Beyond First Thoughts: Understanding the Essence of Equitable Decision-Making, A Phenomenological Study, White Practitioners as Equitable Educational Decision-Makers

Zinnia Un
Portland State University

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Beyond First Thoughts: Understanding the Essence of Equitable Decision-Making

A Phenomenological Study

White Practitioners as Equitable Educational Decision-Makers

by

Zinnia Un

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

Doctor of Education
in
Educational Leadership: Special and Counselor Education

Dissertation Committee:
Christopher Borgmeier, Chair
Esperanza De La Vega
Ruth Falco
Ethan Johnson

Portland State University
2023
Abstract

This interpretive phenomenological study aims to understand the lived experience of White educational decision-makers (EDMs) as they make equitable decisions for racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse (RCLD) students. Six decades after the landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education, the landscape of American education changed. Many scholars theorized the impact of colorblindness in decision-making and the connection to disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students.

The Student Success Act (2019) brings an additional $1 billion in investment to schools in Oregon annually. This allocation of school resources required an initial and ongoing community engagement process to ensure funding supports well-rounded education centered on those historically underserved. As districts try to make equitable decisions about using these funds, the context of our collective human experience has changed. Amid a global pandemic and social and racial unrest, our world is fundamentally different. School communities were left to make sense of this new world as students and staff returned to school impacted by trauma.

This study took place in a midsized school district in Oregon, where 84% of the educators are White, and RCLD students make up 46% of the student body. The district’s commitment to equity through culturally and community-responsive decision-making and actions has a chance to see its impact in this historic investment in Oregon’s educational system. We can learn from the impact of colorblindness in decision-making and holistically serve RCLD students centering on racial consciousness. This study will contribute to current research by making the essence of leading for equity tangible.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother Sao Yai. Our family has this present life because you were thinking about our future many years ago. Your lived experience and story of courage have been the source of power and resilience for me. When I had doubt in my abilities to do, achieve, or be, I remembered I come from strength, determination, and resilience.

I am centered, and solid in who I am because of your legacy. The power of education to impact future generations is one I will hold close to my heart and moral compass as I continue my work and research. Your words got me through the difficulty, discomfort, heat, and impact of transformational change.

“Gold is not afraid of fire”
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank my husband Devin Birmingham, for supporting me throughout this whole process of building my identity as a research practitioner. I have grown along the way, and I appreciate having a partner that has grown along with me. I am fearless and confident because of your unconditional love and support.

I want to acknowledge the support of my dissertation committee. Dr. Chris Borgmeier, thank you for your ongoing mentorship, friendship, and belief that I can. Dr. Esperanza De La Vega, I appreciate all of your support, seeing and naming brilliance as an adjective that described me before I saw or believed that it was within me. Dr. Ruth Falco, thank you for our partnership during my graduate program, I was able to see myself as a research practitioner because of that experience and your mentorship. Dr. Ethan Johnson, you gave me hope during a time when I was in a hopeless space, for your support and acknowledgment of the context that I was in as an equity practitioner was what I needed to continue this work. Dr. Joanne Cooper, your support throughout this journey as I grappled with letting go of what the process should be like and instead opened my heart and mind to the experience of transformation and who I was becoming. My writing colleagues who supported me along the way, Dominique and Tara I would not have made it without your support. It takes a village, I am grateful that in the final stretch of this journey, I was not alone. I had my team, colleagues, family, friends, and mentors that helped make this moment in time possible and a part of my story.

I want to express my deep gratitude to the participants of my study, the care,
conviction, vulnerability, and thoughtfulness that you all shared in your stories give me hope. It helped heal the wounds I didn’t know I had and appreciate the experience of connection to our collective humanity.
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“No single educational group can do the job ahead to transform schools. It will take all of
us—students, teachers, education support professionals, principals, superintendents,
school board members, parents, families, leaders, business leaders, faith-based leaders”
—Working Together, Dennis Van Roekel

The quote by a national educational leader Van Roekel, expresses the sentiment of collective efficacy and action which is not typically accepted and practiced in today’s American educational systems. More often decisions in schools are made by predominantly White leaders guided by an understanding of leadership operationalized through a White, individualistic lens (Ahmad & Boser, 2014; DiAngelo, 2010). In other words, decisions about change are accomplished in silos, without consensus, under the guise of “efficiency” and time constraints, an aspect of an individualistic lens. As Van Roekel says, it will take all of us to transform schools and none is truer than the case of disproportionate outcomes for racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse (RCLD) students.

**Background of the Problem**

Six decades after the landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education, the case has been critically analyzed and research offers an analysis of the negative consequences of the case on students of color. Bell (1980; 2004) shared observations about how desegregation had unintentional consequences that led to the resegregation of students under the guise of merit, discipline, and abilities and resulted in loss of valuable black teachers because the underlying assumption to desegregation was that White teachers and
White educational space were more valuable. While the intent of this case was to desegregate schools, the decision was centered on integration and assimilation into White schools, as opposed to the distribution of resources into black neighborhoods, resulting in disparate outcomes for RCLD students. Ever since, U.S. schools have experienced an increasingly diverse student population represented by a predominantly White teaching force (Sleeter, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, 2013).

Gotanda (2003) stated further that while the court ruling was an awakening to the negative impact of segregation on black students, the actions toward desegregation served to absolve the field of education of the multi-generational suffering and experiences of black people, by providing a blank slate, that cut off all moral, social, economic, and political ties to the past and ignored the realities of the black community. This absolution of responsibility and the notion of a “blank slate” set the stage for White leaders and educators to embrace color-blindness and White innocence that have centered dominant, White cultural values, and neglected engagement, participation, and the voices of RCLD students and families (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher & Ortiz, 2010; Skiba et al. 2011; Gándara & Aldana, 2014; Milner & Ford 2007; Ford & King, 2014).

Ullucci and Battey (2011) review the concept of color-blindness and explain how this concept is upheld by whiteness and two uniquely American concepts: meritocracy and individualism. Meritocracy and individualism allow for the masking of whiteness (Figure 1). It allows cover for denying that race has consequences for a person’s wellbeing and provides the opportunity to be blind to the privileges that advantage White people and disadvantage RCLD people (Rosenberg, 2004). Understanding color-
blindness and its impact on decision making in education is essential to understanding how collectivism is an essential process to educational decision making to address disproportionality.

Ullucci and Battey (2011) identify three building blocks of color blindness, whiteness, individualism, and meritocracy that contribute to the veil that often impacts the decision-making for educational decision makers (EDMs). Color-blindness in decision making allows for a perception of neutrality removed from a racialized context of education and American history (Noltemeyer, Mujic, & Mcloughlin, 2012) where race does not matter.

Ullucci and Battey’s (2011) analysis of color-blindness, can give insight to the impact of decision-making that occurs in the context of predominantly White EDMs. EDMs who use a color-blind lens, might see a problem through the lens of whiteness, where the realities of people of color, specifically students and families of color, are not realized. Leonardo (2002) defines whiteness as a racial perspective or worldview supported by practice and institutions that confers benefits and privileges to White people.

Another building block of color-blindness is the idea of meritocracy (Ullucci & Battey, 2011) the role of effort and personal responsibility to dig yourself out of any situation is heavily reinforced with the rhetoric of the American Dream, that no matter your group membership, individual effort and personal character can wash away vestiges of historical impact of discrimination, trials, and tribulations. This role of merit then is tied with the role of individualism in the process of misreading the realities of students who live outside the reality of whiteness and impact of oppressive systems. Individualism
is based on the idea that each person is the main source of their circumstance outside of historical context, cultural context, and environmental context (Scheurich, 1993).

As a result of color-blindness, White EDMs are likely to make decisions that are situated in realities that are their own and not necessarily true to the experiences of those RCLD students and families for whom the decisions are made. This often renders the decision faulty from the beginning as it does not address the specific needs of RCLD students and their realities, thus perpetuating the presence of whiteness, meritocracy, and individualism. The culture of individualism in leadership further exacerbates this problem when those for whom the decision is made are not invited to participate in the decision-making process. There is not a chance to correct the misreading or misunderstandings of what is impacting the outcomes that RCLD students and families are navigating.

This research study proposes that to change and transform an educational system, it will require a collective effort, where all community members are actively engaged in conversation and decision making. Specifically, it will be important to address our educational leaders in shifting from an individualistic to collectivist approach to decision making. In many cases, educational leaders control the direction, steps and approach through which decisions are made. Hence, supporting educational leaders to examine the lens and approach to decision-making provides a critical skill set that can lead to promising practices for equitable outcomes.

The research on culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 1994) has changed the discourse around education in promising ways. The work of culturally relevant and responsive teaching has shown to disrupt the impact of color-blindness by highlighting the rich experiences and
perspectives that RCLD students and families bring to the school and community. Today, 25 years later, the educational community has yet to actualize these practices in school decision making processes.

So, what will it take to shift educational decision making toward a collectivist approach? Educational researchers and leaders such as Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1995) have pointed out that this type of educational reform must begin with the individual’s interrogation of personal belief systems. She proposed that educators work together as communities of learners to explore and reconsider their own assumptions, understand the values and practices of families and cultures that are different from their own, and construct pedagogy that takes these into account in locally appropriate and culturally sensitive ways.

Ishimaru (2014) and Cooper (2009) highlight the importance of community-led or influenced leadership that contributes to promising practices for equitable outcomes for RCLD students. Much like Cochran-Smith (1995) proposed, the transformation process begins with an inner look at oneself, Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) highlight the importance of addressing epistemological frames as educational leaders. For instance, if one has an individualistic frame and does not understand the impact of structural racism, they can explain away a student or family’s experience of racism and circumstance as related to their personal attributes of being “unmotivated” or “using the race card to place blame on others,” thus making decisions that don’t consider policies and practices that are inherently racist, dismissive, and/or colorblind. This mismatch and faulty thinking highlight the need to develop culturally responsive educational leaders. Educational decision-makers must focus on their settings, context, and roles that contribute to the
transformation or replication of school systems resulting in disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students.

Creating a community of learners can occur in many ways, however, without clear vision and leadership, it will not be sustainable. “...good teachers will eventually leave schools where there are ineffective school leaders, especially in urban educational environments” (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). A leader without an expressed vision that clearly highlights the values of the community and works to reinforce those values will not only hinder the sustainability of a community of learners but reinforce a system of individuals working instead of a community working toward something together.

Context of Problem of Practice

The results of resegregation are embedded in the educational system. For example, the problem of disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students in the areas of special education (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher & Ortiz, 2010), discipline (Skiba et al., 2011), academic tracking (Gándara & Aldana, 2014), and opportunity gaps (Milner & Ford 2007; Ford & King, 2014) continues to be areas of concern in education.

In the United States, the current teacher workforce indicates the disproportionate representation of White teachers as compared to an increasingly diverse student body. The most recent National Center for Education Statistics (2018) reported the teacher workforce was predominantly White at 80% in the 2015-2016 year where racially, culturally, and/or linguistically diverse students made up 52% of the student body. In Oregon, during 2018-2019 89.6% of teachers were White and 10.4% were ethnically diverse, while students who are ethnically and/or linguistically diverse were 38.1%.
(Oregon Educator Equity Report, 2019). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016) 77% of principals were White, whereas only 48% of students in the public educational system were White, meaning students of color made up over 50% of student demographics in 2015-2016. Nationally, administrators of color made up less than 25% of principals serving an increasingly diverse student body. In Oregon, the number of ethnically and linguistically diverse administrators is 11% compared to the increasingly diverse student body nearing 40% ethnically and linguistically diverse.

The substantial disparity between the diversity of the student body and the limited diversity of the workforce in education requires change if we are to address disproportionality for RCLD students. The field of education can no longer ignore the need to change how we make decisions for our RCLD students. Without drastic change we continue to perpetuate the disproportionate outcomes with predominantly White and monolingual educational decision-makers in education who have been conditioned by the laws and policies of color-blindness (Gotanda, 2003).

At the federal level, with IDEA 2004 provisions making disproportionality one of three monitoring priorities, the hierarchical effects are seen in states throughout the United States. Districts all over Oregon and the nation are developing strategic equity plans and are investing in initiatives to bring the "Equity Lens" (Oregon Education Investment Board, 2013) as well as culturally responsive practices to their district and how to operationalize this within in their respective sites (Pazey & Cole, 2012).

In 2013, Oregon Department of Education proposed their “Equity Lens” (OEIB, 2013) which is a public statement that addresses the acceptance and understanding that race and ethnicity in conjunction with systemic policy, procedures, and practices
contribute to the disparate outcome of students of color. Researchers such as Galloway and Ishimaru (2015) have offered recommendations for institutions of education to develop an equity lens including teacher development and preparation centered around culturally responsive pedagogy, improved behavior management, early intervention, family, and community involvement, as well as the reform of systems and policies.

Teachers, administrators, specialists, and educational leaders tasked to make decisions about RCLD students, need to critically assess and question the perceptions, biases, and beliefs they hold within the current scope of their roles and responsibilities (Artiles, et al., 2010; Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012; Skiba, et al., 2008; Skiba, et al., 2011). The awareness of bias in decision-making has led to supporting educators to develop and make decisions using an equity lens, which is gleaned from theories and scholars of critical race theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner, 2005) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002; Richards et al., 2007; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Sleeter, 2012). The need for an equity lens is critical, and it requires cultural humility, collective lens, and the partnership with those who experience the world differently.

**School District**

This study took place in a mid-sized school district in Oregon, (pseudonym: Hope District) where 88% of the teachers, 90% of administrators, and 100% of teacher leaders on special assignments are white, serving a student body that is 43% racially and ethnically diverse. The demographics of this district are reflective of that of the state of Oregon. Demographic data for the district at that time was: 43% of students were racially
and ethnically diverse, 11% of administrators were racially and ethnically diverse, and 10% of teachers were racially and ethnically diverse. The school district began work toward a systemic focus on equitable practices over a decade ago. Equity work was highlighted by former superintendents and district leaders as a necessary part of the discourse and practice for achieving excellence and quality education for all students. Although this district has made gains in academic progress, there continue to be disparate outcomes for RCLD students.

The outcomes reviewed to set context on this district’s opportunity gaps was on-track data, graduation, attendance, and discipline data, and culture/climate data, the data was taken from Oregon Department of Education in the District’s Every Student Success Act (ESSA) Accountability Report, Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS) survey data, and the district’s annual report cards. Table 1 presents the district on-track data for 9th grade students. On-track data is calculated by the percent of students who had at least 25% of the credits needed to graduate with a regular diploma by the beginning of their sophomore year. It can be noted that ELLs, students with disabilities, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan Native are at a higher risk of not being on track to graduate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 9th Grade On-Track Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELLs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 presents the 4-year graduate rates for the years 2015-2018 RCLD students continue to show disparate outcomes.

Table 2 4-Year Graduation Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2015-16</th>
<th>2016-17</th>
<th>2017-18</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>83.7%</td>
<td>83.6%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELLs</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2** means data was hidden to protect student confidentiality as the group does not meet minimum n-size.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>2015-16</th>
<th>2016-17</th>
<th>2017-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>69.7%</td>
<td>86.4%</td>
<td>76.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Latino</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>81.8%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underserved Race / Ethnicity</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
<td>73.0%</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>91.3%</td>
<td>92.4%</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>87.4%</td>
<td>87.7%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Race</td>
<td>93.8%</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
<td>83.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** means data was hidden to protect student confidentiality as the group does not meet minimum n-size.

Table 3 presents high school attendance rates for the years 2015 through 2018 the attendance for high schoolers continues the trend of disparate outcomes for RCLD students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 Attendance – High School Students</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELLs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/ Alaskan Native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underserved Race / Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Race</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** means data was hidden to protect student confidentiality as the group does not meet minimum n-size.

Table 4 presents a glimpse at the elementary referral data by race. Again, the data highlights disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students, specifically for our Black and Indigenous students.

**Table 4 Elementary Referrals 2017-2018**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>0-1 referrals</th>
<th>2-5 referrals</th>
<th>6+ referrals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latine</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native/Indigenous</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Race</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the 2018-2019 school year, the district asked its underserved and underrepresented communities, which they have identified as their Black, Latine, Native/Indigenous, and Pacific Islander students, why there were disproportionate outcomes and how the schools and district could better serve their communities to be more responsive to their needs. The following list captures some of the main themes that emerged from the community listening session (2019, School District internal report).

- “Instructional practices are not differentiated or culturally responsive or affirming.”
- “There are students isolated because of their culture and race.”
- “System tracks students based on race and bias - pulls them from core classes.”
- “School safety and school discipline is criminalizing based on identity.”
- “Lack of representation in parent groups, staff, students, leadership.”
- “System is built on White culture and values that exclude others.”
- “Not everyone has access to communication or are encouraged to communicate.”
“Interpersonal, structural, and institutional racism.”

“School district support for parents/families are not affirming.”

“Lack of empathy and advocacy.”

The information about disproportionate outcomes and the listening sessions shows that the district still requires a major shift in practices to address these perceived barriers to equitable outcomes for their RCLD students and families. Hope School District began focusing on culturally and community responsive practices where they highlighted practices of critical reflection, broadening of perspectives, and a cycle of inquiry, reflection, and practice framed by collaboration with community members in their local school communities. As a district, they focused on common language, anchor texts, concepts and equity move that guided their work in fostering a culturally and community responsive approach to educational decision-making.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of EDMs in a context that has committed to equity and interrupting status quo decision-making. To understand this problem within the context of a school district’s equity work, it is important to utilize a culturally responsive approach. As a qualitative study, the researcher intended to explore and understand the experience of the EDMs. This was accomplished through a variety of data collection methods, but primarily used interviews to explore the phenomena of a new way of approaching decision making in this school district for RCLD students.

The exploration of culturally responsive pedagogy has allowed teachers and
EDMs to serve as change agents in their respective roles within their school communities given their commitment to the development of critical consciousness (Banks, 2006; Irvine, 1990, 2010; Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Along with this, the research has pointed out that EDMs need to acknowledge the role of whiteness and how to critically reflect on personal and systemic practices (Sleeter & Milner, 2011; Sleeter, 2001). Since Brown v. Board of Education, the role of an educational decision-maker is more complex to serve diverse and dynamic students, families, and communities. To be culturally and community responsive requires an educational decision-maker to have the ability to see multiple perspectives and the cultural humility that includes students and families in decision-making that is culturally relevant (Khalifa, Arnold, Newcomb, 2015).

**Significance of the Research Problem**

Oregon is faced with a landmark opportunity of its own. The Student Success Act (2019) sees an additional $1 billion investment in schools each year. Investments in three areas where at least 50% goes to the student investment account, 20% goes to early learning accounts, and up to 30% to statewide education initiatives.

This study examines the experiences of educational decision-makers with a focus on a culturally and community responsiveness lens. It is timely and will contribute to the analysis of this important time in the state’s education. More than ever, the need to practice decision-making that decenters whiteness is critical to meeting the intent of the Student Success Act in Oregon. This study helped me understand how a school district operationalizes an equity lens, with a specific focus on culturally and community
responsive approaches to engage community members for whom this work is trying to better serve. The increasing focus on leading for equity and addressing the gap as highlighted earlier from the state-level legislation and investments to the district level commitment to address disproportionate outcomes sets a context for transforming our educational system. These setting conditions give way to exploring the phenomena between intention for equity and behaviors that replicate or transform systems of inequities. This study might help broaden the discussion of EDMs using a culturally and community responsive lens with community members to bring about sustainable change and disrupt and shift systems of inequity.

The hypothesis guiding this research study is to change and transform an educational system to address a long history of disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students; it will require a culturally and community responsive process, where all community members are part of the conversation and decision-making process. This district has been working on the development of an equity lens for over a decade and between spring 2017 and the present, they have been working on an intensive focus on leading for equity with a stance of collectivism and partnerships with key community members (staff, students, families, and community members). This study gave insight to what is possible when a community works collectively to address the inequity of outcomes, strengthen community partnership, and share accountability for student success during this pivotal moment in time for Oregon Education. To understand this phenomenon requires an inside perspective of those who have the experience of being culturally and community responsive decision-makers.
Methods

To understand this problem of color-blindness in decision-making, a qualitative research design with a culturally responsive approach was used. A phenomenological study was used to understand the experiences of predominantly White teachers, administrators, and educational leaders making culturally and community responsive decisions. Understanding the lived experience of predominantly White EDMs making culturally and community responsive decisions for RCLD students in this context of structural and systemic alignment gave insight to the essence of this rare phenomena of operationalizing equity in American education. This is rare in that, prior to a global pandemic, the school district had studied and practiced looking at education in a culturally and community responsive way and was able to utilize those adaptive skills to understand the needs and challenges of their school community. These skills served as a solid foundation for adaptive and responsive skills to meet every student’s needs. Data collection for this study included a variety of methods, such as surveys, gathering of artifacts, and in-depth individual interviews.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of EDMs in a school district focused on Equity to intentionally close the opportunity gaps for RCLD students. An important element of the study is the supportive school district context in which there is clear focus on equity from level of school board to the teacher with strong alignment across systems, structures, and professional development to support culturally and community responsive decision-making as a primary frame for addressing inequity. I
focused on understanding the perspectives and lived experiences of nine EDMs’
leadership in implementation of culturally and community responsive practices when
addressing a problem, initiative, decision, or concern that impacts their school
community. To understand their experiences, a phenomenological approach was used to
understand the experience of the EDMs over time through a qualitative design. The
overarching question is what is the essence of this phenomenon of equitable decision-
making? The following questions was be explored:

- How would EDMs describe the context and the impact of that environment as
  they are making culturally and community responsive decisions?
- How do EDMs practice culturally and community responsive decision making?
- How do EDMs describe their experience as culturally and community responsive
  leaders?
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will review the consequences of Brown v. Board of Education and the context of cultural mismatch as framed by color-blindness. Critical race theory and critical consciousness will be used to explore disproportionate outcomes with the lens on educational decision-makers who are predominantly White. Promising research around critical consciousness and culturally responsive teaching and leadership will be reviewed to address color-blindness in decision-making. Finally, the methodology for the study will be described in this chapter.

Disproportionality in Education and the EDM

There have been decades of research on the problem of disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students in American education. For example, data on discipline and exclusionary practices indicate a persistent pattern of racial disparity with disproportionate representation of RCLD students throughout education (Swain-Bradway et al., 2014; Christle et al., 2005; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). This endemic problem has resulted in court cases, extensive analysis of current practices within education, and legislative changes in state and federal education laws (Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan, 2011 Sullivan & Bal, 2013).
Historical Context

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) gave legal meaning to the idea that segregation is inherently unequal. The impact of this landmark case that sought to desegregate schools has been broad and it served to significantly reshape the institute of education. The role of race relations in education was at the center of Brown v. Board of Education, and race relations continue to impact policy and practice in education today.

More than six decades of research and analysis of the landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education has presented the consequences of the decision. Bell (1980; 2004) shared observations about how desegregation had long lasting consequences that led to the resegregation of students under the guise of merit, discipline, and abilities and resulted in loss of valuable black teachers, because the underlying assumption to desegregation was that White teachers and White educational space were more valuable. Tillman (2004) questions the (un)intended consequences of Brown v. Board of Education.
by acknowledging the presence of whiteness and interest convergence to analyze the
displacement of black educators, administrators, and superintendents. This consequence
had a devastating impact on the economic, social, and cultural structure of the black
community and ultimately on the social, emotional, and academic success of black
students and students of color (see Figure 2).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 impressed upon public schools the consequences of
not receiving federal funding if policies and practices were deemed discriminatory. The
decision rule from Brown, highlighted the role of cultural mismatch and the unintentional
impact, that deepened that opportunity gap as mandatory desegregation meant the
strengths of black communities and systems of support between parents, schools, and
communities were dismantled. The result was significant cultural mismatch between
Black students and a workforce of predominantly White teachers, administrators, and
EDMs. This cultural mismatch hindered advocacy against disproportionate identification
of Black children and other RCLD students for special education (Trent et al., 2003). The
(un)intended consequence was another pathway for segregation to persist (Connor &
Ferri, 2005) through the impact of cultural mismatch manifested by way of White
decision-makers seeing RCLD students with the lens of academic, psychological, and
cultural deficits (Connor & Ferri, 2005; Harry & Klinger, 2006).

**Educational Decision-Makers**

Tillman (2004) laid out the impact of desegregation and the displacement of black
educators, administrators, and superintendents. This has a direct line to the current
demographics in education today. In 2016, it was reported by the National Center for
Educational Statistics (NCES) that 82% of teachers in public education were White, 6.8% were Black, 7.8% were Hispanic, 1.8% were Asian, and 0.1% were Native American. In 2018, the numbers have not shifted significantly, 80% of teachers are White, 7% are Black, 9% are Hispanic, 2% are Asian, <1% are Pacific Islanders, <1% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 1% are two or more races. In 2017, the U.S. Department of Education released a report titled The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce, and important highlights include the following: students of color make up 50% of student demographics in public schools with the projection increasing to 52% by 2021, yet teachers of color make up only 18% of the educator workforce. More locally, the Oregon Department of Education published the Oregon Educator Equity Report (2019) reporting that from the 2018-2019 school year, 39.9% of students in Oregon schools were culturally and/or linguistically diverse. In contrast, only 10.4% of educators were ethnically diverse, but that number increases to 11.2% if the identity marker is ethnically and/or linguistically diverse. The percentage of ethnically and/or linguistically diverse administrators were superintendents 7%, assistant superintendents 4%, principals 11%, assistant principals 16%, and special education directors 6%. The trend in Oregon over the last 20 years (see Figure 2; from the Oregon Educator Equity Report, 2019), suggests that the percent of ethnically and linguistically diverse students is likely to continue to increase and outpace the increase in ethnically and linguistically diverse educators, further increasing the challenges of cultural mismatch.
How Cultural Mismatch Contributes to Disproportionate Outcomes

The effects of mismatch can be understood by describing the benefits of cultural match between a teacher and institution and the family and student, such as the ease of interactions given common familiarity to symbols, values, and knowledge in the form of shared cultural capital (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). The role of identity is at the center of this discussion, specifically how cultural mismatch between White EDMs and RCLD students impacts decision-making processes that uphold the patterns of disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students. Often the interpretation of White teachers and decision-makers is wrong or incomplete, hence judgment, decisions, and responses that are not affirming RCLD students’ cultural frame and personal schemas often present as biased and deficit focused decision-making toward RCLD students (D’Andrade, 1992; Delpit, 1995; Valencia, 1997; Townsend, 2000; Skiba & Rausch, 2006), this is the danger of cultural mismatch. D’Andrade (1992) posits that the way we view and act upon the world is through cultural models and schemas. This highlights potential for biased or over
generalization perspectives when making decisions for students. Without understanding of other cultural models or schema the mismatch that exists in the field of education persists. McGrady and Reynolds (2013) reviews cultural capital theory which suggests that mismatch complicates classroom interactions and undermines academic achievement, thereby contributing to the reproduction of inequality across generations.

Table 5 highlights the real impacts of cultural mismatch and the necessity for critical reflection of personal and systemic practices that negatively and persistently impact and exclude RCLD students (Brown, 2014; Skrla et al., 2004; Banks, 2017; Skiba. 2006). Several scholars (Ford, 1998; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Warikoo et al., 2016) have identified how the lack of opportunities afforded to students of color due to racial and cultural mismatch can impede access to educational capital by which many White students benefit. Conversely leaving an “educational debt” a term that was coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) to describe the cumulative impact of historical decisions in laws, policies, and practices that have resulted in lack of resources, socio-emotional impact, and harm that impacted students of color.

Table 5 How Cultural Mismatch Impacts Disproportionate Outcomes for RCLD Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Education</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Academic Tracking ELLs</th>
<th>Opportunity Gaps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deficit Ideology and bias toward RCLD students impacts decision-making for Special education</td>
<td>Deficit Ideology and bias toward RCLD students impacts decision-making for understanding and identifying “problem”</td>
<td>Deficit Ideology and bias toward RCLD students impacts decision-making for academic tracking and gatekeeping</td>
<td>Deficit Ideology and bias toward RCLD students impacts decision-making for student identification of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theoretical Framework

In the previous section the substantial challenge of cultural mismatch was presented with explanation of how cultural mismatch impacts disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students. Given the current disparity between an increasingly diverse student population and a predominantly White educational workforce that is not diversifying nearly at the same rate, it is critical to examine how to address challenges to decision-making within a context of persistent cultural mismatch. This section will begin to examine the need for White EDMs to understand and examine the role of colorblindness in educational decision-making in a context of cultural mismatch (see Figure 3). Color Blindness as framed by Ullucci & Battey (2011) will be examined through the frameworks of CRT and Critical Consciousness (CC).
**Color-blindness.** Gotanda (1991) defined color-blindness as the active disregard for the subtleties and nuances of race. Color-blindness ignores institutional racism and contributes to racial subjugation of people of color. Bonilla-Silva (2001) argues that a new form of racism emerged in the post-Civil Rights era, which he highlights as colorblind ideology “the system or racial structural characteristics of post-Civil Rights era comprising of the following elements: increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and practices, avoidance of direct racial terminology, the elaboration of a racial political agenda that forgo direct racial references, subtleness of mechanisms to uphold systems that reproduce racial privilege, rearticulating of some racial practices of the past” (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, p.1).

**Figure 3 Cultural Mismatch with the Lens of Color-blindness**

Color-blindness occurs across multiple levels, from individual decision making for RCLD students in schools, to impacting policies that guide education. In fact, Gotanda’s (1991) review of Brown v. Board of Education, which outlined the negative
impacts of the case on Black communities, has argued that “our constitution is
colorblind.” Many other legal decisions, cases and laws enacted since Brown vs Board of
Education demonstrate the systemic color-blindness of our legal and educational
landscape (e.g., Lau v. Nichols, PICS vs. Seattle School District, efforts to ban using
Critical Race Theory in education).

As colorblindness plays out in schools across America, Damien Sojoyner (2017)
describes the lived experience of Black youth in Los Angeles. In his article, “Another
Life is Possible: Black Fugitivity and Enclosed Spaces,” he discusses the impact of color-
blindness and the role of liberal and individualistic discourse that impact the continued
subjugation of Black youth in systems like education. The description of schools by
Black students in Los Angeles pointed to decisions of EDMs such as teachers and
administrators about their experiences such as observations of seating charts where Black
students were seated in the back of the classroom, and when asked to be seated in the
front, the response that was given was the first row was “reserved for students interested
in learning” (p. 515). Or another scenario about placement in advanced courses and
subjective assignments resulting in failing grades for the Black youth until an
advancement placement highlighted the gifted talents of the youth that was objectively
understood rather than interpreted through the lens of the teacher of the advanced class.
These scenarios are experienced in Hope District, as it was like what was shared by
students and families at the 2017-2018 listening sessions about tracking, biased and
colorblind decisions related to classroom management, instructional approaches, and
subjective measures that leave room for inequitable practices.
Critical Race Theory & Critical Consciousness

Figure 4 Theoretical Framework using Critical Race Theory and Critical Consciousness

CRT will be used to analyze the building blocks of color-blindness as highlighted by Ullucci and Battey (2011) in the field of education by EDMs (see Figure 4). CC provides an additional lens to analyze the promising efforts toward developing a racial consciousness and actions for equity. As this is an interpretive phenomenological study, the use of these lenses allow an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of EDMs in the district that is being studied.

Ullucci and Battey’s Building Blocks of Color-blindness

Ullucci and Battey (2011) offers teacher educators a framework to understand the persistence of color-blindness in educational decision making. Their model highlights the role of whiteness, individualism, and meritocracy as building blocks to color-blindness that reinforce discourse of objectivity, neutrality, and provide detours from systemic
change by internalizing personal accountability for failure to the student.

**Whiteness.** The importance of centering racism in this discussion is the impact of perceived neutrality in decision-making (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Skiba et al., 2011). In a society rooted in White dominance, it is critical to center race and whiteness when examining the impact of decision-making on students of color, when all other variables are accounted for but race and racism, and it highlights the power of whiteness in its invisibility through the guise of individualism and meritocracy. Scholars such as Bell (1992), Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995; 2016) discuss the permanence of racism in the institution of education. They highlight how racism both conscious and unconscious, is a permanent component of our American society. The permanence of racism is framed as an unwritten and commonly known reality for many who have experienced racism as well as for those who are beneficiaries of institutionalized racism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). The exploration of CRT education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sleeter, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Clark, 2020; Donnor, 2021) have brought forth many examples and stories of institutional and hierarchical preference of whiteness in decision-making processes and offers a counternarrative to the role of neutrality, color-blindness, and objectivity.

