sense to her often, Annabelle persists because of her love for her granddaughter. She wishes she could have recognized her granddaughter’s struggles sooner so that she could have provided her with more support. She works every day to improve and bolster this relationship despite her childhood beliefs.

Annabelle commented about the awareness and reflection on bigotry when she said, “I see it in my granddaughter who is non-binary, and she’s they/them. And so, so I see that in her life.” She remarked about her thinking and actions about bigotry as she discussed her granddaughter,

I see that in her life, and you know, it's been harder for me to do they/them just because of grammar. I'm just like, it's really hard. So, I'm working on that piece. But she chose another name, and I am calling her by that name instead of by her birth name.
Annabelle mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems by discussing her religion in the context of a non-binary granddaughter. “For me, it's the internal struggle with my faith and with the love that I have, the unconditional love that I have for her. So, it's a growing process.” Amazingly, she challenges institutional practices to accept her granddaughter for her true self.

**Summary**

Annabelle started as a bus driver for Head Start but had ambitions to do more for the organization. She went through a bachelor’s program and began teaching as an assistant teacher at Head Start. Annabelle is a servant leader who focuses on the well-being of her teachers, children, and their families. She views herself as an advocate for children and their families and focuses on the whole family's well-being. Annabelle has a daughter whose life experiences are helping Annabelle grow and learn about acceptance and love in a different context to which she is accustomed. Annabelle’s bravery in her personal life should inspire her and others in their personal and professional lives.

How does Condoliza feel about these questions? Next, let us view her responses to the questions above.

**Condoliza**

During our interview, Condoliza’s demeanor was calm, quiet, and reserved. She is an Education Manager at the Grand Valley location, an urban setting. She is in her 30s and has a master’s degree—I did not ask the ages of my participants as a function of the
interview. We began the discussion with the story of how she started to work at Head Start. Condoliza’s interview was the shortest and therefore has the fewest quotes. I tried to help Condoliza expound on her points; however, I am still a novice researcher and believe I could have done better with more experience. Condoliza’s had some difficulties regarding awareness and reflection, a mid-range aptitude for reflecting and acting on behalf of her children and families, and a small focus and ability on awareness, reflection, and action to affect practice policies and systems.

From Parent to Education Manager. Condoliza started as a Head Start parent. “I’ve got four kids that I put through Head Start, all while I was going to college.” She soon became a Head Start teacher “once I finished my master’s degree.” At some point, she stopped working at Head Start because of a challenging classroom and began working in various private and public sector jobs. Soon after, she realized that she liked being with children the most. “So, I ended up going back as a teacher and taught for about a year and a half before I was promoted to education manager at one of our sites.” She likes Head Start because they provide education and a host of social services, including advocacy for children—which was the biggest attraction for her. Also significant to her is the mental health and disability support families receive.

Condoliza discussed her previous experiences with early child care or Head Start, “I was actually a Head Start parent.” She commented about her motivation to improve in life, early childhood education, and education in general; one great example is, “I'm going back to school. I need to be a teacher. And I did, and I never looked back.” She remarked that Head Start inspired her and loves working with children: “They had the
mental health support. They have the disability support in the way that all these teams have cohesiveness, [which] is what really pulls me in.” She noted the hardships or barriers she experienced that led to her working at Head Start. “The housing market crashed, and I lost my job, and I just went home, and I said, that’s it, I’m going back to school to be a teacher. And I did, and I never looked back.” Her story had an inflection point surrounding the 2008 housing crash, which led her to shift careers into something more meaningful—teaching and caring for vulnerable children. Next, let us see her day as an education manager.

A typical Day as an Education Manager. Condoliza began with a note about the quantity of work and specific issues with her center. She stays so busy that her phone rings off the hook. “I guess I don't realize how much it rings and gets texts throughout the day until the first time I was at home, sick.” She focuses her time on accomplishing her administrative tasks but remains open to monitoring teachers or responding to anything requiring her attention. She is mainly needed to show up in the classrooms when the teacher is overwhelmed, needs a break, or something else that requires immediate attention. “I’ve jumped out of meetings to go and support somebody.” She maintained the perspective that children come first, then administration later. Condoliza said that she spends time prioritizing the needs of her school and classrooms to pay appropriate attention to whatever class has the most demand.

There's been a few times where I'm in one classroom, and there's another classroom that needs me, and I'll ask, what is the need? Is this something that I can send somebody else for? I can pull a teacher from a different classroom to come support you. So, there is that balance on who, which child at which time gets priority because there's only one of me, and we've got five classrooms.
I selected the quotes below to show her busyness as an education manager. When she discussed her working conditions, Condoliza lamented to her supervisor, “There are times I told my supervisor I don’t want the site that I’m at. We don’t have a working phone on site. And so, it’s my cell phone, my work phone, that’s the primary contact.” She indicated conducting administrative tasks such as updating policies and procedures or answering, reading, drafting, and sending emails. She discussed her administrative duties, “It's a lot of trying to get the administrative work done, but at the same time, constantly popping in and other classrooms for whatever needs might be.” Condoliza remarked several times about observing, assisting, and supervising her teachers, “I always say the kids come first, that administrative work, it can wait till tomorrow.” She discussed her meetings—but mostly about being interrupted or having to leave a meeting to support a classroom. Condoliza seemed a little frustrated because it appeared she had more to do than she could get done. What motivates Condoliza in her workplace? Let us find out.

**Motivation, Purpose, and Self-Image as Education Manager.** Condoliza’s immediate answer was focused and direct.

I really see myself as a role model and a coach for the teachers and their teams. I’m there to help with some of the harder conversations they have to have with parents and with families, like I said, some of the harder things they’re faced with in the classroom as far as the kids go. But I’m always coming into that classroom and modeling how they should respond and what they should do. And if they need a tough conversation with the family, I ask them to be there for that so that they can see how I have authority and what that looks like in hopes that they will be able to do that independently at some point.
Wanting more from this answer, I probed a little further by asking what her leadership style is and how she engages in her role as education manager. She expounded a little by discussing how she coaches teachers. She listens to her teachers, reflects with them, and assists in solving whatever situation they have without giving them the answers. “I do a lot of listening; a lot of reflection. I’m very open-ended.” Essentially, she discussed how she conducts coaching with her teachers.

I selected the quotes below because they show some of what motivates Condoliza in her daily practice. “I see myself as a role model and a coach for the teachers and their teams.” She also said, ”I’m there to help with some of the harder conversations they (teachers) have with parents and families.” She also discussed giving back to the community,

If they need a tough conversation with the family, I ask them to be there for that so that they can see how I have authority and what that looks like in hopes that they will be able to do that independently at some point.

She engages in a practice that also helps set her teachers up for success in the future when they encounter difficult situations.

So, when a teacher comes to me with a problem and you can tell they’re just like, ‘Solve this problem for me’, and I’m very much like that. What are some ways that you can solve that rather than helping or rather than just giving them the answer? I’m going to walk them through it, and I’m really going to do that reflective listening.

She wants her teachers to feel like they have the agency required to accomplish tasks independently—especially the tricky ones with parents. Let us look at Condoliza’s perspective on how child care providers should conduct themselves.
Primary Responsibilities of Family Care Providers and Education Managers.

Condoliza focused her answers on the technical and the procedural.

It's to make sure staff understand those policies and procedures and what that looks like in the classroom, and how that's reflected in the classroom. And then second, again, that modeling in those conversations, you know, I can walk in and see something they're not necessarily seeing as equitable, and I can explain that to them. Like this is this is why this is the way that it is, and this is why it needs to be done in this way. So, having that deep understanding, sometimes it's helpful to have someone that can step in and really stand back and see everything as a whole versus those teachers that are in there moving and so busy throughout the day.

When I pressed Condoliza about an example of how she deals with equity or inclusion issues, she responded with a story about a child. One of her teachers has a child who,

He has these extreme disruptive behaviors. And the teacher had asked right after he reads. She told me he needed to clean up. Can I keep him in the classroom and have him clean up what he needs? And I'm going to take the rest of the kids out?

Condoliza approached the teachers and discussed how keeping him from recess compounded the problem.

I said, No, we really can't do that. I said, because then what you're doing is you're holding that outside time away from him because he hasn't cleaned this up. I said, but there's some tools and some tricks that we can use to at least try and get him to at least [clean] one thing so that he's following those rules.

She continued, “So, I worked with her through that, and we talked about some of those ways she can still support him.”

Next, I share initial comments to show how Condoliza’s answers reflect the study’s themes. She made comments about the awareness and reflection on the responsibilities of a child care provider when she said,

Everyone needs to be included for everything but also based on individual needs and very dependent upon the need of the family, the need of the child, for example, every child can walk into that classroom, and every child gets the opportunity to sit.
She remarked several times about the awareness and reflection on the responsibilities of a childcare provider, “I would have to say meet everyone where they’re at.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems when she said, “To make sure staff understand those policies and procedures and what that looks like in the classroom and how that's reflected in the classroom.” She seemed more technical regarding how she answered; however, she does good work with her teachers to meet the individual needs of her children and families. Condoliza had some things to say about equity and inclusion. Let us find out what.

**Equity and Inclusion.** Condoliza offered an immediate and concise response regarding her understanding of equity and inclusion,

Ensuring that everybody has the same opportunities, both for the families and for the kids in the classroom, and also ensuring that there's no bias based on gender or race or any type of identity that the family or the child has been inclusive of who they are into the classroom. So, bringing those cultures and bringing that identity and bringing that family into the classroom so that the kid can see, this is my community, where I belong, where I exist, and they love me for who I am.

I followed up with her to expound on her answer by asking her to identify what she does to reduce bias at her center. She responded by saying she has not “seen a whole lot of [bias] within [Head Start]” and that “our teachers are very good at not having those biases.” She expressed that when a teacher makes an untoward comment, it is usually based on ignorance. She described an example where one of her teachers began speaking Spanish with another, assuming she knew how because of her appearance.

I saw a teacher go up to another staff member and start speaking to her in Spanish, and she stopped her and she said, I don't speak Spanish. And she said, Oh, I'm sorry, I looked at the color of your skin, and I assumed that you spoke
Spanish. And so, little things like that that you can't make those assumptions for the families, the kids, the staff members, or each other. So, just thinking consciously about that.

Condoliza works with her teachers to reduce these instances so that teachers are not projecting their assumptions on the families.

Condoliza remarked on the awareness and reflection regarding equity and inclusion. One example was regarding a follow-up question about bias, “I haven’t seen a whole lot of [bias] within [our program].” Regarding her thinking and actions on equity and inclusion, she said that it is crucial to ensure "that everybody has the same opportunities, both for the families and for the kids in the classroom.” She did not connect awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems to my question.

Condoliza works to ensure that “equity and inclusion is understood through the families.” She further explained how she engages in equity and inclusion work with an example of a general misunderstanding between two parents. Her example is thus,

I then have to talk with both of them and chat with them about it. And it's typically an understanding of this is how I feel and this is how I'm seeing the situation versus this is how this person feels and sees the situation. So, it's helping them to understand the perspective of the other person. I hear, and I use a lot of ‘I hear you saying,’ this is that correct? And I just want to share with you that this is what this person shared with me. And so, it's really just working through some of those ideas with the families within the classrooms.

Condoliza said her center enjoys “a high range of disabilities and languages and cultures integrated within our classroom.”

When she spoke about how she engages in equity and inclusion work, she said, “I guess it's just always being mindful of who I'm working with and what situation I'm
working in; I'm always very cognitive of my own biases that are subconscious.” It appears that she works on reducing her biases by recognizing them. That way, she can avoid making a cultural faux pas. She emphasized relationships and believes maintaining them helps reduce cultural barriers.

I share comments below to show how her answers reflect the study’s themes. She commented on the awareness and reflection regarding how equity and inclusion are practiced at her center when she said, “It's things that we talk about with the families because it's not only things that we practice in the classroom, but it's ensuring that equity and inclusion are understood through the families as well.” She remarked about her thinking and actions regarding how equity and inclusion are practiced at her center when she discussed a potential conflict between families, “It's typically an understanding of how I feel, and this is how I'm seeing the situation versus how this person feels and sees the situation. So, it's helping them to understand the perspective of the other person.”

Condoliza did not mention awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems. She did not share any words that indicated her mindset regarding influencing systems or policies, although, as shown above, she did discuss practice-based strategies. Next, let us see what Condoliza said about unfair school practices.

**Unfair School Practices.** I consolidated questions eight and nine because they both dealt with unfair school practices. I had difficulties obtaining an answer about unfair school practices. Perhaps Condoliza was having problems finding an example. She spoke a bit about the unfairness of Zoom meetings, the required professional development, and
uneven work distribution. After attempting to obtain more information from her, she discussed the injustice of afterschool programs for which parents need to pay. It was challenging to get more information from this question. Overall, she barely mentioned anything about equity or inclusion during this portion of the interview.

Condoliza remarked on the awareness and reflection of unfair school practices. She said, “There were some after-school programs that required money for kids to participate, and so, there were only select children that could then participate in those after-school programs.” She once commented about her thinking and actions regarding unfair school practices when she said, “I didn’t work there (afterschool latchkey program) for very long. I realize that was not the environment for me.” Again, this question did not bring awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems. Next, let us see what Condoliza said about whom to speak to regarding unfair school practices.

Condoliza mentioned this regarding who she can share her challenges, “Our resources are very close, and we’re all very comfortable with talking with each other. I also meet every month, approximately with our mental health consultant.” Condoliza echoed what the other participants had said about Head Start’s communication and support—that their program wants its employees to be well supported. “She (mental health consultant) does individual check-ins with me, which is fantastic because you can really share anything.” She explained that the meetings with her people helped her understand how her behaviors influence her center. She is very concerned with impacting others, and these discussions allow her to improve.
She feels supported when strategizing with her colleagues and supervisors because they are excellent listeners. “We're very good at talking through things and giving ideas. A lot of times, [redacted] and [redacted] are supervisors will also be present with us, who are wonderful and also fantastic listeners as well.” Sometimes she and her colleagues reflect to understand or become aware of a circumstance. Other times they discuss situations intending to move forward on a specific action. She loves her discussion groups and said, “Our meetings never go long enough.” When reflecting independently, she focuses on how she can serve her teachers better, improve her practice, and meet her deadlines. She also reflects on each teacher independently and how she can enhance their jobs.

When I'm doing it independently, I'm looking more so at my day-to-day work and how I can better myself. You know, did I not meet timelines or deadlines? Why did that happen, or how can I better support this team, which is usually what my reflection is about.”

Condoliza commented several times on the awareness and reflection regarding contacting other colleagues with whom to speak when she notices unfair school practices. In addition to her first statement, she said, “I also meet every other month approximately with our mental health consultant.” When she noticed an unfair school practice, she remarked about her thinking and actions regarding contacting other colleagues with whom to speak, “I think when we're doing it all together, we're looking at some of those bigger issues.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems. She said, “The teachers are the main supervisors for the assistants and aides in the classroom, so, they need a lot of that
support and guidance on how they can support their team, best communicate, and the best work together.” She recognized teachers as supervisors themselves. They have many of the same issues that education managers must deal with, so fostering independent leadership in her teachers is suitable for her center. What did Condoliza say about her advocacy? Let us find out.

**Unfair School Practices and Advocacy.** Condoliza admitted that this issue is complex for her. She has difficulties knowing what to do or what to say. “I have a very supportive supervisor myself that I can reach out to and say, hey, look, this is what I’m seeing, this is what I’m noticing, what do you recommend?” She also said she has two advocates who are great reflection partners to help her strategize to speak up regarding issues she encounters. She coaches her teachers after implementing a new rule or an action to advocate. She tells them, “Sometimes you’re not going to see change right away. Sometimes it’s let’s practice this and implement it, and it’s going to take some time.” She tells her teachers, “Keep trying it and then we’ll come back and reflect on it.” I share some comments below to show how her answers reflect the study’s themes.

She remarked several times about the awareness and reflection on advocacy. She said, “I have a very supportive supervisor myself that I can reach out to and say, hey, look, this is what I'm seeing. This is what I'm noticing. What do you recommend?” She commented about her thinking and actions regarding advocacy. She continued from the previous quote, “She's really great at walking me through some of those sometimes when it comes to a family.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems: “I work through problems with
them, and we talk about what are some ways that we can best meet this need that we haven't seen yet.” Although it appears that she has difficulties finding the agency to engage in advocacy, she relies upon the support of her supervisors for clarity on what to do. Let us see what Condoliza said about bigotry in the section below.

**Witnessing Bigotry.** Condoliza’s initial response to this question was “no.” Upon further reflection, she recalled an example. She described an incident at her location about an argument between two families that attended her Head Start.

We did have an issue on-site between some parents this year where the mom had gotten into an argument over masks [with another child’s dad]. So it started, there was an argument over where they were parking. Then there was an argument because the mom didn’t have a mask on, and the dad asked that she had a mask on, and she said to me that she was fearful of him. And then when she talked to my supervisor, she's like, well, he's a big Black man, and I'm just scared. I don't want to go and be in line with him.