An example of how this is playing out in the current context of the COVID-19 and reopening schools can be seen in the discourse of whose voice is heard, amplified, and used as direct reasons for reopening. In the NY times article “Missing in School Reopening Plans: Black Families’ Trust” (Shapiro et al., 2021), the impact of prioritizing White voices in reopening and vaccination, abstracts the experiences the Black and Brown communities have experienced in the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and
the historical impact of disproportionate outcomes in health and mental health needs.

The permanence of racism and whiteness in educational decision-making can be seen in daily decisions that impact hiring, evaluations, and what is considered a priority. In the Oregon Educator Equity report (ODE, 2019) that annually highlights the growing trend of a diverse student body, the teaching and administrative workforce remains the same. The role of norms and perceived values of skills and characteristics can be centered with the White perspective, thus those in the outgroups are deemed unfit or a mismatch for the position or once hired, an RCLD teacher or administrator, might not be seen as a good fit because of their values and what they prioritize is not that of the dominant White perspective.

The tenet of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993; Sleeter, 2001; 2017; Leonardo 2004; 2010) can help highlight why whiteness gets reinforced in educational decision-making. In a review of CRT in education across the decades since its introduction, scholars studied various ways whiteness as property clarifies the disparities and conflict that exist for RCLD students in predominantly White spaces in a broad range of settings from an elite private school (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) to diverse public schools (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). Shifting the discourse from a colorblind stance relating to values and ideology to an understanding of property rights and one group’s ability to benefit from those rights aligned to whiteness as property in educational situations and experiences such as honors programs, gifted education, advanced placement, and how valedictorians are selected, that are often conceptualized as the property of White students and their families (Dixson & Anderson, 2018) explicitly or not.

An example of cultural mismatch can be seen in the well-accepted and
acknowledged problem of disproportionality in special education. White teachers are susceptible to unconscious acts and decisions that are guided with implicit bias and deficit ideology formed by stereotypes and lack of meaningful relationships with students from communities of color. Without acknowledging and centering whiteness when making decisions about RCLD students, White educators are susceptible to using the scaffolds for cloaking whiteness with discourses of individualism and meritocracy such as, “if they put in more effort” or “that might be too challenging for them that is not their area of strength.” This was highlighted earlier in Sojoyner’s (2017) account of what Black youth experienced in Los Angeles schools. It is critical that White EDMs increase their awareness and understanding of the impacts of whiteness and White dominant culture to combat the biases and deficit-based narratives that they center that contribute to decisions leading to disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students.

**White Innocence.** White innocence is defined as the unconscious bias that stems from absolutions of guilt and responsibility from receiving privilege from policies such as Jim Crow Laws, segregation, red-lining, and voting rights (Ross, 1990). Orozco and Diaz (2016) offer a critical look at White innocence by examining policy and decisions that brand inequitable practices as altruistic. For example, Gotanda (2004) highlighted the concepts of color-blindness and White innocence as an underpinning of the Brown v. Board of Education court ruling. While Brown v. Board of Education was an awakening to the negative impact of segregation on black students, negative consequences of the decision are rooted in white innocence. The actions toward desegregation that resulted from the case was understood by many white people to absolve the multi-generational suffering and experiences of black people, giving a blank slate, and cutting off all moral,
social, economic, and political ties to the past that ignored the realities of the black community. This history of events serving as demonstrations of white innocence have provided a buffer to educational decision making that allows white educators to hold a perspective of neutrality and a belief that all students have a level playing field, thereby ignoring considerations of diversity in decision-making.

In effect, white innocence maintains this false protection for white educators that shields them from confronting the effects of cultural difference on students of color in a school system rooted in white dominant culture. A common decision-making example of white innocence in schools is when special education is presented as a “safe space” where “their needs will be met” thus purporting segregation and limited access to general education as an act of care and beneficence. Often, decisions are defended with good intentions and the lens of neutrality and color-blindness (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; 2016; Skiba et al., 2011; Dixson & Anderson, 2018).

**Individualism & Meritocracy**

Ullucci and Battey’s (2011) present individualism and meritocracy as scaffolds for color-blindness that reinforce whiteness and can serve as effective discourse detours and coded language of hegemony, reinforcing a dominant set of norms and values.

Individualism is a concept that many scholars have highlighted as a barrier to meaningful anti-racist or equity conversations (Di’Angelo, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2003;2004). The concept of individualism is often a predictable and effective discourse detour when trying to understand racism and inequity as it consistently reinforces the idea of individuals as outside of social groups or social contexts (Eubanks et al., 1997; Di’Angelo, 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Di’Angelo’s (2010) review of discourse
highlights the power of individualism as a detour for meaningful conversations about equity and anti-racist work. “The discourse of individualism is a specific set of ideas, words, symbols, and metaphors-a storyline or narrative that creates, communicates, reproduces, and reinforces the concept that each of us are unique individuals and that our group memberships, such as our race, class, or gender are not important or relevant to our opportunities.” (p.5). This helps educational decision makers maintain white innocence and reduces their responsibility to account for race when making decisions involving RCLD students.

Eubanks et al. (1997) talks about transformative discourse as an important concept in transforming American education. “That the dominant discourse in school must be identified, interrupted, and shifted because how people talk about, think about, and plan the work of schools and the questions that get asked regarding reform or change is a hegemonic cultural discourse” (p.1). They go on to define the two types of discourses as Discourse I, dominant discourses that serve to maintain existing practices and outcomes and Discourse II a more critical discourse focuses on addressing the systems and supports, rather than blaming the student and families.

Discourse I is linked to both individualism and meritocracy as ways to blame RCLD students for challenges they face which is deficit-based discourse. For example, an EDM might state “The student doesn’t seem motivated enough to be in the IB course and it will be too difficult for them, I wouldn’t want them to feel out of place.” Here the student is blamed for not being motivated or intelligent enough (meritocracy), which reinforces a deeply rooted American belief of pulling oneself up by their bootstraps. Such discourse by EDMs dismisses the oppressive circumstances rooted in systemic racism
that frequently limit the student’s learning, performance, or behavior.

Discourse II provides an alternative to EDMs which centers on changes to systems and supports, rather than blaming the student, thereby countering the individualistic and meritocratic perspectives. In the previous example, a Discourse II statement would focus on changing the system, rather than blaming the student, such as, “If we change the readings, content and activities in the IB course to be more interesting and motivating for this student, we might also attract more RCLD students to IB.”

Critical race theorists such as Solórzano and Yasso (2001; 2002) highlight the ability for counter stories to challenge this process of hegemonic conditioning where the stories that majorities tell are about merit, causation, blame, accountability, and personal responsibility are presented not as stories but packaged as truth (Delgado & Stefanic, 1993). EDMs can offer a counter-story to address the question of disproportionate outcomes for dual identified students that might include students in the process of understanding the impact of access services for RCLD students. One student’s story can shift the focus away from blaming the student toward an examination of the curriculum and potential incongruent instructional practices that impact the students program. A thematic analysis could reveal similar patterns across RCLD student outcomes or access that offer the opportunity to review the program’s referral process, service model, or instructional content and coordination.

In this section, the definitions of whiteness, white innocence, individualism, and meritocracy are highlighted as the scaffolds of color-blindness that effectively function to uphold hegemonic structures of whiteness and white supremacy. It is critical that EDMs are aware that the lived experiences and current realities of RCLD people include racism
in the daily fabric of their lives because this relates to the concept of color-blindness and the removal of contextual impact. Examples of colorblind beliefs and statements of EDMs that can perpetuate and replicate outcomes for RCLD students include: “I don’t see color,” “I have high expectations for all my students,” or “I treat my students the same.” It is through such discourse that racism discretely permeates decision-making through the educational systems in the United States. Such discourse denies the present-day impact of prior injustices of racial inequity in the past and the pervasive racial microaggressions, societal racism, and systemic racism that RCLD people experience daily (Evans, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This discourse often centers around the idea that the history of race relations in America is linear and that of linear uplift and improvement, which contributes to the sense of color-blindness, the abstraction of experiences of RCLD communities at the absolution of guilt and actions of the dominant white community in racist laws, policies, and practices (Gillborn, 2007; Gotanda, 2003; Orozco & Diaz, 2016). The following section will highlight ways of unlearning the centralization of whiteness through color-blindness, learning racial consciousness, and relearning efficacy for meaningful change of school systems for educational decision-makers.

Unlearning Color-blindness by Centering Racial Consciousness

What has been a gap in research and practice is the tangible process of developing critical consciousness, how EDMs practice that skill and how it affects their actions for equity. In this next section, an analysis of promising concepts for developing critical consciousness helps to address color-blindness in decision-making. The work of Freire
(1971) describes critical consciousness as the connection between developing an awareness of one’s situational and environmental context, development of agency to act to change one’s situational and environmental context.

Using Ullucci and Battey’s (2011) building blocks of color-blindness, the role of whiteness, individualism, and meritocracy can be reframed through CRT. CRT is rooted in legal critique of legislation that abstracted the impact of institutionalized racism (Bell, 1991; Gotanda, 1991). The work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) brought the lens of CRT to the field of education. The tenets of CRT (recognizing whiteness, interest convergence, naming whiteness and function, and interrupting centralization of whiteness) was used as skills and strategies to address the impact of color-blindness in educational decision making and disrupt the discourse that reinforces it (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5 Unlearning Color-blindness**

**Recognizing Whiteness.** Overcoming color-blindness requires recognizing the
presence of whiteness and its pervasiveness in the lives of RCLD people. Harris (1993) brought forth the concept of whiteness as property that has been a central part of racial consciousness. The foundation of inequity was woven into the fabric of U.S. law, has been the role of property and settler colonialism, examples of such has been the concept of manifest destiny, the Indian Removal Act of 1803, where not only is property seized but the genocide and conquest of indigenous lands. As well as the seizure of property and land from Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II, these are impacts of the enduring narrative of the American Dream. The role whiteness as property plays is related to benefits of access and resources in the field of education (segregation and lack of resources for non-white communities) who get to sit in the front of the class or have access to advanced placement courses (Sojoyner, 2017). As highlighted by many CRT scholars, (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995; Sleeter, 2017; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018) the effectiveness of whiteness is its invisibility. Recognizing whiteness is a process that includes defining what it means. Recognizing whiteness helps EDMs to build the critical awareness of its presence in discourse, how it impacts decision-making processes, and whether it is reinforcing structures of the status quo that normalize whiteness as a property that is a valuable commodity.

The exploration of whiteness by white scholars and the budding research of critical whiteness studies (DiAngelo, 2010; Leonardo, 2004) have been gaining momentum from the exploration of White identity and privilege and the impact of participating in a White dominant culture (Leonardo, 2004). This exploration of whiteness has brought forth two broad themes explaining the impact of personally upholding whiteness through reinforcing color-blindness and contributing to the
systematic process in which values of whiteness as property are institutionalized at the benefit of White people and excluded to RCLD people (Harris, 1993). In the field of education, scholars recognize this as part of the cultural mismatch that impacts the decision-making processes that face EDMs in day-to-day practices. Recognizing whiteness is central to the work of developing the ability to identify, name, and interrupt whiteness while reshaping objectives for actions toward a racial consciousness (the understanding of CRT and CC) that disrupts the acceptance and valuation of whiteness as a valuable commodity.

**Interest Convergence.** To begin to recognize whiteness, one would need to unpack the concept of interest convergence. Interest convergence is another tenet of CRT, Bell (2004) names two principles of interest convergence, the interest of folks of color in achieving racial equity will only be accommodated if the interests converge with White people in policy making positions, and the racial remedy will be repealed if it threatens to impact the superior status of White people. This concept of interest convergence is at the center of why there is such frustration about the racial inequities in American history. These principles of interest convergence are highlighted by scholars of education and have come to include two more key principles that are often missed when discussion of interest convergence is brought to light. Gillborn (2013) highlights the two additional principles including the lack of balanced negotiation between communities of color and White people, and the considerations of class and the White community as not homogeneous. These additional principles of interest convergence highlight the complexity and cyclic nature of reform and retrenchment of race relations in the United States. The need for ongoing work is important to the mythology and narrative of forward
and constant progression of racial progress (Bell, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006). An example of this in decision-making can look something like declaring prioritization of diversifying your workforce, but as soon as those who have historically advanced are now competing with values of lived experience related to those who have been historically underserved, RCLD students. There might be narratives such as lowering standards to employ RCLD candidates. Also, if schools begin to invest money in closing opportunity gaps for RCLD students there might be discourses from communities, teachers, and other students about resources being taken away from them and those who have historically benefited from funding and resources. This highlights the concept of interest convergence; the dominant White culture sets the pace of how much progress and reform is allowable prior to retrenchment is experienced. Thus, progress is often fleeting.

**Naming Whiteness and Function.** The process of naming whiteness and function is the ability to move from the personal consciousness to the action of naming it for self as the EDM as well as others making decisions to bring to the collective consciousness of the team, community, and other EDMs. The way people talk about a problem frames the action they take to address it. If the problem is framed with the lens of whiteness the actions to address, it will reinforce the status quo and uphold whiteness. For instance, a common decision made in the educational system is hiring staff. If someone was naming desired traits of trustworthiness from a White, dominant culture perspective they might identify eye contact as an indication of trustworthiness. This disadvantages those from cultural backgrounds where eye contact is a sign of disrespect and may contribute to criteria rooted in White dominant culture that biases against hiring RCLD persons. The function of whiteness in this scenario is to uphold the comfort of
those that hold the power of determination, which in school settings are predominantly White EDMs. These scenarios play out in day-to-day interactions, from investigating a discipline issue, to addressing assignments and work in the classroom, and hiring practices. Those that hold the power make the determination and without representation of those impacted, the default is whiteness, unless EDMs actively interrupt it.

**Interrupting the Centralization of Whiteness.** The process of interrupting the centralization of whiteness is through recognizing, naming, and questioning the role of whiteness in framing a problem, initiative, or plan. The process for interrupting whiteness is to name the interest convergence as well as the interest divergence (Guinier, 2004) of those impacted. An example of this is the narrative around Black Lives Matters in schools, some say it is a political statement, where others say it is a human rights statement. The divergence here is deep and often leads to greater entrenched mindsets that impact decision-making processes related to equitable, welcoming, and affirming spaces for all students with intentional focus on RCLD students. By naming the barriers and bridges of a decision EDMs can localize, personalize, and focus efforts to address the problem. Decentering whiteness can also help name patterns of decision-making that highlight those whose interests will be centered and those whose interests will not be. The process of decentering whiteness can help with the normalization of ongoing processes of study and adjustments that account for changes, setbacks, and lessons learned for work that is complex and deep. An example of this is the role of teaching hard history, Oregon has passed Senate bill 13 which aims to work with local tribes to ensure Oregon’s history is rooted in a pluralistic lens that decenters whiteness. The collaboration and intergovernmental agreement are a huge feat, yet it is still the beginning as EDMs in
Oregon still teach history with a Eurocentric and exclusionary way that does not fully entail the lived experiences of Black, Indigenous, and RCLD peoples.

The importance of interrupting the centralization of whiteness gives a pathway forward that is not linear but cyclical, uncomfortable, and requires multiple perspectives to ensure the current realities and future impacts are acknowledged and addressed as they come. The comfort of teaching the lesson about Christopher Columbus versus the hard history of genocide for settler colonialism are examples of educational decision-making that is costly and perpetuates dominant narratives that reinforces hegemonic practices of whiteness as property, presence whiteness, and White innocence.

Recognizing and understanding whiteness can be jarring for White EDMs at the start of their careers during preservice training (Sleeter, 2001; 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2010; Johnson, 2015). Acknowledging this process for decentering whiteness as messy, impactful, and emotional can prime the work for learning to see the world in color, as multi-dimensional, and for the complexity it encompasses (DiAngelo, 2011; Wheatley & Frieze, 2010).

**Learning Racial Consciousness**

The following sections will highlight the literature regarding learning racial consciousness and applying strategies to support transformational change for equity. Specific strategies for applying racial consciousness include reframing and recentering RCLD lens, the development of culturally responsive plans, implementing cycles of inquiry, and action for equity as steps EDMs can take to overcome cultural mismatch and better support RCLD students (see figure 6).
Reframe and Recenter RCLD Communities through Counter-storytelling.

RCLD communities are centered by using the collectivist approach. A collectivist approach starts with inviting community members with content, context, and impact knowledge to ensure the problem, decision, or action is understood in depth to help with the process of inquiry, action, and review to ensure decision center and impact those as it was intended. Scholars such as Paris and Alim (2017) highlight the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy that seeks to perpetuate and foster -to sustain- linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling (p.93).

Counter storytelling provides a process for reframing and centering RCLD communities by interrupting absolutes through contradictory examples of the experiences of RCLD students. It offers another way to explain or reframe a problem that interrupts
mechanisms of hegemony. For instance, during a school conference the typical meritocratic discourses often include “They don’t show up because they don’t care.” A reframing and recentering of RCLD communities might be “I was able to connect with her parents, they shared they are working two jobs and cannot make the times we have planned. Can we work with their schedule by meeting before school for an hour?” This shifts the discourse away from blaming the family (Discourse I) and decenters the institutions and centers the families.

Scholars have highlighted the need for pluralism in combating the dominant or formal narratives of success or experiences (Paris, 2012). Counter-storytelling (Solórazno & Yosso, 2002) allows a reframing of discourse that can undermine absolutes by contradicting myths or premises of the dominant discourses that perpetuate racial stereotypes or broad generalizations of experiences as the common experience (Stefanic & Delgado, 2001).

**Developing Culturally Responsive Plans**

Cultural responsiveness highlights the need for a pluralistic lens that combats this color-blind individualist experience, leading to a more robust and rich dialogue within school community that includes the socio-political context in which the diverse community and their stories are situated (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2005).

The critical consciousness that educational scholars highlight as crucial for EDMs in the classroom, school community, and in leadership is paired with a collective and collaborative process with community members (Khalifa et al., 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016). Culturally and community responsive ways of leading that address color-blindness
by bringing forth multiple perspectives. Engaging multiple perspectives for addressing complex problems requires a process that challenges traditional rigidity of thought and moves toward a more nimble and dynamic system that can be more responsive to the diverse needs and challenges presented in the field of education. There does need to be an acknowledgement that schools will not get it right the first time in this process, nor should that be the cause for further inaction. This requires persistence, a commitment to equity, invitations for collaboration with RCLD students and families, and the willingness to do things differently that might feel uncomfortable such as, missing the mark, owning it, and recalibrating with those impacted to try again.

Helping educational decision-makers build capacity to get good at failing normalizes the stance of humility. EDMs need to continuously calibrate what to account for when getting to the root cause of this deep well of inequity in school systems and how to localize and centralize those impacted in one’s own school community. A central focus of this work is a collective approach to leadership that elevates partnerships as critical to overcoming disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students.

**Cycles of Inquiry**

Culturally responsive plans are developed through collaboration with RCLD students and families. Once a plan has been developed, it is important that there is a systematic process for implementing, monitoring, and reviewing that plan. This is a cycle of inquiry. Cycles of inquiry are akin to action research. In the field of education, action research is not new, although more and more, it is becoming an area of focus in the field of education given the complexity of our world today.
Understanding and monitoring student progress requires a baseline measure that can be used to identify and understand the problem as well as provide a starting point for goal setting and improvement. A cycle of inquiry includes a community and culturally responsive understanding of the problem, a culturally responsive plan, and plan of action for implementing and monitoring the plan for the desired outcome. Progress monitoring is used to measure the health of a system, progress toward a goal, or progress toward a strategic plan. Calibrating progress requires the discussion of measures. Quantitative and qualitative measures help to address this concept in equitable decision-making.

Progress can mean different things from the perspective of the different community members and participants, which requires input from students and families involved, as they are the experts of their lived experience. The EDM guides a community and culturally responsive dialogue that identifies goals and measures that may surface inequities that EDMs may not have independently. A collective approach that engages a diverse range of community members can help EDMs acknowledge their personal bias as well as overcome them by recognizing and reflecting on personal actions and changing them, becoming more aware of racial and cultural discrepancies in practice such as discipline data or participation data, they may have otherwise overlooked as status quo.

When discussing school climate and culture, disaggregating data by race can be used to assess disparities in perceptions of belonging. Qualitative data can help gain a broad understanding of a problem and root causes through focus groups, listening sessions, and empathy interviews with a range of diverse community members, RCLD students and families who have been traditionally underserved. Broader communication with community members can also inform change ideas and interventions that can be studied
to see the impact of disproportionate outcomes. All steps in the cycle of inquiry should center RCLD students, families, and community members to ensure a robust process for measuring and monitoring the response to and effectiveness of a culturally responsive plan.

The localized contexts of each school district require intentional focus toward their efforts to be culturally and community responsive. School Districts and schools need EDMs that understand their socio-political contexts nationally as well as locally and how their individual and collective actions impact the desired equitable outcomes in their localized communities. It requires a coalition of EDMs using a racially conscious lens to ensure their actions for equity are felt and understood within the setting of their community members.

**Actions for Equity**

Actions for equity are skills required to navigate the complex world of leading for equity focused change. Maintaining productive and effective communication across a variety of community members with a focus on addressing the needs of RCLD students in a White dominant culture can be filled with challenges. Developing skills and providing tools, strategies, and protocols for EDMs to successfully navigate community and culturally responsive decision-making requires that they learn a set of skills to overcome common challenges and barriers that are presented in the process. Examples of actions for equity will be described in the following paragraphs. The EDMs in this study have participated in professional development focused on developing and applying actions for equity including strategies, protocols, and practices for naming status quo
decisions, centering those impacted and implementing, navigating difficult conversations to ensure calibration of mission and vision, and developing consensus for collective action toward addressing the equity problem the community is trying to address.

**Professional Development Plan for EDMs**

This study examined the experiences of EDMs who participated in a district professional development series that focused on building the knowledge and skills necessary to unlearn color-blindness and center RCLD students, staff, and families so that they can have a pathway toward equitable actions for all students. The midsized Oregon school district used in this study, had recentered and refocused their equity work in 2017-2018 as they were onboarding their new superintendent. The board had a focus on equity as did the Superintendent.

In 2018-2019 there was an intentional focus on teaching, aligning, and practicing common tools and actions for equity. Professional development was framed with the use of small group professional learning opportunities, emphasis on reflection, discourse, and collaboration. Administrators participated in ongoing equity-focused professional development and continued the work through partnerships with culturally relevant partners and strengthened collaboration with building equity coordinators. This was a series that occurred monthly with focus on the various protocols addressing status quo decision-making.” Building equity coordinators received similar training throughout the year monthly and served as content knowledge support at the local schools. In 2019-2020, teachers on special assignments (TOSA), coaches, and facilitators leading and supporting systems work or supporting local building principals and staff to meet district
goals also received support, they received training monthly. More than 85% of administrators, BECs, TOSAs, and board members who participated were White. The professional development included opportunities to discuss, reflect, and connect the work of disrupting status quo decision-making to their roles as educational decision makers. In 2020-2021, the participants worked together to attend to the impacts of multiple events that impacted students related to the racial injustices and murders of Black people, increased acts of hate against Asians, and the disparate impact of COVID-19 to RCLD communities.

The following section provides an overview of the professional development provided to EDMs to unlearn color-blindness and engage in equity-focused decision-making. This professional development model is based on the theoretical framework presented earlier, that is rooted in color-blindness, critical race theory, and critical consciousness. Specific strategies will be presented, and artifacts used to address the key components of highlighted skills in professional development.

**Unlearning Color-blindness**

The unlearning process is the changing of one of the variables content, context, and impact to help calibrate a framing that might be deemed harmful. For example, if community members in the school listed above find that as folks shared there was a gap of historical context and current realities that excludes. Then the content of the mission and vision will be addressed as a question. “Does our mission and vision ensure the belonging and services are meaningful and positively impactful for all our students with intention to those who have historically been underserved?” The EDM would then review
quantitative data and connect with those who are not served well and get their insights to the services and supports they have received and the school community would use protocols such as these (see Figure 6) to share their perspectives and understanding of the new information about their vision and mission to then create a plan that would allow them to live their values and address the outcomes that are disparate to their mission and vision for their school. It highlights the importance of contextual variables, content knowledge aligned to best practices, and those who will or are impacted by the decision currently, leading to recommendations or plans for change.

**Recognizing Dominant Culture Lens: Whiteness.** First, EDMs needed to recognize the presence and impact of whiteness in educational decision making. Naming that there is disproportionate representation of White EDMs, there is bound to be decision-making that is centered around schemas that are incongruent or is a cultural mismatch with RCLD students. Normalizing bias without shame or blame, will allow it to be part of our discussions to calibrate rather than a detour to stop discussions and co-construction of actions that might address those cultural awareness gaps. This was addressed through supporting EDMs to develop knowledge of status quo decision-making. EDMs were trained to combat the impacts of individualism and bias through cultural humility and the actions of critical reflection, seeking multiple perspectives and centering RCLD communities. The professional development consistently focused on the concept of vulnerability as a major concept related to critical reflection and its impact on current practices personally as well as collectively as an institution. Much of this has been supported by the adaptive work of culturally responsive teaching and leadership, community responsiveness, restorative circles, and technical moves of improvement.
Personal and Collective Critical Reflection. Personal reflection is required to understand how one participates in, interrupts, or leads the process of interrupting color-blindness. It also helps reinforce personal responsibility and capacity to do this as part of the task of making educational decisions in the community. The following are examples of strategies and protocols used in professional development to help operationalize the tasks of recognizing and naming whiteness.

The “why” of “first thought, second thought”

- The common language is easily accessible and can be used right away in schools to normalize deeper analysis of practices with empathy
- Our “first thoughts” are not always “perfect” or even what we want them to be, especially when it comes to challenging subjects like equity
  - Or, at times, we like our first thoughts, and we develop them further given new information or ideas
- Perspectives can be dynamic - we can change or add to our perspective given new information or ideas

Personal Critical Reflection is reinforced as a valuable and high leverage move.
for equity as it helps slow down the process of decision-making. This protocol (see Figure 8) gives value to the process of slowing down, analyzing our discourse and the frames of thought behind it. It also offers conditions that allow enough space to tackle the scaffolds of individualism and meritocracy in the role of perfectionism and fear of shame or incompetence. As a common scaffold in this district’s priming of conditions for a humanizing process helps build the conditions for sharing authentically and with vulnerability. This adaptive move and context setting for the district allows the normalization of unpacking thoughts and dynamic process of knowledge acquisition and frames for decision making.

**Figure 7 First Thought/Second Thought Protocol**
Collective Unlearning and Relearning is the next level of First Thought/Second Thought and is the process of collective unlearning and relearning. This process helps decenter the EDM and centers the problem of practice, decision, or initiative, those who are impacted by the decision, as well as current research or understanding of the basis of the decision.

The unpacking process allows for a collective understanding for a particular topic through the lens of context, research, or best understanding of the content, as well as those who will be impacted are affected by the decision. For example, a collective understanding process might look like the development of common understanding about a school’s mission and vision. An EDM might host an opportunity to build historical context for a school’s vision and mission, the purpose and value of mission and vision might be the calibration of the role of a vision and mission, then an opportunity for a community to share their collective understanding of the school’s mission and vision. This might be a great way to ensure decisions relate to the common vision and mission.

**Figure 8 Participatory Diamond of Decision-Making**

(Kaner et al., 2014, p.21)
The Diamond of Decision-Making that Kaner and his colleagues (2014; See figure 9) offers as part of participatory decision-making normalizes the complexity of meaningful and inclusive decision-making that decents the default modes of centering the dominant lens that might center whiteness, individualism, or meritocracy without contextual or socio-political understanding. These follow familiar processes for decision-making that might feel hierarchical, centered around conflict avoidance, or quick fixes. The need for diverse perspectives might feel uncomfortable and challenge current schemas for decision making, but it also allows for a shift from what feels like competing frames of reference to shared frames of understanding which can allow for more inclusive alternatives. Just as one cannot tickle oneself, you will need others to help the process of unlearning and development of new frames for thinking and knowing.

**Art of Community.** The Art of Community allows for the process of calibration from what feels like competing frames of reference to shared frames of understanding require the process of listening to learn and when discussing racial oppression an added layer of healing through acknowledging the historical and current impact of decision-making that have negatively impacted RCLD communities. The district in this study recognizes the impact of seeking perspectives of RCLD community members can evoke feelings of trauma and has been developing process that recognizes the risk personally and professional to engage in these conversations, the importance of a community of care, and protocols that supports the process of building authentic relationships through relationships, co-regulation, and co-construction.

Relationship and personal responsibility to create, reinforce, and support a community of care is at the center of centering RCLD communities and developing
culturally and community responsive decision-making processes.

This district uses the Art of Community (see Appendix B) to normalize that there are varying lived experiences which proactively names there is an understanding that there is no default or singular experience when engaging in the following topic. It also highlights the necessary conditions to ensure a culture of care and decision-making. There is a process of using protocol to center our collective values for an aspirational way of being with one another.

The Equity Pillars (see Appendix C) is used to normalize a decentralized process for ensuring the school district and its community understands the commitment to being a culturally and community responsive school district.

**Recentering Discourse.** This district uses the actions for equity protocol to frame processes for listening and understanding the various perspectives of community members in the school district. This process of engaging in redefined actions for equity is supported through normalization of potential feelings of shame, once the current realities and range of emotions are expressed regarding how RCLD communities have been impacted by policy decision, practice, and planning for RCLD communities.

Eubanks et al. (1997) highlight how we talk, think about, and plan the work that guides our actions. They also pose that the default discourse is often hegemonic cultural discourses that reinforce the status quo. how we pose it, to is understanding it and how it impacts decision-making practices is a high leverage move that can help the process of naming a colorblind stance, its function to preserve whiteness, individualism, or meritocracy can help refocus and recenter the Discourse aligned to a common vision for equitable outcomes for EDMs reinforce actions for equity and decision-making that
disrupts the status quo and normalization of. The process of regulation is an important piece of this work so that EDMs can continue to meaningfully accept the feedback “as it is” to make changes in practice without the detour of emotional responses that centers their feelings as opposed to the RCLD community and the responsibility as an EDM for educational equity.

**Methodology**

To understand this problem of color-blindness in decision-making a phenomenological experience of culturally and community responsive decision-making was explored. A qualitative research design with a culturally responsive approach was used to understand the phenomena of the EDMs experience over time. The use of an interpretive phenomenological research approach helped me understand in depth the experiences of EDMs making equitable decisions as culturally and community responsive leaders.

Doing the research study in a context that prioritizes equity and observable outcomes allowed for a variety of data collection sources that can include artifacts, surveys, archival data, and in-depth interviews. As noted in the previous section related to professional development in the research site, there are many artifacts that could be used to frame decision-making processes or protocols to engage in discourse that interrupts status quo decision-making. The interpretive phenomenological approach allowed the in-depth knowledge of what it felt like to experience leading decision-making processes with community members, lessons learned, personal and professional imprints of the experiences. It also allowed a focused and intentional recounting of the experience as a
culturally and community responsive EDM.

The use of interpretive phenomenology allowed the use of CRT and Critical Consciousness to analyze the data that is gathered to see if themes fall within those tenets.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of White Educational Decision-Makers (EDM) during a time when the district they work in focuses on equity to intentionally close the opportunity gaps for racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse (RCLD) students. I focused on the EDMs experience of practicing culturally and community-responsive decision-making when addressing a problem, initiative, decision, or concern that impacts their school community. To understand their experiences a qualitative study was used to understand the experience of EDMs as their learning community unlearns how they had previously framed problems and made decisions.

In the literature, disproportionate representations of RCLD students in special education, discipline, language services, extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities have been an area of focus for many researchers (Skiba et al., 2001; Artilles et al., 2010; Monroe, 2005; Ford & King, 2014; Milner, 2013). Based on the literature review, the conceptual frame of this study aims to understand color blindness in decision-making by predominantly White educators. Nationally and locally in the Pacific Northwest, the context of predominantly white teachers and administrators as decision-makers and an increasingly diverse student body is often part of the persistent conversation about predictable and disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students. The overarching question that drives this research study is what is the phenomenon of equitable decision-making? The following are research questions that guide this study.

- How would EDMs describe the context and the impact of that environment as they make culturally and community-responsive decisions?
• How do EDMs practice culturally and community-responsive decision-making?
• How do EDMs describe their experience as culturally and community-responsive leaders?

Methods

A qualitative study was proposed because the research questions in this study seek to understand the complex picture of a phenomenon described by the participants. Strauss and Corbin (1998) frame qualitative research as an attempt to understand the meaning or nature of the experience of people. Qualitative research lends itself to the researcher being in the field and exploring what people think and do in their day-to-day context. At the same time, the researcher is making connections between the participants’ thoughts/values and their actions. Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain that “Qualitative methods can be used to obtain intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through conventional methods” (page 11). Twenty-three years ago, the typical or “conventional method” to conduct research was a quantitative approach that relied on numbers and statistical analysis. Creswell et al. (2007) supports Strauss and Corbin’s description of qualitative methods. They go on to explain:

A qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or normal human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and inducts the study in a natural setting. (p.15)
While there are different approaches to qualitative research, there are strong common elements among the various ways to conduct research. For instance, ethnography is a type of qualitative research that describes and interprets the shared patterns of a group's culture, but it does not describe the lived experience of a phenomenon. Another qualitative approach of narrative inquiry tells stories of individual experiences; however, it only explores the life of an individual and not a phenomenon that could be experienced by others. Using a phenomenological approach helped me to dive deeply into the “essence” of the phenomenon as experienced by those directly impacted by the contextual conditions and living their experiences in their natural settings.

Phenomenology was the qualitative approach used because it allowed me to cast a light on the rich depth of descriptions and personal imprints of the lived experiences of White EDMs practicing culturally and community-responsive decision-making. This study gave me an “insider” perspective of a phenomenon where White EDMs were tasked to make equitable decisions with a cultural and community-responsive lens.

Phenomenology has deep roots in philosophy and draws from the works of Husserl (1859-1938), who is the father of phenomenology, and Heidegger (1889-1976), who was a junior colleague of Husserl. Peoples (2020) recommends that novice researchers should begin with foundational philosophers Husserl and Heidegger. Understanding the difference between these two philosophical stances is important and helped guide what type of approach should be used in a phenomenological study (Vagle, 2018). Husserl was concerned about the essence of a phenomenon and “believed that it served as the ultimate structure of consciousness. He believed that bracketing (setting aside preconceived notions) allows one to describe the phenomena that is under study
objectively” (Byrne, 2001).

Heidegger didn’t believe that one could fully set aside one’s experiences because we are always in the world with others in the circumstance of existence. In other words, each person brings all their lived experience into whatever situation they are in, literally being their whole self (Peoples, 2020). Instead, he believed that through authentic reflection, we might become aware of our assumptions and engage in a revisionary process of knowing and being (Byrne, 2001), also known as the hermeneutic circle.

Unlike Husserl’s transcendental or descriptive phenomenology, which states there can be no use of a theoretical framework, Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenological approach acknowledges that one can use theoretical frameworks as lenses for understanding and interpretation (Peoples, 2020) in the revisionary process of understanding (see Table 6).

**Table 6 Comparison of Descriptive and Interpretive Phenomenology**

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<th>Husserl’s Ideas</th>
<th>Heidegger’s Ideas</th>
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<tr>
<td>transcendental or descriptive phenomenology</td>
<td>hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenological</td>
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<td>Bracketing is used. The “essence” is what it is without frames or lenses. To do so would be presuppositional.</td>
<td>No bracketing and used multiple lenses. A revisionary process that supports reflection.</td>
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In this study, I used a hermeneutic phenomenological framework to gain insight into the participant's lived experience and to analyze the layers of meaning over time. The interpretive phenomenological approach helped uncover the uniqueness of an
individual's experiences with an emphasis on the individual’s history and background (Gadamer, 2004). This approach was suitable for this study because it normalized the role of bias and assumptions and has a process of revising insights through new lenses and understanding of lived experiences. Between the two philosophers, the researcher chose to use Heidegger’s approach as it provided authenticity to the research.

Heidegger believed that as human beings, our meanings are co-developed through the experience of being human, our collective life experiences, our background, and the world we live in. He acknowledged that gender, culture, history, and related life experiences prohibit an objective viewpoint yet enable people to experience shared practices and common meaning. Hence the act of bracketing is not possible, but with authentic reflection, we may become more aware of our assumptions and biases. (Bryne, 2001)

In critical race theory, there is a critique of neutrality and objectivity as scaffolds for hegemony (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Skiba et al., 2011). Thus, using the hermeneutic phenomenological approach would complement the aim of the study, which is to understand the participants’ lived experiences as White culturally and community-responsive educational decision-makers serving RCLD students.

**Research Site**

The research site for this study is in an Oregon suburban, mid-sized school district that includes 10 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, and 3 high schools. There are two comprehensive high schools and one alternative high school offered for their secondary students. The district also made a commitment and investment in supporting
multilingual students in their school. In the “Hope” District, they created the first Two-Way Immersion program at one elementary school and continued to grow the TWI program by adding an additional elementary school and two middle schools.

Demographic data for the district at that time of the 2021-2022 school year: 43% of students, 11% of administrators, and 12% of teachers were racially and ethnically diverse. Across the district, 88% of the teachers, 89% of administrators, and 100% of teacher leaders on special assignments were White, serving a student body that is 43% racially and ethnically diverse. The demographics of this district, specifically the under-representation of racially and ethnically diverse leaders and teachers compared with the diversity of the student population, are reflective of demographics across the state of Oregon.

The timeline (see Table 7) reveals that the change process is quite complex and takes a long time. The following section shows this district’s equity journey, highlighting how the district acknowledged that inequity was an issue that needed to be addressed. This information was retrieved from archival documents of meeting summary notes from the equity leadership team in the district and board meeting minutes. Despite substantial district efforts from 2000 to 2018, outcome data remained stagnant and predictable by race, ethnicity, and language through various district-level measurements. Over the years, it was observed that the district excluded various service users such as parents/caregivers and community members. Therefore, because the lack of partnership and inclusion as part of their equity training did not get operationalized, there were very few changes to pedagogical practices and systemic support for meeting the diverse needs of students and
families.

Table 7 Highlight of Professional Development Activities & Milestones

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<td>Activities and Milestones in the Districts’ Equity Journey</td>
<td>Conversations about Race</td>
<td>Higher Levels of State Leadership &amp; Superintendents</td>
<td>Patterns of Importing Consultation Work at the National Level</td>
<td>Engaging users in the district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of White Privilege</td>
<td></td>
<td>Begin Discussions Across Leadership in Oregon</td>
<td>Local Partners to Continue Work</td>
<td>Leveling strengths in current systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Disequilibrium without Pathway</td>
<td></td>
<td>State Level Initiatives</td>
<td>Limited Progress as Systems Identities were still very Individualistic and Hierarchical</td>
<td>Assessing the current reality of equitable outcomes &amp; user experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toward Effective Change</td>
<td></td>
<td>Policies begin to have more equity-centered language</td>
<td>Gaps of Practice that impact student outcome</td>
<td>Collective work and alignment of systems</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Timeline of the District’s equity journey

The information below was collected from the district’s archived meeting minute notes:

**2006 - 2012:** Courageous Conversations (Singleton, 2006) was adopted by various school districts in the state of Oregon. Pacific Education Group facilitated the professional development, which was to be implemented in the research site. Conversations about race began to take form during the orientations of new staff. Teachers and staff were introduced to the concept of White privilege. At that time, the district leadership demographic was predominantly White. The equity work that emerged
from Courageous Conversations left the community in disequilibrium without a clear and full adoption of how to operationalize the principles.

**2013-2015:** During this time, the district partnered with other educational leaders of various districts in the state and connected with the Oregon Center for Educational Equity and Oregon Leadership Network. Meanwhile, policies that impacted school district structural systems began to have equity-centered language at the state level. For example, the Oregon Department of Education released an Equity Lens Statement during this timeframe and adopted the Oregon Biliteracy Seal. State leadership influenced the district, which then drafted an equity framework. The equity framework was not actualized at the local school sites. Although there were some adjustments to the district’s strategic plan, there wasn’t a plan to develop an infrastructure that would operationalize the equity framework.

**2016-2018:** The district moved from its contract with Courageous Conversations to the National Equity Project. The district followed the pattern of bringing in out-of-state consultants who didn’t fully understand the historical and current context of Oregon. The district began to seek local partners to help contextualize the work. The National Equity Project brought implicit bias training and discourse-shifting professional development to the district. There was limited progress, as documented in the districts’ continuous improvement plans, which lacked specific actions to address the opportunity gaps being experienced by linguistically and culturally diverse students and families. Based on the disproportionate data that district leaders were examining, they began to question the broader structure systems. Gaps of practice that impact student outcomes magnified the inequitable and disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students. The equity conversations
and training around bias and discourse did not reach the classroom level.

2018 - current: The shift to a networked system of local partnerships for equitable practices began. There was a partnership with the local education service district, which supported “Improvement Science” (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, 2010), and at the same time, the district re-committed to the development of equitable practice. Currently, I am leveraging my previous work with the community to contribute to the conversation. The effort focused on engaging users in the district and keeping the work local and contextual, relevant and community responsive. The school district focused on continuous improvement with an equity lens at the forefront. The superintendent highlighted the goal of equitable outcomes for underserved students, as documented in the school board meeting notes, with accountability to demonstrate this as part of her evaluation. As part of the district’s continuous improvement plan, improvement science is used at various schools, departments, and levels to support the superintendent’s district goal of closing the opportunity gaps for all students with an intentional focus on historically underserved students.

Participants

The participants in this study were educational decision-makers (EDMs) at the district and school levels. Across the school district, there were a total of 100 EDMs who participated in the ongoing and progressive professional development series on equity and culturally responsive leadership. Of the 100 EDMs, 8 were at the highest level of administration (Board members and Superintendents), 43 were at the district level, and 50 were at the school level. District-level EDMs include the following positions: Director
and Associate Directors in Teaching and Learning, Student Services, Human Resources, Community Relations, and Teachers on Special Assignments (TOSA). At the school level, EDMs included Principals, Associate Principals, and Building Equity Coordinators (BECs). Table 8 is a non-exhaustive list of the various EDM’s roles and responsibilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8. Educational Decision Makers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Administrator(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Administrator(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher on Special Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Equity Coordinators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recruitment Process

An email was sent to the 100 EDMs who had gone through district professional development related to equity and participatory decision-making with service users (students, families, staff, and community partners). The recruitment pool was individuals who had participated in professional development from 2017 until 2021. A description of the research study was provided in the email informing potential participants of the voluntary option to participate in a more in-depth research study. An initial survey (see Appendix A) was included in the email for participants to indicate their interest in participating and begin data collection. Out of the 100 potential participants, 14 completed the survey, and showed interest in learning more about the study. I became aware that during the pandemic, many potential participants had left the school district. In addition, the aftermath of the pandemic left many educators exhausted, contributing to their decision not to participate. Over two-month process 14 potential participants were identified, twelve respondents were White, with two being people of color. Two participants were eliminated from the pool because they never responded with the letter of consent. The other two participants were not included because one of the participants was under my direct supervision and the other participant did not have time to participate in the three rounds of interviews. At this point, it became evident that all ten participants were going to be White.

Purposeful Sampling

This study used purposeful sampling to understand the lived experience of EDMs in the school district site, who were tasked with making equitable decisions for all students and closing the opportunity gap, as identified by the superintendent. This
purposeful sampling is used because all individuals invited to participate in the study
have all experienced the same phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) of making
culturally and community-responsive decisions in Hope District.

In December 2021, purposeful sampling was employed to ensure maximum
variation across participants. To recruit a diverse representation of roles across various
levels in the organization, at least three representatives were identified from the following
three roles: Administrators, TOSA, and BEC. The sampling process strived to limit
duplication of roles (e.g., two TOSAS from the same department) to ensure multiple
perspectives about the phenomena.

The criteria used to identify EDMs included:

1. They provided leadership for a recent improvement initiative.
2. They worked with teams of people that included a range of service users (other
   staff, students, families, and/or community members) to improve school or district
   programs.
3. They received or are receiving professional development around culturally and
   community-responsive practices or participatory decision-making with
   community members.
4. They were versed in using common district protocols for discussion or decision-
   making.
5. They had artifacts related to decision-making processes or events they were
   engaged in.

At the time of the study, some participants had changed roles or had brought forth
new experiences given their change in roles. As the study and interview period spanned eight months and due to the availability of the participants, some participants had interviews that spanned transitions between their previous role and new or current role, which gave insight into the lens at the district level and building level role in educational decision-making. Some of the participants have moved on from this context. However, their description of practicing culturally and community-responsive decision-making was situated in the context of Hope district, and the insights about their experiences came from their practice in this district.

Table 9 Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Years in District</th>
<th>EDM Role and Lens</th>
<th>Self-Identified Racial Identity Marker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EDM 1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>District Leader</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>District Leader</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Building Leader</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Building Admin</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Building Leader</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Building Admin</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>District Admin</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Building &amp; District Admin</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Building Admin</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>District Admin</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once consent was established, the first round of semi-structured interviews was
conducted. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was recorded on Zoom. Each of the interviews opened with the participant's consent for the audio and video to be recorded and a review of what to expect as a participant. Due to the impact of the pandemic, the interviews spanned 8 months, and used video recording as it was a convenient and safe process to collect data during the Covid-19 pandemic. Table 10 outlines the timing of the research study over two years.

**Table 10 Timeline of Research Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 2021</td>
<td>IRB Application Submission and Approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2021 – February 2022</td>
<td>Recruitment of Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2022- September 2022</td>
<td>Conducted three rounds of interviews using ZOOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2022 – April 2023</td>
<td>Memos and Analysis of Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April - May 2023</td>
<td>Writing Findings and Summary of Study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

This qualitative research study included a variety of data sources to answer the research questions posed about the EDMs’ culturally and community responsive decision-making experience. Instruments included surveys and semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews included artifacts as ignitors for storytelling and metaphors as a scaffold for describing the experience of what it's like to lead for
equity. The various data sources were used to support the triangulation of data, in which researchers use multiple and different sources of data to provide corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of their study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Instruments:** A qualitative researcher is ethically obligated to collect all data in a systematic way. This allows the researcher to ensure that the data is trustworthy, and with phenomenology, it is even more critical because capturing a phenomena’s essence relies on multiple instances, events, and repetition of acts or processes that the participants experience. The instruments used in this study included a preliminary survey and semi-structured interviews. Each of these is described below.

**Survey:** The preliminary survey instrument (see Appendix A) was sent as part of a recruitment email to 100 EDMs as potential participants. The survey gathered demographic information on the participants, as well as items using a Likert scale to rate their initial thoughts and feelings about equity training, they have experienced while employed in the school district. The survey instrument included open-ended questions to provide a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. An invitation to participate in a follow-up research project was placed at the end of the survey. A short description was provided, and participants were asked to share their contact information should they wish to participate in the next phase of the research process.

**Interview Protocol**

**Semi-structured Interview:** Seidman (2006) explains that the “in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing method combines life history interviewing and focused in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology”
(p.14). He goes on to share the model of a three-interview series where the sequence focuses on life history, details of the experience, and the participant’s reflection on the meaning. I used Seidman’s (2006) three-part phenomenological interviewing structure (see Appendix D).

**Interview One:** Participants were asked to share the history and background of their experience in the district where they were making culturally and community-responsive decisions. By asking them in detail about their experiences as educational decision makers in Hope District, it provided context.

**Interview Two:** Participants shared concrete details about their experience. EDMs were asked for details of their facilitation of collaborative decision-making experiences with various service users. There were also questions related to moments of interaction with community members that were impactful or recognized as important moments for them as an EDM. They were asked to bring in artifacts from these moments of the decision-making process to describe their experience through storytelling.

**Artifacts:** Artifacts were used as prompts in the semi-structured interviews and served as evidence of the processes they facilitated toward culturally and community-responsive decision-making. Rowsell (2011) points to how artifacts and the stories that they sustain hold promise as a research tool to access information that might not be possible through observation, document analysis, or even interviews.

**Interview Three:** Participants were asked to bring metaphors that help describe their experience leading for equity. Participants were asked to reflect on the meaning of their experiences.

**Metaphors:** Metaphors were used to give the participant and the researcher a
common scaffold to assist in describing the phenomenon of leading for educational equity. Schmitt (2005; 2016) notes in qualitative research, metaphors can help simplify complex and/or multidimensional concepts by connecting one familiar concept to another familiar one, resulting in the comparison between the two concepts opening new possibilities and perspectives.

The use of these various data sources allowed for the triangulation of data. The first aspect of the data gives contextual information about what the participants brought to the experience as a foundation. Second, the participants' words provided data for how they experienced making culturally and community-responsive decisions. These data sources revealed how equity work has imprinted on their personal and professional understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, artifacts were used to interact with tangible and metaphoric understanding and demonstrate the essence of their experience as EDMs in the Hope Community.

**Data Analysis**

The goal of phenomenology is to cast light upon the lived experience of a phenomenon. Data analysis in phenomenology is emergent, which means data becomes visible and changes during analysis (Peoples, 2020). I grounded my analysis in the hermeneutic circle process (Gidden, 1984) and adopted Heidegger's belief that biases could not be suspended. Instead, it should be explicitly named and be actively interrogated when interpreting a participant’s lived experience so that I am not imposing my biases onto their experience. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach reveals and interprets the meaning of the lived experience. As such, there was an active
relationship between my interpretation and the participants’ descriptions of the experience. Peat, Rodriguez, and Smith (2019) offer a figure that helps describe the hermeneutic circle that is congruent with the interpretive phenomenological approach. They explain that the researcher is an integral part of the research process and the meaning-making process. This is where the researcher dwells with all aspects of the participants' insights and captures the participants making sense of their world(s). Finlay (2014) likens dwelling to the relationship with a guest and host:

   If dwelling is understood as settling ‘at home’, the ethos of dwelling is hospitality. In the context of phenomenological research analysis, it could be said that we settle into the data (accounts of lived experience), respectfully embracing the language of our hosts or visitors and making ourselves thoroughly at home with it (p. 126).

Giorgi (2009) helps elaborate on the process of dwelling, that in practice, dwelling involves more than a passive “hanging out” in which we wait for meanings somehow to emerge. Instead, meanings must be mined, and layered themes must be shaped up through successive iterations. Psychological meanings must “be detected, drawn out, and elaborated” (p. 131). It is also necessary to go reflectively beyond surface appearance, treating the data as something present to consciousness rather than being the way things are. “One should separate the act of perceiving from the act of positing, and systematically consider what has presented in the act of perceiving...The withholding of positing leaves us with presences, not existences” (2009, pp. 90–91).

   This is commonly known as the double hermeneutic approach to analysis, where
an iterative process is in motion, and the analysis moves from smaller units of meaning to larger units of meaning or between the parts and the whole of the investigated phenomenon or lived experience. Figure 11 names the various dynamic components of the double hermeneutic approach (Giddens, 1984), which aligns with Seidman’s (2006) three-part, in-depth interview protocol. For example, the first series of questions focus on the participants’ lived experiences that tap into their prior knowledge, which establishes a contextual understanding. The next series of interviews related to their practice and artifacts, which reflects the dialogue and text components of the double hermeneutic circle (Giddens, 1984). This process allowed participants to reflect on what they said about culturally and community responsiveness, their examples of practice, and eventually to reflect on what all of this meant. The double hermeneutic concept, related to fusions of horizons (Gadamer, 1967), conceptualizes understanding as related to encounters with objects, people, and pieces of the world. Gadamer suggests that understanding happens when our present understanding or horizon is moved to a new understanding or horizon by an encounter. Clark (2008) summarizes the concept of fusion of horizons as understanding happens when our present understanding or horizon is moved to a new understanding or horizon by an encounter. Thus, the process of understanding is a ‘fusion of horizons.’ The old and the new horizon combine into something of living value. In other words, the fusion of one perspective with another from a broadened sense of understanding.
After conducting the in-depth interviews, the audio was transcribed by a professional transcription service. The transcription, video and audio recordings were reviewed to ensure accuracy. Then following the phenomenological data analysis process that Peoples (2020) described, the researcher began to develop a process for capturing the data. All data, including the interviews, surveys, participants’ examples, and their metaphors, were used to focus on the details and interaction with the people, objects, language, and culture. Heidegger (1967) posits that the unique experience of being human in the world and the interconnectedness and interrelationships of everything in it contributes to the rich descriptions and interpretations between the participants’ words and insights of interpretation. Using Peoples’ (2020) general steps for phenomenological data analysis, the following steps were completed for each interview and participant.

1. Step 1: Rewatch the interview and read the transcript in its entirety to understand the participants' whole story. Then create a memos template that had the key questions for each round and began to pull the content from the interviews into

(Adapted from Giddens, 1984 by Peat, Rodriguez, & Smith, 2019, pg. 5)
the memo document.

2. Step 2: Create preliminary meaning units by pulling the participants’ responses under each question. Then use open coding (Saldaña, 2021) to ensure the EDM’s own words are used as guideposts in developing initial meaning. This process allowed me to create a code book that was a living document that changed as I interviewed, reflected, and clarified with the EDMs.

3. Step 3: Break down the preliminary meaning units and explicitly analyze the data to find places of recurring topics or experiences to recognize patterns within the data. The analysis process was grounded in the hermeneutic circle. Then, journal questions or assumptions about the participants’ meaning making of the experience and devise clarifying questions to ask in the follow-up interview.

4. Step 4: After getting clarification and contextualizing the meaning units, the next step is generating the final meaning units (or themes).

5. Step 5: Situate the narratives of the EDM’s story in an organized way and note when their words clarified or exemplified experiences as quotes.

6. Step 6: Create general narratives from the situated narratives connecting the EDMs’ accounts into a general description of all the participants’ narratives. This process provided an organized way of seeing the situated narratives and illuminating all the EDMs’ meanings of their experience.

7. Step 7: Finally, give a general description of the major phenomenological themes.

Seidman’s (2006) three-part, in-depth interview protocol generated data in three rounds, therefore the steps for phenomenological data analysis after each round provided a
The Researcher’s Role in the Analysis Process

Following the hermeneutic circle process, I immersed myself in the lived experiences of the EDMs and asked myself critical questions throughout the analysis to ensure a rigorous and humanizing process in the analysis of the data. I followed Peoples’ (2020) recommendations by committing myself to rigor, reflection, and reflexivity. For example, Peoples noted that researchers could focus too much on the text and lose sight of the humanity of participants. Therefore, I reminded myself that the data I was analyzing, and their words were connected to a person’s lived experience that comes from a certain context in relation to others in the world. Another practice that continued to connect me to the participants’ humanity was the process of listening, watching, and observing the video recordings.

As part of the analysis process, two methods were used to..., member checking and continual reflexivity of my potential bias. Member checks were completed by following up with participants to ensure that my interpretation was accurate. Secondly, I checked with a few members of my committee and other researchers to help revise my current understanding through feedback that might differ from mine. As a beginning researcher, I continued to read and reread other phenomenological studies so that I could better understand phenomenological traditions and theoretical lenses, especially that of the interpretive phenomenological approach and the hermeneutic circle. And finally, I took breaks from data analysis to let the data breathe what van Manen (2014) coined as “passive activity” (p.345-346), which allowed me to gain further insights with consistent
immersion in the data.

**Positionality**

As the researcher in this study, I identify as a Cambodian American who grew up in a racially and linguistically diverse family. I experienced watching my family deal with cultural differences and misunderstandings regarding my schooling experiences. During this time, I experienced subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 2005), where my cultural and linguistic assets were not valued or built upon. I grew up in a district with a “magnet school” where students could participate in programs that took them out of their neighborhood schools. For 12 years, I was bused to another school, and this resulted in a loss of my native language, Khmer, as I entered the English-instructional school system. As these events unfolded in my life and educational experiences, I began to understand the insider/outsider phenomenon.

I served in special education for over 18 years, 9 years as an educational assistant, and 9 as a learning specialist and literacy specialist. As an educator, I have worked predominantly in White spaces. As a learning specialist, I was often the only person of color within the team, department, or school. I knew what it was like to have questions about decisions that staff (administrators, teachers, counselors, and assistants) made and why there was such resistance to partnering with the families, specifically those who were racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse. The discourse that was used when the work was deemed too complex was often placing gaps of knowledge or action with students and families instead of our educational systems. In my practice as an educator and decision-maker, I started with small pilot projects or studies of my own to understand
the disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students that I served. I often asked the students and families how they experienced our systems. The layers of truth came with trust and relationship development over time. Given those insights, I was able to create better partnerships with students and families as I offered meaningful and relevant support, service, and instruction.

During my time as a learning specialist, the last three years, I also served as the building equity coordinator, that was when I developed many of the protocols, processes, frameworks, and logic models for implementing equity work. I was the District Equity Coordinator for about two years before I became the Director of Equity and Inclusion. My initial professional development series with the district’s EDMs started around the time I was the District Equity Coordinator in 2017.

As a practitioner in equity work over the timeframe of the 11 years in this school district, I observed several patterns that didn’t align with the equity work that the district had embraced. These observations centered on the decision-making process being implemented in the school district by its EDMs. Decisions were most often centered on internal service users (administrators, teachers, counselors, staff, etc.), seldom did other community service users (students, families, community members, and community partners) get involved in the decision-making processes. There wasn’t a consensus process or expectation for collaborative decision-making when there was a focus on disproportionate outcomes.

Unfortunately, there were challenges in effectively engaging and partnering with community members because there were barriers to partnering, such as mistrust of the system, lack of empowered voice, and fear of failing and not knowing all the answers.
Schools and districts didn’t have concrete models or examples of promising equitable practices and outcomes that included others in the decision-making process. Adaptive skills are not historically understood as high-leverage characteristics of school leaders. Seeing this left me with a humble and grounded understanding that this problem is big and requires empathy, humility, and a deep desire to understand those in our system who make decisions for those for whom the educational system has not fully served. As a researcher, I understood that I had both an emic and etic lens as an EDM of color in the school district seeking to understand the lived experiences of the White EDMs in the district. Figure 11 helps define emic-etic constructs.

**Figure 10**
**Emic-Etic Constructs (Lett, 1990 p.130-1)**

EDMs are tasked to make culturally and community-responsive decisions in a
school district that prioritizes the education of all students with an intentional focus on those historically underserved RCLD students. In relation to those who would potentially be part of the study, my role is unique in that I do not have a hierarchical relationship with any of the participants. I have served as a facilitator of collaboration, thought partner, and/or resource for professional development around equity. The current relationship between the research participants and I was framed from the emic perspective as a participant in the school district also tasked to make culturally and community-responsive decisions and an etic perspective as a social science researcher seeking to understand the lived experiences of EDMs in the system making culturally and community responsive decisions in their current roles.

District and Building Administrators are colleagues of mine, and I do not have supervisory roles related to the relationship between these EDMs. Building Equity Coordinators (BECs) are in a relationship with me as members of a professional learning community operationalizing equity initiatives locally and as a collective in the district, I do not have a supervisory relationship with BECs as their building administrators supervise them. Teachers on Special Assignments (instructional or technology coaches, coordinators, facilitators, and specialists) are supervised by district administrators.

As an EDM myself in the school district for almost 12 years, I have the emic lens related to historical knowledge and experience of cultural belief systems and behaviors that the community has lived and operationalized. I understand the challenges that have arisen from the community. I understand what they had to face and overcome, and I recognize the personal impact and toll it has had on personal and professional development. I recognize the norms and practices that have fallen into the perspective of
individualism and colorblindness. The etic lenses are multiple in that I identify as racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse. I also live according to a collectivist and collaborative lens and have an outsider perspective as over 84% of the EDMs in the school district are White.

In a phenomenological study, the researcher is not concerned with generalizing, quantifying, and finding what can be objectively measured or proven, instead, the aim is to gain a deeper understanding of everyday phenomena (Vagle, 2018). The methodology used in this study and the research questions are centered on a stance of humility where one truly wonders and inquiries about the lived experience of another to understand the phenomena of culturally and community-responsive decision-making.

**Summary**

My unique role and understanding of this context drive my desire to understand this phenomenon of making equitable decisions to address disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students. The questions that guided this study were:

- How would EDMs describe the context and the impact of that environment as they are making culturally and community-responsive decisions?
- How do EDMs practice culturally and community-responsive decision-making?
- How do EDMs describe their experience as culturally and community-responsive leaders?

I used the interpretive phenomenological approach for this qualitative study. This approach helped me to better understand the lived experiences of EDMs in a midsized school district in Oregon with predominantly White EDMs making culturally and community-responsive decisions. In the following chapter, I will present the findings from my research study.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In Chapter 4, I present the research findings and connect the study's conclusions with the double hermeneutic circle process (Giddens, 1984). Using the double hermeneutic approach to analysis, I will iteratively move from smaller units of meaning to larger units of meaning or between the parts and the whole of the investigated phenomenon or lived experience of participants. This process will help frame the double hermeneutic process of interpreting the findings. New learning will be achieved through the “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 1967), where the conceptualization of understanding is related to encounters with objects, people, and pieces of the world. In other words, we make meaning and gain understanding when our present understanding or horizon is moved to a new understanding through interaction with the components, as mentioned earlier. In this study, the new understanding will be through the interviews, stories, and lived experiences of the participants as they share the context, experience, and reflections of being an EDM in their current context.

Findings

Throughout the interviews, I asked the ten self-identified White EDMs to describe their experiences and observations of the context they work in, they processed through 3 rounds (Seidman, 2006). Ten self-identified White EDMs completed a survey and participated in three rounds of interviews describing their context, practices and experiences while serving as EDMs participating in community and culturally responsive change efforts within a school district. All participants in the study spoke about the following five themes related to their work as White EDMs in the Hope District.
1) Clear mission and vision for equitable outcomes

2) Critical Awareness, reflection, and consciousness

3) Personal and professional growth

4) Participatory Decision-making Processes with Diverse Community Members

5) Actions for equitable outcomes

To layer and deepen my understanding of this phenomenon of equitable decision-making, I will revisit the five themes across the various rounds to understand the essence of equitable decision-making.