When they discussed the incident with Condoliza’s supervisor, the parent divulged that she was afraid—she did not even want to be in line with him as they stood outside the building. Condoliza was puzzled and did not know how to approach the situation, so she asked her supervisor. Her supervisor was able to play the neutral party, but the parent was being unkind to her also. When this parent directed her aggression at Condoliza’s supervisor, she terminated the interaction and informed her that she would contact her later, thereby diffusing the situation.

[My supervisor] had talked with the mom, and she was really put off at the way that the parent had talked to her. And so, she took a step back and said that she would get in touch with her in a week or so.

Condoliza did not comment on her thinking and actions regarding bigotry as much as I thought she would. When she did think of something, she said, “Um. No, we did have an
issue on-site between some parents this year.” She remarked about her thinking and actions regarding bigotry if the reader recalls the incident about the Black man in line and the other parent being angry. “At that point, it was a situation that was kind of out of my hands, and she (Condoliza’s supervisor) took the lead to work with that family.” Unfortunately, they did not address the racism incident because it seemed that de-escalation was a priority for the Head Start employees. Condoliza mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems when she made this comment at the end of the bigotry situation outlined above,

We all come from different situations and different backgrounds, and everyone sees the situation differently. And so, she totally understands this was the parent’s perspective. There were some ideas that go against our policies and our procedures and how we work with families. But that doesn't mean that we still can’t help that family to make improvements.

Despite blatant racism from the parent who was afraid of the Black man, Condoliza and her supervisor prioritize the well-being of their families. They did not address the racism at the time, and it remains unclear if it was dealt with beyond that evening’s events.

Summary

Condoliza started as a Head Start parent and began teaching after she obtained her master’s degree. The site she manages is a smaller one with fewer resources. Her perspective is that she is more focused on developing her teachers to feel like they have more agency, very much like facilitative leadership. She discussed adherence and understanding of policies and procedures and helping her teachers understand them; however, this did not translate into discussions about altering these practices, policies, or systems for the future. Her views towards change are more conservative, meaning she is
less willing to promote change than the other education managers, but she still values improving Head Start. Next, let us examine things from Danielle’s perspective.

**Danielle**

Danielle seemed excited to meet with me, alert, and attentive. Her previous employer—an early childhood program—stopped their program because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Danielle is an education manager in her late ‘30s to early ’40s (I approximated the age range) with a master's degree. We began our discussion with the story of how she started to work at Head Start. Danielle’s interview included a strong focus on awareness and reflection, being adept at reflecting and acting on behalf of her children and families, and a lesser focus on awareness, reflection, and action to affect practice policies and systems.

**From Parent to Education Manager.** Danielle began work at Head Start after her previous employer ended its early childhood program because of the COVID-19 pandemic. She started as a floater—essentially a substitute—and worked from assistant teacher to teacher, then program supervisor. She mentioned that she had her dream job at the time, but her employer “chose to shut down the program.” Her recent joblessness left her trying to figure out what she wanted,

> And so, I was kind of left trying to figure out what to do. And so, I started out by really looking within myself to figure out what I wanted. Like, I love working with children. That’s my number one goal. But what was it about working with children that I loved?

She answered her question: "Every human being has equal worth, and everybody deserves the opportunity to live a healthy and productive life. It rang to my core that..."
what’s what every child should have.” Danielle asked herself what she could do and where to help children the most.

And so, so that was kind of how I wound up here was just finding a role that was similar enough that it felt safe, but also a role that would empower me to help achieve this kind of goal that I have this professional drive to help children achieve their potential.

Danielle remarked a couple of times about her previous experiences with early childhood care or Head Start, “Prior to my role here, I worked at [redacted] in the in the child development program there for 15 years and came up through there.” She shared a little about her motivation to improve in life, early childhood education, and education in general. “I started as a floater, which was essentially a substitute, and then I became an assistant teacher and then a lead teacher, and then a program supervisor.” She remarked on how childcare work inspired her to work with children. She said, “I have this professional drive to help children achieve their potential.” She also mentioned the hardships or barriers she experienced that led to her working at Head Start. “I had my dream job, and I didn't realize it at the time. And then COVID. And so [redacted] chose to shut down the [childcare] program.” Unfortunately, Danielle had to leave what she realized was her dream job. It is fortunate for Rondo County Head Start to have such a dedicated professional working for them. Next, what did Danielle say about her typical day as an education manager?

A typical Day as an Education Manager. Danielle’s response to this question was pretty short. Her immediate response was thus,

It's different every day. That's what's typical, you know, currently because of the constraints of life right now with COVID and staffing and those things. My role is
a lot more operations-driven and inspirational, and educationally supervising. So, I picture my role being one to inspire teachers to try new things, reflect on their teaching practices, problem-solve with parents, partner with teachers, be in the classroom, helping and supporting. That's what I see my role as the reality of my role right now.

Her answer showed that she spends most of her time motivating and supervising her teachers and ensuring her center operates smoothly. Danielle spends time working with her teachers regarding the various challenges in their day-to-day tasks. “My role [is] being one to inspire teachers to try new things, reflect on their teaching practices, problem-solve, partner with parents, partner with teachers, be in the classroom, helping and supporting as an extra.” She also discussed engaging in reflective practices so that she and her teachers can overcome their problems.

Danielle is a new education manager from another organization and is still getting up to speed; therefore, she is still determining what her role looks like. She discussed some of her problems when she said, “Staffing constraints is generally each day providing breaks. It's problem-solving for the operations ends of things just because of the situation we're in. And so, that's where I see it right now.” She indicated conducting administrative tasks and inspiring teachers as her primary roles: “My role is a lot more operations-driven than inspiration and educationally supervising.” One critical aspect of her supervision is observation and monitoring of her teacher's performances, which she mentioned numerous times,

At my site specifically, I am the only person in a classroom all day or in the kitchen. And so, if somebody calls out, then I'm the person to help support in those classrooms. If multiple people call out, then I cover breaks everywhere.
Similar to the other education managers, Danielle spends her time managing many aspects of her center. It was good to hear her discuss her ambitions regarding reflective practice, “I think again, in the future, as things get better, I hope it will be more reflective practice [at my center].” Even though she is mired in learning her new role, she is thinking ahead to engage her employees with reflective practice. Next, let us find out what motivates Danielle in her role.

**Motivation, Purpose, and Self-Image as Education Manager.** Danielle’s answer to this question was pretty short but powerful. She immediately offered a deep and thoughtful response. She believes that “no child should have their future determined simply based on the DNA they are born with or the location they are born in, or the socioeconomic status in which they are born to.” She believes these children “need people in their corner and help empower them so that they have the opportunity to achieve their potential.” She enjoys working with children so much, and she explains,

> Even if a child needs to go for a walk because they’re overstimulated, we get to go outside and go for a walk. Like, that’s part of my day. I get to go play with Play-Doh. I get to make connections with children. I get to make connections with adults. I get to make connections with families, with community members, and with teachers. I don’t know. I might be thinking high and might of myself, but I feel like I get to make a mark in the world and make a difference, and that feels good.

Danielle has a passion for childcare work. She said she has “this internal drive that no child should have their future determined simply based on the DNA they are born with, the location they are born in, or the socioeconomic status.” She displayed her reasoning for supporting, inspiring, and motivating coworkers, children, and families, saying, “We need people in our corner. And so that is my drive, is to be that person in
their corner. And help empower them so that they have the opportunity to achieve their potential.” Danielle gushed a little about what she loves about her role,

I get to make connections with children. I get to make connections with adults. I get to make connections with families, with community members, and with teachers. I don't know. I might be thinking high and mighty of myself, but I feel like I get to make a mark in the world and make a difference. And that feels good.

What Danielle said sounds weighty. She has pride in her work, her position, and what she can help bring to the table. Danielle makes a difference in the world, and she knows it.

What does she think about the responsibilities of a childcare provider? Let us find out below.

**Primary Responsibilities of Family Care Providers and Education Managers.**

Danielle continued to give her concise, direct, and thoughtful answers. She said the following after asking her the question,

I think it comes back to that meeting where the child is, so I think the primary responsibility of child care is to see each child as an individual and respect, honor, and promote that individuality. I think that if you lose track of the individual and you try to make assumptions or make plans based on a large group, you lose track of the uniqueness of each child. You're losing track of the strengths of each child. You're losing track of the opportunities and even the challenges that that child has prior to school while in school. And if we come back to the space of Education empowers children to achieve their potential. Then you have to, you have to meet them where they are. You have to meet them as that individual. So, I think when you look at early childhood education, you can't. You can't look at it as a group; you have to look at it as 20 individuals.

Her answer above is a clear example of education managers' challenges. She continues,

I think that my role as the education manager really is to inspire that reflection because when you are in the trenches, especially working with 20 young children or eight or nine or ten, or however many young children there are, there are moments in time when it is survival, right?
She discussed the chaos of what happens as the classrooms are running. She shared an anecdote that sums up this hectic atmosphere and how she gets everyone through the day,

If you work in an infant classroom and you have nine babies crying, you're putting out flames left and right, right? And if you are in a preschool classroom with 20 preschoolers and they're going and, you know, 15 different directions, you're going to be putting out flames too. And so, I think that being that safe space to engage in reflection and to just say, you know what, you got through it, congratulations.

It can be difficult for the teachers and supervisors to make it through a day at Head Start, so she believes that being that support for her teachers is crucial if the classrooms create challenges for her childcare workers. She believes in thoughtfully reflecting with her teachers to help them understand how to resolve their problems.

Next, I share initial comments to show how Danielle’s answers reflect the study’s themes. She displayed awareness and reflection when she said, “I think that if you lose track of the individual and try to make assumptions or make plans based on a large group, you're losing track of the uniqueness of each child.” She remarked about her thinking and actions on the primary responsibilities of a family child care provider, “If we come back to the space where education empowers children to achieve their potential, you have to meet them where they are.” She did not mention awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems during her answers to this question.

**Equity and Inclusion.** Danielle began by discussing inclusion.

Inclusion is just really again going back and knowing each child individually to know what's going on with them and meeting them where they are, and creating an environment in a space that is reflective of all of the knowledge you have about each child.
She said equity is “knowing each child’s going to need something different.” Danielle shared that equity is not about everyone getting the same thing; it is about each child getting what they need to succeed. She identified relationship building as part of inclusion and equity. Her answer to this question was concise and informative, although short.

Danielle commented about the awareness and reflection on equity and inclusion when she said, “I love inclusion, so, what comes to mind is ensuring that all children, regardless of anything, are able to experience the same or are able to have the same experience in their environment as every other child.” She talked about her thinking and actions to address the child and family’s needs.

So, building that relationship, learning that about them, and then the inclusion is essentially providing that—I don't want to say different—but providing that unique experience that is reflective and representative and respectful to the child's unique personality, individuality, autonomy.

She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems. She said that childcare workers should be “creating an environment in a space that is reflective of all of the knowledge you have about each child.” This process of creation is also considering the needs of the children. Essentially, Danielle is constantly adapting her center’s environment to improve services. Next, let us see some of how equity and inclusion are practiced at her center.

Danielle does an excellent job at delineating between inclusion and equity. She discussed how she ensures access to the right support personnel.
I think that inclusion is really partnering with all of the specialists that we have. I have a lot of children in my center who have various developmental disabilities going on or impacting their learning. So, partnering with their specialists and that technical assistance piece that they provide, as well as some of the mentoring and coaching so that we can engage in that reflective practice to make sure that the environment is responsive.

Through her lens, inclusion involves the willingness to be inclusive and the methods to get there. Danielle believes in ensuring that experts should be available to provide technical assistance to children beyond her ability to help. She thinks the technical assistance will allow her teachers to engage in reflective practices to serve their children better.

Her discussion around equity was a bit more revealing. Below is her robust and informative response regarding equity and inclusion at her Head Start program.

I think that equity is one where we're continuing to grow. It does require the willingness of people to engage in the process. And I don't necessarily feel that I have teachers at this time who wholeheartedly want to embrace equity work versus equality work. But they're not necessarily in support yet or see the value of the equity piece. They want to provide the same for everybody. And so that's an opportunity for growth, and that's a challenge right now. And I think it's one of those things that the pendulum is going, you know, we are seeing those changes, and we are seeing more and more people willing and wanting to engage in that work. And so, I'm excited for the future of early childhood education. We just got to get through all the staffing crises.

Although many people in Head Start work on inclusion and equality, Danielle described a workplace where people are unsure how to implement equity. She has problems engaging in reflective practices regarding equity and is uncertain how to work on it with her resistant teachers. However, she is hopeful because the younger generation of teachers is more willing to engage in equity and inclusion practices. “I do think that there are more
and more people coming into the field who utilize an equity lens and who employ inclusive practices.”

Danielle revealed some of how equity and inclusion are practiced at her center. One example is, “I have a lot of children in my center who have various developmental disabilities going on or impacting their learning.” She remarked on her thinking and actions to address the child and family’s needs when she said, “I think that inclusion is really partnering with all of the specialists that we have.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems. “Partnering with their specialists and that technical assistance piece that they provide and some of the mentoring and coaching so that we can engage in that reflective practice to make sure that the environment is responsive.” Through the lens of service to children and their families, Danielle keeps an eye on continuous improvement to improve her workplace. Let us find out below how Danielle does regarding unfair school practices.

**Unfair School Practices.** Danielle briefly paused to think about an example of unfair school practice and came up with one. She shared a story about a boy who could not delay gratification because of a developmental circumstance. One of her teachers thought the boy should learn to stand in different places in line because he was always in the front. As a result, the child would not behave and would push to the front of the line anyway. His behavior upset the teacher, and so she punished the child, So, we talked about it, and he’s now at the front of the line every time, and nobody cares, you know, they're four and five. They want to go outside like, who cares who's at the front of the line? And so again, that was just that. The
unfairness about it was we knew that we were not setting him up for success by having him stand anywhere else besides the front of the group or the line.

It seems like Head Start employees try hard to be aware, reflective, and active when addressing the needs of individual children and families. When addressing the idea of fairness, she said this,

Fair is meeting each child where they are developmentally and recognizing you have 17 children that can hang out in the line just fine and you have three that can’t, that we need to spread out—and so meeting those 17 children, empowering them to be successful on their own because they already are, and also supporting the other three who can't navigate this transition independently. And that's what's fair is; fair is meeting those children where they all are developmentally but independently. So, it was a conversation with the teacher, which then went to the team.

Danielle shared an emotionally moving story about her previous job before Head Start.

I had a child in my center who required one-on-one care because she had cerebral palsy and a whole lot of other things going on. Our Executive Director decided that we were no longer going to provide that one-on-one care for her, or if so, the parents were going to have to pay for it.

Danielle told her executive director, “Okay, well, let's look at it from the parent's side, and then also, let's look at it from the teacher's side, and let's look at it from the child's side.” Knowing how dangerous a position she was in, she persisted, “This is not an okay thing to be doing, and if you're going to move forward with it, I can’t stop you.” She said that was the “only time I've been professionally yelled at.” Then, she called her immediate supervisor and told her everything. Danielle said, “I don’t know that I have a job tomorrow.” Ultimately, the executive director was asked to resign, and Danielle kept her job.
Regarding awareness and reflection, Danielle remarked, “I have a lot of children who have multiple diagnoses of different developmental delays.” She asserted her thoughts and actions about whether they have noticed unfair school practices,

One of the little boys in our program really doesn't have the ability to delay gratification to be anywhere other than the front of the line, and knowing that about him individually, my brain is, who cares if he's at the front of the line every time. I put him at the front of the line every time.

Showing this to her teachers is essential if they want to adjust how they engage their children. These are important lessons when working with young and developmentally delayed human beings. Fairness is not the same for children as adults, which should be important to teachers. She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems when she said,

So, we talked about it, and he's now at the front of the line every time, and nobody cares, you know, they're four and five. They want to go outside like, who cares who's at the front of the line?"

As stated above, fairness is different for these children, and children should not be made accountable to the same standards as adults. Teaching this fact and helping her teachers implement this practice is an essential step in respecting all children and their families.

Next, let us find out whether Danielle has colleagues to discuss school issues and how she advocates.

**Unfair School Practices and Advocacy.** Danielle is relatively new to her position, so she is still building her support team at Head Start. Since she is new there, she shared her experiences at her previous workplace, which was the same role as now.

“We definitely engaged in these conversations all the time about equity, about inclusion,
about fairness, about responding to child behaviors and development. And those are some of my favorite conversations.” She said she misses pre-COVID workplace dynamics where she can openly share her ideas around equity and inclusion more readily.

One day at work, Danielle’s boss stopped engaging in one-on-one care with a child with cerebral palsy unless their parents paid extra. Danielle was unhappy with this sudden and cruel decision and did something about it. She explained her process of resolving the situation. She said the crux of engaging in equity and inclusion work is obtaining as much information as possible and communicating that to all parties. She described her problem-solving in this situation,

Okay, well, let's look at it from the parent's side. And then also, let's look at it from the teacher's side, and let's look at it from the child's side as much as possible and try to bring in those other perspectives. I don't necessarily think that I'm going to change people's minds all of the time, but I can bring awareness and enlightenment—hopefully—to the unfairness of a policy or a practice or a decision, even in the case, you know, where we were essentially trying to kick a child out for having a disability.