The following subsections will begin to make clear how these five themes help create a roadmap to what it means to lead for equity as an EDM in Hope District. The meaning units that surfaced related to the themes, and the examples described by each of the EDMs contributed to the level of saturation of the theme and meaning units creating a prevalent presence in the experiences these participants had while making equitable decisions. In the narrative, the meaning units will be named with supporting quotes to help contextualize the experiences of EDMs. The findings are organized by layering the information and insights from the participants using Seidman’s Phenomenological 3-part interview process, which I call rounds (See Figure 12). The themes that emerged from most saturated, or prevalent to least saturated were, personal and professional growth, participatory decision-making with diverse community members, actions for equity, clear mission and vision for equitable outcomes, and critical awareness, reflection, and consciousness.
Round 1

Understanding the Conditions for Cultural and Community Responsiveness

Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable Outcomes

All participants named a clear mission and vision as something they experienced while working within the context of Hope District. They named the district’s commitment to a student-centered vision and mission for educational equity. They also pointed to clear guidelines for the work through frameworks, policies, and experience of support for actualizing the work across the system that reinforces the reputation and collective identity of the district’s values and mission to educate every student.
**Policies, Process, and Practices.** Most EDMs shared the explicitness of these commitments through policy and practice. EDM 3 shared the specific policies that set the context for the equity work in this district,

The board passed an anti-racism resolution and has done other similar work [around equity-focused policies]. Our hate speech and bias [policy] is in our plans [continuous improvement plans]. All those things make it feel like some things are explicitly happening that are both top-down and bottom-up, which I like because I like to think that we reach our goal faster that way, right, if we're moving in both directions. Those things like vision statements are always vague, like the 10,000-foot view, and there's a purpose for that. But you know, how all those things are acted upon and how they look in practice at each place is very different, I think. So, it's nice that we have it, but how it lives and breathes and walks and moves is another thing. (EDM 3)

EDM 5 described the clear values that are present in Hope District and understood by the leaders within the district in their personal and professional charge,

It's explicit. It's explicitly expressed in the way that we are asked to do our [continuous improvement] plans and the way that we work with teachers on their goals, that we are committed to closing the opportunity gap or achievement gap depending on what language you use and how you look at it between all underserved groups. That's very, very clear. Well, there's a deep commitment to racial equity in the district leadership, and that's true of a lot of the building leaders, although not all of it. I think that we collectively have made it so that if
you don't express a commitment to racial equity, then you don't express anything at all. (EDM 5)

Although this is the case now, many participants have shared that this has not always been the case in Hope District and that this focus on equity and operationalizing it has been a recent occurrence, specifically with the work with the current board and new leaders. EDM 6 detailed the journey and progress the district was on toward clarity and focus through community engagement and sharing for feedback,

This wasn't always the case, but recently in the last few years, very purposeful and planned work has been developing an [equitable educational] framework. A very specific framework has been helpful. And I think one piece to it being purposeful has been that every group within the district has had an opportunity to learn about the framework and give their input in terms of their experiences with the framework and working through their day-to-day practices using the framework. So, it's certainly been, in my mind, like a very holistic approach as opposed to receiving a policy. At the end of it, everyone has interacted with it. So that's been really great, and I think ultimately has helped people buy into the process because we didn't always have that right. My experiences were that there were vague policies around equity and inclusion, but it was kind of a one-and-done experience, not an ongoing conversation. So that's, I think that's been the real big difference in the last few years that I can see. (EDM 6)

Awareness of how equity work evolved and actualized over time was a story that
emerged in the participants’ descriptions of the district’s context and conditions for EDMs to make equitable decisions. EDM 7 noticed the commitment as more visible and noticeable through the investment of time, attention, and funding. They explained the following:

You really see our district's values as we are challenged. Recently, I saw the district valuing the voices of our students and families. There is less defensiveness and more humility and willingness to learn and grow. Resources are dedicated to equity initiatives- including time and money. I feel like there has been a shift in we're ready to stand by our values as opposed to feeling uncomfortable; we can talk about putting up Black Lives Matter signs up, whereas five years ago everybody would have been afraid to talk about it. So, I do think that there's an evolution. (EDM 7)

Most of the EDMs described that the district’s clear mission and vision to center student needs and assurances of the equitable educational outcome clarified their role in that mission and vision. Participants stated the impact of understanding their “why,” and they affirmed that these conditions allowed for clarity of purpose and centering student needs.

**Centering Student Needs** EDM 8 affirmed the core value of student-centered decision-making in their experience:

Explicitly, it’s the priority to serve each of our students in a way that they deserve so that each can meet high expectations. And I would say from the very first or second day of working here, I knew that [equity] would be part of our work. And that's what drew me to come to this district in the first place. I think over time that
Courageous Conversations’ work evolved into something different. The National Equity Project came in maybe five or six, seven years ago that had a different approach to looking at things that were more about listening and learning from others. And then I think as we've had more experience with the Director of Equity’s leadership, it's been more about creating the protocols and the processes to be able to think and learn and process together, knowing that we're all on our own journeys and that we all have our own experiences. Then we need to capture and learn from other people's perspectives.” (EDM 8)

Most participants discussed the impact of transparently and publicly naming the district’s commitment and actions toward equitable decision-making. There has been evidence of this work through committees, state-level, and local budget decision-making processes, and processes for calibrating decisions to center the district’s mission and vision of educating every student in an equitable and culturally and community-responsive way. This ongoing commitment, over time, highlights not only the talk and thought of equitable decision-making but the results and outcomes of equitable decision-making that are tangible and concrete. These all contribute to the district's identity as a culturally and community-responsive school district that centers equitable decision-making processes and actions for equity.

EDM 9 described their observation of this transparency of the district’s commitment to equity,

I guess I would describe it [equity] as a priority and that it has been made public. And when things are made public and part of the discourse among staff, students,
and the community, then there's a very different level of accountability for what that means. Because it's easy to talk about it or to keep it among the adults. But then the level of accountability is almost nothing. And so, to have it part of the conversation not just with the staff, but to have it with students and to have it with the community, just makes it really part of what we do and that is as important to the climate of our schools. (EDM 9)

The transparency described by EDM 9 is reinforced by EDM 10 in a very public way, as they shared about the community engagement process for accessing the landmark decision to add funding to schools through the Student Success Act. This was a milestone in Hope District as it was funding to focus on equitable practices through allocation and investments toward equity and centering student needs,

I believe in the work that we did with the Student Success Act, the policies we put in place, the committees that have been structured to address issues like the committee raising student's voices, really trying to bring them to the table and make a difference. [Our commitment to equity] is explicitly defined in the strategic plan, superintendent goals, and resources directed to an entire department. Implicitly, it is how we engage students and families in decision-making and how all staff members engage students in the classroom, in our building/playgrounds, and on our buses. (EDM 10)

Centering of students was named by many participants as part of culturally and community-responsive work. Partnering with those for whom they were serving was a critical component of equitable decision-making. Honoring students’ lived experiences
and expertise of their own lives kept coming up as a way of assessing whether the system was conducive to the diverse student body that leaders and the districts’ employees were trying to serve in a meaningful, connected, relevant, and responsive way. They also shared the points of time when leaders and traditional thought processes within the district were challenged and created moments of humility and change through listening, reflection, and willingness to grow and change practices.

EDM 2 shared an observation of centering student voice at the district level,

> When I go to board meetings, those times are held and protected [for students]. Not only do they speak, but there is also real action taking place based on what they say. In this example, students expressed their fear of being in the classroom when there was a rise in COVID cases and their concern about the impact on final exams. Compared to experiences in the past, sometimes we give students opportunities to speak, but they don’t impact decisions. In that one board meeting, there were six students, and the Superintendent immediately addressed how they were feeling about the decisions that were made; it was held above other decision-making that has been the case in other areas, such as hate speech and other areas. Values student voice and uses that voice to drive decision-making. (EDM 2)

The act of centering others gives space for the participants to reflect on their actions, discourse, and beliefs in relation to serving students.

**Critical Awareness, Reflections, and Consciousness**

All participants described how the vision and mission expectations for educational equity helped create the conditions for EDMs to do the work of equity with the clarity of
addressing barriers, opportunity gaps, and disproportionate outcomes for RCLD students. As EDMs began to do the work, they acknowledged one way or another that, as White practitioners, they all grappled with internal work such as critical awareness, reflection, and consciousness.

**Critical awareness.** Many of the participants reflected on the critical awareness that came about from talking to and working with staff, students, and families who have historically been marginalized or minoritized in our system. They identified key moments in their practice where they experienced a sense of awakening and not being able to unsee what they were now aware of, as well as moments of discomfort. EDM 8 described how that critical awareness impacted them in their work,

> On my personal journey, my muscle has gone from zero, like no awareness to, okay, now I'm starting to understand that this is here. I can remember in my initial equity onboarding training my mind was blown. I'd never had to think or been challenged with thinking about any of those things [inequities] before…That's now at the forefront of every single thing that I say and have said and done as a principal since I've taken over that seat. I took risks to say things that I really felt that I never would have ever before because of my own maturation process and the muscle building or conditioning or strengthening or endurance or resilience or courage, however you want to describe it. That had been built over six years of thinking about it. (EDM 8)

EDM 4 recalled a pivotal moment in their career while listening to the lived experience of a parent they served in the past.
I had a student in 1st grade who identifies as part of the Black community, I noted they were excelling in every category, lots of friends, excellent academics, and behaviorally and attendance they were very successful. A few years down the road I talked to the parent of that student who shared with me how they were struggling to be in our school community, which was White centric and White dominant, there weren’t a lot of other students who they connected with who also identified as part of the black community and felt very isolated and this parent was hurting because of this. and it hit me so hard because I had never opened my eyes, I had never thought to even notice. It wasn’t on my radar; we were never asked to track. I was focused on all the other things we tracked about an experience of a parent of a former student who was black. (EDM 4)

The lack of awareness of what was reality for students was repeated multiple times over by the participants, it moved from individual examples of the inequities and discrepancies in lived experiences for RCLD students, to the systematic impact of decisions that didn’t include those for whom EDMs were serving.

**Critical Reflections.** The critical awareness then led to critical reflections, which participants identified as uncomfortable moments of critical awareness. These moments caused participants to reflect on their work, personal belief systems, and how they were received or perceived by others who didn’t share a racial affinity with them or how they were going to advance the work with the newfound awareness and understanding of the inequities around them. EDM 4 shared an “aha” moment that not only was uncomfortable but quickly laid into view the complexity of addressing transformational change.
I remember another time when I kind of stumbled over an AHA that I wouldn’t have made in a meeting I was leading with a colleague of color, and we were doing some SEL [social emotional learning] and some work with groups of teachers and people. We were talking about affinity spaces in conversations for families to have voice and express their perspectives and things so that we could lead to this change. And it just kind of dawned on me, oh, wow. Like, wow, we kind of need White affinity spaces too. And that landed with the colleagues of color that were there…maybe like a little misunderstanding. Where it was interpreted to say, every space is the space that belongs to them [White folks], which I agree with. But we've also got then a situation where they're [White folks] feeling silenced and then they're leading to defensiveness and because they are defensive then they're reactive to any kind of change that that system would then make. Then we get in a deal where we've got to widen the circle and have everybody in the same circle, so to speak, in order to be able to hear each other and see each other and be part of the same decision-making to humanize each other to each other and with each other. And that is a big job. So, you know, bottom line, if you're trying to lead for this work and you start to peel the onion, and you realize that that's the level of depth that we need to figure out if we're really going to do it. You've got thoughts like; do I have what it takes to be able to pull something like that off? Can I host that? And how do we get that done? That's some big work. (EDM 4)

“Aha” moments were common in the work of critical reflection; it also
reinforced many of the participants’ stories of critical awareness leading to recognizing or seeing something within themselves that was at times hard to reconcile or accept as part of the reality of this work. EDM 3 reinforced this notion of deep and deliberate work of equity that involves personal reflection and changing one’s own practice or recognizing one’s own biases as a leader,

If we can't understand ourselves better, then I don't think that we can really, truly engage with this work. But that's the scary part. I think as a White person, I can say that it's hard to think of unpacking my own identity in that way and exploring within. It's much easier to, like, sign a petition and walk away, right? Or show up to a march and yell and be angry, but then go back to my very comfortable home. None of that requires much internal change. But being open to being changed by their form of leadership and their style and way of being in the world. And seeing value in that has helped to give me a new perspective and new ways of walking in the world. That's not to say that I can't improve, obviously, but yeah, there's something about that deep work that is hard and really scary for people because it's really personal. And I don't know that our society or our culture and certainly not our schools typically provide a space to get that real. (EDM 3)

As participants shared about their internal work, many of the participants named the presence of White dominant culture and lens in decision-making, as many of the practitioners in Hope district were predominantly White. The work of critical reflection was identified as an important part of being an equitable educational decision-maker.
serving a diverse student population who were racially, culturally, and linguistically
diverse. These were some examples of this reflection emerging from many of the
EDMs.

Recognizing White culture, and you grow up in it and working through realizing
that you’re in a culture that is based in White supremacy, and privilege and power
not realizing it and not being aware of it and then becoming aware of it and
actively thinking about it, and actively doing something about it that has been the
progression. To be unaware is really haunting to be unaware and the conveyor
belt and the moving walkway, I was on the conveyor belt and how I was
socialized to be and to see that in other people and see the outcomes. It is
frightening. (EDM 1)

Just by having my whiteness reflected back to me so much and being in a
predominantly White place and a predominantly White system [was challenging].
I don't know. That's a very first thought answer because I really haven't thought
about that before, but I wonder if that has contributed. I don't know, there's a
saying about the things that we hate about others are the things within ourselves
that we hate or the things that are hard about others are things that are hard within
ourselves. That happening, potentially being able to see other people's biases and
tendencies towards White supremacy without naming it as such. And to realize
the ways in which those things drilled within me. (EDM 3)

I feel like I've gone from like an unaware kind of carelessness, to starting to
realize that people and students of color experience the world differently than I do, and about systematic racism and oppression to realizing that was sort of a thing. And, then to figure out my place in that too, now it is figuring out my place in the world and there's a thread underneath there of like parenting and White saviorism and a lot of different things that have brought me to where I am, which is not at the end of anything. (EDM 5)

**Critical Consciousness.** Many of the participants talked about critical consciousness as a part of leading for equity, they defined critical consciousness as the awareness one has about the current reality of inequities and the commitment to act against those inequities in the system. Many of the participants shared getting to this deeper understanding of equity work and leading it.

Yes, that [critical consciousness] is the one I want to talk about the most. The [action] that I am talking about takes more reflection. You have to really learn yourself; you have to reflect and learn and take some time to engage in conversations with people. Come to your own awareness of yourself and your bias more about the journey you are taking and less of the action we can do. I am still on that journey…When I get into conversations with people who believe they are acting within what they consider to be equitable practice or community responsive practices but don't have their own stories or awareness, I feel we have a long way to go. I believe that piece of it is so important, and I also wonder how we move people in that direction. So people can have action and use buzzwords, and it is not a personal journey it will always show at some point. You can tell
based on conversations and actions, this is the most essential and most important [part of equity work]. We can always do more things but how are we growing and inspiring or impacting others to take their own journey to become more aware, to be more critically conscious, community responsive, etc. [is the work] (EDM 2)

Some of the participants shared the frustration and friction that might keep them from acting differently for equitable change. They shared the progression toward critical consciousness and what it takes to get to the point of changing or doing things differently. The following EDMs described a progression of thinking, talking, feeling, and acting for change.

So, changing anything is really complicated because if you keep it the same and it sucks it is not your fault, but to try to change it and it sucks it is definitely your fault. And so again, we're having to navigate hard emotions to do that, to do that work, to change anything, to transform, to do it a different way. (EDM 4)

The following EDMs share the frustration, heartbreak, and messiness of the work of acting for equity. They give words to the ways in which the work isn’t always gratifying or appreciated but humbling, hard, and at times seemingly impossible. All these feelings contribute to why people don’t always embark on the task of equitable decision-making; it is riddled with emotional impact, uncertainty, and feelings of inadequacy.

It's frustrating to watch leadership let people get away with shit. That's really frustrating and that happens a lot. So, and then to be part of a system, I just told you that sometimes you only have five years of impact. I've been here a long time.
So how have I become part of the system? And am I perpetuating any of these outcomes myself? As a White person who can not see them, if I choose not to or if I do, it's like watching the way people might talk about a student of color or family of color. Staff of color are watching White men walk in a room and the way they teach, talk about people with power. I have a hard time seeing them have power. I've been noticing that a lot lately, not seeing how they take up the most [space]. They say the most words in the room and they talk first and they don't use the protocols or follow a structure. Seeing even well-intentioned people that I care about do this, it is frustrating. (EDM 7)

EDM 10 talked about the frustration of not getting to the outcomes soon enough,

We keep saying we're trying to do the work, but we're not getting there. I just don't see the outcomes that would show that we're successful. So that is frustrating and then there was heartbreak and sadness when students looked at me directly, and said you aren't doing enough, and you need to be gone because you're not doing enough. That rattled me a lot because I think what breaks you down builds you up. I feel that I've run the gamut. I mean, and it wasn't just students, it was parents. Right. And what was interesting, I think, as I anticipated, parents who didn't see value in the investment of time or resources into a lot of the equity work we were doing, and I anticipated that. What I didn't anticipate were the parents that went after me, that said I really wasn't about this work and that I didn't care about kids, and that that was probably the emotional piece. Wow, I have not been attacked in that capacity. But I think it also really was a check for
me to say, okay, so then what can I do? That's, more, that's better, that's different?

(EDM 10)

Round 1 brought to the surface 5 common experiential themes for EDMs working in Hope district. The data also brought to light the impact of the context and work that EDMs were engaging in. There were emotional impacts, centering students and having guidelines set the stage for educational decision-making to be done, and those that were practicing it had a lot to say. These actions and practices will be explored in Round 2.

**Round 2**

**Practicing Culturally and Community Responsive Decision-Making**

Round 2 interviews focused on experience and practice. Participants were asked to bring to the interview artifacts from a time or two they had to facilitate, practice, or lead a culturally and community-responsive decision-making process. The results of Round 2 will be presented using the themes identified in Round 1 to give depth of description and insights to these saturated themes from the participants. Round 2 will build on the common experiential themes identified in the Round 1 interviews: personal and professional growth, participatory decision-making with diverse community members, and actions for equity.

Round 2 Interviews included questions that allowed participants to describe what they did in their roles as EDMs to practice culturally and community-responsive decision-making. The participants brought forth artifacts to ignite their storytelling of how they led, facilitated, or were a part of equitable educational decision-making processes. For this round of interviews, I included their preliminary definitions of what
they thought culturally, and community-responsive decisions were and how they would know whether they have been culturally and community responsive. During the recruitment phase, EDMs were asked to describe what culturally and community responsiveness means and looks like in practice. Table 11 presents participants’ descriptions of what cultural and community responsiveness means to them. In Round 2 interviews, they shared two examples of a process that falls under their definition of culturally and community responsiveness.

When asked to define culturally and community responsiveness (see Table #11), all participants identified the need to bring together various community members across administrators, licensed staff, classified staff, students, families, community members, and community partners with different perspectives that were racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse to address the problem, initiative, or practice. All EDMs identified the need to include these various community partners in a collaborative process. Many of the EDMs described the intentionality that came with facilitating the collaboration process in a culturally and community-responsive way. Many recalled using district protocols and resources to support the success of these example experiences to ensure equity of voice, participation, contributions, and direct connection to actionable change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EDM</th>
<th>EDM’s Definition of Culturally and Community Responsiveness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EDM 1</td>
<td>“When we have collected/listened to stakeholder input and have used it to make a decision in a way that will support community needs.”</td>
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| EDM 2 | “Honoring cultural backgrounds and embracing anti-bias, examining personal bias, centering student, family, and community voices. Inviting diverse
perspectives. Process agreements, first thoughts, leaving room for research, data, and community voice”

EDM 3 “If the decision either arose in response to a cultural/community need and if the decision included a variety of perspectives across demographics and experience in order to meet that need.”

EDM 4 “1. A PROCESS that is inclusive and representative that is perceived as responsive and supportive by all stakeholders.
2. The RESULTS of the decision are perceived as responsive and supportive by all stakeholders.
3. The IMPACT of the decision supports the growth, well-being, and success of all stakeholders.”

EDM #5 “Uncertainty, I try to do a lot of partnering with people and reaching out for help when I can in order to check myself.”

EDM 6 “If all stakeholders have meaningfully participated in the action and student outcomes should reflect this.
Meaningful participation should look like providing the space for everyone to have a voice.”

EDM 7 “If a decision is made collectively with representation from the stakeholders that are impacted by the decision. Careful consideration is given to assessing the possible impact of the decision on various groups. Making sure to fully understand the need/gap/problem you are responding to is important. But mostly no decision is made "nothing about us without us."

EDM 8 “Not sure...I hope that all my decisions are [culturally and community responsive] but it's difficult to know if decisions are culturally and community responsive.
No decision is black and white.”

EDM 9 “When the decision is made in response to input and feedback from the stakeholders the decision impacts”

EDM 10 “If you have looked at your decision through an equity lens [framework] and you can answer ‘yes’ to your decision.”

Personal and Professional Growth
The theme of personal and professional growth bridged the findings from Round 1 (understanding the conditions) to Round 2 (experience of practice) interviews, where EDMs reflected on their experience and growth as they progressed from more personal work to practice and application of learnings and skills. Participants describe what it feels like to work in the context of Hope District. Ten of ten participants felt supported, that the work was purposeful, and that they experienced feeling conflicted, being challenged, and growing from the work. All but one of the participants felt positive, inspired, and efficacious. Seven out of ten participants felt frustrated when making equitable decisions in Hope District. Seven out of ten participants shared how disconnected and inconsistent some of the leaders and staff were in practicing equitable decision-making. Seven out of ten participants recalled feeling the work was at times contentious, which felt dangerous and risky.

Previously in Round 1, the participants shared their feelings as they described their experiences working in the Hope School district. All felt supported by their colleagues, supervisors, or someone who was there with them as they were doing the work of a culturally and community-responsive leader. This was important because they described how the work was sometimes challenging and risky. They all shared that they benefited professionally and personally in their practice, noting that they were engaged in essential/purposeful work. They noted growth and evolution as human beings, personally and professionally.

I feel supported. You know, I think everybody's at a different place. And at times, we run into staff members who maybe aren't as far along on their equity practices
or their equity work, and I feel like I have the skills to navigate conversations with them. But I also feel like I have support when I have struggled or need more in navigating a conversation with someone to help them understand where I'm coming from and my perspective. So, it feels like I can engage in that work and not be shut down. (EDM 1)

I feel supported. Our Equity Director is the leader of the Equity and Inclusion Department and they have created so many amazing things. And I feel like I have learned so much through everything they’ve done, not just with equity, the protocols, and the frameworks, but even just how they run meetings and how they communicate with people and how they dig so deep. When I go to them and I'm like, I want to present this, and they dig at it deeper, and they get me to a deeper place of thinking. And sometimes I have to go back and research. And I don't know enough about this. I need to learn more. I mean, like, that thirst is so there for me. And so, for me, it not only feels like amazingly supportive. But it has inspired me to do more, learn more, understand more, reach farther. They helped impact all of that. And so, I'm also very grateful because I feel like I've grown not just as a teacher, but also as a leader. And I feel like from their mentorship. I'm able to go into my corner of the world and bring what they teach there. (EDM 2)

One participant (EDM 4) spoke in length about how they were supported in their equity work and their awareness of the importance of language. “I think language is important because to have the word is to have the concept. And there's a lot of intuition that I have about the right thing to do, but I haven't really always wrapped words around.” They
went on to explain that the district provided tools for them to use, as noted below:

One way that the district has helped me is to give me additional language tools that are shared amongst other leaders and other staff people in our district. So, when we have that common language around equity and when we've compared notes on the concepts and the directions that we're heading, then it becomes a very useful justification for the things that I already wanted to do that I thought were right. That might not be familiar or even popular at times. So, I have been like a dog let off their leash, you know, to be able to run a little bit more wild and free and be like, No, look, this is what we're supposed to do. This is what we're all going to try to do, right?

Participant EDM 4 contextualized the equity work for themselves. They spoke about how it was authentic and connected to them as a leader.

This is just me taking that in my own direction, from my own context or taking it a little further over in this direction. But I'm able to draw the line between conversations that we all have together to the crazy thing that I'm trying to do right now. And in that process, like, there's a lot of power to it because it's harder for people to say no when we've all been in that conversation already and they're able to draw that connection too. So that has been very good. And then I think I mentioned this a little earlier, but I've also been supported because my own ideas have been refined and tempered through the process of learning alongside other equity leaders. (EDM 4)
Although there are many accounts of how supportive the district is with its leaders, colleagues, and other people doing similar work. That is not always the case with every leader in Hope District, Some of the EDMs shared a feeling of disconnect and inconsistency between these practices and values for equity. They shared that the importance of equitable decision-making through cultural and community responsiveness is understood from the district leadership level but varied in implementation at the building level.

At times it feels like we are saying that we believe in equity, and we want to do what's right by students and we want to do what's right by staff. But then there may be a disciplinary action that doesn't reflect what perhaps we are saying is our vision. And so, there's a disconnect there. Or even working with staff, there might be a staff of color and I think that their experience in our district is very different than mine. And I don't think we take the time to think about that or acknowledge it before we make decisions. (EDM 1)

EDM 3 recalls their initial years in the district,

The first couple of years, I think part of what was frustrating for me in the first couple of years was dealing with navigating what felt like a disconnect between who people said they were and what people said they were. And what I witnessed was actually happening. And that was really challenging for me. It was frustrating and hard. (EDM 3)

EDM 3 reminded us of how advancing equity work takes time, and emphasized the level
of frustration that can come with doing this work. Some EDMs shared the frustration and, at times, the riskiness of this work earlier in their career in the Hope district. For example, EDM 5 felt frustrated with their lack of preparation for this work early on. They said “I was frustrated that we educators were either sort of on board or not on board. And I don't think we asked anyone to reflect on why they were where they were in their journey, especially as White educators.” From this participant’s perspective, they were told there was a problem to fix without giving time and space for staff to understand the complexities of systemic oppression, racism, and our own biases in decision-making. They went on to explain:

We sort of said, here’s what the world is, how the world is experienced, and here's what systemic systems, systemic oppression and racism looks like. And here's what it's like to have some information on what it's like to be a Black or Brown student in our schools and in the world. But I don't think we ask people to think about themselves in their own experiences and their own racial identity. If we did. That's not what I took away from it. And so I only started doing that in the last couple of years. And I think we have to ask people to do that…If the level of self-reflection that you have asked people to do and that we have asked people to do, gets all the way down to the teacher level and the staff level, the playground staff level and the reading assistant level and the entire workforce level… that would be something else. (EDM 5)

Another participant recounted situations where staff felt their jobs might be in jeopardy because they attempted to advocate for change and have grown in their personal and
professional journey.

I think that we’re all working in a job where there's people involved and it's a really high stakes job. Right. Like we can do so much damage to kids and families so quickly and without ever intending. But then when you understand the long-term consequences of that, it's very serious. And so, I think that I mean, for me, it's not too difficult to admit that I've made mistakes. Naturally, I would ask people for help. I don't feel the need to, like, do everything right or look right all the time. However, I think that maybe the difference now is that we can all do that openly and question our decision making or go to each other and collaborate. The more people talk about how they make the mistakes, the more it just normalizes that we're all just in this together, trying to figure it out, trying to do the best we can as we go, with an opportunity of always learning how to do better for the people that we serve. (EDM 6)

In the words of the participants who reflected on their personal and professional development, some also recalled the thoughtful and strategic actions that had taken place from previous leaders. Changes in key leadership positions occurred in the district, which made the advancement of equitable practices and vision possible.

I think that the previous leaders were choosing some people to be disrupters and put them in charge of something. I mean, that was my sense, put them in charge of some things and then continue to support and encourage that. And I think that that was really a powerful move. And I don't know how our current superintendent was hired for that position and whether that was school board
support as well. I don't have that context at all. All I know is that I was in a new role. We had a new Director of Secondary… which I think represented a big shift and an equity focus. The Director of Equity was a new role. I mean, lots of people all at the same time. It seemed like we were stepping up for that. (EDM 4)

The idea of having people in new positions and bringing on “disruptors” to prepare for the “big shift” and equity focus for the district took deliberate and intentional moves at the district leadership level. However, the schools’ general staff, including teachers, counselors, office staff, playground staff, and learning assistants, needed to be aligned or aware of their responsibility or role in being culturally and community responsive. This then contributed to some of the EDM’s feelings of inefficacy or lack of confidence to facilitate change. A few participants felt that, at times, due to this gap, they did not feel fully competent as a leader, which impacted their personal and professional growth. This feeling was met with support from leaders at the district level to help center them back on the values and goals of the district. The participants faced multiple challenges in facilitating change in Hope District. Below are how some of them described the growing pains (aka groan zone).

It felt like we were failing the community. That's how it felt to me, like we were failing the community and I felt like it was too exclusive. Only one team was making the decision. I didn't feel like the decision was based on any real data or information, and I just felt like we had failed the community. I felt like I wasn't comfortable with the decision at all. Perception data from students, perception data from teachers, perception data from admin. (EDM 2)
I think of one [a challenge] being the expectation that we're going to work to
100% consensus. I think from the outset of the process I said we are going to be
working until we have a place where we're at 100% consensus on a process. And I
think that was pretty thorny, right? And that was because I expected we could
work through all this together. But I think that also set this up to be a lot more
laborious and tedious and to drag out to a place that made a lot of people
frustrated. (EDM 8)

Well, I think any time I've done something like this [making equitable decisions],
I've always had a group of people that I have felt like had my back or supported
me. I think without having people that are like minded or that you trust too
because these are pretty personal processes. They're hard and it's hard. I think
that's why a lot of people don't do the hard stuff because it's hard and kind of like
I said, the first time nobody told me to do any of this. Nobody said you have to
do this. I could have very easily continued the same thing the previous leader did.
And I mean, I think any time you are true to yourself it feels good in the long run.
(EDM 7)

Navigating the change impacted participants at a personal level. For example, 4, one
participant talked about the pushback that came from advancing equity and leading for
change. The hard work of accountability, facilitation of self-reflection, and continuous
improvement for their team that they were leading. “Doubt and self-doubt seep in when
you’re doing hard things. Are people questioning me? They might be polite … in front of
my face but talk behind my back, those conditions don't allow us to be our best selves.”

(EDM 7). It is clear from the participants that equity work is hard and that one can’t do it alone. It takes a support system and a collaborative process. Table #12 provides evidence brought forth by the participants of what they did to operationalize culturally and community-responsive practices in collaborative ways.

Table 12 Culturally and Community Responsive Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EDMs</th>
<th>Example #1</th>
<th>Example #2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EDM 1</td>
<td>IEP Meeting; Leading for change. “There was shared voice and participation, not one person was centered and talking the whole time. People’s voices seem to have the same weight as possible, more than what was traditionally felt. There was collective agreement and decision-making.”</td>
<td>Leading a Department/Team/System; Leading for Change “We were creating a stronger community, creating connections with one another and collective accountability. We were moving away from working in isolation and toward collaborative decision-making processes with different perspectives.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 2</td>
<td>Committee Work: Collaboration with Students for Black History Month; leading for change. “We were changing who is centered in decision-making. We were doing something different than typically done. We partnered with students, decentering teacher-led practices and centering student and community insight that is responsive to those within our community.”</td>
<td>Meeting for initiative; leading for change, posing different approach. “We did not center culturally and community responsiveness and the impact of it was unsuccessful. No protocols, frameworks, or processes getting diverse voice and perspectives.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDM 3</td>
<td>Committee Work for Bias incident and hate speech related to policy, leading for change. “We had diverse people across roles, classified, licensed, admin, and families. Protocols were used for conversation like community agreements. There were various ways of facilitation to get multiple modes of engagement and participation, protocols were used for learning together. The outcome was an inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives as to the importance of this work within the community brought</td>
<td>Inclusion of classified staff in school-wide culture and climate training related to bias incidents and hate speech; leading for change inclusive processes. “We moved away from philosophical conversations. We deliberately included and invited diverse community members with different perspectives in the room and so many different voices that the conversation was based on the lived experiences of the people in the room.”</td>
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| EDM 4 | Meeting and Training: Calibration Circle; leading for change.  
“We create spaces for people to listen to each other and to be heard by those people that make official decisions or defer those official decisions to others as a process. We invite people’s voices, lived experiences, and perspectives to be known. Create a common structure for dialogue, communication, emotional attunement not only to listen but to be listened to.” | Youth Advisory Committee: New School Naming process; Leading for change.  
“We provided an opportunity for all students to put ideas forth to be considered by the whole group. And we had a special process designed to be able to create both influence and expression of preference.” |
| EDM 5 | 100% Meeting (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support process); Leading for Change Reprioritizing Efforts  
“We used structure and process to discuss culture, climate, and community responsiveness. We reprioritized social-emotional wellness, instead of focusing on academics. Using students, staff, and family voices about how things were going. We interrupted the business-as-usual process of decontextualizing what has been happening with COVID and Distance learning.” | Staff Meeting based on what the school community thought was important to bring to all staff, Leading for Change Course Correction  
“We determined with multiple internal community members about what to bring to the whole school community. Different perspectives helped decentered the administrator and dean’s agenda and brought it across various internal collaborators.” |
| EDM 6 | Big Group Committee for new Bias Incident and hate speech Lessons, Leading for Change Internal and external collaborators (parents/caregivers)  
Honest feedback from families, parents, and caregivers especially related to materials, lessons, shared with their children. Specifically, with racially culturally and linguistically diverse families. Partnering with families to discuss and support communication at home. | Smaller group committee for review of materials content and information; Leading for Change Breakout groups or smaller groups for reviewing materials allowed for more opportunities for conversation, authentic feedback, and point of view, including potential disagreements. The smaller groups allowed for more opportunities to share honest and open feedback without the impact of administrator or school staff dynamics that might dominate the space. |
| EDM 7 | Disproportionate Committee: Leading for Change  
“We brought in different perspectives, specifically addressing an issue impacting our Latine community. I tried decentering the White-dominant culture, and bringing in more representatives and staff that know our community in a different way and contribute a more holistic perspective of the community we are trying to serve better. Moving away from predominantly White middle class women making decisions.” | Leading a Department/Team/System: Leading for Change  
“We were moving toward a community-centered, collaborative decision-making process. Moving away from the expert, fixer mentality to the culturally and community-responsive way of engaging and processing ways of supporting diverse communities. There was the ability to talk about equity to an extent, but they couldn’t talk about it personally, there wasn’t a lens to talking to those who” |
The way EDMs define culturally, and community responsiveness frames their thinking, guides their actions, and results in the outcome that they produce in their decision-making process. Eubanks, Parish, and Smith (1996) talk about the power of Discourse, they define Discourse I as replicative and reinforcing the status quo and Discourse II as transformative and questioning of current systems that reinforce the hegemony of dominant culture. The participants of Hope District do their work under the guidance of Discourse II with culturally and community-responsive practice, which
expects and demands the participation of those they serve in the decision-making process. Tables 1 and 2 show the conditioned and reinforced definition of culturally and community-responsive practices and the actions the participants associate with the practice of cultural and community responsiveness. These tables contextualize the EDMs' experience in practicing culturally and community-responsive leadership. Thus, allowing us to understand what they believe culturally, and community responsiveness means, and how they in turn operationalize the work in their own lives.

**Actions for Equity and Change**

In Round 1, all the participants talked about the need for clear, common, and collective actions for equity, so there is an understood expectation, that as leaders in the district, these actions are observable, tangible, and effective when collectively driving, facilitating, and supporting change in a human system. As leaders shared what actions have made the greatest impact, Figure 13, Actions for Equity presents the following conditions highlighted for effective change:

- Centering people through investments
- Guiding policies used for operationalizing practice.
- Facilitating processes for collaboration for change
- Protocols used when working for equitable outcomes.
- Practice toward collective charge for ensuring educational equity.

**Figure 12 Actions for Equity**
This is a visual representation of what emerged as EDMs shared their experiences leading.
**People.** Centering people through investments emphasizes bringing multiple perspectives, experiences, resources, and knowledge to the decision-making process. Many EDMs described that with an investment in an Equity infrastructure and Department, there were people keeping a pulse on the vision for equitable outcomes, progress, continuous improvement efforts toward change, and creating conditions for the district to intentionally advance equity in the schools to serve students and families historically underserved. The idea of funding what is valued in a community and investing in systems for change came up multiple times.

Creating a department, equity team meetings, systematic structures across the district, Equity Leadership Team meeting regularly at all the schools and team members working toward the pillars (community, student, staff, family). There is a lot of discussion around equity and willingness to have conversations about equity and is an indicator of commitment, building administrators are a part of
that. Programs have changed to ensure more equitable practices (such as instruction in math), all students should be able to access the content. (EDM 1)

Our equity department leads our district with an established systematic approach reaching community members through our Building Equity Coordinators, Equity Leadership teams, Basic Needs Teams, Family Partnership Advocates, Restorative Practice Coordinators, Culturally Responsive Coordinators, and Culturally Responsive Liaisons. Additionally, we commit to equitable practices in the following ways.

1. building an equitable workspace by actively recruiting a diverse staff that better represents our student demographics
2. partner with local universities to establish a Diverse Educator Pathway Program.
3. protocols for critical conversations that include a common language across all grade levels
4. We condemn racism and hate speech and commit to being an anti-racist district through Anti-bias, Inclusive culture, and climate, Identity Affirming campaigns and more
5. We support Affinity and ALLY groups to provide a safe space for our students to meet in community and support equity initiatives.
6. We work to deepen our commitment to culturally responsive practices, grow our critical consciousness, and implement with fidelity, restorative justice.” (EDM 2)
When I think about it now, I take it for granted a little bit, but when I think about the work that’s been done with our school board, some of the top-level budget decisions, those are all significant in moving our district along as well as the conversation protocols and building capacity in people. Creating positions, I would say one of the more recent pivotal things is having family partnership advocates and elevating the importance of parent partnerships and the voices of our families. I mean, the pandemic allowed us to really value that. I hope that partnership with more of the whole child community school system continues (EDM 7).

**Policies.** Policies were described as a way that helped frame the goals and objectives of decisions being made in the work of leading for equity. EDM 8 described the role of policies in advancing practice as a guiding light for the people in the community,

I think that putting policies in place recently has made it clear that being part of Hope School District means that we follow this board policy in regards to bias and hate speech. You know, having very clear policies that say this is part of our values, make it. Much easier to have those more crucial and critical conversations at the building level because they say this is part of the root of what we do in our school district.” (EDM 8)

The role of policies to set the tone, expectations, and guidelines for practice creates new pathways for practice. Policies set the values of the district, and as EDM 5 describes, Hope District, is setting the conditions for bold moves to happen.
Having the anti-racist resolution and bias incident and hate speech policy and administrative rules, shouldn't feel bold, but it felt bold at the time, the fact that we listen to students, and we listen to students of color in our district. Our school board actually engages and listens to students and students of color. I feel like it's huge. I just think it's incredible. I think it means a lot to the kids. And I think it's the only way to make change. I feel like with that plan we are saying, no, we're doing this, we're going to check on how it's going. We're going to look at the data, we're going to talk to kids. We're going to be explicit with our community. I feel like that's another way that we are just making bold moves. It shouldn't be considered bold, but it is. (EDM 5)

**Processes.** Many EDMs shared the ability to facilitate and lead processes for thinking, discussing, learning, and supporting one another through the change in practices and improvement in implementation to meet the diverse and dynamic needs of the students they were charged to lead. This is part of the work that defines culturally and community responsive education. EDMs help with building routines, rituals, and predictable decision-making processes that help center student first decisions that help mitigate bias through ensuring decisions included content information, context information, and impact of decisions.

Some of the EDMs talked about the centering and redefining of actions for equity that were more process oriented. The process of listening was important because it was the connection to empathy, understanding multiple perspectives and truths, as well as supporting healing for those talking and listening.
There's also been a ton of learning on my part around what change making strategies look like. I guess for lack of a better word, in this context at least how to move slowly, deliberately, carefully, and thoughtfully, not, not lazily, but boldly with bold, small, deliberate steps that are kind of unwavering. But to embody practices that lean towards the practices that we embody through some of our equity protocols like our first thought, second thought, or our art of community norms, things like that are really just inviting people to be in conversation in a different way. Not even necessarily explicitly talking about race or identity or any of those things, but just like helping to transform the way people listen and the way people show up to spaces and the way people make room for others in conversation. And that has been really transformative for me in my own learning. (EDM 3)

District leaders modeled facilitating processes at the macro level, which helped EDMs see the benefits of participatory decision-making, with diverse community members that have not historically participated in these processes. Students and youth are one of the demographic groups that have not historically been a part of these processes, as well as families and communities that we have disproportionately underserved.

I think the Student Investment Account (SIA) process was a pretty strong new way [of working]. We spent a lot of time taking time to have stakeholders come together and with protocols so that it wasn't open sharing. And it's not that open sharing is bad, but just that when we have protocols, we make sure that people have voice and opportunity to share, and we get feedback that might go a little
deeper when we are intentional about how we ask people to share. So, I think getting parents and students to the table, having them share. Some of it was more of a cultural shift because students were empowered to have their voice heard and staff. We are bringing these families and parents' voices around as feedback loops. (EDM 7)

EDM 10, recounts the intentional engagement work to bring in community partners to bring forth family and student voices that had historically been unknown, due to lack of efforts to convene and plan for processes for their feedback and insight for decision-making.

Under the facilitation of the equity coordinator at the time, now director of equity there were intentional efforts to listen to parents and to students just saying, ‘our experience in our high schools is not good. We aren't greeted with the same welcome and understanding as our White peers. So, all those pieces I felt and there were a lot because I felt like from day one that I was behind equity. But it wasn't until it was really in my face from students and families saying, ‘you weren't doing enough,’ that it just hit me that this was the right thing to do. (EDM 10)

EDM 4 talked about a common process the leaders in Hope District have adopted as a process for equitable practice and humanizing the experiences of those in the district through the use of circles.

I also think just at the district level, I'm thinking about the circles that were hosted
at our school district office to be able to hear the lived experiences of some of our students of color related to racist language and experiences of racism within our schools and the structures and protocols that were set out that allowed people like myself to be in the listeners' position instead of the speaker, you know, transformative and impactful to be able to have some of those simple structures that flip the script on who's got voice and who's the speaker, who's the listener. (EDM 4)

**Protocols.** Protocols helped with mitigating bias, including marginalized voices, and decentering power in decision-making processes through participatory decision-making processes. Specifically moves like Art of Community, First Thought/Second Thought, Head - Heart - Hand, Zones of Comfort, and ABC protocols. Some EDMs talked about the use of protocols and how they supported successful processes of leading, facilitating, and learning opportunities as a community. This is the foundation of culturally and community-responsive practices and education. People talk about what works, what to celebrate, what to work on, and how to mitigate harmful practices through collective efforts.

When we talk about interacting in the community like, say, with families, for example, or with our school teams, there are protocols in place for how to have conversations. So, there are tools now, and I think prior to that, you had to go more on your kind of personal value or belief about how to interact around equity and inclusion, and so it was so much more individualized, I think. And, since it's really kind of standardized across the district, I can go into any meeting and know the flow of how we're going to have conversations or how we're going to use tools
to get to put those frameworks into play. (EDM 6)

I think how I would describe the focus and actions [for equity] have been how intentional the capacity building, learning, collaboration, sharing perspectives and listening, [has been]. I think it has helped move between the do some actions to help change some beliefs or help those move forward and help change some beliefs so that then you can take that next step towards an actionable kind of move for equity. And I think some of that has been practicing listening, giving someone space to talk and listening, not interjecting your own kind of thoughts or your own story or your own agenda. Like in the Art of Community of how we think together. And so, building those muscles on how we think together to help evolve and then take the next action, not just to do something and call it an equity move, but making the next right move in the context of the group you're with or the school that you are within. (EDM 9)

With protocols like first thought, second thought, and zones of comfort, then we're in a place where we can acknowledge that these are natural byproducts, like discomfort and being in the risk zone and getting in the danger zone are natural products of doing hard work. And that's normal to feel versus instead of like we didn't know how to even navigate that and felt like if you got in the risk or danger zone that we are doing something wrong, right? So having those tools and the protocols has made a huge difference using a first thought and saying it's okay to say your first thoughts, even if that's not necessarily the person that you want to show up as, it's okay to speak your first thoughts. Right now, that's what we're
trying to do. And the idea is when we hear everybody's first thoughts and maybe
do some processing around that and look at some other things, then we can
potentially get to a second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth thought. Right. Like a
millionth thought that starts to realize who we want to be, because it's not even a
second thought where we probably even show up where we are yet. (EDM 8)

**Practice.** In Hope District, practice means the courage to try something new, the
vulnerability to share that you need help making inclusive decisions, and the openness to
revise and revisit thinking with a continuous improvement lens that disrupts typical
patterns of decision-making. Practice means leaning in on the concept of humility and the
power of diverse perspectives that help calibrate decision-making processes.

**Participatory Decision-Making Process with Diverse Community Members**

What emerged from Round 2 interviews were that all EDMs shared that the work
of culturally and community responsive educational decision-making and action is all
related to leading for change. The examples from the most saturated to least saturated
were facilitating participatory decision-making processes with internal and external
diverse service users (staff, students, families, and community members or partners),
leading teams, departments, or initiative, and facilitating meetings and training. When
including community members in decision-making processes, it was critical to
understand how to facilitate the work. Figure 14 presents the four contexts in which the
EDMs examples of community and culturally responsive decision making occurred. In
this section, data will be presented from participant interviews examining the four
categorized examples of culturally and community responsive decision making identified
by EDMs:
- Facilitating Meetings and Trainings for Change
- Facilitating Accountability Process for Practice
- Facilitating Participatory Decision-making Process with Diversity Community Member
- Leading a Team, Department, or Initiative for Change

Figure 13 Examples of Culturally and Community Responsiveness

In all 20 examples, the objective was to address change and improvements to the systems the EDMs were a part of, leading or facilitating these scenarios. All the examples presented reflected the EDM’s ability to lead for change and equity within the systems in the district. A few of the examples shared related to a policy or procedural review for change, some of the examples were related to meetings or training, and many of the examples included work with community members,
specifically students, families, and staff with racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse perspectives.

**Facilitating Meetings and Training for Change**

Four participants brought forth the facilitation of meetings or training as examples to describe how they practiced cultural and community responsiveness.

Revisiting the roadmap themes identified earlier. The presence of themes that emerged were the following from most saturated to least saturated.

- Actions for Equity and Change
- Collaboration and Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Community
- Clear Mission and vision for Equitable Outcomes
- Personal and Professional Growth
- Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness

**Actions for Equity and Change.** All highlighted that what went well from those examples was the ability to hold space for staff to engage with the topics or problems that were brought to the staff to help address. All EDMs identified that there was a sense of collaboration, engagement, and commitment to the process when space and process for discussion were present.

I just feel like they [protocols] kind of continually present themselves as like tried-and-true practices of using these protocols like art of community. And it's not a protocol, but like the concept of relationship before task and some of those components that we've used in our district many times, sometimes with varying
results, but just kind of continuing to lean into those and to get better at using them and to have positive and affirming results. (EDM 3)

**Participatory Decision-Making with a Diverse Community.** The challenges that come from facilitating opportunities for reflection and growth of staff. Some highlighted the need to support a community adapting to changes within the values and expectations of an organization.

This team was really steeped in White, middle class dominant culture. And that's not what we need in education, when we have disproportionate outcomes for our Black students in discipline and behavior. They could only talk about equity in very much an academic or data based or some kind of moral conviction type of way, but not in a way that led them to talk to people who might represent a black family or a black student or check themselves or look in the mirror. There wasn't a lot of looking in the mirror, a lot of looking out the window. We just didn't see that we would impact change if that's the way we treated people. Or how we treated each other in the department and didn't reflect, [there was] very little reflection. So, it impacted the way they worked with other [colleagues] and the way they worked with staff. It didn't seem very responsive to what our students and our [staff] and our communities needed. (EDM 7)

Some of the EDMs discussed the change management process for people and their level of self-regulation and self-awareness when faced with diverse perspectives that center on historically underserved communities.
From my perspective, generally speaking, that it [the meeting] went well broadly. But what went well for my process from my perspective was making the connection between educating students and staff and families around our work towards being anti-racist is not a separate thing from what we already do and what structures we already have in place. That felt like a relief, I think, to the teachers and it was really good to have conversation around that. Like lots of grade levels, you already have a community that you've built in your classroom, and you already are working with kids on how to treat one another and how to make repairs. And so that was what went really well. And then asking people to make commitments and asking people what they needed from us also went really well. (EDM 5)

Some of the EDMs shared the successes of trying something new and seeing that it created different experiences for not only the students and families but for the staff.

Looking at the parents, I could tell that she felt heard, and I don't know that she had always felt heard by a school. I saw someone that opened up and told us her story and someone that listened. She felt safe enough to express emotions in that space… I think going into the meeting, people felt hopeless, like they had tried all of the things individually, they had tried all of the things that they thought could maybe help this student and to get to a point of better understanding of where that student was coming from, where the family was coming from, and also for the family to hear where the school was coming from. I think that provided people the opportunity to be heard, to hear what has been done, and also to then collectively
work together to come up with some new ideas. And so, when you're able to have fresh ideas, new thoughts, then that sense of hopelessness erodes. And what you're left with is this hope that this new idea or whatever can be implemented, and you see some change from that. (EDM 1)

Some EDMs named that when bringing forward diverse perspectives and giving time for processing the information together with their colleagues, or others within the community, it allowed for participants to feel included in the conversation and offered a sense of refreshed energy within the community.

So, I was affirmed in allowing people space to have conversation about what was working well and what they needed and giving each other ideas and talking about ways that they could be responsive to their students like second grade and what's going on in second grade recess or whatever. I believed that giving them space to have those conversations would lead to more commitment and a refreshed sense of energy around them. Instead of me just telling them what they needed to do and why. (EDM 5)

Some EDMs identified the narrative that staff shared of limited capacity, and feeling overwhelmed of having to focus on or address one more thing or initiative from the staff they were leading.

I was about to say at this time of year that we did this, but it's really all the time. There are just lots of people who feel like they can't take one more thing. And if they look at social emotional learning and social justice as a separate thing
outside of reading, writing and math, then it's going to feel like something got added to their plate rather than we're sort of just the way we are. Shift our priorities in the same six-hour day. So, I think the first thought for a lot of people is I can't do another thing. And so, we just needed to give them space to have that feeling. And then luckily in a lot of cases, their own colleagues, their same grade level peers were able to shift them past that first thought. (EDM 5)

Some EDMs also identified the comfort that some staff members had with being told what to do. A few of the EDMs reinforced this observation in practice where they noted that people don’t want to step into that self-reflective work, that it was too hard to be that vulnerable at work.

I have observed that some people feel emotional discomfort around the experience of being [a new situation] And they're typically people, in my experience, who find comfort in a pattern where they're not expected to be in charge or to have to be consulted to make important decisions. And there's a certain comfort in learner dependence. There's a certain comfort in having the boss tell you what to do because then you're off the hook for the outcome. And so, I've heard from people say, you know, you're the boss. Tell me what to do. I'll do it. (EDM 4)

When asked to reflect on their expectations and experience of leading and facilitating the examples for meetings and training for change, the EDMs shared experiences that affirmed, broadened, or conflicted with their expectations. Topics identified that affirmed
their expectations included: practicing new skills of convening, facilitating collaborative efforts, and setting conditions for authentic sharing, listening, and collaboration, the staff felt a sense of connection, community, and renewed energy. The conditions of an equity department with a budget to fund initiatives, interventions, and investments made the work actionable and tangible. The cross-collaboration among various service users in the system such as students, families, and staff reinforced trusting relationships, conditions for change, and improvements to the school community. EDMs shared that there was a sense of expansiveness, energy, hopefulness, and opportunities for healing for those involved.

[The first meeting] I didn’t feel like we could grow if we were unwilling to grow if we were only experiencing the tightness. They don’t know it is a safe place yet. They are new to the group, maybe their experience was if you say something that is maybe culturally unacceptable to disagree without feeling discomfort. I could feel people were reluctant to share it and didn't feel like we were getting anywhere... [The second meeting] the impact of [the protocols and processes from our Equity Department] stretches to all different areas, from the first conversation felt very “tight and restrictive” its noticeable too... after we had the conversation about first thought, second thought, people were flooding with their thoughts, ideas, opinions that were different than anybody else's. And we were talking about our goal is not to establish this group like it's to be authentic and share and all these things. And so, I could feel the difference happening. And people were laughing, and people were sharing, and people were disagreeing. But it wasn't
EDMs shared the sense or feeling as though things were different, things were happening in a way that was hard to pinpoint but was going the right trajectory, as EDM 3 describes,

It feels there are some things explicitly happening that are both top down and bottom up, which I like because I like to think that we reach our goal faster that way, right, if we're moving in both directions. And so, there's structural changes made to provide building equity coordinators funding at every school, to provide full time Family Advocates at every school, to put some money where our mouth is, so to speak, with regard to what we say we value around equity and serving families and providing needs or providing support for needs that they have.

Putting money into an actual department. (EDM 3)

Some of the learning broadened their understanding and perspective of working with people in a humanizing way. This included the ability to be vulnerable and acknowledge that when people share authentically about their lived experiences it makes the work move from philosophical to applicable and tangible because they are talking about their experience with that concept.

It's hard to see everything change all at once, especially when you don't have buy in from people. And so, it's like. It felt slow, but really it's been bold and deliberate, like scheduling 1 to 1 with all of the teachers, asking them very specific questions about their experience in the school and their relationship to coaching and feedback. And it feels like it took some time, but because all of
those things are very deliberate actions that have helped to get me to a place in my relationships with people where there's more trust and more vulnerability, although it's not widespread. There's been a lot of positive change. (EDM 3)

The school community not only finds belonging and actionable change, but they are also empowered to do and try new things for a collective purpose, increasing their collective efficacy.

Deliberately including all stakeholders in our conversations so that whatever it is that we're talking about, we could have had a very philosophical conversation around our Positive Behavior Instructional system and the way it is or isn't serving kids. But because we had so many different perspectives in the room and so many different voices, and because we created structures where they were invited and expected to share at their tables, it wasn't just a philosophical conversation. It was actually based in the lived experiences of the people in the room. (EDM 3)

Some conflicts that were brought up by EDMs were balancing the adult needs and the student needs when staff had not done their personal work of self-reflection and awareness.

By shifting the policies, you're moving the power away from us [adults] to be the decision makers around what should be done and instead into the hands of the people we're trying to serve. And so, you're asking other folks what they need and doing things that they need instead of doing something that you feel like you think
should happen. So, I think that is shifting the role of power. And I think in some ways that's why it's difficult for some people, because it's hard for them to let go of that power. And they see being able to tell a student to take their hood off when they walk in the door as a piece that puts them in control and power. And then by losing that opportunity, they're feeling like something has been taken away from them and that they can't control and be in as much power anymore. (EDM 8)

The five concepts that were present in the work of facilitating meetings and training, from most saturated to least, included the skillsets of knowing when and how to use various protocols to help the team or people in front of you as an EDM. Centering the needs of those and participating in decision-making from diverse perspectives can add the benefits of vetted decision-making that account for a broader range of needs. While facilitating, EDMs shared personal and professional learning and growth through practice. As they were facilitating that collaboration, they shared the need and use of the protocols necessary to support critical awareness and reflection for those they were leading and supporting. When there were potential conflicts, they discussed the use of the district’s mission and vision for educational equity as a common focus and focal objective of the work. Through these challenges, the tools and protocols supported the personal and professional growth of those in those meetings and training to broaden thinking and center students in decision-making.

**Facilitating Accountability Processes for Change**

Three EDMs had scenarios that were aligned to a policy, practice, or procedural change. Revisiting the roadmap themes identified earlier. The presence of themes that
emerged were the following from most saturated to least saturated.

- Collaboration and Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Community
- Actions for Equity and Change
- Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness
- Clear Mission and vision for Equitable Outcomes
- Personal and Professional Growth

All participants identified the difficulties and uncomfortable process of changing practice or policies. There were common feelings of doubt, push-back, and risk in advocating and leading for change.

We're just trying to gather all the information and end up with a product that's meaningful. And just going back to that. I mean, it was a good, overwhelming feeling, but it was, and I think sometimes you collect so much information and really want to be careful and mindful of what you put back out, captured what we wanted to. So just the sense of feeling overwhelmed and the responsibility to get it right and do that. Well, it was a lot in the end. And then also kind of hitting the target. We want this done at a board meeting approved and this feeling a tremendous sense of responsibility to do it well. (EDM 10)

All EDMs shared the need for skills to address conflict using protocols and processes that allowed community members to share their lived experiences and take part in the decision-making process.
And I think with our Director of Equity inclusion, with equity leadership teams in our schools, with level directors that we work with that are there to process and recognize that, like it's okay to create the conditions for people to have hard conversations that go on our journey together, that those have been the pivotal moments [for change]. We use our circles and have a chance to actually use a protocol and a process where we can hear all those varying perspectives without feeling like we have to debate them, and we can acknowledge they all exist and create a safe enough space where hopefully people feel like they can listen and learn and share. And with protocols like first thought, second thought, and zones of comfort, then we're in a place where we can acknowledge that these are natural byproducts, like discomfort and being in the risk zone and getting in the danger zone are natural products of doing hard work. (EDM 8)

Most of the EDMs shared the community’s openness to change, and the importance of collaboration with community members, students, families, and community partners.

[I learned] how important partnerships and collaboration was… with specialists and the partnerships with families to make sure you really understand the child and how to work together on that. And then how that plays into the idea of [equity]. It takes a village to raise a child and and how that is important from an inclusion standpoint, if that makes sense, to also then creates an equitable experience that a kid gets to experience school with peers to the greatest extent possible. (EDM 9)

Many of the EDMs shared that it was not realistic or feasible to believe that the capacity
of one leader can make some of the changes in practices and policies that were inequitable or reinforced barriers. It took the engagement and participation of families, community partners, and students to make it through the conflict and discomfort while advocating and advancing change that was sustainable. EDM 9 elaborates on his through his own experience,

Some of those [fundraising] decisions were controlled by a very small number of people. And that was just kind of a perpetual thing each year, because those are the people who got to make the decisions. And there were a lot of people who, through that process, when we were asking questions of our Padres de Latinos Group. They didn't feel involved. Which means they don't really feel like they have much power in the decision-making process. Or how to be more connected to the school and that kind of thing. So, I think that's where sometimes it just needs to be different, where we just needed to get more people involved. It changed the power dynamic that was in place (EDM 9).

When asked to reflect on their expectations and experience of leading and facilitating change through policy and practice review, the EDMs shared what affirmed, broadened or conflicted with their expectations of experiences identified that affirmed their expectations included using protocols and processes with people to create opportunities for the community to spending time talking, listening, and planning together around the common goals of serving every student.

When we talk about interacting in the community like, say, with families, for
example, or with our school teams, there are protocols in place for how to have conversations. So, there are tools now, and I think prior to that, you had to go more on your personal value or belief about how to interact around equity and inclusion, and so it was so much more individualized, I think. And also, since it's really kind of standardized across the district, I can go into any meeting and know the flow of how we're going to have conversations or how we're going to use tools to get to put those frameworks into play (EDM 6).

All EDMs expressed the success of their work in partnership with their community, the utilization of feedback from those historically underserved, and centering students in decision-making. All the EDMs focused on policy and practice change shared the common overwhelm of getting the community feedback and how hard it was to hear at times.

“We spend a lot of time taking time to have stakeholders come together and with protocols so that it wasn't open sharing. And it's not that open sharing is bad, but just that when we have protocols, we make sure that people have a voice and opportunity to share and we get feedback that might go a little deeper when we are intentional about how we ask people to share… Getting parents and students to the table, having them share. I think that what I said at the end, where I talk about as a leader at the building level, like the more affinity groups that we had. The more the shift and the culture happened. When that happened, it wasn't because of three people, our alternative ed teacher, the special ed teacher, and me. Some it was more of a cultural shift because students were empowered to have
their voice heard and staff. More and more, staff created spaces for those messages and those conversations to happen.” (EDM 7)

Participants also shared that something they didn’t know was how to use the rich insights and qualitative data, while not spinning. The counter to overwhelm is the potential simplifying and risk of centering one’s own thoughts and beliefs, it takes discipline to account for the feelings and impact on the community. While also ensuring that equity is given to those sharing feedback and who is centered in the conversation.

“When you're in control of the process, which I am. You're also in control of the outcome of the process. So, I feel like there's a way in which if I'm not very careful, if I don't hold myself accountable, I can create a process that ends where I want it to end. Even though it seems like everybody made the decision together and I've done that before, when I've been clinging to a particular outcome and I've had to really check myself on that and be like, my job is not to determine what decision we make. In the end, my job is to hold space for the conversation so that the group can inform that and that I am one participant amongst many that can offer their perspective too and hopefully I'm heard as well. But I have to be careful around that, just as the teachers have to as they engage the students in conversation because there is a power imbalance.” (EDM 4)

“It's become much more normalized to acknowledge we're making this move because we have students that are underserved and therefore we need to make this move because of that. Whereas before it might have been, we're doing that
because we know students are underserved, but we're not going to call that out publicly. We're going to do it in a way so that we're doing it. But not everyone knows that's exactly the move that we're making…it's my role to help facilitate everyone else on their journey so that they can be critical reflectors of their own actions to help be thinking about how they may be contributing or not to moving the direction that we want to move. And if we're still in a place where we don't agree on where we're trying to move, then it's my job to help ask the questions for people to to think about why that might be the case that they're either on board with understanding that we do have underserved populations of students and our actions are contributing and to help provide a narrative to that.” (EDM 8)

All EDMs highlighted the difficulties and hard work of making policy and practicing changes especially when you achieve those goals. “This [Educational Equity Policy] was a policy that came from the community for the community. This served as an accountability framework for our district to live up to our goal of serving every student” (EDM 10)

We came together in a circle where we had a process within small groups to actually talk through some things that were difficult for some people. We could create the conditions to have those conversations and make multiple policy changes within this process. We can actually come together at a group of 75 and move forward to creating some new revised policies. (EDM 8)

Some EDMs shared the surprise of how people might see or experience things so
differently that it would be naive to believe that small changes won’t be noticed or be impactful. The lessons learned from these groups of EDMs included how to serve the community when there might be extreme users (those with perspectives at opposite sides of the spectrum), or conflicting needs or wants. How to center the district’s mission and vision for equity at the forefront of decision-making.

A few of the EDMs shared the role of power in decision-making and change, and how that helps or hinders progress from being made within an organization.

**Facilitating Participatory Decision-making Process**

Six EDMs identified examples that convened or collaborated with community members including internal and external users within the school district. Revisiting the roadmap themes identified earlier. The presence of themes that emerged was the following from most saturated to least saturated.

- Collaboration and Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Community
- Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness
- Actions for Equity and Change
- Clear Mission and vision for Equitable Outcomes
- Personal and Professional Growth

Most of the EDMs elaborated on how their presence, leadership, and facilitation connects or resonates with the community members. They shared the feelings of efficacy and authentic partnership. Participants described the importance of collaboration and
partnership with other colleagues and staff in the schools that might make community members more comfortable, and the content shared more accessible linguistically.

And I do think that an interesting part of bringing the community together was what I mentioned before with the Latine community participating, was that it appeared that they were having a good experience and in a lot of ways they were, and they gave feedback. But the reality was like it wasn't all stated in those sessions, you know, it had to come out in a, in a different way, in a more like comfortable setting with our Family Partnership Advocate, they were still not feeling fully included in the process or comfortable with the process. And a lot of that especially had to do with the language part because it was in English. And so, some families felt like they were kind of left out. And so, I think that in, in those kinds of situations, it's really easy to miss out on people who maybe feel a little more marginalized in the process. So, I think that's where it was so important to have a role like the family advocate to help get that information that couldn't be spoken of in a more formalized system with like an administrator. (EDM 6)

For instance, a few EDMs recalled working with other staff members who shared affinity with some of the community members to bridge and connect with trust. Some of the EDMs also identified potential barriers and insights they gleaned through some of the reflective process after practice. For example, a few of the EDMs noted the need for transportation, childcare, and translation as things to consider. An outcome from these scenarios were processes and infrastructure for families to connect, gather, and share voice. A few EDMs lifted affinity spaces for families after the lessons learned from these
efforts. All but one EDM utilized the district’s protocols for discourse and setting conditions for facilitating opportunities for partnership with community members.

We certainly noticed that even though we set this meeting up to have maximum participation, the reality was some people were more comfortable sharing ideas or thoughts than other groups of people. And in fact, although we did get some really good feedback from the next families, it kind of came out later that they didn't feel completely comfortable in that setting like there was, and there was some other barriers in place, child care was something that came up as something that was making it hard for them to attend or just kind of not feeling like, you know, they shared, but they could have shared more or been more comfortable. So that down the road really presented itself with an opportunity which we've made some shifts since. (EDM 6)

When asked to reflect on their expectations and experience of convening the community for collaboration and committee work change, most of the examples were the EDMs sharing the affirmation of including and centering student voice, engagement, and partnership.

It felt like we were heading in the right direction. And it also made me realize that we need to do more of this [partnering with students in decision-making]. We need to create more opportunities for student voices. The way that the whole thing played out as students were creating it, and then the response that we got from the entire community, it felt like this is how we should be approaching all our
decisions. We should be going through this process with all of our decisions and not just making decisions in small groups or with just a few people and not including everyone. (EDM 2)

Most EDMs talked about the process of inclusion and setting conditions where participation, engagement, and partnership were central to the efforts. Many of the EDMs felt the process of collaboration was successful specifically when they convened communities who have historically been underserved, the RCLD students. That they viewed those as learning opportunities for them to improve their collaborative decision-making skills through cycles of reflection and improvement over time, through relationships.