She advocated for the child directly to her boss, endangering her job, “You're the executive director. But I can at least say to you that this is not fair. [Expelling this child] is not okay; this isn’t right—this isn’t fair. Maybe those people making those decisions will slow down.” Danielle did not lose her job in this situation; her previous boss did. “It was the only time professionally I've been yelled at, actually, and that person ended up being let go from [redacted], largely because of this process.”

I share comments below to show how her answers reflect the study’s themes. She often remarked on the awareness and reflection of having other colleagues with whom to speak when you notice an unfair school practice. One prime example is when she
discussed being new at Head Start, “The newness and the role and the virtual piece has made it really difficult [to discuss school practices].” She frequently commented about having colleagues with whom to speak when she notices an unfair school practice,

> We definitely engaged in these conversations all the time about equity, inclusion, fairness, and responding to child behaviors and development. And those are some of my favorite conversations. And so, I do think. I think that it is harder now and hopefully will not forever be so difficult to find that space to connect with teammates about these conversations.

She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems when she said,

> So, if I invite that reflection, can you tell me more about this policy or this practice or this decision that was made? Generally, I end up finding out I don't have all of the information. And so, when you invite that, you get more information, and then I feel like I can make a more informed decision.

Her decision is regarding whether to advocate for a specific issue. After collecting her data, she makes her decisions. She tries to make practice or policy changes to reflect a new way of doing things if she can. Overall, Danielle is courageous and incredibly confronted such an influential person successfully. This potentially career-ending move led to a positive, lasting change at her center. If anything proves that she is willing to go to great lengths for her children, it was that scenario. Below, let us discuss what Danielle has to say about bigotry.

**Witnessing Bigotry.** Without reflection, Danielle’s commencing response was yes. It took her a little time to think of an example, but “I was thinking ageism.” She shared a measure of how her subjectivity impacted some teachers at her center,

> I think one of the things where we've really seen it is the move to digital and virtual and not providing support for all learners. Meaning when we shifted to
digital or virtual. I didn’t provide—and this is my own fault, too—but I didn’t provide training on how to teach circle time at Zoom through Zoom.

It is crucial to share times when people did something accidentally or by oversight, resulting in an unfair situation or practice. Being inequitable or exclusive does not always happen because of evil intent. It can occur because someone does not understand how to apply equity or inclusion in a given situation. The younger generations sometimes overlook technological advancement as potential barriers to engaging in equity and inclusion. Danielle said, “We’re not setting people up for success, and that’s another constraint that we’re operating within and the conflict that creates and the distrust that it creates too.” She worries about the decades of experience potentially being left behind by the older generations who feel unsupported by their new technology.

She also discussed a curious instance of sexism at her previous employer. While working at an early childhood center, the facilities evolved to where,

It's all women—there was no men's bathroom in our child care facility, which is really interesting. It's the exact opposite of what you would think. But like, I had male teachers working for me, and they were like, wait, where's the restroom for us?

Women had worked as the only gender in their early childhood care center. One day, a new male employee asked Danielle where the men’s bathroom was. Danielle did not have an answer and immediately realized that their center had just dispensed a small dose of bigotry against men.

Often, she commented about her thoughts and actions regarding bigotry—I shared many examples above. I also shared multiple times her thoughts and actions about discrimination. She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting
institutional practices, policies, and systems. “I don't know how old your children are, but it seemed like even just five years ago, everything was done on paper, and now we're trying to do everything digitally, which for me personally is awesome.” Interestingly, this technological advancement causes older teachers to be left behind. “If you think about the fact I have these teachers that have been here for 30 years, and we're telling them now, your processes are old, and they're not in support of where we're trying to go as an agency.” Fortunately, Danielle understands both aspects of this change and does her best to keep the younger professionals engaged and the older professionals up to speed. Navigating change in a technologically advancing world can be tricky—especially when one is a supervisor across multiple generations. Eleanor is the last education manager interviewed.

**Summary**

Danielle began with Head Start after her previous early childhood education position shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems that she views her role very similarly to transformative leadership: inspiring her teachers, ensuring operational effectiveness, assisting her teachers with their day-to-day activities, and conducting observations. She highly values the fun time she gets to have with the children and her colleagues. Danielle also values advocacy and courage, which is evident when considering her confrontation with a feisty executive manager. She is also strategic in that she was able to maneuver around a potential loss of employment and won a significant victory for her center and the child whom she advocated. Next, let us see what Eleanor thinks about equity and inclusion at Head Start.
Eleanor seemed calm, collected, attentive, and dignified. She provided thoughtful and concise answers at a slower pace than her colleagues. Eleanor is an education manager in her ’50s (I approximated the age range) with a master's degree. We began the discussion with the story of how she started to work at Head Start. It is essential to know that Eleanor was hired during COVID-19 and her experiences in her current role are minimal. She often referenced work at other Head Start programs. Eleanor’s interview included a strong focus on awareness and reflection, a high aptitude for reflecting and acting on behalf of her children and families, and a solid focus and ability on awareness, reflection, and action to affect practice policies and systems.

**From Parent to Education Manager.** Eleanor began working with Head Start in 2002 in a different program.

I spent more than eight years as an education site manager. So, very similar to what our education supervisors do.” Then about four years ago or so, I left that program, did the stay-at-home mom thing for a while, and then I’ve been with this program since the beginning of August.

Eleanor applied to the Rondo County Head Start program when she could rejoin the workforce and was accepted. She rejoined Head Start after COVID had gone through a couple of its surges, and she felt it was safe to apply for work again. Eleanor described difficulties running her center because many in-person activities are now virtual. She had to learn this job while engaging virtually and digitally with children and teachers. When I interviewed her, it seemed she was recovering from, or still in, a lockdown due to a COVID-19 surge,
Just before we went virtual again, I was trying to establish a somewhat regular schedule of getting out to each of my sites and visiting classrooms so that the teachers at those sites don't have that moment of why she is here when I walk into their rooms.

She believes she is still in the relationship-building phase of her current position and wishes she could do it in person instead. She lamented about how the COVID lockdown affects her youngest children,

I think it's no surprise—no mystery to anyone—that it's not the best way for children to learn. And their ability to do the best they can with what is required right now is sort of amazing to me.

Eleanor remarked about her motivation to improve in life, early childhood education, and education in general. “I was with them for over 15 years, starting as a teacher home visitor and then working my way up. I spent more than eight years as an education site manager.” When I asked her about when she started working at Head Start, she said, “I missed the big bulk of, you know, all of that stuff (COVID-19 and its impact on the workforce). And when we thought things were starting to get better again, I ventured back in.” Eleanor seems dedicated to Head Start and keeps finding her way back to working with them. Next, let us see Eleanor’s typical day as an education manager.

**A typical Day as an Education Manager.** Eleanor is still learning her job; her initial answer was “familiarizing myself with some systems and things like that.” That said, her response to this question was relatively brief. During a short period when the United States felt like COVID-19 was no longer a threat, she began scheduling observations, but another COVID-19 surge ruined that. Since then, she has focused on relationship building, policy updates, and ensuring the virtual spaces are available. She
praised her teachers’ abilities to engage their children via an online platform—not an easy task with preschoolers.

I selected the quotes below to show her typical day as an education manager. She discussed conducting administrative tasks such as updating policies and procedures or answering, reading, drafting, and sending emails, “I'm spending more time familiarizing myself with some systems and things like that.” She also discussed her meetings when she said, “I'm still meeting regularly with my supervisors to check in about how things are going with virtual services.” Although she is new and has been inducted via a virtual platform, she does her duties to ensure she builds relationships. Next, let us find out what motivates Eleanor in her work.

**Motivation, Purpose, and Self-Image as Education Manager.** When we began discussing systems, policies, or anything beyond the micro, she expounded,

> You know, it has evolved over my journey. I think the thing that shifted over time was initially starting as a teacher, but then moving into more administrative roles was realizing that I could have a greater impact on a wider variety or a larger number of children focusing more on training teachers and improving teaching practices, than doing the direct service with the children.

Her answer shows the natural evolution from a teacher focused on direct action to a supervisor who understands her impact beyond direct action. She scaled her level of perceived responsibility up to her work position. “I really enjoy, you know, working with the teachers and just sort of helping them see different ways, maybe to do things or engage with children in different ways.” When I inquired further about increasing the scope of her impact, she said
There's a parallel process with the children and the teachers, right? We meet the children where they are because each child is on their own learning path and, you know, builds on their strengths and their needs based on where they are. And the same is true developmentally of teachers, right? Every teacher is somewhere along their own developmental path. And so, being able to see that parallel process and look at teachers not thinking of this is where I think they should be. But this is where they are, and this is where what our vision is of where we would like our program classrooms to look like. So, how can we help teachers move along that continuum?

Interestingly, she viewed teacher and child developmental paths as having similar trajectories. Her responsibility to help teachers along their developmental path is similar to a teacher’s responsibility to assist children along their developmental journey.

Eleanor’s management style and what she thinks of her responsibilities were evident in her responses. She said that when she was “moving into more administrative roles, I realized that I could have a greater impact on a wider variety or a larger number of children.” She said this about supporting, inspiring, and motivating coworkers, children, and families, “It’s not something I always knew about myself that I really enjoy, you know, working with the teachers and just sort of helping them see different ways, maybe to do things or engage with children in different ways.” She discussed giving back to the community numerous times, “But this is where they are, and this is where what our vision is of where we would like our program classrooms to look like. So, how can we help teachers move along that continuum?”

Eleanor’s focus on helping her teachers develop professionally sets the groundwork for them to be successful future leaders. Next, let us see what Eleanor thinks about the responsibilities of childcare providers.

**Primary Responsibilities of Family Care Providers and Education Managers.**

Eleanor began by saying,
It’s like an onion, really, because there are so many different levels. In the larger scope, of course, we expect everyone to be welcoming of everybody that walks through the door regardless of their background. But at a more micro-level, you know, I want teachers each year to look at the families that they have, the children and families that they're working with, and get to know who they are and what's important to them because I want every child to be able to walk into the classroom and see themselves.

She admitted that she does not know what it means for every child to see themselves in the classroom because most educators are White. It is difficult for her to reconcile that the children’s cultures must be reflected in the school, but White educators are most prevalent. She hopes her teachers ask questions and build relationships to understand their families' needs and wants. She also said teachers must avoid assumptions about their children and families.

When she began reflecting on her role as an education manager, she widened her scope to systems thinking.

I consider my responsibilities more around training the teachers or finding appropriate training for the teachers. About how to implement authentically welcoming all families, and how they help the families feel welcome and feel important because every family's participation looks different.

She discussed developing strategies with her teachers to help families feel more involved with the program: books and literature that reflect families’ cultures and identities; the type of seats and sitting arrangements that make the center comfortable for families; the posters and pictures that show families from various backgrounds are seen, accepted, and celebrated. Her mind and words stayed very focused on the systemic aspects of her position after it came up.
Next, I share initial comments to show how Eleanor’s responses reflect the study’s themes. “We expect everyone to be welcoming of everybody that walks through the door regardless of their background.” She said this when she remarked about the reflection and action on the responsibilities of a childcare provider, “I want teachers each year to look at the families they have, the children and families they're working with, and get to know who they are and what's important to them.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems. “I would expect every classroom has photographs of the child's family and maybe some other things important to them in their lives.” If the representation of the families attending Head Start is happening via exposure to literature, posters, and activities, it changes how everyone behaves in the classroom. These changes include helping educators be “welcoming of all families and help[ing] the families feel welcome and important.” Next, let us see what Eleanor thinks about equity and inclusion.

**Equity and Inclusion.** “When I say equity and inclusion, what does that mean to you? Eleanor quickly juxtaposed equity with equality. “Equality is everybody having the same thing, and equity is everyone having what they need—to be brought to the same level.” For her children, equity and inclusion look like “being able to participate to their fullest capacity, whether it's because they have some sort of disability and need accommodations for them to participate in all of the experiences available to them at their greatest ability.” Every year, she and other education managers work with administrative management to help identify and remove barriers for their children and families.
Eleanor remarked about equality versus equity, “equality is everybody having the same thing, and I think equity is everyone has what they need—to be brought to the same level.” She asserted her thinking and actions of equity and inclusion. “I think we've all seen the visual picture right of equality and equity of the kids trying to watch a baseball game and standing up.” She continued, “equity doesn't mean everybody gets the same thing. It means they get what they need to bring the barriers down for them in their life.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems. “So, what can we do to bring down as many barriers as possible for the children and the families to be able to participate as fully as possible in the opportunities that head start can offer?” She is adept at considering practices, policies, and systems. It seems her years of experience influenced her to project ideas of what honesty and fairness will look like in the future. Next, let us view some examples of how she and her center practices equity and inclusion.

Eleanor shared how she and her teammates practice equity and inclusion with an example of a child in her program. “I'm thinking about a little girl in one of our centers who is not only in a wheelchair but needs a lot of accommodation to participate in every facet, from mobility to feeding, to all of these things.” Eleanor thought about the child because it was fresh in her mind, and this child needs intense equity and inclusion work. Since the child is a challenge, she and her teachers work closely with an Education Services District (ESD) team.

We think about everything from how do we arrange the classroom so that she can have full access to all areas of the room. What are the accommodations that she might need at mealtimes? What types of modifications do we need to make?
She then shifts to an example of language learners. “How do we communicate and interact with all children so that they are able to understand what their expectations of them are?” She discussed visual, body language, non-verbal, and various alternative communication methods so that the children can follow along with the teacher even though there might be a language barrier. “So, beyond verbal language, what else are we employing? You know? Whether it’s visual schedules or just, you know, non-verbal cues to know that it’s about time to do something different.”

Eleanor also shared that she spent time in the Peace Corps in different countries. She discussed recognition of her privilege and how it informs her practice. She became aware of her freedoms at home when she lost some of them in Namibia and Guatemala. These experiences showed her what it feels like when privileges are taken away. She also discussed her location now—the Pacific Northwest—and the trouble of finding a diverse workforce with the requisite qualifications. “I think we all know that the lower-level positions tend to be more diverse in the staff. The higher you go, the more homogenous we tend to be thinking.”

Eleanor discussed awareness and reflection of equity and inclusion several times. “I have had opportunities to live as the only White person in a place, right? But at the same time, recognizing that my privilege never left me.” She remarked about her thinking and actions on how equity and inclusion are practiced at their center. “[We] try not to make assumptions and jump to conclusions. I think that we do our best—it’s not always 100 percent.” She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems ten times. “I think we all know that the
lower-level positions tend to be more diverse in the staff, and the higher you go, the more homogenous we tend to be thinking.” Her systems thinking seemed to center around complaints, but she recognized some difficulties affecting policy, practice, and systems when White gatekeepers comprise our hegemony. Next, let us uncover what she does when she notices unfair school practices.

**Unfair School Practices.** Eleanor recalled an unfair school practice that she encountered as a child. It was not her, but her brother whom teachers mistreated because of his learning style. Her brother had difficulties completing homework but was active in class and learned the material well enough to get A’s and B’s on his tests. Her family suspected a developmental delay, “but he always just learned differently.” So, they left it at that without a diagnosis. She reflected heavily on this perceived injustice toward her brother and asked questions. She said that “it was about the requirements and not the goal. What is our goal? That everybody does the same requirements or is our goal the gaining of knowledge?” In her view, school is about learning and understanding the material, which her bother was doing quite well. “I think that was the beginning of my journey in understanding the importance of individualizing for the children.” She learned from this experience and used her knowledge to apply it to her practice way in the future.

Eleanor lamented the decreasing individualization practices as children progress in elementary school. She thinks that recognizing each child’s individuality reduces as the children age. “That starts changing as soon as kids jump into the public school, kindergarten and up, there's less and less and less individualization as children go on.” Unless a child has a specific plan with the school, the care for the individual becomes lost
in the mix of high school requirements. Increasingly, conformity is expected, and care about the family is no longer a concern for educators. “As they move higher through public education, they are expected to conform to expectations rather than [deviate from them].” She remembered reflecting a lot with her family about the unfairness of her brother’s situation. Her family seemed to think similar to her—that her brother was fine and the school could not accommodate him, even though it would have been possible.

Eleanor remarked about awareness and reflection of unfair school practices, “He was a kid who could do zero homework and go in and get A's and B’s on all these tests, right? But he was failing his classes.” She asserted her thoughts and actions about whether she noticed unfair school practices.

What is the purpose of school, then? Is it that he is getting that knowledge and proving that he has it? Or is it that he jumps through your hoops? And so, I think that was the beginning of my journey in understanding the importance of individualizing for children.

Individualization in education was vital to her very early in her life. Her experience with her brother set her on a path to becoming an equitable educator. These lessons stayed with her, and she applied them as an adult. How about the colleagues with whom she shares stories? How does she do that? Let us find out.