“I just feel like they kind of continually present themselves as tried-and-true practices of using these protocols like art of community. And it's not a protocol, but like the concept of relationship before task and some of those components that we've used in our district many times, sometimes with varying results, but just kind of continuing to lean into those and to get better at using them and to have positive and affirming results.” (EDM 3)

They shared that it required them to ask for help from those within their community. They shared that there did need to be intentional efforts to make the environment conducive to authentic feedback. Some did share that it was hard at first to understand how to go about the application of the insights and feedback gathered. EDMs highlighted the benefits of clear action plans that came after these engagement sessions that are
When we talk about being ethnographers of our own school communities. I feel like that has been a really important thing to start to understand more of what that actually looks like and how that will directly impact how effective our response can be to our community. What does that mean to be more effective and responsive to our students in the classroom, which I think lends to that idea of empathy and compassion. I think that the values have been talked about more in-depth each year for including students and community in decision-making. I think that that has happened at a much higher level over recent years than in the past. It brings community members, a broader cross-section, a broader group of people or representation, at meetings and decision-making. I think that was the explicit part.

(EDM 9)

Most EDMs affirm that context matters, and planning for the people, context, and content for which the community is convening takes much intentionality to facilitate. A few of the EDMs expressed their surprise when they witnessed many of the community members taking the work seriously, inspired by passion and eager to contribute to the work, and wanting to be an ally and advocate for change.

The seriousness level was very high, people were very committed to giving feedback and going through the information [of our lessons]. They took it very seriously. I was really thinking, wow, we're getting a lot of good information here because they were actively engaging in the material. And so that was really
positive because that was the goal of the activity. We wanted to get real feedback, they're really ambitious. I was so impressed with the amount of innovation that people were coming with and the passion for the topic. (EDM 6)

Some new learning that the participants identified included technical barriers that needed to be addressed in future efforts including childcare, transportation, translation, affinity spaces for community members who wanted to participate but in their native language and with others who “understood without explanation”. These needs made the funding from the Equity and Inclusion Department more meaningful and relevant to the efforts of culturally and community responsiveness, because now that they have feedback loops formed from students and families, they are better able to develop initiatives that are relevant, specific, and concrete. This was another way the vision and mission were clear within the district’s infrastructure because there was funding available to reinforce and support partnership with students, families, and community members as defined by them.

All the participants highlighted the impact of the district’s clear mission and vision for equitable outcomes as a catalyst for the examples listed as part of their cultural and community-responsive work as EDMs. All the EDMs indicated some type of personal or professional growth upon reflection of these examples, specifically related to leading for equity in the context of this school district and actualizing those values of including students and the families in decision-making process.

Leading a Team, Department, or Initiative for Change

Six EDMs brought examples of leading a team, department, or initiative for change. Revisiting the roadmap themes identified earlier. The presence of themes that
emerged was the following from most saturated to least saturated.

- Actions for Equity and Change
- Clear Mission and vision for Equitable Outcomes
- Collaboration and Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Community
- Personal and Professional Growth
- Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness

Of all the examples, these were the most difficult as described by the EDMs. Leading people and new initiatives require understanding how to use strategies, tools, protocols, and processes for change management, and supporting people through change. As well as the adaptive skills to be authentic, in care and support for staff on their own journey. EDM 1 explains their step into acting for equity, the process of building community, voice, and collective accountability to one another.

As I was starting that role, there was a lot of everyone working in isolation. And team meetings were all about an agenda and efficiency and kind of checking the box like we did the meeting. And so, it felt very cold. And so, a shift that we really worked towards is like, how do we connect? How do we do this collectively and collaboratively? How do we share ideas? How do we care? When you have more people around the table and fresh ideas. It's easier to keep going. I guess I don't know if that made sense or not. So, I think we grounded our work in what feels very basic, but starting with collective norms and naming how are we
going to connect with each other? How are we going to run through these meetings? What do we want? To be able to do in these meetings and what's the purpose? And then from there, we built a vision of what this department wants to do. (EDM 1)

EDM 5, described the realization of creating space for the team to process their collective work.

There's enough collective wisdom in the room that if you use a protocol, for example, like, here's the data, look at it. Think about it. Interpret it that you don't have to spoon feed people that. And so, I really appreciated that, and I saw that play out. (EDM 5)

EDM 7, elaborated on the same idea of creating the conditions for collaboration,

And so having been a principal, you learn really quick that you can't do it that way [top-down management]. And so, I had developed my muscle of bringing people together, using protocols, having process and voice. Building relationships within those teams. I think teaming was a big [part of leading]. I understood that in order to be an effective team, the team needed to understand and know each other and value and respect one another. (EDM 7)

Disruption of traditional practices can be very tricky especially once those practices have become familiar and comfortable. Facilitating that shift requires the skillset to not only understand the new pathway or paradigm of what that practice looks like, but how to
support staff in their journey through processing change. The knowledge of how to support staff in their emotional regulation through change. Helping to set new structures for the change, and navigating efficacy toward current goals when the context has changed.

I've mentioned the way that we've structured staff meetings as well has changed significantly from how I understand it to have been in the past when there was very low engagement, but we've changed that structure. So, we have people sitting in intentional groupings. We've formatted the structure so that we're actually using those groups so that people are talking and using them to help make decisions. There are protocols and then sharing out. We've tried to mirror our morning meeting structure in our staff meetings where morning meeting structure starts with a warm welcome as a relationship before a task and then ends with what's called an optimistic closing. And so, we've also intentionally incorporated those into our meetings and it's just so awesome to get to hear the collective efficacy component at the end of hearing what everybody has taken away and what they heard at their table and then also the relationship building component. (EDM 3)

Although all but one EDM used protocols designed and shared by the district leaders and Equity and Inclusion department, the processes and ideas of distributive power, voice, agency, and partnership were woven through all the EDMs’ examples of culturally and community-responsive practices.
I learned that the person with power speaks. Less engagement means fewer ideas shared. This process is limiting, and not meeting the needs of the whole. This conflicted with what my beliefs of what culturally and community responsive was (EDM 2).

Integrity and discipline to ensure distributive power is a constant point of reflection as cautioned by EDM 4 and reinforced by EDM 6.

I have to be cautious that when you are hosting that can also mean you are in control of the outcome if you don't check yourself and realize that you are accountable for holding space for voice and decisions. It takes self-discipline and integrity to process and remembering that you are a participant among many (EDM 4).

I would say that the role of the facilitator like me in a position like the administrator and a White educator, certainly sets the stage for the one who gets to decide how it goes. So, how I am moving forward with the events are kind of like everyone follows along with it because you're in that position of power. You're in that position like you're the boss, the one that decides. So, whatever I came up with was expected that everyone would kind of follow along. And so even if people felt like maybe there were certain aspects of giving feedback, someone like me or in my position could have some limits to what they'll tell or what they'll say because I'm the one that's inviting them to go. [I am] setting the agenda and what we're going to talk about, how we're going to talk about it. So,
there's. There's definitely like an authority piece there. This was where the learning from our Latine families was humbling. That they wanted a different space to share their feedback (EDM 6).

The results highlight the skill sets and actions for equity having full saturation. Many of the examples included needing skills for equitable change management revolve around addressing the discourse of lack of capacity, lack of resources, and scarcity that permeates through the community. There were multiple examples identified by EDMs related to social-emotional impact, thus the skills to support staff in a systematic way to facilitate transition processes is critical. The ability to hold space for worries, fears of the unknown, and new to be a part of the change process can start creating the conditions of what change can look like in a thoughtful, caring, and process-oriented manner. Change includes the process of mourning what was familiar and preparing for new, EDMs shared that giving time and space for that as part of the skill sets for equitable decision-making can make leading for change more successful. Some EDMs shared that if staff can feel that they care for learning, growing, and changing, then they can facilitate and create space for their students that might need that same level of grace and support. “We created space to be vulnerable as a leader, people appreciate it when they can say I am leading this, and I am not happy with the outcome, and we need to do things differently. Staff appreciate that level of honesty (EDM 5).

Having a clear mission and vision for the work was also critical as the EDMs aligned their decisions with the policies that center equity and students and disrupt the power dynamics that have historically been practiced. Internal staff and leaders dictate
the initiatives using research, their experience, and some data.

Technical expertise often gets overshadowed by the adaptive needs and skills necessary to make change happen. Data review and action was a disconnect when outcomes for RCLD students were not being addressed. Individual conversations were helpful to navigate this conflict (EDM 7).

The shift toward partnership with those who are the service users such as students, families, and staff create a disruption in the habit of decision-making that can cause conflict. Some of the EDMs expressed great hardship working with the staff that has that traditional, singular, color blind, decontextualized lens to decision-making which creates conflict when the EDMs try to decenter that thought counter storytelling, bringing forth multiple perspectives and policies that challenge the historical decision-making patterns within the organization.

For example, especially around communication protocols. So, before we're in a situation where we're going to have a hard conversation or it's going to be a messy situation, or we're not going to be in agreement and there's going to be a lot of opinions. It's an opportunity to ground everybody in the state of mind that we're going to be in as we work through a problem. So, say, the art of the community, for example, that's a really nice way to ground everyone. So, there's a process every time and it kind of settles down the group and then we're able to talk through a scenario or a practice… so that we can solve problems better together. So that certainly helps in those hard situations. And, and so we've been able to do
that with no place for hate, for example, working with families in particular
talking through these are the lessons we're going to roll out. (EDM 6)
I had a realization that technical expertise without the adaptive skills to meet the
needs of those who we don't share affinity with don't lead to change. Managing
people is complex. I learned that is hard to hold accountable, the people we have
history with or relationship and friendships (EDM 7).

As EDMs navigate the conflict they have shared that as challenging as it has been, the
system of support by the district leaders where they reinforce and affirm these changes
and interruption of status quo has supported the EDMs’ personal and professional
growth.

The folks that have supported me in the work have shifted as my role has shifted
from an associate principal to principal. A few years ago, we had a deep equity
issue at our school, and we had no way of addressing it. We didn’t have the tools
or the resources to know how to confidently move forward through a really tough
situation. As a community we were afraid of the conflict, and we were not
certain enough to go into that situation… so we steered away from the conflict.

I very clearly remember a conversation [in a training with the then equity
coordinator, now Equity Director about tools and protocols for transformational
change management] when I became principal with the former principal that I
was the vice principal under. That said, if we would have had the tools and
protocols where I remember him texting me right after and saying, Man, if we
would have had these tools and protocols like a year and a half ago, we really
would have known how to navigate this, wouldn't we? Right. And so, we just
didn't know how to navigate that really hard scenario because we didn't know how
to enter in without specifically saying, here's what you're supposed to believe
right now. Why aren't you? (EDM 8).

They have shared feeling supported, cheered on, and effective thought partners as they
navigate the various conflicts and need for calibration with the people the EDMs were
tasked to support and the systems they were charged to improve and change to be more
equitable and inclusive. Many of the EDMs shared that through collaborative and
participatory decision-making, what felt restrictive and tight, was replaced by a sense of
hope, ingenuity, and creativity because there were different and more perspectives, and
more contributors that can alleviate some of those feelings of insufficiency.

Given the infrastructure of Equity leadership teams, they also had local partners
across the various roles that could help model, practice, reflect, and engage in new ideas
for change.

Learning the value of having affinity groups. Learning about push back, learning
the value of having affinity groups and navigating some of the push back. I came
in kind of towards the end of that push back, I think. But there were still some.
And so having helped to work with people. Around, helping them to understand
the importance of [affinity spaces]. And bringing a student voice into that
conversation. We had student quotes around the library where we had our staff
meeting and it was just anonymous student quotes about their experiences. And I
think that was just such a powerful way to bring the student voice into the room without creating further harm from having to navigate adult responses to their words, but to kind of protect them while also highlighting them at the same time. And that was really moving for people to know that it wasn't just some agenda that was being pushed by people, by adults who thought it was a good idea, but that it was actually responding to a need from within the community (EDM 3).

The practice and facilitation of critical awareness for the staff, giving them space to reflect on their impact as practitioners, given the feedback of the service users of their organization, students, and families.

The biggest focus has been including community voice and we do it at so many levels, the last three years have been compounded in decision-making. The way we work together to make decisions has been a highlight especially over the last 3-4 years, 3 years especially. What always sticks out to me is how well and how important it is for us as a district to incorporate stakeholder voice at every level. All levels mean teachers, staff, students, families, community members. Community Voice and collaborative decision-making a systematic approach to stakeholders and communication, decision-making, the work of the equity department have been more advanced, well thought out parts and pieces, ensure voice of stakeholders and action is taking place with head-heart-hand, accountability (EDM 2).

Some of the EDMs shared that this partnership with students and families, though not
perfect, gives them the evidence of commitment to changing, trying something new, and humility to say they are a work in progress.

I think recently within the special education department, they've created family listening groups and they're trying to collect information from parents and families around, how they're experiencing systems and how their students are experiencing systems to make decisions. I don't know if decisions have been made yet, but I think they're in the early stages of including families. Trying to think about other initiatives that have happened. We're going to include multiple stakeholders from the families, the teachers, and there's been students and administrators involved. And instead of just everyone sitting there and hearing from the administrator, like, here's how things are going at the school, they took data and they dug into it and wanted to hear from people like what did they see and what kind of decisions should they be taking back to the building leaders based on that input? (EDM 1)

The EDMs shared the grace the RCLD community have been able to give to them as they live this new identity as culturally and community responsive leaders.

My mind was blown when the first time I told a family like. I acknowledge that I'm a White person and I'm providing you this perspective from a really privileged White place. And I'm not going to pretend to have any idea or know what you're experiencing, but I'm here to help learn and try to do this together. And when I took a risk to say that my mind was blown with the response, which was, wow, no
one's ever acknowledged that with us before. Right. So, I feel like leading from a place of humility or trying to encourage all of us to be in a place of humility and you know, it blew my mind (EDM 8).

Summary

When asked to reflect on their expectations and experience of convening the community for collaboration and committee work for change, most of the examples the EDMs shared the affirmation of addressing conflict as an opportunity to calibrate our focus toward a collective vision and mission of serving students in an equitable and just way. This then allowed decision-making to be collaborative, healing, and empowering. The community was closer as EDMs did what was different in that historically, instead of exerting power and dominance toward compliance, the approach was collaborative and humanizing. The hard work was still there, but the way in which to steer a lead was moving away from the traditional unhealthy way of leading, which reinforced power structures that went against their goals as a district. During these times of change, the adaptive skill sets we affirmed as a necessary skill to lead as an EDM.

The new learnings that were brought forth was that it takes initiative and intention, as some EDMs shared, no one tells you what to do. “No one is making you make any of these changes happen. So, it is easy to get stuck in the comfort of the familiar.” (EDM 7) Many also shared that it takes a lot of self-discipline, reflection, and critical consciousness to facilitate and support collaborative decision-making, it can happen so easily that the host of these conversations can inadvertently steer the conversation a certain way away from the committee’s goals if one doesn’t have the
integrity to be the voice amongst many as opposed to the voice for the group. Most of the EDMs that shared the example of leading teams, departments, and initiatives shared the difficult and sometimes impossible task of leading people toward change and holding them accountable for the change, especially when there is history and relationships and friendships with people.

As stated earlier, these were the examples that connected most with the hardships of leading for equity. There is an active commitment to engage that is a criterion for being an equitable EDM. “Things don’t happen without leaning in.” (EDM 1)
Unfortunately, as leaders leading people through critical self-reflection, for those who have not had the capacity, or muscle developed for that work, there is a lot of push back, the conditions that are reflected to the EDM is not conducive to them being their best because of the retaliation, active undermining, lack of cooperation, or blatant attacks on the EDMs character, integrity, etc. These seemed to be patterns of the context of where the EDMs were trying to lead for change.

**Round 3 Reflections of Culturally and Community Responsive Leaders**

The third and final round of the interview process allowed the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience as EDMs practicing culturally and community responsive decision-makers. It also gave them the opportunity to reflect on who they are, and their lived experience connected to this phenomenon of leading for equity. It allowed them to address the intellectual and emotional connections between their practice and life story or lived experience (Seidman, 2006). I asked each participant to do this by sharing some metaphors of what it is like to be an EDM from their perspective and lived experience. Steele, Baird, and Davies (2022) notes that metaphors are useful for inviting
people into worlds that they might not otherwise have seen. They can stimulate imagination, incite feelings, help people to see new meaning and even lead to change. (p.99-100) I also asked them to reflect on what they might say (words of wisdom) to a new practitioner given their lived experience practicing culturally and community-responsive decision-making. The following were some results from this exercise to help participants reflect on what it was like to practice equitable educational decision-making from their perspective.

All the metaphors brought forward were related to the context characteristics that were lifted from the Round 3 interviews. Because of the foundational Round 1 interviews, I watched for patterns that might emerge in the following rounds of interview. Round 2 had participants bring artifacts to describe how they operationalized what they defined as culturally and community responsiveness. During this round, it was clearly evident and connected to the larger theme of Actions for Equity and Change. Again, the patterns appeared to reinforce and gave credibility to the themes originally identified from Round 1. In Round 3, all 10 participants brought at least two metaphors to the interview. There were four prominent themes that surfaced when EDMs reflected on what it means to be an EDM for Equity. It is important to note that in Round 2, the focus was on describing their actions, whereas Round 3 focused on their reflections and thoughts about their experiences as Equitable Decision Makers. The theme of Actions for Equity and Change did not show up in this round of interviews. This is also a reflection and alignment of Seidman’s (2006) 3-part interview protocol where participants are asked to reflect and make meaning of their experiences. The next section will present the metaphors that participants brought to the third round of interview and their descriptions of how the
metaphor makes sense to them. The themes are organized from most saturated to least:

- Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness
- Participatory Decision-making and Diverse Community
- Personal and Professional Growth
- Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable Outcomes

**Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness.**

The following metaphors were mentioned during round 3 interviews that were connected to the broader theme of Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness

- Coil or Spring
- Crabs in the Crate
- Driving without the technology of today
- In a fight with myself
- Caterpillar
- Dark horse
- Haunted House
- Party host facilitating activities that allows guests to engage.
- Melting Pot vs Salad Bowl

Seven EDMs shared metaphors about critical awareness, reflection, and consciousness to describe what it means to lead in culturally and community responsive ways. The words they used during Round 3 interviews highlighted critical reflection, monitoring, and adjusting to make equitable decisions. The following quotes are representative of how
some of the participants explain their metaphor.

“Fight with Myself”: I am in a fight with myself all the time, I never regret it when I take a beat (minute) or a day or whatever to get more information and think about things, and especially when I reach out to people. You know, and kind of build a mini team around things, whether it’s a student’s behavior plan or a family who is frustrated or a staff who maybe isn't implementing something with fidelity or whatever. I never regret taking a minute and gathering more information and talking to smart people. I never regret it. I've never regretted it once. And I have regretted a lot the times that I jumped right in and tried to fix things. Whether it's because I spent money on something I didn't need to spend it on, like outside of school, or I stumbled all over myself in a conversation because I wasn't really ready to have it because I was in a hurry. And so, I've never regretted not hurrying. But it's not natural. People will say to me, you’re so calm and cool and you don't rush, and you really listen. And those things are all true. But it's like. It's not the natural state of me. It’s super intentional. Because all of those things are actually hard for me. I have just learned to do them and to present them that way (EDM 5).

Participant EDM 5 appears to share about an internal struggle, but in their reflection, they understood that they had to fight with their first instinct to “fix”. Instead, they worked on pausing in order to practice waiting, getting more information, and reaching out to people.

The coil metaphor shared in the following quote frames the work as an iterative
process that allows for greater understanding and depth, through practice, reflection, and trying new things and learning from those efforts.

**Coil or Spring:** Like a coil or spring, as you circle back to points of recognition that you've been at before, it's like you're there with, with greater understanding of depth. So maybe it's like you started with an understanding or maybe you saw the problem and then you're working through it. And then you go around the circle about how you view the problem, understand the problem, see the problem, and you get back to the same spot, but now you see the problem and you understand the problem, but you still don't know what to do. Then building capacity to have an idea around what I'm going to do about this problem. But then you try it, and you work through it, and you get back and you say like, ‘Well, that didn’t work’, but I have a better understanding of the problem and I want to try something new.” (EDM 1)

The coil metaphor that EDM 1 shared has an essence of cycles that begin with a question and travel around, eventually coming back to the original question with new eyes and experiences. The practice of the continuous improvement cycle is embedded in the educational landscape.

Many of the EDMs also surfaced the self-doubt, not knowing, and unsureness that they are navigating through while guiding and leading their staff and colleagues through the equitable decision-making process.

**Caterpillar:** Like in the caterpillar phase, right, where you're, kind of bumbling around a little bit. You are not aware of yourself, not really fluid or graceful and
then go into that cocoon phase. In that cocoon phase, that was a lot of listening to stories in education and listening, being a listener, taking a lot of information in. Seeking out understanding what educators and students and families are going through. So, it's like serving that role as a listener first and not feeling obliged to step into that role as trying to avoid that space of wanting to dominate the conversation or have the right thing to say or be like be the one that puts on that performance (EDM 6).

There is a level of humility that is needed to do this work, because of the uncharted territory to create and transform to something new. The reflection and consciousness come through practice, just as the caterpillar is bumbling around with uncertainty, the transformation over time allows for the development of confidence through practice reflection toward improvement and change, as highlighted by the butterfly metaphor. EDM 6 builds on the idea that transformation is messy, but it is okay and it is part of the process of becoming aware of who you are, of your surroundings and how to act in relevant and responsive ways. These experiences of critical awareness, reflection, and consciousness toward connected action as identified by many of the participants, do not come through self-guided work. There needed to be interaction, connection, conflict, and calibration with those within the community. ‘Aha’ moments come from the interactions, partnership, and collaboration with diverse communities, where new insights are gained and understood through communication, listening, and collaborative partnerships.

**Participatory Decision-making with Community Members**

The following metaphors were mentioned during Round 3 interviews that were
connected to the broader theme of Participatory Decision-making with Community Members. Six EDMs shared metaphors that helped explain the meaning of culturally and community responsive decision-making. The process of bringing people together with diverse perspectives and collaborating for a common purpose was a topic that came up from the metaphors shared by the EDMs. The common thread in these metaphors are interactive moments with people, places, and things.

- Orchestra Band
- Gardener
- Driving without the technology of today
- Party host facilitating activities that allows guests to engage.
- Big Hug
- Gardener
- Mosaic & Jigsaw
- Salad Bowl

One participant shared why they chose a particular metaphor, which in the example was a Mosaic. They explained their journey towards developing and creating an equity policy through community engagement and participation. They described their Mosaic metaphor as follows:

**Mosaic:** The two metaphors of a mosaic and a jigsaw puzzle. And I think that both are good. But there was something about the mosaic that is beautiful not that a jigsaw puzzle isn't beautiful, but there was something about a mosaic that's permanent that I feel, you know, in that sense of creative art that can kind of last
longer than a jigsaw puzzle. So, I leaned towards a mosaic just because I think that there are just so many beautiful mosaics that really… when you get close, and you look at every little unique piece or tile and it's just so beautiful. There's something that seems messier about a mosaic that creates a beautiful picture than a prefabricated puzzle that's been punched out. I think Mosaic resonates with me more than a jigsaw puzzle, because at least, my experience is I didn't know where it was headed. In those parts where you're walking through, it is very stressful and just, it was where it's headed. But it was a beautiful outcome (EDM 10).

The Mosaic appeared to provide a context for this participant’s journey. Walking through the unknown “parts” of building a new policy, eventually led them to a beautiful outcome that felt creative and permanent. This participant walked into the messy and unknown parts of building policies with others, but came to acknowledge the result, though not perfect, still beautiful.

The following gardener and orchestra metaphors help to describe the need to pay attention to people, variables, and actions needed to, support and tend to the desired outcome as a community. How to ensure the conditions are conducive for growth, nourishment of talent, and achieving a collective goal of growing sustenance or making music together.

**Gardener:** The Gardener, you can't just plant the seed and wander off and hope that everything's going to be okay. It just doesn't work that way. And so, it made me think of that as being a gardener. Because it's constant, constantly taken care of. Even in the off season. You have to do… you have to take care of the
foundation or the land kind of idea so that things are ready to go for the next season. And we kind of work in seasons as educators. Years before you may see visibly or more tangible kinds of results. Because it's what is happening below the surface kind of idea. And so that made me think of that. I was like, Yeah, you kind of have to, you have to take care of it (EDM 9).

**Orchestra:** When I was younger, I played in an orchestra band, and even though we all had different instruments again, we had the same goal, and the goal was to play the same musical number. But we all had our own different instruments. We all played them differently. We had one leader, but we had different inputs, but we all worked together to create the same goal. And then. The goal was this beautiful song that we created. And so that's how it feels when you're working with others who are aligned with you in the same thinking. You're still struggling together. So, like, even, like learning the song at the very beginning of learning the song, we're in different places. Some people are farther along that have been practicing more or that are better at their instruments that can catch on to it quicker. Some people are really struggling. We're all struggling together to learn this song and then we get to a point where we're able to play it beautifully (EDM 2).

These metaphors help the participants make meaning of their work leading for equity with those in the community over time. Their words brought out the myriad of perspectives, needs, contributions, and the recognition that without help from those in the community, they might not get to the collective outcome. Through these metaphors, the
participants point to how equity work is hard, especially when leading for equity.

**Big Hug:** Equity work is like a big hug. A big hug because we are all vulnerable. And sometimes we need an empathetic or compassionate presence to sit with it. Like a hard situation. Sometimes you don't need... You just need a big hug, and we don't need all the words or to try and work through it because it's very vulnerable work ... the big hug also sometimes signals the start of healing. It's a big hug because we've got to get to that place where we can still tell each other it's going to be okay (EDM 9).

Equity work means leading for change as noted in Round 2, the work is supporting people to think differently, know more about those they serve, and willing to change behaviors that contribute to the advancement of equity.

**Personal and Professional Growth**

The following metaphors came up during Round 3 interviews that were connected to the broader theme Personal and Professional Growth.

- Border Collie
- Rest areas on a road trip
- Cocoon and Butterfly
- Like a River
- Party host facilitating activities that allow guests to engage.
- House with infinite rooms in the dark, finding one light switch at a time.
- Mosaic v Puzzle
Seven EDMs shared metaphors that reinforced the personal and professional growth that occurs in this work of culturally and community responsive decision-making. Many EDMs talked about the internal drive that is currently present within them while practicing equity work. They realized how difficult and complex it can get working and practicing equitable decision-making for a more just educational system. It is “big work” and at times requires a period of learning, thinking, connecting before gaining confidence to act, and then back to thinking, reflecting, and then doing again. There are periods of respite that are required because of the complexity and weight of the work.

**Cocoon and Butterfly:** It’s like being in a cocoon, meaning that you're in the dark. It's not always the happiest place to be, you know? You're thinking, growing, changing, and processing and it's a lot of reflection. So it's kind of like that cocoon, represents that piece and then not that like I'm a butterfly by any means, but there's moments where it's like you're going back and forth and being in the cocoon, reflecting and thinking to like having moments where you can come out and say what needs to be said or make decisions that need to be made and then go back into that cocoon for a while, think it through, process it, try to make the best decisions you can and continue to educate and think and reflect and then come back out. So, it's like a slingshot cocoon to butterfly effect, I would say. So, I think that for a long time I didn't feel totally ready to come out. And then as I kind of moved through, and towards leadership or leadership roles, then I really felt like, okay, it's time. Like when is it time to say what you think or to support people in a way that is new or different? That's kind of how it happened.
for me. So just a lot of years of sitting on it and thinking about it and then
deciding, okay, it's time. It's time to make those moves (EDM 6).

The metaphor provided by EDM 6 reveals an internal process that occurs over time and
in a cyclical pattern. The cocoon provided a safe place to think and reflect, while the
butterfly allowed interaction with the community in a new way. There is also a capacity
building element where along the way, an EDM needs to keep the people connected in
the community with one another while doing the work that can be emotionally charged.
The Border Collie metaphor speaks to this connection as noted below.

**Border Collie:** The border collie is an interesting dog. It's got a very high internal
drive to work. It's got these instincts to keep a group of animals together. 99% of
the actions of those dogs come from their own internal orientations. Their own
instincts to keep people together and keep them moving as one. And the rest of it
was just a little bit of training to say where to head them. And so, the thing that I
like about that metaphor is that I feel like my own internal orientations are to keep
people together and to keep them sort of harmoniously operating as a collective.
And I can do that work pretty endlessly with a lot of joy and energy, and I try to
approach that work with a light heart and a playful energy like those dogs. And it
is. It's a bad metaphor because I don’t think of the people I'm working with as
sheep or people that I'm in charge of. It's just a matter of creating a context and
using subtle movements to help somebody who's going off on their own, to
remember to be part of the group and stick together as we are trying to operate as
a single unit. And that's kind of the task of community, of leadership, of
organizing lots of people to do some tasks like running the school or teaching a
class or whatever it is. I think it is really simplified. Like I think the work is not
just about what I'm doing, it's more about what the group is doing (EDM 4).

EDM 4’s metaphor connects to the importance of creating levity in the work, community,
joyful energy, light heart, and playful energy that we bring to the work that oftentimes
can be heavy. The work is a journey and like being on a long road trip. The journey is
more manageable, and achievable with rest areas along the way, which indicates the need
for good infrastructure to support the long journey. EDM 5 explains their metaphor and
why rest stops benefit the families and students they are trying to serve.

**Rest areas and stops.** It makes me feel sometimes more comfortable being
uncomfortable or being vulnerable. When I have either myself or with a group of
people, tried to take a certain direction and then stopped and slowed down or
pivoted or whatever. [Pausing] has never gotten negative feedback from the
people that we were trying to walk alongside like families of students of color or
families of kids with disabilities. We've never gotten feedback to move faster.
This year that was negative, where they said, I wish you didn't do that. That never
happened. We've had White staff members say like, I want there to be more
outcomes. ‘I want this to go faster. I feel frustrated with the lack of action, you
know, things like that, but never from the families or the students that we were
trying to do better.’ So, stopping, slowing down, changing direction, and getting
more feedback is not a bad thing. But our White staff members genuinely wanted
to do equity work, but they wanted there to be a thing, a product like a lesson, a
document, a rule, and they wanted it quickly. But never from the families or the kids that we were trying to better serve (EDM 5).

These metaphors affirm the EDMs’ description of the work is important, and complex. Changing systems to better serve all students with a specific focus on RCLD students takes time, intention, and intuition. Thus, having a common roadmap, north star, as to what the community is working towards together is important. The edges of the puzzle that are being created by Hope District are guided by a clear mission and vision for equitable outcomes.

**Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable Outcomes**

The following metaphors were brought forward during Round 3 interviews that were connected to the broader theme of Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable Outcomes.

- Mechanic
- Crabs in the crate
- Ecosystem
- Mycorrhizal network
- Hosting a vegetarian dinner party
- Rules written in Invisible Ink

Six EDMs shared metaphors about what it means to be an EDM practicing culturally, and community responsive work aligned to the clear mission and vision of the district. Most related to systems that are complex, interconnected, and a mystery, still yet to be understood. As highlighted in Round 1 the theme of Clear Mission and Vision for
Equitable Outcomes practices centers students in a holistic way. The role of EDMs now is to address the systemic barriers. As EDM 1 explains using the mechanic metaphor,

**Mechanic:** You're a mechanic and somebody brings you the car. It's a system that's there, right? Like you don't have any control over the system that you're inheriting. But somebody says it's broken, and you've got to figure out how to fix it. And so, you have to figure out, like, what's not working, what is needed? So, in that sense of systems where as mechanics, we're trying to diagnose a problem and fix it (EDM 1).

Some EDMs shared how frustrating it is at time to lead with equity in mind, when others do not have the same goal, the work is so big and complex at times, that there isn’t focus, and people unknowingly sabotage each other's efforts because there isn’t an alignment, plan, or coordination of efforts, thus no one achieving their goals. The lack of clarity and alignment of mission and vision, can result in the process of working against each other, as EDM 2 shares with their metaphor of Crabs in the Crate.

**Crabs in the Crate:** So, if there's one crab in a crate, they can easily walk out of the crate and accomplish their goal. But if there's many crabs in the crate or other crabs in the crate, they're all trying to get out. And so, they actually end up pulling each other back in and none of them escape the crate, so we end up not meeting our goal. It's been frustrating for me because I keep trying to climb out of this crate, you know, And I've got other people who are just like pulling me back. So, this goal can never be accomplished. And I'm trying to give my reasons why. And I just keep getting shut down and shut down. And the reason why I came to that
metaphor. And my thinking here isn't that I want to work on my own to accomplish the goal. That's not where I'm making the connection. But my connection is that when I'm working in a group that my thinking doesn't align with their thinking, then we are basically pulling each other down, sabotaging our own mission to accomplish a goal that we want to accomplish that doesn’t have an equitable lens at all that we're looking through. So that's kind of the connection that I made with that metaphor (EDM 2).

Some talked about uncharted territory, and the time it takes to plan, and still not know if the conditions are right to do the work, and the need to do it anyway because there is an urgency to change things. The host metaphor acknowledged that there will be a lot of feelings, expectations, and potential conflict because of fear of being judged.

**Host of a Party:** You're the host of a party, and you are facilitating an opportunity to experience something different. Where you're serving a meal that's designed to provide or encourage healthier choices in diet, specifically food options that people haven't thought of before, like either vegan or vegetarian or keto or whatever you want to call it, right? But you're planning and you're hosting a party of people that are coming to the party are all expecting this extravagant gourmet meal of rich diets, with proteins like seafood, steak, or other meats. Your job is to broaden people’s minds to something new and different (EDM 8).

These metaphors help bring to light what it is like to lead for equity, the challenges, uncertainty, learnings, and growth that occurs for those practicing the work of transformational change. The need for partnership, support, and accountability toward a
new way of being as educational decision-makers and leaders. The conditions of the environment for which this work takes place help guide the people that bring these ideas to life to work toward operationalizing an inclusive, culturally and community responsive educational system together.

Limitations of the Study

This study is a comprehensive look at the experience of White EDMs leading culturally and community responsive decision making in one school district. This study examines a single community so the results cannot be generalized but can give insights to starting points for those who don’t know where to start when facilitating equity work in schools. This study is also specific to the context of Oregon’s legislative backdrop of the recent investment in funding for educational equity through the Student Success Act.

Although this study gives insight into the work that White educational decision-makers are doing to address the disproportionate outcomes in their own community, the conditions that allowed the work to occur might not be easily replicable. Also, this perspective is limited to the lens of White practitioners. In Hope district, when convening RCLD communities, the number one ask is more representation in instructional and leadership staff that is proportionate to the diverse student population.

This district’s journey has been in progress intentionally, for almost two decades. Although this study can give insights to the necessary time and commitments that are required to create the conditions for equity work to advance, it might not be clear on how educational leaders might start the work to build infrastructure, cultivate engagement and partnerships with community members both internal and external to the daily work in
Another limitation of this study is my role in the district as the emic/etic lens as an insider and outsider. As a part of this district, I have built some of the infrastructure, practice, and evidence of efficacy over time. While doing the advocacy work, I have had some experience with the district and leveraged relationships that I built to make progress on systems change. Some limitations might be that I have more contextual knowledge of what EDMs have shared and that might impact the way I interpret the results.

In Chapter 5, I will synthesize the findings to answer my research questions. I will also situate this study in the current context and the conceptual framework I shared from Chapter 2.
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Introduction

The problem of practice that this research addressed was the negative impact of colorblindness by predominantly White Educational Decision Makers making decisions for RCLD students. This interpretative phenomenological study seeks to understand the experience of White EDMs engaging in equitable practices in a school district context that centers equity in decision-making to support RCLD students. In this school district, White EDMs make up an average of 88% of the teaching and administrative body, while 47% of students are RCLD. EDMs have received support, training, education, and practice about being culturally and community responsive. This process of unpacking what was learned through the qualitative research conducted in this study allows practitioners to get a glimpse of what it looks like to plan for widespread cultural mismatch in the current workforce. Chapter One, focused on the disproportionate outcomes of RCLD students in the United States public educational system. Given the context of a predominately White teaching force in an increasingly diverse student body, the researcher discussed the impact of cultural mismatch.

Chapter Two explored why disproportionate outcomes of RCLD students persisted and focused on the effects of colorblindness in the context of predominantly White educators after the decision rules from Brown v Board of Education. The impact of this decision directed attention to educational decision-makers as an essential part of this study. The researcher then introduced a conceptual framework to analyze the problem of colorblindness and its impact on educational decision-makers and the public educational system.
In chapter three, the research methodology and data analysis process were shared. As an equity practitioner of color leading predominantly White EDMs, the researcher was curious about the experience of White EDMs serving as equity leaders and making equitable decisions. During the recruitment phase for the study, most of the potential participants were White, so the researcher chose to focus on White EDMs to understand the experience of White EDMs serving RCLD students. The researcher shared the emic and etic perspectives as a leader within the context of the district while being an outsider as an RCLD EDM in the field of education. The researcher wanted to understand the experiences of White educational leaders working to advance equity and advocate for the RCLD community. Given the context and conditions for supporting equitable decision-making, what is the essence of this phenomenon of equitable decision-making? The following research questions that were asked to help to understand that broader question:

1) How would EDMs describe the context and impact of the research site’s environment as they make culturally and community-responsive decisions?
2) How do EDMs practice culturally and community-responsive decision-making?
3) How do EDMs describe their experience as culturally and community-responsive leaders?

Chapter Four presented the results of my qualitative analysis based on Seidman’s phenomenological interview process to answer the research questions. Limitations of the study were also shared.

In Chapter Five, findings will be synthesized and situate the study in the literature related to colorblindness and educational decision-making. Throughout this chapter, each of the research questions will be examined by integrating the five key themes from
participant responses (Clear mission and vision for equitable outcomes, Critical
Awareness, reflection, and consciousness, Personal and professional growth,
Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Community and Actions for equitable
outcomes) with the research literature and conceptual framework (see Figure 15)
presented in Chapter 2 that situates the phenomenon in Critical Race Theory and Critical
Consciousness. Finally, implications and opportunities for future research will be shared.

**Figure 14 Un’s Conceptual Framework Equitable Educational Decision-Making**

Here is a brief review of the five most prominent themes drawn from EDMs’
responses in the study.

“Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable Outcomes” made evident the importance
of context in establishing the conditions that allow White EDMs to use their time and
energy to lead for equity successfully. “Critical Awareness, Reflection, and
Consciousness” and “Personal and Professional Growth” demonstrated the important work necessary for White EDMs to mitigate colorblind decision-making, which is necessary given the cultural mismatch between RCLD communities and White EDMs. Finally, the themes “Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Community” and “Actions for Equitable Outcomes” frame the actions, processes, tools, and protocols that support White EDMs in leading others to make equitable decisions within their organizational roles. The next section will review the research questions and consider how the findings align with or add new insights to the literature. In addressing each research question, it is evident how the themes cannot be understood in isolation because of the synergy between context, practice, and personal development throughout the EDM’s experience as they develop and engage in equitable decision making.

**RQ 1: How Would EDMs Describe the Context and the Impact of Their Environment as They Make Culturally and Community-Responsive Decisions?**

A strong organizational infrastructure or system(s) is critical to supporting equitable decision-making with more resources, time, people, and positions necessary to promote equitable decision-making across the system (Ray, 2019; Modeste et al., 2021). When working to change systems toward more equitable practices, clarity of the goals among the service users and service providers is necessary. Change for equity can happen if the people within the system work toward those changesconcertedly with clear and measurable outcomes and clear roles and responsibilities. If those things are not present, then it can highlight structural vulnerabilities, as Mitchell et al. (2017) describe as what emerges when a person in a new or ambiguous organizational role has the flexibility to
address everyday demands while also having an “an unclear or inconsistent work portfolio” (p. 5). Individuals who experience role ambiguity are unable to prepare properly for their work because they are subjected to and responsible for responding to shifting demands. The pressures of the overall organization as well as the needs of their supervisor stagnate transformational change while allowing a perception of movements toward change. In reality, the infrastructure is not built for transformational change.

Due to disparate and disproportionate outcomes, Hope District needed a clear commitment to the work of equity and equitable outcomes for every student, specifically RCLD students. The first research question in this study addresses the need to understand how equitable decision-making is connected to Hope District’s context and their adopted vision, mission, and policy as well as the conditions that were set to implement these values.

Findings across all participants described the work of equitable decision-making as meaningful, purposeful, and a collective mission and vision for the district. All described being guided by a clear mission and vision reinforced by district leaders with clear implementation plans and with feedback and insights from the community members that make up their school community.

Based on responses from EDMs, the Hope District seemed to create an effective context for equity by establishing a “Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable Outcomes.” EDMs described a clear mission and vision for equitable outcomes as the school district having policies and supporting documents that clearly laid out the values of the district and explicitly named the collective charge of leaders in the district. EDM 6 explained the district process of establishing the lens, values, and policy framework of the district:
In the last few years, very purposeful and planned work has been developing an [equitable educational] framework. A very specific framework has been really helpful. And I think one piece to it being purposeful has been that every group within the district has had an opportunity to learn about the framework and give their input regarding their experiences with the framework and working through their day-to-day practices using the framework.

The district has multiple documents that reinforce culturally and community-responsive education, including the framework that EDM 6 described. They go on to share what it was like before these documents helped guide the collective work.

So beforehand… we weren't really sure what to do, but there really wasn't a clear avenue to take. So, I felt like oftentimes I would rely on my own belief systems in regard to addressing issues that came up. And so, it felt like before there was so much variety in how people approach issues of equity or inclusion. And so, it was more difficult, I would say, to feel confident in the path that you're taking to support students and families and educators than there is now.

These statements by EDM 6 reflect similar statements across EDMs demonstrating the importance of a supportive context that is explicit and clear in the mission and vision for equitable outcomes. The comparison with previous efforts demonstrates the direct impact context has on the ability and capacity of White EDMs to lead with equity in decision making.

Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness was a strong theme from EDMs throughout the study. Critical Consciousness was such a key theme across all
rounds of interviews that it seemed to represent a central piece to the puzzle linking across themes in a way that is critical to the collective image being pulled together. EDMs described how the supportive district context was particularly critical in supporting them to move beyond colorblindness in decision making through development of Critical Consciousness, including Critical Awareness and Critical Reflection (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).

In Chapter 2, Ullucci and Battey’s (2011) framework of colorblindness was introduced to understand the persistence of color-blindness in educational decision making. Their model highlights the role of whiteness, individualism, and meritocracy as building blocks of color-blindness. This scaffold of one's thinking reinforces discourse of objectivity, a sense of neutrality, and allows for detours from systemic change. Colorblindness manifests itself by placing blame for failure to others instead of reflecting upon the system’s role in contributing to the outcomes of disproportionality.

Having policies in place is one thing, but how a district operationalizes their practices to align with their policies and reflect their values is a question that naturally follows. The complexity of transformational change is often thwarted by discourse that frames the idea of meritocracy and examples that often conflate being “effective” with efficiency, “time, place, and who is measuring success” (Ullucci and Battey, 2011, p. 1202). Table 13 shows how the Hope School District used Ullucci and Battey’s Colorblindness Framework to implement contextual support for EDMs through specific Equity Moves to combat colorblind decision making and support EDMs in developing critical consciousness.

EDMs gave powerful examples of how the district demonstrated the equity moves
of counter storytelling, participatory decision making and systems accountability which not only established the conditions for EDMs to develop Critical Consciousness, but also provided meaningful examples of the district’s commitment to equity.

**Table 13 Situating Hope District in Ullucci and Battey’s Colorblindness Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scaffolds of Colorblindness</th>
<th>Hope District’s Equity Move</th>
<th>Rationale and Description of Equity Moves</th>
<th>Evidence in Artifacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whiteness</td>
<td>Counter Storytelling through RCLD Lived Experience</td>
<td>There is framework document related to culturally and community responsive decision-making that helps decenter the majority and hegemonic context of predominantly White spaces through partnership with those historically underserved</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Collectivism and Participatory Decision-making</td>
<td>There are policy documents with expectations of collaborative and participatory decision-making to ensure congruent instructional practices and decision-making processes align to the district's mission and vision statements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meritocracy</td>
<td>Systems Accountability</td>
<td>There are continuous improvement plans, that interrupts the discourse of meritocracy by way of Equity Audits and show evidence of efforts to systematically address barriers experienced by RCLD students and families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An example of the way that the Hope District employed equity moves to address colorblindness is evidenced in the quote below by EDM 5 when Hope declared that it would become an Antiracist school district. Two years before the national protests linked to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbrey, and too many others, when many organizations started to adopt anti-racist policies, students in Hope District demanded better from the district. EDM 5 elaborates on the district context and the impacts of counter storytelling, participatory decision making and systems accountability:

> It shouldn't feel bold, but it felt bold at the time. And the fact that we listen to
students, and we listen to students of color in our districts like our school board, actually engages and listens to students and students of color. I feel like it's huge. I mean, I just think it's incredible. I think it means a lot to the kids. And I think it's the only way to make change. I feel like the plan, and I know that every building is in a different place with that. But I feel like that Anti-bias plan and saying, no, we're doing this, we're going to check on how it's going. We're going to look at the data, we're going to talk to kids. We're going to be explicit with our community. I feel like that's another way that we are just making bold moves. That shouldn't be. It shouldn't be considered bold, but it is.

EDM 5 continues to share the importance of why this was a bold move by the district.

Because I think we are still [in a] pretty White suburban area. We could get away with not doing those things because I think we still have enough families who are just kind of cruising along like White families who are like cruising along, doing fine in their suburban lives, who might not push back. And so, I feel like we could still get away with maybe not being as willing to push the envelope. And so, I feel like that's bold. I mean, I don't know, it shouldn't be brave, and it shouldn't be bold, but I still think it is. (EDM 5)

Freire (1971) describes critical consciousness as the connection between developing an awareness of one’s situational and environmental context, and the development of agency to act to change one’s situational and environmental context. EDMs statements suggest that efforts by the Hope District to establish this context were critical to their journey through the work of critical awareness, reflection, and consciousness and how it prepared
them to practice culturally and community-responsive decision-making.

EDM 5’s sentiments are not unique; in fact, the urgency is exacerbated by the broader context. Researchers and scholars in educational leadership have noted an increase in focus on equity work, especially in the context of the COVID pandemic and the disparate impact it had on communities of color, and students and families experiencing social and economic impact. This collective imprint of a worldwide experience shifted the paradigm of health, relationships, and economic security. In addition to this global impact, the intersections of racial injustice and collective experience of racial consciousness were amplified at a national level with the racial injustices and xenophobia toward communities of color (Lewis, Modeste, & Johnson, 2023). Nationally, people were wrestling with the reality of racism and the impact it had in their own backyards. While schools responded to the national protests in 2020, many school districts and professional organizations within the field of education made value statements about the importance of addressing systemic racism (AASA Superintendents Association, 2020).

In Oregon, the impact of the pandemic saw the investments from the Student Success Act, where the focus for funding related to mental health, well-rounded education, and prioritizing historically underserved communities set the backdrop for decision-making. There was also the Oregon Department of Education’s Every Student Belong policy that publicly stated the need for districts to ensure the schools were places that were free from harassment, bias, and hate.

Amid all these state-level advancements of equity and centering historically underserved communities, Hope district received funding from the Student Investment
Account. The district allocated approximately 20% of those funds to stand up an Equity and Inclusion department. The Director of Equity and Inclusion was tasked to lead the district and facilitate the work of developing the district’s identity as an Anti-Bias and Anti-Racist school district. This was a first in the history of Hope District, and after over a decade of trying to advance Equity, there was now a department, with roles and positions that were responsible for operationalizing the Anti-Bias and Educational Equity and Racial Justice policies. Not only has Hope district developed documents to help guide the practices of EDMs in the district, but there is also funding, resources, and strategic level support to advance the work. The development of equity frameworks, educational frameworks, and logic models for operationalizing the district’s mission and vision were reinforced by the work of the Equity and Inclusion department. EDMs now had a network system of support to advance equity initiatives within their own school or departmental community.

RQ 2: How do EDMs Practice Culturally and Community-Responsive Decision-Making?

Three themes were most evident from EDMs when describing practices for Culturally and Community Responsive Decision Making, they were:

a) Personal and Professional Growth,

b) Actions for Equity, and

c) Participatory Decision-Making with Diverse Community Members.

Personal and Professional Growth demonstrated the important work necessary for White EDMs to mitigate colorblind decision-making, which is necessary given the cultural
mismatch between RCLD communities and White EDMs. Finally, the themes Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Community and Actions for Equitable Outcomes frame the actions, processes, tools, and protocols that support White EDMs in leading others to make equitable decisions within their organizational roles.

Once again, it is important to point out the central role of Critical Consciousness when discussing EDM practices for supporting Culturally and Community Responsive Decision Making. EDMs’ statements suggested how the authentic use of Actions for Equity and Participatory Decision Making must be grounded in the EDM’s Critical Awareness, Reflection and Consciousness.

In this section a progression of examples from EDM 1’s lived experience will offer a connected, progressive, and comprehensive view of how the themes of Personal and Professional Growth, Actions for Equity, and Participatory Decision-Making with Diverse Community Members came together for equitable and educational decision-making. The example from EDM 1 also demonstrates the centrality of Critical awareness, reflection, and consciousness. Note this example is an intersection of supporting RCLD students with disabilities; it demonstrates an equity concern in supporting students with disabilities and cultural mismatch.

EDM 1 shared the realization that not many people are eager to engage in transformational change, “people are waiting for others to lead”. In the following excerpt, they recount how they facilitated meetings and training responsive to the staff’s lack of understanding of how to serve RCLD students with IEPs.

The school staff and I put together two or three training courses and we just
would reserve a time in the library like twice a month to do the same training, and it was optional. But we created the space for people to come learn about the IEP process or we talked about accommodations, modifications one time and then we talked about behavioral interventions and other time and, people came to us afterwards and were appreciative and they were like, ‘This has never been done. This was really helpful, but we didn't get it. You know, there was no extra like we just had to go do it in order to create that change. And people wanted that information. But there's no the requirement of us doing that. So, it took someone to just go do it, you know? Had we not, the system would just have kept going. Like the wheels weren't going to fall off, but. that made [the system] a little bit better, I hope. It's just a shift. I feel like I feel it more like part of that, I think is experience. And part of that is like leaning in more. And just like if I don't do it or if someone it doesn't have to be me. But if someone isn't leaning in, then. The… the escalator keeps going, right? The moving, moving runway keeps going. And we're not making any changes, and we just allow the system to continue to perpetuate inequities.

The theme of Personal and Professional Growth and Actions for Equity lives with this idea of a new way of thinking, doing, and practicing. As EDM 1 shared in this interview, they made a connection to the act of doing things differently with a comment about the “moving walkway” which was used from Tatum’s (2001) work. The moving walkway describes racism as a mechanism that is a part of everyday life and can reinforce the outcomes of injustice if one is not aware of its presence and actively or consciously
addressing it.

As EDM 1 describes, leaning in, they are talking about walking against the moving walkway, consciously doing something different about the problem that was presented. In this story they shared, they noticed how the school community was talking about students, and they realized the staff did not fully understand IDEA, Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), and the district’s mission of inclusion. Instead of being frustrated and blaming the staff, they began doing something different, and partnered with other staff to help with this lack of awareness. They created space for learning, thinking, and discussing together.

The proactive steps that they set were just the conditions necessary to build upon the new learning. The following is another example from an IEP meeting for an RCLD student and family and how the EDM describes their practice.

I'm thinking about a student who has many identities within our system who is really struggling. And the student didn't feel heard. The family didn't necessarily feel heard. You know, there's a lot of frustration from staff because that student wasn't attending classes. They were in the halls and so everyone felt like we needed to have an IEP meeting. Well, you know, this student had had IEP meetings before. The family had been involved in IEP meetings before. And in this particular case, it felt like it needed to feel more collaborative. And so, we took out the way we would set up the room. We took out the tables, we set up the meeting in a circle. We had the IEP up on the board to review. But really it was about listening and storytelling, and it went really well, I think.
The change in facilitating this meeting was centered on listening to the student and family, which was an action for equity, and this new way of facilitating is an example of this EDM’s personal and professional growth using culturally and community responsive practices.

You know, we started with strengths, and we started with people telling good stories about the students. And the student was there, and the family was there. And from there, we kind of jumped into the pieces of concern. And we created space for the parents to really tell their story about what the student was experiencing from their perspective.

You could see the people around the circle, like, kind of loosening up and hearing the parents’ story. And so, they came into this meeting with their ideas about what was happening. And you could see during the meeting their perceptions changing and their understanding changing about what the situation was and why that student wasn't coming to class. And, you know. Being in a lot of meetings that I've been in, it's very cut and dry. You go through the process, people are engaged, but it's not it just isn't the level of connection that was experienced in that meeting. And there was a lot of emotion that was expressed through tears, through laughter. And so, by the end of that meeting, I think. People left with a sense of hope that things were going to get better for that student. And so, it just highlights with me, it is a highlight for me as far as facilitating a meeting that I think we made some headway, at least for that student (EDM 1).

What EDM 1 shared in their story about bringing together people to help solve complex
problems was about listening to multiple perspectives and distributing power (Participatory Decision Making with Diverse Communities). The process of bringing different perspectives together to address needs more specifically and centered on those being served was a new way of practice (Action for Equity). What transpired was not just solutions but hope and recommitment to continuing to try together. This feeling of community is part of a common trend that emerged when talking about Personal and Professional Growth for the EDMs, the trust and relationship that formed through these culturally and community responsive practices.

This concept of collaboration and Participatory Decision Making is a remedy to the impacts of individualism, whiteness, and hegemony, or the concept of “how it has always been.” The counter storytelling also addressed the dominant narrative that initiated this story about meritocracy, the student was not going to class, and the frustration that initiated the meeting (Solórazno & Yosso, 2002; Paris, 2012). EDM 1 could have structured the meeting the same way, by centering on those that initiated the meeting. Instead, they opted to get more insight and more information and humanized the experience for not only the student and family but for the team. Practices all supported by the Critical Consciousness of the EDM. These were concepts and ideas that came from the district’s work around restorative practices, equity tools, and protocols, which the school’s administrator brought to their school. That helped the facilitators of these processes feel equipped and supported to try something new.

EDM 1 reflects on this story to provide a context for their thinking of what led to a change in practice.
Around the time that there was a lot of work around the circles and facilitation of circles. And I was a part of those trainings and there had been a lot of work with staff in that way and there had been some work with student like classroom work that way, but we hadn't tried a new style of IEP facilitation. And this seemed like a really good opportunity to try something that we'd been talking about.

As noted earlier, EDM 1’s story exemplified several themes of personal and professional growth (trying something new; initiating the training and seeking partnership with others) through the actions for equity (circle process, amplifying community voice through use of protocols, and setting conditions for collaboration) they used to facilitate a more collaborative IEP meeting that centered on the experiences of the student and his family. EDM 1 continues to explain the many ways they experienced Personal and Professional growth from this experience.

[It felt] good to facilitate this meeting, I mean, I was like, well. Here's something new that I'm trying that seems to be working… this is kind of cool, right? Yeah. You know, it's it was out of the box. It was not something that I have typically done, and it seemed to be successful. So, I guess that was just a nice feeling. I think that I mean, making assumptions if I'm trying to imagine what other people are thinking. Looking at the parents. I could tell that she felt heard, and I don't know that she had always felt heard by a school. I saw someone that opened up and told us her story and someone that felt safe enough to express emotions in that space. And I saw a student who is often. Or was often maybe defiant as a way that people would describe the student, like open up and really share why they felt
that way or what they were experiencing at school, that kind of made them respond that way. And then I also saw staff members like. Nodding and acknowledging their experiences. They told their story and acknowledged it and then tried to work… work in that space to come to a more collective solution or program. I think we tried to really set that space up as a place for like highlighting the student strengths and then addressing what wasn't working well. And I think all the people in that space were engaged and it felt like it was collaborative. And not just another process or another meeting.

In this description of their practice, the EDM recontextualized the student and family’s experiences. As opposed to decontextualizing and thus dehumanizing the student and family’s experience. This addresses the scaffold of colorblindness, as highlighted by Ullucci and Battey (2011) as meritocracy and individualism work together to avoid context considerations and reflection of the place of history in prioritizing the experiences of able, White students as the default experience. The image of equitable educational decision-making is forming, it is showing that RCLD students and families are having their lived experiences amplified through the practice of holding space, creating the conditions for lived experiences to be known, to be heard, and to be validated as true and real.

The findings revealed the common patterns that emerged from the EDMs were the centering of people as the work happens among the people within the community. The process, how people show up to do the work collectively, the protocols, how the work gets done together, and the practice that supports the common goal (see figure
below, from Chapter 4) thus describing Actions for Equity that the EDMs are engaging in Hope District.

The participants’ Personal and Professional Growth was reinforced by the Actions for Equity that was discussed and described by the EDMs in the study. The connection to hope, healing, and capacity served as reinforcement for EDMs to feel empowered to center those being served (Participatory Decision Making) rather than those who built the system and preserving the power dynamics (Khalifa, Arnold, Newcomb, 2015). The need to re-engage and partner with families and students is part of the rehumanizing work that has a persistent presence in the lived experience of the EDMs in Hope district. The shift from hopelessness to hopefulness re-energizes the commitment with one another to support the student and fueled and maintained Personal and Professional Growth.

As EDMs shared their lived experience working in the district 100% of the participants spoke about feeling supported, that the work was purposeful, and that they experienced feeling conflicted, being challenged, and growing from the work. The policies and practices in Hope District set conditions that allowed communities to come together to address the complexities that emerged as they were serving students, and it set the opportunities for trust and relationships to be strengthened as they continued to work together.

In the conceptual framework that was offered earlier (Figure 13), the unlearning of colorblindness through EDMs learned Critical Consciousness creates the conditions for which true collaboration can occur. Round 2 not only discussed Personal and Professional Growth, through anchoring in the Actions for Equity, but also the work of
Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Community Members. The next part of the conceptual framework is Learning and Practicing Racial Consciousness. The concepts of lifelong learning and cultural humility come up as part of the next rounds of findings for the third research question focused on understanding the experience of leading for equity for White EDMs.

RQ 3: How do EDMs Describe Their Experience as Culturally and Community-Responsive Leaders?

The third and final round of the interview process allowed the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience as EDMs practicing culturally and community-responsive decision-making. It also allowed them to reflect on who they are, and their lived experience connected to this phenomenon of leading for equity as White practitioners. It allowed them to address the intellectual and emotional connections between their practice and life story or lived experience (Seidman, 2006). The researcher asked participants to bring in metaphors, which enhanced the interview with rich descriptive words that revealed their thinking. The metaphors were used as prompts for deep conversations during the data collection process of Round 3.

The Following themes emerged with strong patterns of saturation in the analysis of Round 3 data.

a) Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness,

b) Participatory Decision-making,

c) Personal and Professional Growth, and
d) Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable

They were reinforced through levels of saturation as important aspects of equitable educational decision-making and made clear the picture or the essence of this study.

Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness. Many of the EDMs’ metaphors related to Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness included the images of “fighting with myself,” “coil or spring,” and a “caterpillar” (see full list of metaphors in Chapter 4) The common thread of these metaphors was related to self-awareness, continuous cycles of reflection and the impact on practice. Some EDMs have shared this process of critical awareness and the ability to use that understanding of self, to impact change within one’s community. During round 3 interviews, participants had the opportunity to share their final “words of wisdom”. EDM 3 shares their transformation as a culturally and community responsive leader in the following.

I think my wisdom to share, I guess, is that. I don't think that we can transform systems if we're not willing to be transformed ourselves and opening ourselves up to that kind of transformation, being willing to be changed. By doing this work, it’s just so powerful and has a ripple effect. I think, when people see us changing. It's that human aspect again. ‘Like, oh, I don't have to get this all right?’ I can change my mind and I can have second thoughts? I can go deeper, and I can revisit a topic that we were talking about before without feeling shame or embarrassment.? Yeah. The more I've experienced living into my own personal transformation, the more I've witnessed people around take a sigh of relief. Like,
okay. And that, I think that's part of what's inviting [about this work in the
district] (EDM 3).

EDM 3, speaks of an invitation in their words of wisdom. The invitation to get involved in equity work includes the openness to make change and to grow personally and professionally. The ripple effect appears to include vulnerability and bearing witness to one’s own transformation. The interactive process that is shared here by EDM 3 is reinforced by the coil metaphor, offered by EDM 1. The process of continuous learning of cultural knowledge and context is supported by many culturally responsive scholars (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2006; Gay & Howard, 2003; 2002; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

In the metaphors “fight with myself” and “caterpillar” EDMs 5 and 6 talks about the support needed to grow and learn through interactions and seeking out information, knowledge, and understanding from the community. As gleaned from their metaphors and elaborations, one cannot engage in personal transformation without the help of others broadening their perspectives or insights. This connection and relationship with others offer insights into the next theme of Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Communities.

**Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Communities.** Some of the EDMs’ metaphors related to Participatory Decision-making with Diverse Communities included the description of a “Mosaic,” a “Gardener,” an “Orchestra,” and “Hugs” (see full list of metaphors in Chapter 4). The common ideas from these metaphors were the importance of relationships and the complexity of gaining and maintaining trust over time with people in your community. There were also periods of uncertainty due to the contributions of all the participants in the decision-
making process. The “Mosaic” metaphor helps with understanding the feelings, emotions, and elation that occurs once the Mosaic is completed, but the journey to completion is riddled with feelings of uncertainty, worries about the outcome, and at the end, still being proud of the beauty and complexity of the collective work. Working with the community, they bring their lived experiences to the work, and sometimes it fits perfectly with your image of what the Mosaic should look like, and at times it changes your whole plan.

EDM 6, speaks to the messiness of collaboration and what they learned about being okay with the discomfort that arises when there is no trust or alignment.

So, I really rely on other adults within other [diverse] groups to tell me the truth. But that means that we have to have a really trusting, honest relationship. So that means that I have to be vulnerable enough with people from other groups to tell them that I'm afraid that I may make mistakes. I'm not really sure, you know, like about any scenario that comes up so that they know when there's a truth that needs to be told. They know that I'm receptive to hearing that I'm not going to shut it down. I'm going to listen, and I want to hear, and I might be upset, or I might be sad about it or, you know, but that's okay. I can handle that. It's part of my responsibility as a leader to, sometimes just feel bad about it and suck it up. You know, like, I made a mistake where I had a blind spot, or we made something happen that wasn't great. And just having to, like, sit in that. So, it's kind of about having relationships with people who have relationships with people and are honest and trusting.

Karen Mapp (2013) talks about dual capacity building for families and schools to partner.
The gap of partnership comes from lack of understanding of how to partner between families and schools. As White practitioners, there were many challenges including not having the perceived credibility from other White practitioners to lead for Equity and the mistrust or skepticism from RCLD communities who have negative experiences from school leaders. The metaphors speak to the time it takes to practice, and build skill sets, and relationships with the community, or those you serve. These all lead to personal and professional growth as EDMs. The process of partnering and including families in decision-making processes are at the core of culturally and community responsiveness, as well as the process toward anti-bias and anti-racist practices. (Gay, 2010; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016).

**Personal and Professional Growth. A few of the EDMs’** metaphors related to Personal and Professional Growth included, the “Cocoon and Butterfly” relationship of transformation, the strengthening of personal identity through the “Border Collie” example, and the support of “Rest Areas and Stops” in the process of personal and professional growth. The connections that were made from these metaphors include the relationship between personal growth, acknowledgement of personal strengths, and the conditions necessary for personal and professional growth to occur. The cocoon and butterfly metaphor explains the transformation that occurs as one embarks on the journey of being a culturally and community responsive leader. EDM 6, describes that experience for them.