Eleanor had much to say regarding colleagues to meet with and share stories about what she finds unfair. She quickly confided about her counterpart with whom she discussed everything. Eleanor is delighted to have someone who understands her difficulties. With her colleague, she discusses pertinent issues and shares strategies. “But we have a lot of conversations around those types of things, and if issues are coming up
in classrooms, then I feel like she and I bounce things off of each other all the time.”

Their relationship makes their workplace open and communicative; see blockquote below.

Eleanor commented about the awareness and reflection of other colleagues with whom to speak when someone notices unfair school practices,

I would say so far, most of them feel pretty comfortable saying, Bringing things to me or, you know, talking about things like that, if something is happening; whether it's around access for children or do we need to make exceptions in certain things because of extenuating circumstances for a family or a child, that kind of thing.

She commented numerous about her thoughts and actions of colleagues with whom to speak when there are unfair school practices. “All of our teachers are somewhere along their own developmental spectrum. So, some might need a little reflection of their own to recognize that, you know, we may not always do the same thing for all children, right?”

She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems.

If some children need to be able to hold some sort of fidget and circle time to be able to focus doesn't mean we have to do that for everybody because kids are totally capable of understanding that every kid is different, right?

She goes back to individualization. Things that apply to one child do not necessarily apply to another. Next, let us reveal how Eleanor advocates when she notices an unfair school practice.

**Unfair School Practices and Advocacy.** Her advocacy begins from a manager's perspective attempting to resolve an issue. She begins advocacy by learning more about what happened or the situation. Then, she tries to flesh out any differences in perspective
or understanding. She asks questions like, “This is what is going on for me; how do you interpret this? Are you seeing this the same way?” Once she and her colleague understand the situation, they draft up actionable items. Then they act according to their plans. They can make rules or guidelines if they are successful in their actions.

She recalled the previous example of a child with the necessary extreme accommodations. She discussed the intricacies of attending to this child’s needs while simultaneously being mindful of the other children. She asks questions like, “Do we need to rethink room management? What do we need to do to make this a better situation? What’s within the power to do with what we have right now?” She explained that this is difficult because as she troubleshoots how to accommodate a needy child, she is also trying to assist her teacher in moving along her developmental path.

I share some comments below to show how her answers reflect the study’s themes. She commented on the awareness and reflection about unfair school practices when she said, “I think it’s still an ongoing thing, actually, and that particular teacher? Is maybe not as far along her own developmental spectrum as I would like in thinking about ways that she can help.” She commented many times about her thoughts and actions about unfair school practices.

So, I'm working with that site manager and thinking, okay, do we need to rethink the room arrangement? What do we need to do to make this a better situation? What can we do? What’s within the power to do with what we have right now?

She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about potentially adjusting institutional practices, policies, and systems. “And what might we need to think about at a larger level? Like, does this classroom need different chairs so that they don't take up as
Always thinking about the bigger picture, Eleanor devises strategies to help her children, families, and teachers at the moment and develops practices, policies, or systems to make them concrete. Next, let us see what Eleanor said about bigotry.

Witnessing Bigotry. Eleanor did not have much to say regarding bigotry. Eleanor recognized that simply being a woman makes her a target for discrimination. She also said she is employed in early education—a female-dominated realm. Because of that, Eleanor claims, bigotry impacts her less than if not working with so many women. She had difficulties recalling examples regarding this question beyond her experiences. I remember Eleanor shared a Peace Corps experience and asked her about that. When her memory kicked in, she remembered many uncomfortable moments in Namibia and Guatemala. Eleanor remembered catcalls, harassment, and the feeling that some of the jeers may have been malicious. She did not recall a situation where she was in danger, just frustration with the locals and their sexual harassment.

She commented on the awareness and reflection about bigotry when she said, “Certainly, as a woman, there have been limitations in our society. But I'm in a field where it's female-dominated, so I don't feel that in a very tangible way.” She remarked about her thoughts and actions about bigotry.

“I think, at some point, it got to the point where I would say things back, and some friends would be like, just ignore it, man, let's go. But I'll be honest; I've been fortunate not to be in any major situation where I had to stand up for a situation. She mentioned awareness, reflection, or action about institutional practices, policies, and systems when she said,

I was training teachers, and you know, the kids always wanted to touch me, touch the hair because my hair is so different. And they probably never seen that color
here before. So, I felt like I had to become okay with my personal bubble being almost non-existent like that. In the past, maybe the only White people they knew potentially were South African Afrikaners.

Perhaps this quotation was a stretch, but she had to set personal practices and policies that included people touching her hair in ways she did not appreciate. The touching went against her instincts but helped ingratiate her to the community that accepted her for a while.

**Summary**

Eleanor came to Rondo County Head Start from being a stay-at-home mom. Before that, she was an education manager at a different Head Start program. Her age and experience at Head Start allowed her to speak fluidly and competently about altering practices, policies, and systems. She wanted to be in higher administrative roles because of the possible systemic impacts in these roles. Eleanor recognizes the various levels of systemic effects her role can have. Perhaps she did not mention systemic changes at a high frequency; however, she did speak about them competently and recognized the impact of altering and updating practices, policies, and systems for posterity.

Next, let us take a look at the data analysis.

**Analysis of Data**

I want to note that I am an imperfect researcher. I seek nuances in the discussions; also, my subjectivity is embedded in the interview process and the data analysis. There are topics where we did not delve in-depth where we could have. I recognize times when I could have made more profound queries. I also understand that my participants cannot
give 100 percent of their emotional and intellectual energy to every question. I followed
the ebbs and flows of the conversation-style interviews and probed where possible.

After each interview, I listened to the conversation as Sonix (https://sonix.ai/) transcribed. I took this time to determine whether I missed anything, giving me
something to do while Sonix finished transcribing. After transcription, I listened to the
recording again, going through the transcription line-by-line until I had coded every
sentence in the interview. Plano-Clark and Creswell (2015) noted that coding involves
labeling words to form themes in the data. I used that method to generate my themes,

Schneider’s (2019) theoretical framework guided my coding and thematic
analysis. While interviewing, analyzing, and interpreting the findings and meaning
derived from the interview data, this framework helped me quickly identify themes in the
discussions. Also, to guide me in exploring the participant's answers, I used Gorski and
Pothini’s (2018) guidelines on the abilities of an equity educator and the seven steps in
the equity literacy approach (See tables 2 and 3). Initially, I thought my analysis would
naturally revolve around critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action
independently. Instead, I noticed dynamics between critical awareness, reflection, and
action vital to conscientization. As Figures 2 and 3 showed and reflected in the interview
data, there are reciprocal dynamics between the elements of critical consciousness.

After I developed my set of two themes based on the dynamics between
awareness and reflection, and reflection and action, I had difficulties categorizing the
other responses from questions four through 11 because they had elements of awareness,
reflection, and action. There were also conspicuous voids of awareness, reflection, and action when discussing certain aspects of the topics. Sometimes, when it seemed natural to seek a practice, policy, or system fix to a problem, the education managers would not recognize these opportunities. Gorski’s (2020) fifth equity literacy ability states that educators must have the “ability to sustain bias-free, equitable, and anti-oppressive classrooms, schools, ideologies, and institutional cultures.” One aspect of sustaining bias-free classrooms is the willingness and ability to influence and implement better practices, policies, and systems. I saw the gap between the education managers’ desire to improve conditions and their hesitancy to upset the status quo at work. Recognizing this gap gave birth to the following central theme: educators’ abilities of awareness, reflection, and action to influence practices, policies, and systems. Figure 7 is an excel image of a single question and eight lines of code. You will see one of the themes I derived from that question to the right. Each question had its own set of themes (3 or 4). I then took a step back and looked for connections between the various themes in the questions. I then noticed that the themes emerged from my initial coding and led to me obtaining my first two major themes and, finally, my last. Figure 8 shows how Gorski’s (2021) abilities relate to the theoretical framework of awareness, reflection, and action by Schneider (2019).

**Figure 7**

*Excel Image of Thematic Clusters*
### How I Interpreted my Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BB</td>
<td>Head start was really kind of where my passion lies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB</td>
<td>Center based child care and head start agencies. And I did that for four years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>&quot;Body language was open, she was very explanatory and talkative&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>So I started as a bus Driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>I wasn’t able to teach right away because I didn’t have a degree or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>I loved it, and I felt like I was able to kind of show them what I was able to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>I love the philosophy that head start head has</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>I was doing home child care at that time and wanted out of that into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>something different</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Abilities of Equity Literacy Educators

1. Ability to recognize even the subtlest biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies
2. Ability to respond to biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies in the immediate term
3. Ability to redress biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies in the long term by addressing their root causes
4. Ability to actively cultivate equitable, anti-oppressive ideologies in the long term by addressing their root causes
5. Ability to sustain bias-free equitable, and anti-oppressive ideologies and institutional cultures

- Primarily informed by Schneider’s (2019) framework
- Analysis framed by Gorski’s (2021) – Abilities of Equity Literacy Educators

**METHOD OF ANALYSIS**
I developed these perceptions from the data by paying close attention to the repeated words and patterns of the participants. When the participants mentioned something that matched the theme, I tallied it one time. Some of the answers were complicated and exhibited various ways of thinking, so I did my best to categorize those comments. Sometimes my participants would have dense answers that displayed multiple themes. In my analysis, I noted that when a participant discussed a story related to a theme, it became more pronounced in my thinking and solidified a thematic pattern from the data.

I categorized responses into three themes:

1. Awareness and reflection—individual and family contexts regarding equity and inclusion (Figure 5).
2. Reflection and action—individual and family contexts regarding equity and inclusion (Figure 6).
3. Awareness, reflection, and action—of institutional practices, policies, and systems.

I found that most educators were comfortable discussing awareness, reflection, and action in the context of the individual child and family; however, the same was not necessarily typical if that context expanded into a broader scope. When thinking about a problem, it became clear that the education manager participants were willing and able to be aware, reflective, and active on a case-by-case basis. It was, however, difficult for them to discuss policies, institutions, and systems.
The following section discusses the first three questions and the participant’s responses. After, I examine the awareness-reflection and the reflection-action cycles. My analysis includes a discussion on the final theme of what to do on a systemic or institutional level. I begin each section by discussing the themes. Then, I mention the frequency of mentions of the themes by the group. Afterward, I examined more detailed findings from the individual participants.

Themes of the Introductory Interview Questions

The first three introductory interview questions were about becoming an education manager for Head Start, a typical day at work, and what motivates them daily. From their answers, I developed the prevailing themes from the intensity of mentions. The initial question helped my participants be open and honest and inspired our dialogue. To address the becoming an education manager question, they stated poignant experiences as referenced below. When asked what a typical day at work was like, all participants opened up with “there is no typical day,” as said by Beatrix, or “I feel like you wear many hats,” mentioned by Annabelle. Although the group did not share this sentiment as often as the second and third themes, they all responded emphatically. It seems clear to me that an education manager wears many hats and is constantly transitioning between roles; class observations, teacher assistance, and supervision were the largest share of the responses. They all expressed that they put most of their effort into their people. They ensured that the classes had an adequate number of adults present. They were available to cover for breaks or staffing shortages, guided and coached their teachers, observed and monitored for performance, and reflected with their teachers.
The following questions revolved around day-to-day motivation and what they believed their purpose was—this question related to how they see themselves as education managers. The prompts inspired thoughtful answers from participants. Beatrix shared a story about how a Head Start worker encouraged her to be a teacher simply by offering moral support during hard times. She keeps that example in mind when she operates day-to-day. That inspiring moment, which happened years ago, still motivates her to be her best for her children and their families daily. She remains aware and reflective of her status—a teacher inspired her in her past—and now she exerts effort into ensuring she supports her teachers similarly. She reminds us, “I think it's sharing the knowledge that I've gained and gathered over the years, but also allowing for a lot of discussions and personal exploration so that they not only feel inspired but competent and supported.”

Condoliza discussed how she put herself through a master’s program because of Head Start’s assistance. Head Start’s aid allowed her to become an education manager. She now helps teachers along their journey. Danielle said, “we need people in our corner, and my drive is to be that person in their corner and help empower them so that they have the opportunity to achieve their potential.” Similarly, Eleanor noted that her methods include sharing a “vision with teachers so that she can help them develop along their development path.” The responses to this question set the stage for more profound questions to follow.

These participants have no shortage of passion and inspiration to work with children. Some participants went through significant hardships that Head Start helped
them through. If Condoliza did not have a Head Start option, it would be a wonder if her children entered early childhood education, and almost certainly, she would not have been able to obtain a master's degree.

Next, I break the remaining analysis into three sections, as I explained above. I primarily base my analysis on Schneider’s (2019) three-element framework for critical consciousness derived from Freire (1970, 1973). I also include Gorski’s (2020) framework to guide me on the abilities of equity literacy educators and Gorski and Pothini’s (2018) seven steps of the equity literacy process. Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) showed the various marginalizing conditions covered by equity and inclusion.

At first, the themes seemed to delineate between awareness, reflection, and action when I noticed the reciprocal nature of each element pair. Rarely did I catch awareness, reflection, or action happening in isolation. Instead, I found that awareness fosters reflection and vice versa. If an education manager knows that a marginalizing incident occurred, she will think about it. Her consideration of the situation could lead to further insight, or awareness, which will help her reflect better. Figures 2 and 3 show the reciprocal nature of awareness, reflection, and action. Beyond these first three themes, I provide my analysis for questions four through 11. I discuss the three elements of critical consciousness by their themes: awareness and reflection; reflection and action; and awareness, reflection, and action regarding systemic issues. Now, I turn to the three themes.
Theme 1 – Awareness and reflection regarding equity and inclusion

My Head Start participants spend much time being aware and reflective. Throughout the interviews, these education managers showed how they reflect. Most frequently, they reflected on their level of awareness of a given topic, idea, circumstance, or event. The education managers expressed some version of what Beatrix said: “To care for and support the development of a child in a way that recognizes who that child is as an individual.” In particular, the part of her statement, “Recognizes who that child is as an individual,” indicates reflection and awareness because awareness of individuality is essential if an educator is to understand what a child needs and must be reflective to determine what care should look like. Each child has unique circumstances and characteristics. It takes constant observations and revisions to keep up with a child’s development, which requires an in-depth awareness of the child and reflection on how to address their needs.

Beatrix had an insight into a situation at a previous workplace—perhaps one of the most profound discussions in my interviews. She worked at a Head Start program with many different family cultures; migrants from various countries attended this program. The Mexican migrants—having the most people in the program—started a cultural community so they could speak the same language and help each other. Eventually, this group became the dominating subculture in her Head Start program. They became unfriendly and unaccepting of individuals who did not belong to their group or whom they did not deem worthy. Within the culture of Head Start, a subculture began exerting influence and control. This power and influence became a problem for the
program. The situation with the Mexican migrants is critical because it gives evidence that regardless of the dominant group's status, as Freire pointed out, groups tend towards control.

Freire (1970, 1973) discussed the phenomena of oppression at various levels. In the situation outlined above, the Central American and Mexican migrant groups were seemingly acting out the behaviors of the oppressor. In this case, they were the oppressor and gatekeepers for their Head Start migrant community. They could determine whom they would accept and reject as community contributors. To use Gorski’s (2020) framework, Beatrix succeeded in her ability to recognize the bias of this dominant-yet-marginalized group of migrants (see Table 3 for Gorski’s framework). I wanted to highlight this response because of her nuanced description of the situation. It showed her ability to recognize inequity, even amongst marginalized groups.

**Table 3**

*Abilities of Equity Literacy Educators—Recognition*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abilities of Equity Literacy Educators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong> Ability to recognize even the subtlest biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong> Ability to respond to biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies in the immediate term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong> Ability to redress biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies in the long term by addressing their root causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong> Ability to actively cultivate equitable, anti-oppressive ideologies in the long term by addressing their root causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5</strong> Ability to sustain bias-free equitable, and anti-oppressive ideologies and institutional cultures</td>
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Across the interviews, there was much discussion about equity, equality, and inclusion. Every interviewee implicitly understood the differences between them. Beatrix had a great initial response, “We do not expel or suspend students for any reason.” Not expelling or suspending children in early childhood education seems like it should be obvious, but it is not in many programs. In Annabelle’s case, she performs exercises in her classroom with children and dolls with different skin tones to teach about equity and inclusion. Eleanor summed up the group's ideas about equity and inclusion nicely,

With equity and inclusion, in a practical way, for me, I think of every child coming into our program, being able to participate to their fullest capacity, whether it’s because they have some sort of disability and need accommodations for them to participate in all of the experiences available to them at their greatest ability.

All participants conveyed that their primary method of practicing equity and inclusion is building relationships with the children and their families. They can determine the family's needs and begin addressing them from that point.