In the cocoon you are thinking, growing, changing, and processing and it's like a lot of reflection. Then moments where you can come out and say what needs to be
said or make decisions that need to be made and then go back into that cocoon for
a while, think it through, process it, try to make the best decisions you can and
continue to educate and think and reflect and then come back out. So, it's like a
slingshot cocoon to butterfly effect, I would say. So, I think that for a long time I
didn't feel totally ready to come out. And then as I kind of moved through, like
moving towards a leadership role, then I really felt like, okay, it's time. Like when
is it time to say what you think or to support people in a way or like start to speak.
That's kind of how it happened for me. So just a lot of years of sitting on it and
thinking about it and then deciding, okay, it's time. It's time to make those moves.

**Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable Outcomes.** The last theme connected to
EDMs’ metaphors describe their experiences as culturally and community-responsive
leaders to the relationship with systems, vision, and mission. The “rest stop and rest area”
metaphor was a great insight for infrastructure and clearly organized systems to support
the travelers on this journey of equity work. The “mechanic” metaphor resonates with the
people overseeing the health of the system to function as it is intended to serve every
student.

New studies are highlighting the importance of clarity in operationalizing vision
and mission statements or clear theories of change and can focus efforts toward
dismantling historic and current forms of oppression to rebuild just educational
experiences for students and families (Irby, Green, Ishimaru, 2021;2022). Recently,
scholars such as Ray (2019) have theorized the ways in which mechanisms in institutions
and organizations resist meaningful change related to equity, diversity, and inclusion.
Having clearly stated values in policies, and systems of accountability as well as centering on participatory decision-making and continuous improvement plans is critical. It makes the work meaningful and sustainable when it includes and centers collaboration with students and families.

Summary

As stated in the introduction, the problem of practice that this research addressed was the negative impact of colorblindness by predominantly White EDMs making decisions for RCLD students. The goal of this study was to understand the experience of White EDMs engaging in equitable practices in a school district context that centers equity in decision-making to support RCLD students. Results from the study revealed many moments of magic, where the ‘aha’ moments came up for the participants as they reflected on their experiences working in Hope District, their stories, and experiences practicing culturally and community responsiveness, and the metaphors that helped them make meaning of their experiences.

All EDMs shared pivotal moments of reflection, awareness, and action through practicing equitable decision-making in Hope District. Many of the EDMs shared “not having the slightest clue” at the start of their journey in education and the ways some students and families experienced school differently because of their RCLD identity markers. This theme affirms the colorblindness that Ullucci and Battey (2011) frame as Whiteness and the interview data revealed EDMs' lack of understanding of RCLD student and family experience, given their identity as a White practitioner. EDM 8 shares the lack of awareness that they came to Hope District with, and how it matured through working in the district.
I feel like I came into [the district] purely as a learner about this [equity] work, like my lived experience. You know, the perception of inequity and privilege and marginalization of groups of people was never part of my experience growing up. I grew up in a homogeneous, White world that didn't offer to me… It was never a part of my life. I never had to be I was never asked to even think about that right until I started to pursue work in leadership. Right. And at that point, it was coming up for the first time, like even in my educator preparation courses, that was never discussed. Right. You just did what you did with pedagogy and assessment and classroom management. You know, but it was never… it never became the fabric that holds everything we do together until I became an administrator. And even when I became an administrator in my previous school district. It was mentioned, but it was not the fabric behind what do… why we do what we do. And then when I came to [this district] for me personally. Then it is starting to click in together and say, okay, this is why I'm here. Right. Whereas I didn't know before why I was necessarily doing the work I was doing. I was just trying to impact kids and learning. When I came to [this district] and after like two, three, four years here and especially when I stepped into the principal chair, then I knew very clearly like, This is why I'm here, this is why I've been called to do this work is because of the privilege that exists, the inability to recognize that privilege in our system sometimes and the marginalization and inequities that are being perpetuated because we're not aware and we're not trying to look at things to see where that exists (EDM 8).
This quote captures most of the five key themes that emerged from all participants in the study and makes a clear link to the original concerns about the impacts of colorblindness by White EDMs. This quote also really centers on Critical Awareness, Reflection, and Consciousness in a way that aligns with the experiences across all the EDMs.

**Humanizing the Decision-Making Process.** All the EDMs in the study created many moments in practice where RCLD students and families could preserve their dignity and find hope for a pathway forward. Participants’ stories and descriptions of their experiences shared what was central to the 5 themes: the humanization of the decision-making process. Figure 16 organizes the various levels where humanization of decision making occurs across the organization.

**Figure 15 Levels of Humanizing Decision-Making Process**

- **Personal Level.** At the personal level, all the participants talked about the humanizing
process that occurred for them as practitioners, learning and building critical awareness of their positionality and their identity, often racializing themselves for the first time. Acknowledging that Whiteness comes with privilege and, at times, the veil of ignorance of others’ experiences. There was a process of learning and growing over time. The ability to move beyond shame, blame, or immobilization to a newfound sense of responsibility, efficacy, and skill sets to lead for transformational change. The themes that saturated this level were Critical Awareness, Reflection, Critical Consciousness and Personal and Professional Growth. These concepts are reinforced by scholars who have worked on anti-bias and anti-racist practices (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998; Khalifa, Arnold, Newcomb, 2016). As EDM 3 shared so courageously, the process of humanizing ourselves is to understand who we are, our own stories, and how those lived experiences empower us to do things we didn’t know we could do, break patterns that we didn’t know we could break.

Being my whole self in this work in general. It's been hard because there are some real deep people-pleasing tendencies in me that just want to make sure that people are comfortable and if I need to, some patterns of the past for me was to make myself smaller so that other people can be more comfortable. But that hasn't served me. And the reality is that it also hasn't served others either. And what I've found is that when I step out in vulnerability, in being my full and authentic self and living into that completely in all settings, people actually seem quite drawn to that and tend to lean in a way that I didn't think. My fear was that they would shy away, but that doesn't seem to be the case. Our Director of Equity has talked about this, the work that we're doing is being invitational and disarming when we model our own transformation, and I think that's been my experience (EDM 3).
Communal Level. At the communal level, all the participants, and those they led or supported, talked about the humanizing conditions that were created to allow the work to occur. For example, EDMs used the Art of Community, a district protocol and process, to intentionally facilitate and create spaces for engagement, in which staff and participants were cared for and safe to take risks, communicate honestly and develop critical consciousness. The themes that saturated this level of humanization were Participatory Decision-Making with Diverse Community Members, Actions for Equity, and Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable Outcomes.

Communities are where the decisions are being made. The lived experiences of all members of the community make the work complex, challenging, and rewarding. The skill sets and actions for equity that were described in the study show the developing capacity of EDMs to lead for culturally and community responsive change. Humanization of decision making in the community shows up when the decisions are intertwined with the responsibility and commitment to others that the educational system has historically othered or dismissed. Participatory decision-making makes the decisions truly culturally and community responsive, as well as sustainable, as it includes those for which the decision impacts. What was once complex, scary, and unknown is demystified and the fruits of collaboration with the community leave a legacy of possibilities, creating pathways of relationship that are new and give the feelings of abundance and optimism that can fuel a community’s work of transformation. As EDM 4 details in their reflection and words of wisdom,

The places that we're trying to get to can't be arrived at through the process of
smart thinking or strategy or force or control or doing it right or perfect implementation of some theoretical model. I think that is a short-sighted approach, and it's one that within our society and culture, the mainstream, people tend towards a lot. And I think that the emotional queues that we throw up within our community when we're thinking about it in those ways shut people down for the openness. It leads people to fear because it's an attempt to control them without their voice and participation. It's without the with. So, what I would say is to recognize this as a path of personal growth and a path of personal opening, and that the realms of art and poetry and spirituality can be really useful in this way. Those are better languages in some way to talk about what we're trying to do. It's like getting out of that conceptual headspace of past and future thinking and being present and connected with the ones that we're with and being able to really listen to them. And mostly I think that that is an art of removing rather than adding. So, if we strip down all the shoulds and have to’s and smart ideas and theory and we just can be in a place of listening and connecting, then so many good things come from that. That's the seed, the seed, and the heart of that work, I believe. (EDM)

**Systemic Level.** For humanization of decision making at the systemic level, all participants discussed the impact of creating policies that were born from listening sessions that centered on the lived experience of RCLD students and families and strategic plans that were developed through deep community engagement processes, and investments that support families who have expressed barriers to accessing schools, resources, and community. Setting the conditions to center relationships and partnerships
is important for supporting EDMs to make the necessary changes to create a just and responsive educational system to those historically underserved, RCLD students, families, and staff. The themes that saturated this level of humanization were Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable Outcomes, Actions for Equity and Participatory Decision-Making with Diverse Community Members.

Clear Mission and Vision for Equitable Outcomes can be witnessed through predictable and routine processes of community engagement for strategic visioning, annual budget processes, and continuous improvement plans. District leaders model actions for equity in everyday practice. The Actions for Equity not only creates the infrastructure for practice, but also supports the critical decision-making process from start to finish with people in the community impacted by those decisions.

Systemic Actions include the allocation of resources and support through accountability structures and guidelines to help operationalize the work in a meaningful way. Having a clear mission and vision for equitable outcomes helps to direct the work in a focused and transparent way, always centering the work with an equity focus. The foundation and belief that every student can, with the right conditions, and the commitment to ensuring those infrastructures of support are resourced and clearly reinforced through time, attention, people, and resource creates the spaces for collaboration and ingenuity to grow, which humanizes all who are in that system (Wheatley & Frieze, 2010; Ray 2019; Irby, Green, Ishimaru, 2021; 2022). A system that reflects on its outcomes and asks why through a public and transparent process, is a system that has the workings and capacity to develop and operationalize deep equity work.
This passage describing leaders as hosts by Wheatley and Frieze (2010) nicely demonstrates the humanization of decision making expressed across EDMs.

Leaders-as-hosts need to be skilled conveners. They realize that their organization is rich in resources, and the easiest way to discover these is to bring diverse people together in conversations that matter. People who didn’t like each other, people who discounted and ignored each other, people who felt invisible, neglected, and left out - these are the people who can emerge from their boxes and labels to become interesting, engaged colleagues and collaborators… Hosting leaders create substantive change by relying on everyone’s creativity, commitment, and generosity. They learn firsthand experience that these qualities are present in just about everyone and in every organization. They extend sincere invitations, ask good questions, and have the courage to support risk-taking and experimentation (p. 3).

As stated earlier in the chapter, the image of equitable educational decision-making is forming, and it is showing that EDMs have come to place significant value on seeking out and understanding the experiences and perspectives of RCLD students and families. EDMs reported engaging in practices of holding space for RCLD students and families and creating the conditions for lived experiences to be known, to be heard, and to be validated as true and real. It also shows how EDMs contributed to equity work in Hope District, finding their confidence through practice fostering personal and professional growth.

**Implications**
This was a comprehensive interpretative phenomenological study that sought to understand the essence of White EDMs making equitable decisions for RCLD students. The image that emerged is represented in Figure 17.

The EDMs in Hope District shared their lived experience making culturally and community-responsive decisions with a critically conscious lens, through three rounds of interviews. What emerged from the EDMs’ stories, reflections, and descriptions was a humanizing process of decision-making with diverse community members. The components of this process of Humanizing Decision-Making start with Racial Consciousness and Personal Growth, Setting Conditions for Participatory Decision-Making, and Building Skill Sets and Capacity to Lead for Change. First and foremost, the process centers people, specifically people who have historically been underserved, RCLD students, families, and staff.

Figure 16 What is the Essence of Equitable Educational Decision-Making?
**Racial Consciousness and Personal Growth.** As all the participants in my study were White, the process of critical reflection and the task of culturally and community-responsive decision-making to better serve RCLD students, made their racial identity a focal point of reflection. There were many moments of missteps, discomfort, or lack of awareness that came up when working with RCLD students, families, and staff. Often listening and hearing the experience of RCLD students and families resulted in the development of racial awareness, self-reflection, and personal growth.

**Create Conditions for Participatory Decision-making.** All the participants in the study indicated the necessary work of creating conditions for participatory decisions to occur. This looked like building capacity for staff and leaders to listen in an intentional way, that included self-monitoring, self-regulation, self-reflection, and self-realization related to scaffolds for informational gathering and mitigating bias in decision-making. As RCLD individuals share their truth and lived experiences, EDMs can experience a range of emotions and often conflate or misconstrue what is being said or conveyed due to biases, particularly colorblindness. Creating the opportunities to build those muscles for engaging with the community and honoring their perspectives, insights, and voice require intentional practice. Skills for facilitating collaborative and participatory decision-making processes are necessary for creating conditions for productive collaboration, especially if the community has experienced harm or negative imprints with the school and its leaders. The use of protocols, processes, and practice helps create the conditions necessary for equitable decision-making.

**Building Skill Sets and Capacity to Lead for Change.** EDMs not only make
decisions, but they also have the task of leading for change. The skills that were highlighted were Actions for Equity (see Figure 13) and participatory decision making. As much of the insights from RCLD students, families, and staff are related to barriers and practices that need to be addressed, conflict can also arise when advocating for change. Any type of change in an organization requires careful consideration and planning as well as awareness of the impact on the people asked to change their practices, or those impacted by the change. These are all considerations of change management that need to be accounted for to humanize decision making with diverse communities.

**Implications for Equity Directors and School Leaders.** In conclusion, the results of this study impacted my understanding as a research practitioner, an RCLD EDM, and an Equity and Inclusion Director. As a person of color serving in the role of Equity and Inclusion Director, it is important that I understand how White EDMs experience their participation in leading culturally and community responsive change. As a leader new to the role of Equity and Inclusion Director I was able to build off the work that I had done previously as an EDM of color and as an RCLD teacher, using my skill sets and knowledge around culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy when leading my department, and culturally responsive leadership in my practice as a district leader driving transformational change. All of those lived experiences allowed me to create processes, protocols, policies, and practice for transformational change. As a research practitioner, I was able to immerse myself in the literature, learn about promising practices, learn about theory, and about implementation and improvements, but there was little guidance specifically in understanding and supporting White EDMs as
equity leaders. This is a prime example of cultural mismatch at play.

It is important for Directors of Equity and RCLD leaders to understand how White EDMs experience their participation in leading culturally and community responsive change, because that is the current context. By understanding the experience of White EDMs, I learned the challenges and successes that they experienced and how they might or might not have aligned with my experiences as an EDM of color. Many White EDMs, despite being equity leaders, did not grapple with their racial identity until later in their careers, prompted by explicit training. That was difficult for me to understand, as an RCLD leader I have been working through the impact of race in my life for as long as I can remember.

The importance of priming the work of Equity and those who are decision-makers is critical to the success of RCLD students. If decisions are made without all the information that is pertinent to the context or individual, then the impact of those decisions might not actually address the needs or problem at hand. The skill sets, resources, and support systems that are required for participatory decision-making to gain the diverse range of perspectives and information about a challenge is critical to the success of advancing equity in a system.

Developing racial consciousness and investing in the personal and professional growth of your EDMs is critical. This can be through personal reflection, clear equity moves, skill sets and opportunities to practice and build capacity to lead for transformational change. This is beyond one and done “training”, but a process in which EDMs have opportunities to reflect on their practice and how their identity impacts their decision-making patterns over time.
Second, creating conditions for participatory decision-making; priming the conditions to support equitable decision-making requires the work of creating a culture and climate that centers on humility, care, courage, and collaboration for change. The five concepts of leading for equity that were affirmed by all participants in this study, can be utilized as a starting point for a community’s ability to create the conditions for equitable decision-making. The use of these concepts to build the infrastructure for equity work to occur can support actionable and concrete steps and strategies toward transformational change.

Third, although this study is specific to a school district in the Pacific Northwest, having an in-depth study that seeks to understand the deep equity work that is already in motion might offer a glimpse of promising practices. This study can help close the gap between theory and practice. This is an example that shows when Equity does work and moves beyond the personal journey of self-reflection or the symbolic gestures of policies and begins to create models of communities humbly doing the work of transforming systems. Though the work is complex and big, it can be done in a collective and collaborative way.

Fourth, this was a study that focused on White EDMs, but it has potential ramifications for retention of communities of color or racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse educational decision-makers. Dixon, Griffin, Teoh (2019) share the reasons why teachers of color leave the profession. One of the challenges teachers of color name is “They experience antagonistic work culture that leaves them feeling unwelcome and/or invisible.” (p.2) and two solutions that align to this challenge “schools should be places that culturally affirm teachers of color, i.e., where the goals and values
of the school match up with the goals and values of the teachers. Schools should be places that affirm a teacher’s humanity and racial identity allowing teachers to feel free to be their authentic selves.” (p.3) All of these recommendations cannot happen without EDMs being racially conscious. If predominately White spaces can first be racially conscious and address colorblindness, then the conditions would be conducive for not only recruiting RCLD educators, staff, and decision-makers, but support and ensure retention as well. The capacity for White EDMs to interrogate, realize, unpack, and recalibrate to a more racially conscious lens, can create the conditions to tend and nurture spaces where RCLD staff and communities not only survive, but thrive.

Finally, this study offers a glimpse into lifelong learning communities with technical skillsets such as protocols, clarity of purpose through policies and adaptive skillsets, openness to new ideas, ability to revisit and revise our understanding, and listening differently to the community members you are working with. The work of humanizing our system through relationships and partnership with the communities we serve takes time and intention.

As a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse woman leading in education, I have found this topic of equity to be so vast and deep that it would take multiple lifetimes to get close to fully unpacking. When tasked to do this work of equity, it is certain that I will be working with White EDMs. I have learned clearly through this study and their perspectives how much more challenging it is for them due to potential tendencies toward colorblindness and distrust and concern from RCLD students and families. It is critical that we understand the lived experience of White EDMs, because they make up the majority of our educators and administrators in Education. Through insights that emerged
from the findings of this study, as Milner shares, “start where you are but don’t stay there” (Milner, 2021).

Equity work reminds us that we are a part of a human system and helps us slow down to learn from our mistakes before they become links of regret and shame that wraps us like armor and hides the semblance of our humanity. In slowing down we also see the potential and opportunities to strengthen our collective spirit and efforts to be a community that sees, serves, and values the people that bring it to life (Un, 2020).

This was a quote from one of my statements as I was announced as the new Director of Equity and Inclusion. As I work to wrap up my study, I am reminded of why this work is critical. At first thought, I was centering on this concept of advocating and advancing a just system for RCLD students. Along the way, as I listened to students, families, staff, and administrators doing their best to make meaningful change. I learned over time that the community needed healing. As I was advocating for RCLD students and families, it dawned on me that our White EDMs needed to be humanized as well. The cultural mismatch grows as EDMs reinforce their armors, as they are bombarded with issues they might not fully understand, have support for, and have guiding principles to take courageous steps toward change. The work of critical self-reflection and the acceptance that we might have missed something when trying to serve our families and students who are racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse, their perspectives.

The cultural mismatch and colorblindness cause frustration, confusion, and at times harm. Hearing the regrets, feelings of shame, vulnerability, fears, insecurities, and
lack of skill sets, the EDMs were expressing these gaps, sometimes in very public ways. It made me think of things differently, and how to center the needs of our RCLD communities when helping White EDMs build capacity as disruptors and shifters of colorblindness. I realized that if I wanted to see change, I needed help. In seeing the gaps in practice, if I believed these EDMs can be change agents and equitable decision-makers, then what would they need to know? What type of conditions do we need to create so that they can be successful to bettering our systems for those furthest from justice? How can they make the change we need to see for our students and families, by including them in the decision-making process?

Deeper work is the ability to see the bigger picture of what needs to be done and build the capacity of who we have in front of us, to do the best work we can to transform our systems to be more just. Disproportionate teaching demographics has been a persistent problem since the Brown v Board of Education decision-rule, over 60 years ago. We can throw our hands up and say we can’t serve our RCLD students, admire the gap, or we can collectively address colorblindness and build racially conscious EDMs. As leaders for equity, we can educate and create opportunities to build common skillsets and practices, aligned to a clear mission and vision of serving every student. If we can create those conditions now, then we can maintain them for those that join our community and grow the capacity for transformational change.

Those in our community have what it takes to bring our commitment to addressing injustices and personal responsibility to our collective reality. We are not stuck in the loop of inaction and shame but filled with the responsibility and commitment to do better for one another and specifically our students furthest from justice. Racism
and systems of injustice impact all of us, some at a higher cost than others so we must know our community, who is in it, our struggles as well as our strengths because only we can solve the problems ahead of us. No one will save us, we are our own problem-solvers, creative collaborators, and advocates for justice, equity, and inclusion. It will take all of us, all the time, always to do this important work of upholding the promise of serving and educating every student.
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Appendix A: Survey Draft

CCRE Educational Decision-Maker (EDM) Survey

Name

I would be interested in participating in a Research Study about educational decision-makers in a school district collectively practicing equitable decision-making, instructional practices, and leadership.

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe, I need more information

Educational Decision-Maker Role

Mark only one oval.

- Board Member (Current/Terminated)
- Director
- District Administrator
- Building Administrator
- T534 Coordinators, Instructional Coach, Facilitators - District/Building
- Building Equity Coordinator

How would you identify yourself?

Racial, Ethnicity, Gender, and other identity markers (example: Asian, Cambodian American Woman)

5. How long have you been in education?
   - example: 20 years (camp counselor, playground assistant, special education assistant, special educator, building & district equity coordinator, director of equity)

6. How long have you been in the district?
   - example: 15 years

EDM Survey

7. Have you practiced culturally and community responsive decision-making?

   Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Other: ______________________

8. “I have facilitated or led a racial initiative, improvement process, or community decision.”

   Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Other: ______________________
9. I have artifacts from meetings that related to decision-making processes or events/meetings I've led. (Notes, minutes, summaries, protocols, brainstorming documents, and collaboration documents)
Mark only one oval.
- Yes
- No
- Other:

10. I've worked with teams of people including ANY of the following stakeholders (staff, students, families, community partners).
Mark only one oval.
- Yes
- No
- Other:

11. I've received equity professional development about cultural and community responsiveness, participatory decision-making; and/or district's equity moves.
Mark only oval.
- Yes
- No
- Other:

12. I believe that to effectively transform our school system staff need to have a common vision for serving all students.
Mark only oval.
- Strongly Disagree
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Strongly Agree

13. I am able to use our district equity or discourse protocols for discussions or decision-making processes.
Mark only oval.
- Strongly Disagree
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Strongly Agree

14. I believe that I have the ability to positively impact student outcomes regardless of a student's identity, context, and contextual circumstances.
Mark only oval.
- Strongly Disagree
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Strongly Agree

15. As a school district, we know how we collectively serve our students.
Mark only oval.
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Strongly Agree

16. I believe that to effectively transform our school system to serve all students, families need to be involved in decision-making.
Mark only oval.
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Strongly Agree

17. As a school district, we understand how our practices impact student outcomes at an individual and collective levels.
Mark only oval.
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Strongly Agree

18. I believe that to effectively transform our school system to serve all students, we need community partnerships to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps.
Mark only oval.
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Strongly Agree

19. I have conversations with my colleagues about student achievement, opportunities, and needs.
Mark only oval.
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Strongly Agree

20. I have conversations with my colleagues about the strengths they bring to supporting students and families.
Mark only oval.
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- Strongly Agree
21. I believe that to effectively transform our school system to serve all students, they need to be involved in decision-making.
   1: Strongly disagree  2: Somewhat disagree  3: Neither agree nor disagree  4: Somewhat agree  5: Strongly agree
   Mark one only.

22. I have conversations with my colleagues about the strengths each student brings to our school community and how to scaffold differentiated instruction for areas of need.
   1: Strongly disagree  2: Somewhat disagree  3: Neither agree nor disagree  4: Somewhat agree  5: Strongly agree
   Mark one only.

23. I understand the impact of a predominantly white staff serving racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students.
   1: Strongly disagree  2: Somewhat disagree  3: Neither agree nor disagree  4: Somewhat agree  5: Strongly agree
   Mark one only.

24. I believe that educating all students requires an understanding that they bring their lived experiences into the classroom and school communities.
   1: Strongly disagree  2: Somewhat disagree  3: Neither agree nor disagree  4: Somewhat agree  5: Strongly agree
   Mark one only.

25. I believe that affirming students’ lived experiences will help them connect with others and to what they are learning.
   1: Strongly disagree  2: Somewhat disagree  3: Neither agree nor disagree  4: Somewhat agree  5: Strongly agree
   Mark one only.

26. I believe that when we normalize different perspectives, effectively communicate them and critically think about its impact then we can affirm global communities.
   1: Strongly disagree  2: Somewhat disagree  3: Neither agree nor disagree  4: Somewhat agree  5: Strongly agree
   Mark one only.

27. I believe that if we treat everyone the same then we can address inequitable outcomes without being divisive.
   1: Strongly disagree  2: Somewhat disagree  3: Neither agree nor disagree  4: Somewhat agree  5: Strongly agree
   Mark one only.

28. To be culturally and community responsive, we need to have a stance of cultural humility and center the needs of our racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students, families, and staff.
   1: Strongly disagree  2: Somewhat disagree  3: Neither agree nor disagree  4: Somewhat agree  5: Strongly agree
   Mark one only.

29. When developing culturally and community responsive plans, there needs to be an intentional focus on bringing in student, families, and community members who understand contextual factors, critical reflections, and impact of decisions.
   1: Strongly disagree  2: Somewhat disagree  3: Neither agree nor disagree  4: Somewhat agree  5: Strongly agree
   Mark one only.

30. When developing culturally and community responsive plans, there needs to be an intentional focus on bringing in student, families, and community members who understand contextual factors, critical reflections, and impact of decisions.
   1: Strongly disagree  2: Somewhat disagree  3: Neither agree nor disagree  4: Somewhat agree  5: Strongly agree
   Mark one only.

Open-Ended Questions

31. How would you describe the district’s commitment and actions to equitable practices?

32. What values are expressed in this district, both explicitly or implicitly regarding equity?
33. How do you know if you’ve made a culturally and community responsive decision?

34. Describe a time in a decision-making process where you learned something about the process you didn’t expect.

35. What did you learn from the collective decision-making process?

36. Describe a decision-making process that you would like to use as a point for reflection.

37. You are describing to a new colleague that has joined the district, what would you tell them about what to expect as a culturally and community-responsive leader?
Appendix B: Art of Community

Art of Community

- We acknowledge that we bring our lived experiences into our conversations
- We strive to be in community with one another with care
- We try to stay curious about each other
- We recognize that we need each other’s help to become better listeners
- We slow down, so we have time to think and reflect
- We remember that conversation is a natural way we think together
- We expect it to get messy at times
- We will listen with intention to learn something new

Adapted from Margaret Wheatley’s “Turning to One Another,” (2000) by Z.Lin (2019)
Appendix C: Equity Pillars

Hope District’s Goal: Educating Every Student
Equity Pillars uphold the promise of “Every Student”
Critical Questions for Developing an Equity Lens for Equitable Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Families</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>❑ Do we have a stance of cultural humility?</td>
<td>❑ How do we understand the culture of our community?</td>
<td>❑ Do we have a way of engaging students’ voices?</td>
<td>❑ Do we have a way of engaging family and caregivers’ voices?</td>
<td>❑ How are we using collective vision to build a tightly-linked system of care for our students, families, and staff?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❑ How are we creating Professional Learning Opportunities to engage in critical analysis of our discourse and actions for cultural and community responsiveness? (Discourse I &amp; Discourse II)</td>
<td>❑ How does staff feedback impact our proactive planning?</td>
<td>❑ How does student feedback impact our proactive planning?</td>
<td>❑ How does family and caregivers’ feedback impact our proactive planning?</td>
<td>❑ How are we utilizing feedback to build stronger transitions for families?</td>
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<td>❑ How do we use protocols and procedures to reflect on practices and develop our staff’s technical and adaptive skills?</td>
<td>❑ What are staff perceptions of how their learning community sets, values, and includes them?</td>
<td>❑ How do students perceive how their learning community serves, values, and includes them?</td>
<td>❑ How are we utilizing feedback in a meaningful way that is responsive to student needs?</td>
<td>❑ What community resources are we accessing to bridge the barriers to participation?</td>
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<td>❑ What do we prioritize in our budgets and allocation of resources? Who is included, and who isn’t?</td>
<td>❑ How are we utilizing the feedback in a meaningful way that is responsive to staff needs to serve student needs adequately?</td>
<td>❑ How are we inviting students to participate in decision-making processes that impact them?</td>
<td>❑ How are we utilizing the feedback meaningfully that expresses the value of family and caregivers’ contributions and partnership?</td>
<td>❑ How are we informing the community of our work to serve our students and community better?</td>
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<tr>
<td>❑ Do we have a connected or disconnected system? How are our systems working to align our collective vision and mission?</td>
<td>❑ How do we engage in a growth mindset, culturally sustaining, responsive, and restorative practices?</td>
<td>❑ Can students feel the impact in their classrooms and school community?</td>
<td>❑ Is our work visible and transparent to our community?</td>
<td>❑</td>
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Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Interview 1

I will build rapport with participants by talking about the interview process, what to expect, and the cycles of engagement. Each interview will include a space for clarifying questions and elaboration based on previous interviews, responses, or artifacts review. As part of the hermeneutic analysis process, I will explicitly ask questions about my interpretation of their responses to ensure the description of the phenomena is accurate and assist in revising my initial interpretation.

Part 1: Analysis of Survey will allow for elaborations and clarification of survey questions that might have.

Part 2: Semi-structured interview questions:

● Describe your experience in this district.

● From your lived experience, how would you describe the district’s focus and actions for equity?

● How does it feel to work in this district and practice equity work?

● How has the district’s equity focus and mission shaped and supported your work in the district?

Possible follow up questions:

Tell me more about…

I heard you say… Can you elaborate on that?

How did this compare to your last experiences?
Interview 2

I will continue to build rapport with participants by talking about the next steps of the interview process, what to expect, and the cycles of engagement. I will continue to hold space for clarifying questions and elaboration based on previous interviews, responses, or artifacts review. As part of the hermeneutic analysis process, I will explicitly ask questions about my interpretation of their responses to ensure the description of the phenomena is accurate and assist in revising my initial interpretation.

Part 1: Analysis of previous interviews will allow for elaborations and clarification of survey questions that I might have.

Part 2: Semi-structured interview questions:

- Please share with me a time you facilitated a conversation about an inequity or led a collaborative decision-making process.
  - Why did you determine this to fall under cultural and community responsiveness?
  - How did it feel to lead or facilitate this?
  - What were some thoughts you had?
  - Reviewing artifacts they brought - Tell me about this artifact...
  - Rose- Bud Thorn Prompt:
    - Rose: What was in bloom? What went well during that process? Why do you think that?
    - Bud: What was the bud - or - what had potential for
growth? What were areas of growth, why?

- Thorn: What was an “ouch” moment that made you uncomfortable? Or What was a sticking point that might have been a negative imprint?

  - What affirmed your expectations, what broadened your perspectives, and what was difficult or ignited your curiosity about the process?
    - Why?
    - How?

- Questions that came up from previous interviews or surveys that surfaced as a need for further inquiry.
Interview 3

I will continue to build rapport with participants by talking about the next steps of the interview process, what to expect, and the cycles of engagement. I will continue to hold space for clarifying questions and elaboration based on previous interviews, responses, or artifacts review. As part of the hermeneutic analysis process, I will explicitly ask questions about my interpretation of their responses to ensure the description of the phenomena is accurate and assist in revising my initial interpretation.

Part 1: Analysis of previous interviews will allow for elaborations and clarification of survey questions that I might have.

Part 2: Semi-structured interview questions:

- Given your lived experiences making culturally and community responsive decisions, how has that impacted you personally and professionally?
  - Tell me more about that…
  - Why do you think that is?
  - How did you feel when you realized that was happening?
- What did you choose as a metaphor for what it is like to be a culturally and community responsive leader facilitating equitable decision-making processes?
  - What would you share with others about how this has impacted who you are as a person and practitioner?
- Questions that came up from previous interviews or surveys that surfaced
as a need for further inquiry.

• Is there something you wish I would have asked to let me know more about your lived experience as a culturally and community responsive or equitable decision-maker and leader?