Despite clear intentions by the education managers to attend to equity and inclusion, they feel like their teachers struggle with equity versus equality. Recalling when Danielle mentioned that not all teachers want to embrace equity work, Beatrix acknowledged that Head Start has difficulties accepting a variety of cultures and is not adequate regarding equity towards cultural and linguistic matters of concern. Regarding equity, she stated that “I’m not actually seeing where we are as a strength.” Danielle aptly recognized that “equity is one where we're continuing to grow and engage. It does require
the willingness of people to engage in the process.” Eleanor, Danielle, and Beatrix admitted that many teachers could not engage in equity. One reason Beatrix does not think that Head Start “is there”—being proficient in equity practices—is because many Head Start educators have little or no experience with marginalization and its conditions. This inexperience requires overcoming exposure to myriad cultures—something expressed by every education manager I interviewed.

Another item kept reappearing regarding equity and inclusion relating to status. Eleanor said, “The higher you go in administration, it tends to be less diverse.” Almost every research participant expressed the benefits of having people who look like the children in the classroom represented at Head Start. Unfortunately, despite Beatrix’s efforts to learn Spanish or Eleanor’s experiences living in different countries, neither are Black, so they wonder how to represent Black culture properly. From this interview data, it appears that Head Start is having difficulties understanding how to attract and promote diverse Head Start leadership to reflect better the populations they serve. Eleanor expressed her chagrin when she said she did not know how to bring a more diverse staff to the Pacific Northwest context.

Beatrix, Eleanor, and Danielle were very talkative, sharing, and open. Also, they carried themselves as naturally extroverted. Alternatively, Annabelle and Condoliza were not as talkative, and my probing was limited in its success. They had some outlier responses when addressing my interview questions about equity and inclusion. Beatrix, Eleanor, and Danielle, strongly align with Gorski’s (2020) first ability: “to recognize even the subtlest biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies.”
During the equity and inclusion part of the interview, I noted that Annabelle became nervous and fidgety. Annabelle said, “So for me, it’s a little bit of a fear because I wouldn't ever want to hurt or offend someone in a way that would make them feel bad about who they are.” She had difficulties—it appeared that it was hard and scary for her to reflect on this topic, “and sometimes I’m afraid of saying the wrong thing because I don’t always know.” Although she reported this as a sensitive subject for herself, she is aware of her lack of awareness and is honest and open about learning, despite its emotional toll on her. Condoliza was a little different regarding her responses. She engaged me with the shortest discussion, and I had many difficulties probing for answers with her. Some of her responses showed thinking in the context of equity and inclusion. Some of her answers displayed a lack of awareness regarding oppression. When I asked her if she had ever witnessed someone being a target of bigotry, her initial reaction was “no.” When I asked about unfair school practices, she pivoted the discussion toward unfairness in Zoom meetings or work distribution. She did not mention equity and inclusion even though the subject was directly related to the interview questions. Despite her lack of experience, Annabelle showed that she was willing and ready to engage in more profound equity work, even though she harbored some fear.

Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) guided educators on practicing equity and inclusion; they stated that disabilities, poverty, race, English language learners, LGBT, gender, and community and family engagement must all be considered. The education managers did not mention intersectionality or allude to intersectionality. The education managers did not discuss religion as an aspect of equity and inclusion. Although
Condoliza immediately responded with “no” regarding equity and inclusion, she did open up and share a story about an incidence of racism (covered above in the results section under Condoliza). By all measures, each education manager showed competence in Gorski and Pothinis’s (2018) first ability of an equity literacy educator.

**Theme 2 – Reflection and action on addressing child and family needs**

The education manager participants engaged in reflection and action centered on relationships with children and families. Rondo County’s Education Managers build relationships to include the child’s family in their planning. Their rapport with children and families bolsters the relationship between the teacher and their children and families. The interview information shows that the better the relationships, the better education managers are at meeting the needs of their children and families. When you are more deeply acquainted, it is easier to advocate effectively for someone. Thus, education managers excel when reflecting and acting on behalf of their children and families on a personal ad hoc level (addressed more in chapter 5).

Gorski’s (2020) abilities of equity literacy educators, represented by Theme 2, are highlighted in Table 4. I found that the education managers stayed child-and-family-focused regarding reflection and action. When it came to children and families, they could respond to and redress bias, inequity, and oppression. One example is how education managers maintain third-party relationships better to serve their children and families via language interpretation services. Reflection and action are reciprocal as well. Eleanor described “a little girl in one of our centers who is not only in a wheelchair but needs a lot of accommodation to participate in every facet. From mobility to feeding to
all of these things.” Eleanor and her team are in a constant state of revision with this little girl. They attempt short, medium, and long-term solutions, but the little girl shows that her needs are moving targets. In this scenario, it is necessary to be reflective and active when caring for her.

Table 4

Abilities of Equity Literacy Educators—Respond and Redress

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Education managers demonstrated their engagement in equity work by tasking their teachers to introduce their children and families to differing cultures. They build trusting relationships with their teachers, so they feel comfortable engaging in this work with children and families. Relationships are also helpful if a teacher has students who operate in dual and multiple languages and English as a second language (ESL) because non-verbal communication can fill many gaps. Beatrix stated that the Rondo County Head Start program partners with an “interpretation service. So, when we are doing a home visit or a conference or even just a phone call with those families, we make sure that we have a legit interpreter who can have those conversations with those families.”
The combination of interpretation services and relationship building helps families feel more included in what is happening with their preschool-aged children. Beatrix speaks for the education managers when she describes the inclusivity in Head Start,

I think that's another way that we're very inclusive and equitable is that we really don't do any kind of special plan or services for a child without including the family in that conversation, and the family has to be involved in creating that plan.

When I asked the participants what equity and inclusion meant, their answers centered on ‘meeting each child where they are.’ This sentiment is published over Head Start websites in many forms, but it is regulated by The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Teaching and the Learning Environment (Head Start Program Performance Standards, 2016). Each participant showed firm competence regarding awareness and reflection of answers. Each participant was thoughtful; Eleanor said, "equality is everybody having the same thing; equity everybody having what they need.” She also noted,

So, with equity and inclusion, in a practical way, for me, I think of every child coming into our program being able to participate to their fullest capacity, whether it's because they have some sort of disability and need accommodations for them to participate in all of the experiences available to them at their greatest ability.

Danielle and Beatrix also had important answers. They, along with Eleanor, discussed equity via the example of the fence and the baseball field. Three children are standing on
the same size boxes but attempting to view a sports game. One child cannot see because he is too short. That is equality—everyone has the same size box. If they practiced equity in the same situation, each child would have the box at the necessary height to view the game. Further along, we would remove the fence, so the boxes were unnecessary, and then find the next topic to address equity and inclusion further.

When the education managers discussed how they practice equity and inclusion at their centers, they revealed a bit more about the current status of Head Start. A high frequency of mentions included equity and inclusion in the frame of having the family in the preschool experience. Condoliza discussed how she practiced equity and inclusion activities with children and their families when she said, “I'm always very cautious and aware of what I'm saying and what I'm doing and how I'm interacting with children and families through building relationships.” Education managers learn how to engage families with appropriate equity and inclusion practices through relationships. Beatrix stated, “It’s arrogant for us to assume that we know better than a parent what is best for each child, their family, their situation.” Each education manager I interviewed expressed this sentiment.

Annabelle brought up something poignant regarding equity and inclusion at her center. She indirectly voiced incidents that we identified as microaggressions. She did not seem apprised of the term but described it perfectly. She said she is “getting better at noticing [microaggressions] because of the training we’ve had around inclusion.” She identified the microaggressions as a “subtle kind of joke around them, around race, or those types of things.” Annabelle seemed very willing to engage in discussions about
controversial topics relevant to her children and families. Although she is the oldest of
the education managers and is very religious, her openness is emotionally moving.
Annabelle shared a story about her non-binary granddaughter's struggles to remain open.
The following quote sums up how her openness leads to equitable and inclusive decisions
as she struggles with her granddaughter’s identity.

So, for me, it was easy for me to shift once I understood how important it was for
her. And so that's where I was, and then I talked with her parents about it, they're
not in the same thinking right now, and that's OK because everybody has their
process, and it takes some longer than others to figure out.

Condoliza leans heavily on building relationships with her children and families
to overcome obstacles that may be present. When asked about equity and inclusion,
Condoliza spoke in general terms. “So, it's things that we talk about with the families
because it's not only things that we practice it in the classroom, but it's ensuring that
equity and inclusion is (sic) understood through the families as well.” She mentioned that
she discusses equity and inclusion regarding various topics but did not give examples.
Instead, Condoliza responded by saying that she tries to understand “how I feel and how
I’m seeing the situation versus how this person feels and sees the situation.” She kept
steering the conversation toward relying on relationships to guide solutions, and equity
and inclusion seemed like an afterthought or secondary issue.

Beatrix, Danielle, and Eleanor were very open and willing to discuss controversial
topics around equity and inclusion. They were more open to saying “Mexican” or “Black
culture” when describing such issues, whereas Annabelle was more reserved, and
Condoliza was avoidant. Beatrix and Danielle seemed to address these issues head-on with exuberance. Eleanor was more careful, comprehensive, and concise during her discussions. Eleanor seemed ready to challenge dominant cultural perspectives, but her strategy was more cautious and systemic, which I cover in the following section.

Annabelle and Condoliza appeared to need permission in the form of establishing relationships to commit to equity and inclusion work. That commitment seemed to be case-by-case, depending on the relationships. After exploring theme 2’s reflection and action, I examine how my participants treated awareness, reflection, and action related to systemic biases and social problems.

**Theme 3 – Awareness, reflection, and action on systems, policies, and practices.**

“We do not expel or suspend students for any reason,” said Beatrix. It was comforting to hear that Head Start has such a policy. The Suspension and Expulsion (2016 (a)(1)) policy state that “A program must prohibit or severely limit the use of suspension due to a child's behavior. Such suspensions may only be temporary in nature.” Rondo County Head Start goes beyond these guidelines to ensure that suspensions are not slowing the progress of their children’s development by not carrying out suspensions. 45 CFR 1302.17 (b)(1) states, “A program cannot expel or unenroll a child from Head Start because of a child’s behavior.” Section (b)(3) gives guidelines if a child is ineligible for services, but only if they can “directly facilitate the transition of the child to a more appropriate placement.” Rondo County’s Head Start policy toward expulsions and suspensions aligns with the national Head Start policy.
The education managers discussed equity and inclusion as highly important. They responded relatively well toward awareness-reflection and reflection-action, especially regarding interpersonal care for their children and families. However, a different story emerged about addressing systemic issues. For questions four through 11, I counted many mentions of the first theme—awareness and reflection. I counted fewer comments on thinking and action for children and their families. They mentioned awareness and reflection significantly less when it came to thinking outside of their realm and engaging in systemic or policy changes. The weight of the issue regarding altering practices, policies, and systems carried much less impact and importance in our interviews. The lack of discussions around these was stark despite including all three of Schneider’s (2019) models of critical consciousness for policy, systemic, or practice-based topics in the interview questions.

The education managers seemed geared toward thinking and advocacy when addressing the children and families. Despite my attempts to probe, their minds did not readily apply policy and systemic thinking to the questions I asked. I attempted to draw out the education managers' systemic and policy thoughts and ideas, but their mindsets were not always aligned. Eleanor, however, mentioned policy and systemic issues more frequently than the others.

Theme three is important because it came to life when I noticed a lack of mentions regarding systems thinking and policy. Eleanor showed that she works within five of the five abilities of an equity literacy educator. Eleanor asked, “So, what can we do to bring down as many barriers as possible for the children and the families to
participate as fully as possible in the opportunities that Head Start can offer?” Recalling earlier, Eleanor discussed a child with a dis/ability and a wheelchair. Beyond examining her awareness and thoughts and performing her actions to include the child more, she also discussed how she involved the Education Services District (ESD) in making this child’s school environment better while still accommodating all of the children in that child’s classroom.

Eleanor demonstrated the first ability—"to recognize even the subtlest biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies by identifying the status of this child’s conditions” (Gorski, 2020). She knew how to address the child and family without feelings of inadequacy—ability two. She displayed ability three by addressing the root causes of the child's discomfort to the best of her capability. In this child’s case, the space itself is a cause of the disquiet, so Eleanor made physical modifications to the environment to make it a more welcoming learning environment. Eleanor effectively minimized potentially oppressive thoughts or actions by treating this child as a whole and not making the issue of her accommodations a problem—thus, working ability four. Under her supervision at her center, Eleanor showed that she could cultivate bias-free, anti-oppressive ideologies.

Eleanor shared many thoughts regarding meeting children where they are and what she thinks about addressing their needs.

But I also think about, you know, dual language learners. How do we communicate and interact with all children so that they are able to understand what their expectations of them are? So, beyond verbal language, what else are we employing? You know? Whether it's visual schedules or just non-verbal cues, to know that it's about time to do something different because those types of things don't just benefit the children who are dual language learners.
Eleanor made a compelling point about the children’s need to understand their teachers’ expectations, despite the language barriers. It is inclusive to help the children and families understand all expectations. She makes the children and families partners in comprehending their responsibilities. Keeping these close relationships with the children, families, and teachers while openly communicating each other’s needs, she promotes and sustains bias-free and anti-oppressive ideologies and institutional cultures (See Gorski’s abilities framework in Table 5).

Table 5

Abilities of Equity Literacy Educators—Cultivate and Sustain

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Moreover, Danielle also showed that she works within the five abilities, despite having fewer mentions of awareness, reflection, and action about systems, policies, or institutional practices. She shared an emotionally moving story that I expanded on in her findings section regarding her boss almost firing her for standing up for a child that
required one-on-one care. Her conviction was strong enough to initiate a conversation with her supervisor’s supervisor about the wrongness of her decision.

The executive director held ideologies that led her to conclude that a child needed less help. Danielle’s awareness, quick reflection, and action led to a frightening confrontation with her executive director. Standing up to her executive director and the unfair treatment of this child with severe disabilities showed her willingness to sustain bias-free and anti-oppressive ideologies. Successfully thwarting this decision, opening up the executive director position for a more equitable and inclusive person, and implementing a more inclusive vision shows that she possesses ability number five of the abilities of equity literacy educators. She could do this because of her high level of awareness, reflection, and willingness to act to improve things for the short and long term and make changes within her system to improve services to children and families.

Beatrix is a very focused and diligent early childhood care professional and knows how to advocate for herself, her teachers, and children and their families effectively. She is willing to go the extra mile for everyone who works with her. Beatrix also seemed to be encountering difficulties and frustrations when influencing systemic change. She showed hesitation and trepidation regarding that aspect of her role. “I think where I need to be aware of is that I am not the best person to offer the solutions because I’m seeing it as an outsider.” Although Beatrix is intimately involved in her family's lives, she does not feel she has the authority to advocate for them because Beatrix is White. She speaks of Mexican and Spanish-speaking families when she says, “I think that I try my best to advocate. I might not be the best spokesperson.” Although she shows the
willingness to put herself on the line to advocate for her children and families, she feels she is not the right person for the job. Hesitancy and lack of perceived self-efficacy make it difficult for Beatrix to redress biases in the short term or create a bias-free equitable learning environment with anti-oppressive ideologies in the long term.

Condoliza presented herself as someone who works closely with families regardless of their barriers. She discussed a willingness to address any family problem through "building relationships. I always know what the need is and how I can best approach a child and a family with five classrooms.” Condoliza enacts Gorski’s (2020) ability number two because she can “intervene effectively” when bias or inequity arises. Unfortunately, she showed that she could not advocate against inequalities because she was not able to engage the parents—it was her supervisor who had to resolve the situation, as expressed in her interview section above. Her supervisor contacted each parent the next day to discuss the incident and settled it with them independently. In her interview, Condoliza fulfills Gorski’s (2020) first ability well; two, partially, and three through five, she did not express any related stories to demonstrate these qualities.

Annabelle demonstrated a lot of heart. Her compassion for others spills out in her interactions—even during her interview. She spoke about relationships with her families slightly differently than Condoliza. Whereas Condoliza seemed like she could partner with families to help them figure out problems, Annabelle appeared to be a nurturing mother figure for her families. It is profoundly benevolent maternalism, and I feel like she would do anything for her children and families if she felt the need to do so. She hinted at her willingness and ability when she discussed her granddaughter. It took vast
quantities of compassion and love to question her religion to make room in her life and consciousness for her non-binary LGBT granddaughter. She was not aware of her ability to question her beliefs until her granddaughter came out to her. It seemed like she had a depth of compassion encompassing any child or family in distress or experiencing difficulties. Although she shared hesitancy and trepidation at abilities four and five, she also showed that she could find those abilities under the proper circumstances.

Danielle and Eleanor expressed that they had the best understanding and willpower to engage in all five abilities. Beatrix is a less experienced but ambitious professional who has yet to exercise her power as an education manager professional when it comes to changing practices, policies, and systems. Condoliza showed that she could be aware and reflective of equitable and inclusionary practices, but she is not inclined to push against institutions for change. Annabelle showed all five of the abilities of equity literacy educators, but her path appears via close relationships. Annabelle cannot have tight enough relationships with all her children and families to fight as passionately as she does for her granddaughter. Unless she has a close relationship with every child and family at her Head Start, she may find it challenging to apply an institutional change.

Overall, Rondo County’s education managers follow Head Start’s lead regarding their objective to “meet each child where they are.” They each feel that advocating for their families is paramount and will do so if required. There are, however, varying levels of commitment to equity and inclusion regarding distinct topics such as race, ethnicity, and culture. The difficulty in exploring these topics does not dissuade the education
managers from doing their job; however, there are times when it feels uncomfortable for some of them.

The education managers are not explicitly offered professional development by Head Start to figure out how to change systems or policies, but there is room for changing practices. As Annabelle mentioned, there is a chain of command to follow to implement practices, making it tricky to do this as well. When considering the complexity of changing practices, it is reasonable for teachers to determine that changing systems and policies are more intricate. When the psychological barriers impose themselves, they tend to hinder any potential progress by the education managers as they try to make a change.

Above, I shared an analysis of each participant's capabilities to engage in equity literacy educators' five abilities, as Gorski's (2020) framework put forward. In the next section, I interpret my findings through the context of the seven steps in the case analysis approach.

**Interpretation of Findings**

I interpreted my findings via Gorski and Pothini's (2018) seven steps in the equity literacy case analysis approach. I applied their case analysis approach to describe the information I gathered from my interviews. Gorski and Pothini (2018) designed the seven steps to improve the “four abilities of equity literacy” (p. 12), which are now the five abilities that Gorski (2020) updated on his website. They state that the “steps are cumulative, designed to prepare us to develop informed, mindful responses to multilayered classroom and school scenarios” (Gorski & Pothini, 2018, p. 13). First, I
identify biases and inequities in the interview data narratives (Table 6). Such prejudices and injustices include negating discrimination and inequalities, implicit judgments about people with different statuses and identities, explicit decisions about people with different statuses and identities, and an unwillingness or inability to recognize signs of bias and inequity.

**Table 6**

*Seven Steps in the Equity Literacy Case Analysis Approach*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Name of Step</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Identify biases or inequalities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Take stock of various perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Consider possible challenges and opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Imagine equitable and just outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>Brainstorm immediate-term solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Brainstorm long-term solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>Craft a plan of action</td>
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Schneider’s (2019) critical consciousness begins with identifying biases or inequities. Awareness allows us to identify and label. Diemer and Blustein (2006), Thomas et al. (2014), and Watts et al. (1999) all showed how vital the stages before action are. Awareness is essential because, as Gorski and Pothini state, “Many biases and inequities students face in school are implicit and unintentional, hidden in day-to-day practices, school traditions, and quiet interactions” (2018, p. 14). Some biases and
inequalities were present even before the interviewing began. There were no Black, Latinx, disabled, LGBT participants or people who spoke English as a second language. One potentially marginalizing condition is that Annabelle expressed her religious beliefs, but she is Christian, the majority religion in the United States. Beatrix and Condoliza identified as people who had experienced socioeconomic-related issues before their careers at Head Start.

Overall, education manager participants in this study at Rondo County Head Start place much trust in the relationship aspect of caring for their children and families. They work hard to be aware of what is happening with their children and families and think of how to help them. They act bravely, sometimes to their peril, such as in the case of Danielle and her executive director. Sometimes, they miss opportunities to be that bulwark for their families, such as with Condoliza and the parent who did not want to be near a Black man in line. According to Gorksi and Pothini (2018), such a mindset may make it challenging to address bias and inequality because it indicates implicit trust when she could be challenging her preconceptions more.

In contrast, Eleanor, Danielle, and Beatrix questioned biases and inequalities as a habit. Beatrix shared a story about her time home visiting. The conditions in which some of her families lived were deplorable. Beatrix recognized the inequalities that caused the family to live in such a situation. Danielle and Eleanor each studiously address biases and inequities. Eleanor’s approach is very systemic, practice-based, and policy-driven. Her mind seems to be assessing future outcomes via policy and practice by influencing her systems at work. She asks questions like, “Do we need to rethink the room arrangement?
What might we need to think about at a larger level?” Eleanor involves all the stakeholders so that she makes more comprehensive decisions.

The education manager with the most difficulties identifying biases and inequities was Condoliza. According to her interview, she appeared to have challenges recognizing bias and inequalities unless forming close relationships with the families. Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) showed that people's awareness could be raised enough to learn about their circumstances and ability to do something about them by encouraging critical questioning. Perhaps Condoliza, or other practitioners with her skillsets, could be asked some vital questions so they may gain some perspective and broaden their awareness. Bloom et al. (1991) supported this idea by stating that participants “seemed to feel that they had become more open and more tolerant of differing positions and ideas (pp. 63-64)” during their research study. There is plenty of evidence to show that despite the range of teachers’ skills, dispositions, and abilities, each can develop their awareness, allowing them to identify inequalities better. Next, step two—take stock of various perspectives (Table 6).

Investigating multiple views of a situation is an awareness and reflective activity. It requires interpersonal awareness because one must be aware of other people and their perspectives to understand one’s thinking and actions. It is essential to do this as group input helps more people benefit through augmenting awareness and reflection and bolstering each other toward action. Collective agreements are where the education managers at Head Start excelled. The education managers provided many examples of
how they leveraged relationships where parents are involved in the decisions of their child’s educational experiences.

Each education manager incorporated multiple perspectives from various viewpoints. For example, Beatrix discussed interpretation services provided by a local company with Head Start partners. Danielle mentioned partnering with specialists for children with dis/abilities. Eleanor discussed working with the local Education Services District—which helps with accommodations for children. Annabelle considered her supervisor or other colleagues with whom to confer to obtain a better understanding of a situation. Recalling Condoliza’s encounter with the racist parent, she was uncertain what to do in this intense situation. Eventually, she collaborated with her supervisor to deal with the situation; however, her supervisor settled the parental conflict. None of the participants noted the effects of group dynamics directly, but their stories alluded to how collective work enhanced their ability to lead more effectively. Overall, this Head Start education managers group does very well by involving as many stakeholders as possible.

Each participant collaborated with various partners to operate effectively in their positions. Beatrix, Danielle, and Eleanor more readily took on the perspectives of others to perform and implicitly understood the need to collaborate to find better solutions. Condoliza and Annabelle stuck closer to their immediate social circles but still collaborated when the time came. These education managers meet with mental health professionals, their supervisors, each other, and their teachers. Birky et al. (2006), Diemer et al. (2006), and Diemer and Li (2011) showed that support is a fundamental aspect of critical consciousness development. Although peer support did not affect critical action, it
certainly helped their critical reflection. During this step in the process, heightened reflection and awareness are the targets. Next, let us consider step three—consider possible challenges and opportunities (Table 6).

Step 3’s *Consider possible challenges and opportunities related to equity* is an excellent reflective step that connects well with critical reflection. Although the education managers were not as adept at discussing systemic, policy, or practice-based changes to their Head Start, they were robust in their awareness, reflection, and action toward children and families. As far as challenges are concerned, there is a need for National Head Start to discuss program and policy changes. Many of Head Start’s policies and regulations come directly from the U.S.C. or the CFR. The high-level decision-making it takes to apply systemic change at national Head Start is often too difficult and time-consuming for a Head Start teacher or education manager to take on.

Recalling Annabelle's statement, applying policy change at the program level is challenging because of the “chain of command” that must be acknowledged and respected. The chain of command can make it arduous to apply program change; therefore, it must be onerous to attempt to effect change at the national level. Thus, although there are pronounced obstacles between Beatrix and a new local policy that she wants to implement, her energy is best directed toward Rondo County Head Start and its management team. Before she tries to influence local Head Start policy, she is a manager and could apply local policies to determine their effectiveness at her level. She could then show the evidence to people above her in administration to determine if their application in a broader context is apt.
There are also opportunities for Rondo County Head Start. The most important is the dedication to the children and families. Through these many interviews and stories, it became clear that the education managers care deeply for their children and families and are willing to accomplish demanding feats for them. Surprisingly, it also appears that Head Start does not help with professionally developing education managers to change its systems, policies, or practices on a national level. There are opportunities for improving teachers and education managers by showing educators like Eleanor or Danielle as examples of how education managers should approach their management. Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) demonstrated this in their book, but we need managers like theirs in every school to do what they did. Suppose the program managers encourage the actions of Danielle, who put her job on the line for a child in her previous program. Through Danielle sharing her story, other education managers and teachers may take the example to bolster their confidence to do something similar. Reports of a trusted and familiar education manager’s actions may generate a virtuous cycle of locally implementing systemic, policy, and practice alterations (Table 6).

Steps four, five, six, and seven are all reflective steps. Step seven says craft a plan of action—it does not say act. Some education managers discussed difficulties with their teachers regarding equity and equality. Beatrix shared regarding equity that “I’m not actually seeing where we are as a strength.” Recalling when Danielle elaborated on Beatrix’s thoughts on page 159, it may be impossible for all the teachers to engage in equity work versus equality work. Danielle explained that “their identity is wrapped up in it. They’re not at a space where they want to engage in that work or feel that it needs to
be different because for 30 years, what they did worked.” Imagine a future where Head Start managers are empowered to make equitable and inclusive changes to the national Head Start systems, practices, and policies, rather than left to believe the way Danielle describes. How would this happen?

As one example, photovoice is a method that has arisen in the literature review and appears to be decisive in adjusting the frame of reference of people in a given community. Baker and Brookins (2014), Carlson et al. (2006), and Thompson et al. (2016) all conducted photovoice studies to listen to, and understand, the voices of their communities. Photovoice research studies have given the people engaged in the research a deeper understanding of their situations. Community members can coherently plan and apply the change they need by understanding their circumstances more clearly. Photovoice gives people enough power to be aware and reflect on their current circumstances. Through reflection, we imagine equitable and just outcomes—potentially leading to high-level accomplishments via action predicated on a thorough reflection (Table 6).

Out of my interpretation findings, I discuss in Chapter 5 the final three steps in the equity literacy case analysis approach. I place them in Chapter 5 because they imply sustained engagement on behalf of education managers as part of my conclusions.

**Summary**

People evolve, and this group of professionals develops fast. Therefore, these professionals' mindsets, knowledge, and agency are on a continuum. Everyone is on their specific journey, and as I mentioned above, equity and inclusion work seems to always be
on a spectrum. There is a range of levels of awareness, propensity towards reflection, and willingness to participate in actions. This range seems dynamic, changing with the ebbs and flows of the day, week, or month. One thing that remained essentially static was the education managers’ dedication to their children and families. Through relationships, anything is possible—is the mantra I would propose when describing this group of professionals.

Above, I provided my analysis of the data. First, I analyzed the preliminary questions and responses. I discussed theme one—awareness and reflection about children and families. I described how dedicated to understanding and thinking Head Start education managers are. Theme two revolved around the education managers' thoughts and actions about children and families. They demonstrated their willingness to overcome difficult things, even outside of their comfort zone, with families because of relationships. Theme three discussed systems, practices, and policies' awareness, reflection, and action.

I then interpreted my findings using Gorski's (2020) and Gorski and Pothini’s (2018) framework. I described the limitations of my study in the final section to show the reader the true scope of my research. Next, I will complete the discussion regarding immediate and long-term solutions and how to craft plans of action going forward. Following that, I will finish my investigation with/in the larger research context and make my closing remarks.
Chapter 5: Discussion/Conclusion

In chapter 4, I shared my presentation of the study’s findings. In this chapter, I will offer my final thoughts on the study's interpretations and implications and conclude with notable remarks. My research question was:

How are the critical actions of Education Managers in a Pacific Northwest Head Start program influenced by critical awareness and critical reflection?

The findings were rich and diverse. The participants I interviewed were all delightful, hard-working, child-oriented professionals. On the one hand, Beatrix was exuberant and willing to share everything that could be helpful, while on the other hand, I did my best to attract responses from Condoliza, who was not as expressive. Danielle's deep analysis and thoughtful answers mirrored some of Annabelle's deep passion, although they both expressed themselves differently. Eleanor's systematic analysis of all things Head Start, children, policy, practices, and systems was thought-provoking. Her passion for children is tempered by her experience and systematic analysis of practices, policies, and systems to better serve them. Each participant made an offer toward my main question. The data show these education managers primarily focused on their children, families, and classrooms as a school community. They mostly worked to implement critical actions daily but overwhelmingly did not address equity issues from a systemic, organizational, and procedural perspective.

Further, I also turn to my researcher notes to consider my research question more deeply. My journal entries were not as thorough as I had initially planned. I planned on taking notes about the various aspects of my participants, but I only used note-taking to
orient myself to the moment and the participant. I generally reflected the ambiance of my participant, even in my note-taking. By that, I mean that I wrote more lively emotions for a more lively participant. If the participant was less enthusiastic, I omitted more of the emotional aspect. For example, with Annabelle, I had written that she is emotional when discussing specific topics or people or how she is compassionate. When talking to Beatrix, I wrote, “She started getting serious with her body language when discussing perspectives of various cultures.” I also recognized Beatrix’s positive attitude and mannerisms. I wrote less about my emotional impressions of Danielle, Eleanor, or Condoliza, who were more reserved than the other two participants.

Overall, my note-taking helped me orient myself at the moment and recall the emotional states of my participants. This note-keeping practice allowed me to also stay critically aware and reflective in my process toward taking action in writing this research and making conclusions and implications for additional actions. So, I now consider what more I learned through this research process.

**From my Interpretation Findings Come Continuous Improvement**

Beatrix is very passionate and thoughtful about her communities. She always looks for the best way to support her teachers, children, and families. I see a sea change in Beatrix that I believe I see in many people, not just educators. This sea change is happening amongst the younger people in the United States, especially now in the shadow of Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization (2022)—the infamous case overturning Roe v. Wade (1973) (CIRCLE, 2022). Beatrix is very open and accepting of different ethnicities, levels of ability, and nationalities. She may not be as studied as
Danielle or as experienced as Eleanor; still, her passion and openness to others represent a shift in the youth's perception of differences in appearance or thinking. It seems like the media is working hard to keep people at odds with each other, probably because people like Beatrix will become more prevalent in the future, thereby threatening their dominance.

Diemer and Blustein (2006) discussed Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), which I bring forward from Chapter Two. Essentially, it is when people value non-egalitarian and pro-hierarchical social dynamics—the diametric opposite of critical consciousness. Critical consciousness seeks to understand and thwart oppressive dynamics; SDO defacto maintains them. SDO is the status quo globally. SDO is how politicians rationalize the poor treatment of Mexican migrants in the United States and how China is potentially committing genocide against the Uyghurs (Boissonneault, 2022). It is a feeling and belief that one's cultural group is better than the others.

Beatrix, Danielle, and Eleanor reject the notions of SDO, although they are subject to its effects. Eleanor recognized this when she shared her exasperation regarding finding non-whites to work in middle management positions that could benefit from more diversity. Danielle rejected this notion so implicitly that she confronted her executive director and jeopardized her job to advocate for a marginalized child. Beatrix showed that despite her efforts to have a more egalitarian atmosphere, groups still create cultural groups based on their version of SDO. Although I see elements of SDO in Condoliza and Annabelle from what they describe of their past experiences, I also find that they are working to overcome these perceptions and influences.
I see a future where SDO is analyzed and questioned, especially with models like Gorski and Pothini (2018). Those who support it will fight back to instill the ideology of oppression in as many people as possible. Such as in current times when Critical Race Theory is being suppressed so that real and lived histories cannot be told. Now we have the frameworks: SDO and critical consciousness. They are two perspectives that color the human perspective on humanity.

On the one hand, there are awareness, reflection, and action against all things oppressive. On the other hand, there is a rationalization for the oppression of groups of people deemed inferior. As awareness grows, it will be interesting to see how people respond to this knowledge. Will people in society recognize the SDO and work against it? Will they work to maintain a social hierarchy, or will they work to help bring down the walls of oppression?

From my perspective, it is not easy to know where our society continues to influence our education systems, like those in the Pacific Northwest Head Start. I see hope in Danielle, Beatrix, and Eleanor, but I also see the influences of SDO from the past in Condoliza and Annabelle. I think pushing forward into the future will include each one coming to terms with what they are willing to allow to happen—the actions they take based upon critical thinking and reflection. Will we be courageous and engage in critical consciousness, or will we regress and fall back upon a tried-and-true method of maintaining the status quo via the tenets of SDO? The substantive question above cannot be answered in these pages but is worthy of an ask for looking into our futures!
Next, I show how my conclusions drawn from the findings of Gorski and Pothini’s (2019) seven steps are based on continuous improvement through sustained practices.

Conclusions Drawn from the Findings

At Rondo County Head Start, the education managers I interviewed work with their teachers to improve their equity lens. Some teachers are resistant to equity but are okay with inclusion. Head Start needs teachers and education managers with enough accessibility and perceived self-efficacy to engage in the struggle to improve systems, practices, and policies on any systemic level, such as the teachers and administrators portrayed in Theoharis and Scanlan (2015). Annabelle shared that it is difficult to influence change because she must honor the organizational command structure. If education managers have difficulties approaching change because of the structure, then this would be doubly arduous for the teachers.

The Oregon Head Start Association (OHSA) is a central point for Head Start that operates in Oregon. They have an administrative coordinator and an executive director with nine board members. One objective of a grassroots effort could be to demonstrate to the OHSA that empowered employees adjust their systems, practices, and policies to serve their children better. OHSA can then promote such measures to the other Head Start programs across the state. These efforts, of course, are predicated on improving equitable and inclusive practices, not subverting them. At some point, if the actions in Oregon are successful, they can be used as a model to implement nationally. I do not
presume to have all the answers on how to craft this action plan; however, if I worked at Head Start, I would begin asking the questions to develop a plan.

The education managers are so dedicated to their children that some will override their feelings and beliefs to help them succeed. Perhaps it was a stretch to think that all five education managers are bastions of equity and inclusion. Indeed, equity and inclusion work is always in progress, as Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) thoroughly communicated through their research studies. My participants in this study seem to be on a spectrum. In this spectrum, Schneider (2019) identified a three-element model of critical consciousness (Figure 1), which breaks down into critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action.

On the one hand, they are all aware, reflective, and active on behalf of their children and families, directly serving them. On the other hand, they seem unaware, unwilling, or unable to perceive that they can influence practices, policies, and systems higher up in the organization. Primarily, they reside along a continuum of much of this work. Watts and Flanagan (2007), Watts et al. (2011), and Jemal et al. (2020) all discuss this willingness and ability as political efficacy. Watts et al. (2011) defined political efficacy as “the perceived capacity to effect social and political change by individual and/or collective activism” (p. 46). The authors examined political efficacy in engaging in a social system to serve their needs better. Applying this idea to our education managers at Rondo County Head Start, it seems clear that the education managers could use help in understanding the power they wield in their organization.
If there was such a thing as being perfectly equitable, I have not seen it. Perhaps this is why I see the value in Gorski (2020) and Gorski and Pothini’s (2018) work to unpack equity by building a language and literacy around what it can mean. I have only ever known that everyone can be fairer and more inclusive, and even the best practitioners must improve. Theoharis (2007a), Theoharis (2007b), and Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) have provided numerous examples of how every equity and inclusion worker has room for improvement. Equity and inclusion are not the finish line. Instead, they are an ongoing process of growth and learning that no human can perfect. Recalling a section above, Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) outline eight areas in equity and inclusion to attend to—which I identified below. But how many people can become experts at equity and inclusivity in all eight areas? It can take an entire lifetime to become competent and confident in being culturally fluent in one culture, let alone eight categories that span from a person’s identity to the religion they practice, ethnicity, and so on.

To capture the scope of equity and inclusion mentioned during the interviews, I used Theoharis and Scanlan’s (2015) inclusive leadership list that identifies the various marginalizing conditions a leader must be aware of. They outlined nine areas in which leaders should be practicing equity and inclusion: 1) intersectionality—the merging of two or more of the following marginalizing conditions, 2) poverty, 3) disability, 4) race, 5) English language learners, 6) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning individuals, 7) gender, 8) religion, and 9) community engagement. Head Start’s inception and long history have involved helping families in poverty and with disabilities.
Gorski (2020) states that an exemplar equity and inclusion practitioner understands when and how to influence systems, policy, or practice changes for the short and long term. They will be able “to sustain bias-free equitable, and anti-oppressive ideologies and institutional cultures” (Gorski, 2020, Sec 5). They will also be able to “recognize the most subtle biases and respond to them in the immediate term” (Gorski, 2020, Sec 1). These education managers are engaged in equity and inclusion at different levels. On the one hand, Danielle was willing to lose her job for equity and inclusion. On the other hand, Condoliza deferred to her supervisor when encountering a racism incident (and still took action to find help in inequitable situations).

Rondo County Head Start attends to equity and has people in poverty and disability in scope. Rondo County Head Start works with migrant Mexican families better than other marginalized groups; some groups were better represented than others. During my discussions about migrant families, Beatrix spoke about English learners and providing interpretation services to serve her families better. Also, Beatrix spoke about the culture-within-a-culture dynamic at Head Start. She said, “I don't see a lot of representation in our staff of representing Black culture.” She also spoke about Somali families being excluded from other migrant groups because of the dominant White culture influence.

There were not many mentions of the LGBT community in the interviews except for the discussion with Annabelle. She spoke at length about her transgender granddaughter and discussed the intersectionality of her various identities. Annabelle was the only interviewee who opened up enough to explore the topics of gender, sexuality,
and intersectionality. The two things I did not hear much about, if at all, were the topics of religion and community engagement. Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) noted that the school is “nested in a wider community” (p. 136). They also asked, “how do school leaders engage families and external community members in their efforts to craft school communities that are inclusive” (p. 162). With this group of education managers, the finding is that they partner with many community members to provide a more equitable and inclusive environment; for example, interpretation services and the Education Services District that takes on more challenging preschool cases. One thing to note is that all education managers should be willing and able to advocate and fight for legislation that helps schools.

For the professional development aspect of continuous improvement for education managers, and thus any middle managers, the findings help me consider how to turn to a type of improvement that empowers. Professional development specifying the empowerment of education managers and middle managers to boldly make changes at their level and be staunch advocates for those above them can help organizations be more flexible and meet the needs of their employees as leaders and change agents in systems.

My findings make clear that these middle managers affect change daily but may have a more challenging time connecting to institutional and even policy-level change. It seems important to show education managers the special place they hold in the organization. They are leaders of entire sites but are also in the middle of the organization’s operations. They have the power to implement change below them—they ought to recognize when this is the case and when to write the new practice, policy, or
system down into a new institutional procedure. They have the ear of the executive
director, but the executive director expects them to know what is necessary to run their
site optimally. And this professional development to improve institutional systems can
affect more than a single site.

Empowerment to present new ideas to upper management can bolster
relationships and create a collaborative spirit of change amongst various decision-makers
within the organization. Having the trust of colleagues and managers can facilitate the
implementation of new practices, policies, and systems. This relational space takes time
to cultivate and can be facilitated toward empowerment through professional
development opportunities, potentially mirroring concepts from this research design.

Education managers can be empowered at this administrative level by modeling
conversations during meetings or discussing the problems and impacts of a new practice,
policy, and system change. They can also engage in real-life or computer-based
simulations that help them practice scenarios where they can implement short-term
outcomes that allow them to strategize for longer-term outcomes. Asking questions like
those in my interviews stimulates real-world scenarios from the education managers’
lives and can promote awareness and reflection on actions. They can place their past
problems front and center to consider how new actionable outcomes could create
empowerment—effectively creating the changes desired at their institutions.

Recognizing what to improve and effectively advocating for changes to
implement system-wide are valuable methods to empower this group of professionals to
make salient changes. I believe a model that emphasizes continuous improvement on
awareness of what is needed to improve their sites and that promotes effective reflection—solo and in a group setting—to discuss their progress will empower them to enact change. Head Start educators can successfully implement such measures with facilitation, encouragement, and professional development opportunities to engage this way.

Next, let us take a look back and move towards the future.

**Looking Back and Moving Forward**

This qualitative exploratory study investigated Head Start Education Managers and how they attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action. I sought to understand better the experiences of education managers at a local Head Start program. I asked: How are the critical actions of Education Managers in a Pacific Northwest Head Start program influenced by critical awareness and critical reflection? I also wanted to know where the education managers at this Head Start operate on the liberation-oppression spectrum. Another inquiry item is how these education managers view their responsibility to critical awareness, reflection, and action.

The intended outcome of this research study was to learn and understand education managers' navigation of critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action. To do this, I asked a gamut of questions designed to reveal their thoughts on equity and inclusion and how they navigate them utilizing a critical consciousness lens provided by Schneider (2019). Further, I analyzed their responses using Gorski’s (2020) and Gorski and Pothini’s (2018) frameworks on equity and inclusion. Together, the participants and I shared stories to understand their awareness and reflection on
marginalized families in their care. We also discussed their actions and what those look like in their understanding and consideration of a given situation. Oppression and marginalization are a fact of life for many communities, so noting and analyzing how aware, reflective, and active the education managers are in their circles of influence at school became an essential component of this research study’s conclusions and implications. Ascertaining how teacher-leaders educate and care for our most vulnerable is crucial to understanding their dedication to equity and inclusion. I delved into the storied lives of five education managers and discovered some exciting narrative experiences and analyses. Thus, it becomes crucial to review my research study's significant findings and outcomes as a next step.

**Synthesis of Findings and Themes**

To best address an exploratory study, I worked with thematic understanding and interpretive findings to derive the significant themes from within the interview data. The first set of themes emerged from our interview questions one through three and the responses given by participants. Since these were questions designed to learn about my participants, I placed them in a separate category from the remaining questions. I customized themes for questions one through three because of their uniqueness related to the other questions and because of the introductory nature of the questions. For questions four through 11, I developed a set of themes that applied to all the questions because it became evident that they fit into my preconceived categories—awareness, reflection, and action. At the end of this section, I propose a new four-element model of critical consciousness that seemed to bubble up from the data, analysis, and interpretations. This
model suggests future implications for equity and inclusion efforts for middle management, such as my participants—the Head Start Education Managers of Rondo County.

My first thought when uncovering the first theme—*Awareness and Reflection*—was the revelation that awareness, reflection, and action are not entirely distinct from each other. During the interviews, I noticed a relationship between Schneider’s (2019) three areas of critical consciousness. I could not determine that awareness occurred on its own. I observed that awareness gave way to reflection, which further informed the awareness, leading to further reflection (Figure 5). This relationship is dynamic, and the cycle can continue perpetually unless there is a concrete and simplified solution to a problem. However, dilemmas are multifold and complicated, making the awareness-reflection process longer and offering multiple solutions. Having numerous and sometimes competing analyses can proliferate potential solutions, thus creating a sort of paralysis.

My five participants spent most of the interviews discussing awareness and reflection. These areas are the safest of Schneider’s (2019) critical consciousness model because they do not require action followed by consequences or fear of repercussions due to actions that stand up against the prevailing mindsets. Awareness and reflection can happen inside someone’s mind unless someone reflects with another person. Gorski’s (2020) first ability of equity literacy educators indicates that the education managers should be able to recognize the subtlest of biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies (Table 3). Beatrix, Eleanor, and Danielle demonstrated that they could do this implicitly
and explicitly. They showed they were implicitly open to differences and did not shy away from equity or inclusion topics. They also expressly confronted situations with multiple viewpoints and resolved them. Condoliza and Annabelle offered different stories of life experiences. They were both explicit in their support for divergent groups of people or individual identities, but their implicit bias was apparent from some of their responses. They tried to be aware and reflective of their prejudices and attempted to mitigate them when possible. Condoliza, although adamant about her willingness to help children through anything, offered little experience in recognizing the subtlest biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies in some cases. For example, when the racist parent indicated her discomfort with the Black parent, a person sensitive to the situation may have handled it more quickly, not letting the incident gain traction. People sensitive to race issues can identify, address, and redress an incident more quickly. A higher skill level in these things helps prevent situations from getting out of control.

This theme combines Schneider’s (2019) elements, which were originally separate from each other—awareness and reflection. The reciprocal dynamic between these two elements gives life and bolsters each other. Awareness leads to thinking, and thinking broadens our understanding and awareness. This theme was also shaped by Gorski’s (2020) first ability of equity literacy educators (Table 2), “Ability to recognize even the subtlest biases, inequities, and oppressive ideologies” (Gorski, 2020, Sec. 1). That quote aligns very well with Schneider’s (2019) awareness element. Indeed, equity literacy educators should be able to recognize subtle bias in all areas. They should be able to identify bias in classroom learning materials, objects, and artifacts. Educators curious
about school practices, policies, or systems could be advantageous for the learning environment (Gorski, 2020) because their inquisitive nature sometimes leads to asking essential questions. These questions lead to reflection, which initiates more awareness but also action.

Reflection and action also exist in a reciprocal dynamic, presented as the second theme—Reflection and Action. Parents and teachers work to build their children’s awareness and reflect together. As stated in the analysis section above, the higher the relationship quality between teachers and parents, the better education managers meet the needs of their children and families. Teachers are also human beings with their own families. Relationships are how each of us connects and understands each other more. The deeper these bonds are, the more willing we are to help each other. This fact was displayed best by Annabelle. She is ready to accept and work with children who are different, come from different backgrounds, and have separate identities. When Annabelle broached a personal subject—in this case, her non-binary LGBT granddaughter—her care and intent became more pronounced. Perhaps she is adamantly and explicitly open to helping her granddaughter navigate her identity because she cannot come to terms with her implicit bias. Regardless of the reason, Annabelle courageously displayed her humility by admitting that she loves her granddaughter and is willing to overcome her implicit biases to better care for her.

Annabelle, Beatrix, Condoliza, Danielle, and Eleanor proved that they are critically active in adapting for the children's benefit. Annabelle displayed personal critical action by accepting her daughter. Beatrix’s insistence on staying up to date on her
Spanish language abilities and ensuring interpretation services are available and ready at any given time is personally active. Condoliza’s self-knowledge informed her that her manager should address a racism incident instead of her. Danielle stood up to her executive director, putting her job on the line. Eleanor works closely with the Education Services District to better support her dis/abled children. Gorski (2020) would recognize that each education manager, except Condoliza, shared stories that showed they have abilities two and three (see Table 4). Although Condoliza responded appropriately by allowing her supervisor to handle the racism incident, she could have had difficulties addressing the root causes without the supervisor. Although all the actions shared above are not explicitly pushing practice, policy, or systemic change, they are actions that provide benefits to Head Start children and families.

Theme two combines two of Schneider’s (2019) elements, which were originally separate from each other—reflection and action. These two elements are complementary and lively. Thought does not always lead to action, but actions often lead to thinking, although not always. Reflection and action are trickier because people can be fooled into action without thought. One would hope that the person thinks about their actions afterward, but that is not guaranteed. Indeed, research by Diemer et al. (2006) has shown that in many instances, awareness and reflection can be present in people who have familial support systems, but action, very infrequently and with much more effort. Also, support from family did not necessarily promote actions either (Diemer et al., 2006).

Gorski’s (2020) abilities also framed this theme. Abilities two and three (Table 2) are about responding in the short term and redressing bias in the long term. Short-term
means actions that can be accomplished on behalf of children and families that do not require official practice, policy, or systemic change. Perhaps it is a quick fix in practice that can be subsequently written into policy that addresses the root cause of a problem. The education manager has the power to write the policy for coworkers under her in the hierarchy; thus, she can redress this bias under her purview in the long term. It would take more effort to push this higher in the command structure for institutional change.

In the third theme—Awareness, Reflection, and Action—a potential struggle with authority and potentially harmful outcomes could lead many teachers and education managers not to act. Conversely, education managers are willing to serve when it comes to making accommodations for a single child—on a case-by-case basis. When our education managers have the authority to make changes at their sites regarding practice, policy, or practice, they often do so without involving the administration above them. Conflict arises when those decisions require administrators who do not agree or are unwilling to apply the proposed changes.

Difficulties seem to arise when education managers consider changing practices, policies, or systems that are not within their purview and authority. Since they have a reasonable amount of rule over their hierarchy, it does not take much for them to implement a change that can help their children and families. If an education manager needs to change a policy, they can do that and have it be a new guideline. However, further obstructions become apparent when that change requires a meeting with the executive director and their staff to change practice, system, or policy. It appears that each education manager except Condoliza would readily implement changes that
cultivate and sustain equitable, anti-oppressive ideologies in the long term by addressing root causes and institutional cultures under their purview, see Table 5 (Gorski, 2021). However, for Condoliza, the data has shown that her level of awareness may not be high enough to recognize when changing policies, systems, or practices is appropriate. Also, this significantly limits her ability to respond to and redress bias and inequity; it almost nullifies her ability to cultivate and sustain bias-free equitable, anti-oppressive ideologies by addressing root causes and institutional cultures (Gorski, 2020).

The obstacles could be proximity to the executive director, the rigidity of the chain of command, little infrastructure to implement change or many others. Combined with the emotions involved, these impediments can become problematic. Beatrix, Eleanor, Annabelle, and Danielle are the most equipped to bring systemic, policy, or practice issues to their managers and administration. They know their level of proficiency, and if they supervise adequately, they also know their teachers’ level of expertise. These education managers all know each other and share ideas frequently. They meet and discuss amongst themselves at work to improve their program. When more than one identifies an issue, they all discuss whether they should bring it to management for further review. At this point, the group meets and determines whether they must take action. The actions above are proper, but what if they need to improve their awareness? What if they need more time to reflect? One pitfall of working at Head Start is that many issues abound, but not all are addressed. Not being able to recognize bias and inequity means that education managers must continuously revisit the
awareness-reflection cycle to sustain anti-oppressive ideologies and institutional cultures (Table 5).

Theme three was a surprise to me. It combines all of Schneider’s (2019) elements but adds two more dimensions. One extra dimension is that critical consciousness envelops critical awareness, reflection, and action (Figure 9). The other dimension is each element’s focus on practices, policies, and systems. It gives an idea of the forces necessary to alter education managers' policies, practices, or systems. The model can also apply to middle management at non-education organizations and corporations. Essentially, all that is required to begin this journey is the desire to engage in equity and inclusion at their workplace and be willing to change practices, policies, or systems. This model provides a hyper-focused view of critical consciousness and how it can be used to influence systems, policies, or practices.
Let us not forget Gorski’s (2020) abilities, numbers four and five. It was serendipitous, in my estimation, that the “ability to actively cultivate equitable, anti-oppressive ideologies in the long term by addressing their root causes” (Gorski, 2020, Sec. 4) and the “ability to sustain bias-free equitable, and anti-oppressive ideologies and institutional cultures” (Gorski, 2020, Sec. 5) aligned with my customized theme three. Cultivating anti-oppressive ideologies in the long term harkens back to awareness, reflection, and action to improve practices, policies, and systems. Well-written, people-centric language in human-first policy helps cultivate anti-oppressive ideologies in the
long term. Here, we can feel empowered to change practices, policies, and systems because ability four demands that we rightly do so. Ability five focuses on institutional cultures in the long term. I found this quote from Gorski (2021, Sec. 5) to be quite salient in light of the Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization Supreme Court ruling,

> Equity progress often elicits concerns and complaints from people who are accustomed to a disproportionate share of access and opportunity and are able to recognize these concerns and complaints as an indication of progress, not as a reason to roll back progress.

Hopefully, this serves as hope to those experiencing resistance to their efforts towards equity and inclusion.

**Conclusion**

There are different types of critical awareness, reflection, and action regarding education managers. Perhaps the plight of the middle manager involves operating two similar critical consciousness constructs. The first construct is the same as Schneider’s (2019), which involves awareness, reflection, and action. The only alteration is to be aware, reflective, and active regarding decisions made under one’s own purview. The second construct is the same, except it extends to our communities. Growing critical consciousness beyond the self and immediate surroundings are trickier because individuals raised differently have different ideas of what is fair and equitable. It is more straightforward in the case of an education manager because they are accountable for their Head Start program. Education managers should be culturally embedded in their Head Start program to be sensitive to the needs of their children and families.
Figure 1 is Schneider’s (2019) three-element model for critical consciousness; Figure 9 is my four-element model that considers policies, practices, and systems. Even with the awareness-reflection, and reflection-action components working, many individuals and factors exist in a school setting. Perhaps a child has a challenging relationship with an assistant teacher; a parent does not get along with a home visitor; there could be a supervisor who has unresolved bigotries. With all four elements working together and a team of education managers boldly tackling their imperfections regarding equity, children and families will still be slipping through the cracks. Most of all, what they can do is their best, and the four-element model improves middle managers in educational institutions who want to change practice, system, and policy. Next, I discuss the larger context of this study.

Limitations of Study

Rondo County Head Start, and the education managers I interviewed, are representatives of themselves. This study does not represent any other Head Start program in Oregon and certainly not in the rest of the United States. An executive director, under her auspice, is running this program. She has the power to implement systemic, policy, or practice changes. The five education managers I interviewed are simply that. They would have to work with their executive director to implement change. The same is probably true with most Head Start programs. Therefore, what is valid with Rondo County Head Start, may not be accurate in the county next door, let alone a different state.
The issue of Policy Council did not come up during my interviews. Policy council was a critical omission by me, the researcher, and the education managers. I could have probed to elicit policy council responses, but I did not consider doing this upfront. However, it is interesting to note that the council did not come up in any of the conversations and stories put forth by the participants, even when discussions were tangentially related to policy.

As mentioned above, I am also still a novice interviewer. I could have phrased my research questions better, which is easier to see in hindsight of the data writing and analysis. I believe I can learn how to spend more time drawing out more detailed answers, and this would have happened were I more experienced.

I could have spent more time with my participants to get to know them better. Unfortunately, the restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed my ability to observe them in their locations. Oregon had some strict COVID-19 lockdown measures making it prohibitive to do so. Such observations would have been helpful so that I could embed myself into their organization more and allow relationships to bloom with the participants.

**Policy Implications**

I write the ending of this research in the context of and just days after Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization (2022)—the overturning of Roe v. Wade (1973). It now appears that policy is paramount as we advance. I say this because the Supreme Court has created blocks to civil rights, and policy is the only thing that can supersede the court’s decision. This court decision may not make life more difficult for Head Start
children and their families in Oregon; however, changes are coming soon for many places in the United States.

Although one Head Start program cannot change governmental policy on its own, it can look within its boundaries to know how to help its families at its level. At the state level, at the Oregon Head Start Association, directors can implement guidelines and policies that bolster the healthy lives of children and their families. At the program level, directors can do the same with more significant effects and faster implementation. At the program director level, they can achieve a higher level of equity and inclusion than the city or county that governs them. In essence, they can create a little fiefdom of health and positivity. Education managers are vital to this process.

The education managers cannot readily implement policy at the program level but have the power to influence their program director, at least at Rondo County Head Start—even if it feels like they must adhere to a command structure. The education managers’ unique position within the organization allows them to view what is happening lower and higher on the command hierarchy. Their unique status gives them insight into what the teachers and program director must endure day-to-day. Their position also makes it difficult to do so because of how much they must manage on a given day—a challenge was highlighted by Theoharis and Scanlan (2014).

Perhaps a special collaborative agreement between the program director and education managers could empower both positions to work to be more aware so that they can identify and ponder upon the most effective policy actions. Recall Figure 9, where there is a constant feedback loop between awareness, reflection, and action and how they
all revolve around practices, policies, and systems in the context of critical consciousness. Theoharis (2007a, 2007b, 2008) and Theoharis and Scanlan (2015) show that resistance to policy change can be felt from many sides, including those in positions lower in the command hierarchy, presenting different challenges. The program director and education managers would be wise to follow Gorski’s (2020) five abilities because they provide a framework to steer organizational culture towards equity and inclusion. They are already aware, reflective, and active, but they should apply these to their school environment via Gorski (2020). Action is the way forward as Head Start leads the way. They act on behalf of their children with unwavering care. Perhaps it is time to place more of their focus on policy since they have such a deep understanding of their children and families.

**Situated in the Larger Context**

My qualitative research study investigated how education managers attend to equity and inclusion. In some ways, my research study continued Schneider’s (2019) research study qualitatively. Schneider’s analysis was quantitative and looked at educators; mine was qualitative and sought to determine how early childhood education managers attend to equity and inclusion examined via a critical consciousness lens. Our research studies navigated away from the classic view that critical consciousness principally applies to marginalized communities. Indeed, education managers in relatively privileged positions utilize critical awareness, reflection, and action in their personal lives to operate in their work positions and personal lives. Further, they use critical consciousness to impact their workplaces' practices, policies, and systems.
Policies and systems can be rigid. Their design should include a certain level of rigidity to maintain their form, but they must also have a well-engineered organizational development process beginning with policy. Policies are essential because they give shape to all other administrative actions. Administrators should carefully craft policies to allow alterations to practices, policies, and systems at every operational level in Head Start. Arabella Advisors (2019) indicated that common challenges in ECE include poor alignment between management and data systems and disconnects between policy and practice. Addressing ineffective policy alignment is good so that ideas come from all strata in an organization. An organization that is not connected with its employees to change policies when a good thought arises is an organization that is missing opportunities to serve its children and families better. Accessibility to suggestions on improving a system or policy can make the organization more responsive to its employees and flexible to change.

Middle management growth opportunities in Head Start could be continuous and ripe with potential. We enter an era where human rights are taken away, and exclusivity appears to be the going phrase, not inclusivity. Steering away from inclusivity is directly against what Bloom et al. (1991) showed brings happiness and satisfaction to early educational learning spaces. With critical consciousness driving equity and inclusion work, there will be no shortage of professional development improvement workshops, continuous critical consciousness professional development, or classes. Since no one can perfect awareness, it is something that everyone can improve all the time. This means even the humblest mindfulness meditator has room to improve. Education managers can
engage in purposeful reflection with coworkers and improve their listening abilities. Via analysis of their workspaces, they can act on behalf of their children to improve services. Head Start could be professionally developing education managers to recognize institutional needs and meet those needs with appropriate actions on behalf of their children. They should also be doing this to change practices, policies, and systems.

Theoharis and Scanlan (2015), Scanlan and Theoharis (2016), Carey et al. (2018), Diemer (2020), and Showunmi (2020) all discussed intersectionality and the various identities and statuses people can hold. I will be honest; it is a lot. There are eight different realms in which a person must attempt to be competent. One would be lucky to engage in three of them skillfully. The struggle in doing so means we should treat critical consciousness as a journey in which we never truly see the end. We may only engage with three or four of these identities or statuses regularly, so it would make sense to do our best to improve those. Otherwise, it would be best to interact with the world openly and curiously and be willing to learn and accept other ways of being. Next, I discuss the implications of the study.

**Future Implications**

Equity and inclusion are essential in all education, including Pre-K and K-12. Despite its structural and institutional presence, I argue that bigotry and prejudice have no place in a school or classroom. Discrimination only creates barriers between people, and those barriers need to come down so that a child can do their best learning and thinking. Hopefully, learning more about education managers and their unique hierarchical position will clarify how they can better attend to equity and inclusion. They have
significant power to implement change at their level and below but still have a rigid organizational command structure above. They must provide evidence and make an argument to effect change. These education managers are middle managers with two critical consciousness levels to operate: 1) at their level where they can make their own decisions, and 2) at the level above them where they must convince their supervisors. I provided a model (Figure 9) that addresses both. As shown, policies, systems, and practices are in the middle of the three elements of Schneider’s (2019) critical consciousness model. This model provides a clear path to engage in awareness, reflection, and action from any point in the process while keeping the broader picture in mind.

It would be interesting to conduct a similar study with more people helping run the research and more participants. It could be a mixed-methods study that includes observations and focus groups. Despite conducting my interviews independently, I felt a sense of camaraderie between the education managers. It was almost as if they were feeding off each other’s ideas, wholly separated from each other. I believed that if I embedded myself and earned more of their trust, I could uncover fascinating knowledge. One additional method to do this could be to conduct focus group interviews. I also believed that a mixed-methods multiple case study approach would help understand more deeply how critical consciousness functions at all administrative levels and how employees engage in the process. Jemal et al.’s (2020) vignette-style questions illicit deep critical consciousness analysis that does not rely on self-reporting and gets at the essence of critical consciousness.
Perhaps other researchers could use my critical consciousness model in Figure 9 to develop additional thinking that addresses items I have not identified. My model is suitable for conceptualizing influencing policies, practices, and systems. Many organizations seem unable to alter their policies, practices, and systems safely—safe regarding maintaining the structure and integrity of the institution or company. An institution must be flexible enough to update itself given the available information at any given time but not so flexible that its mission and purpose are easily jeopardized.

I also think that it would be helpful for teachers and administrators to engage in action research regarding critical consciousness. By action research, I mean the process of conducting non-official research to apply practice changes at the instructional level in the short term, implement policy changes in the mid to long term, and create systemic changes to emplace new practices. The equity and inclusion work that critical consciousness would inform fits very well with action research. Imagine a principal engaged in action research to improve equity and inclusion in the schools by providing a path for their teachers to affect policy, practice, or system. Indeed, I believe that action research is the principal realm of critical consciousness. Diemer et al. (2015) thought critical consciousness was more relevant to marginalized communities; however, Schneider (2019) broke ground, quantitatively studying critical consciousness amongst privileged communities. My qualitative study confirmed that critical consciousness is essential to how education managers function at a Head Start program to attend to equity and inclusion. As expected, their post is unique in that they have the power to change policy, practices, and systems below them and can influence the management team to
apply changes above them. I hope this study empowers all educators to recognize their authority within their organizational structure and apply pressure to improve school conditions for all stakeholders.

I plan on presenting my study to the local Head Start program, where I conducted my research. This information can be powerful for education managers at Head Start and middle managers alike. Empowering professional development for this group of professionals can bring responsiveness and flexibility to organizations and companies to better serve their employees and customers/clients. If my presentation is well received, and the local executive director thinks this research can help national Head Start, I plan to present my findings to them. Hopefully, we can create a virtuous cycle of education manager improvement that allows them to be more effective in their position. Overall, an empowered education manager recognizes where they and their institution can improve and implement new practices, policies, and systems on their level while understanding what to implement above them so they can effectively advocate for the change.

My work utilized Schneider’s (2019) framework. Her study was a quantitative study that investigated participants who were not inner-city, at-risk youth. Instead, she studied the critical consciousness of educators—a “privileged” population benefitting from an association with the culture of power and social advantages. I expounded on Schneider’s (2019) study by investigating education managers in smaller numbers but in greater detail as a qualitative study. I built my model informally based on Schneider (2019). My study presents a more well-rounded look at critical consciousness and its operations with middle managers to bring the voices and perspectives of those affected
by systems and those who influence those systems. These two dissertations provide a basis for further studies that include more intervention and qualitative inquiry. A mixed method investigation can explore awareness, reflection, and action further while focusing on the stories and perspectives of these lived experiences.

Exploring critical consciousness with more privileged educators added dimensions to quantitative inquiry into marginalized people. Forging into the future, we now have the tools to analyze the entire spectrum, ranging from studies with people in positions of power to the Oppressed. We can now research people in quantitative modes and research with people in qualitative ways. My dissertation asserts that critical consciousness can be applied across various people and perspectives that entangle equity, inclusion, critical awareness, reflection, and action(s).
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Appendix

Consent to Participate in Research

Project Title: Critical awareness, reflection, and action in Head Start leadership:
A critical consciousness case study of Head Start leaders

Population: Education Managers of Head Start school locations

Researcher: Christopher Pearce Agudelo, Curriculum and Instruction, Portland
State University

Researcher Contact: cpearce2@pdx.edu / 206-919-6645

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The box below highlights the main
information about this research for you to consider when making a decision whether or
not to join in the study. Please carefully look over the information given to you on this
form. Please ask questions about any of the information you do not understand before
you decide to agree to take part.

<table>
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<th>Key Information for You to Consider</th>
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| Voluntary Consent. You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to
  you whether you choose to take part or not. There is no penalty if you choose not to join in or decide
to stop your involvement. |

Why is the study being done? The purpose of this research is to collect and document
the narratives of Head Start leaders (education managers) about their experiences as leaders and how
their critical awareness and reflection influence critical action.

How long will it take? It is expected that your participation will last a total of 45
minutes, which will consist of a series of interview questions, and additional time to review and edit transcripts of your interview.

What will I be expected to do? If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will do the following things:

1. Review and consent to Participate in Research.
2. Agree to meet online with the researcher for a 45-minute interview.
3. Agree or not to have the interview audio taped.
4. Agree or not to review and/edit the interview transcripts for accuracy.
Risks. The risks of this study are minimal. Some discomforts of your taking part in this study may include revisiting moments and/or experiences that may have been traumatic for you or families and/or children under your care.

Benefits. The benefit of this study for individual participants would be to grow professionally through the opportunity to explore and reflect on their experiences as family child care providers.

Who is doing this research?
The researcher Christopher Pearce Agudelo from Portland State University is asking for your consent to this research.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of the research is to better understand how Head Start Education Managers attend to equity and inclusion via critical awareness, reflection, and action. You are being asked to participate because you are an Education Manager at Head Start. About 6 people will take part in this research, and I am interviewing one person at a time.

What happens to the information collected?
Information for this study will be collected through interviews with Head Start Education Managers at the Head Start program that I am studying. The completed and approved dissertation will be electronically published on ProQuest and will be available electronically via the PSU Library.

How will my privacy and data be protected?
This researcher will take measures to protect your privacy including all participants will use self-selected pseudonyms and have the opportunity to review and edit transcripts of interviews prior to analysis.

To protect all of your personal information, we will keep all data collected throughout the study in a password protected private cloud drive. Despite these precautions, we can never fully guarantee that all your study information will not be revealed.

Individuals and organizations that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect research records. This may include private information. These individuals and organizations include the Institutional Review Board that reviewed this research.
What other choices do I have besides being in this research?
It is your choice to decide whether or not you want to join in research.

What if I want to stop my part in this research?
Your part in this study is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you may stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to take part in any study activity or completely stop at any point without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to join in will not affect your relationship with the researchers or Portland State University.

Who can answer my questions about this research?
If you have questions, concerns, or have experienced a research related injury, contact the research team at:
  Christopher Pearce Agudelo
  Researcher
  206.919.6645
  cpearce2@pdx.edu

Who can I speak to about my rights as a part of research?
The Portland State University Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) is overseeing this research. The IRB is a group of people who independently review research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. The Office of Research Integrity is the office at Portland State University that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights, or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:
  Office of Research Integrity
  PO Box 751
  Portland, OR 97207-0751
  Phone: (503) 725-5484
  Toll Free: 1 (877) 480-4400
  Email: psuirb@pdx.edu

Consent Statement
I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to make a decision about my taking part in the study. I understand that I can ask more questions at any time.
By signing below, I understand that I am volunteering to take part in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to provide consent before I continue in the study.

I consent to join in this study.

Name of Adult Participant ________________________________ Signature of Adult Participant ________________________________
Date ________________________________

Researcher Signature ________________________________ (to be completed at time of informed consent)
I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

Name of Research Team Member ________________________________ Signature of Research Team Member ________________________________
Date ________________________________