

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND  
RESPONSIVENESS SERIES

by

EMILY MARIE YOUNG

(Under the Direction of Jami Royal Berry)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster a district educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. In this qualitative study, an action research design team implemented a four-part professional learning series to describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on participants' ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency. The action research design team also examined how district leaders can support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development. Thematically analyzed data centered around four main findings: 1) Reflective Practitioners; 2) Safe and supportive spaces; 3) Empathy for participants; and 4) Collaborative team dynamics.

KEY WORDS: Cultural competence, Culturally competent leadership, District professional learning, Educational equity

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND  
RESPONSIVENESS SERIES

by

EMILY MARIE YOUNG

BS, Georgia State University, 2007

MED, Walden University, 2009

EDS, Lincoln Memorial University, 2013

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2024

© 2024

Emily Young

All Rights Reserved

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND  
RESPONSIVENESS SERIES

by

EMILY YOUNG

Major Professor: Jami Royal Berry  
Committee: Karen Bryant  
Sally J. Zepeda

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
May 2024

## DEDICATION

Thank you to all of those who have supported me on my educational journey. Many of you have inspired me, supported me, and cheered me on through this time. However, I would not be where I am today without the boundless love and unwavering support of my family. This dissertation is dedicated to my family as it stands as a testament to their enduring support and love.

To my husband, Michael, your belief in my abilities and support have been my rock. You always say “yes” to my dreams, and you ensure I have what I need to be successful. Your sacrifices and encouragement pushed me forward during the difficult moments. I will forever be grateful for the faith you have in me.

To my children, Jayden and Ethan, your resilience and understanding during the countless hours spent away from you are deeply appreciated. Your love has been my motivation, and I hope this achievement serves as an inspiration for your own dreams.

To my mom, Belinda, your unwavering commitment to education has been both an inspiration and a guiding light throughout my academic journey. Watching you obtain your own doctorate while working as a teacher and being a single mom of eight was truly inspiring. Your resilience, wisdom, and unconditional love have been instrumental in my pursuit of knowledge.

Thank you all for being my anchor, my motivation, and my joy!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not be complete without the support and direction of my wonderful chair, Dr. Berry. Dr. Berry, thank you for your guidance, mentorship, and constructive feedback throughout the entire process. Your expertise has been invaluable in shaping the direction of this research and contributing significantly to its refinement.

Dr. Bryant and Dr. Zepeda, thank you for serving on my committee. The time you devoted to reviewing and providing feedback to this work is greatly appreciated. Both of you brought insight and a unique perspective, lifting the depth and quality of this dissertation.

I would also like to acknowledge a few of my colleagues, Teri Rudolph and Katrina Hannigan, who provided great insight and support throughout this research study. The time we spent together allowed us to produce great content for a great purpose. We are truly equity allies.

Lastly, throughout my educational journey, I have had countless leaders pour into me, helping to shape who I am today as a leader including Pam Williams, Clifton Alexander, Tamara Perkins, and Leilani Scott. To my former principal, Clifton Alexander, thank you for taking a chance on me as a new leader and helping me to refine my leadership skills, as well as pushing me to continue my education. Leilani Scott, thank you for taking a chance on me to be a district leader. Your belief in me and my skills has helped me to grow my leadership capacity in ways that I would have never imagined.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES .....	x
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of the Study .....	5
Research Questions .....	6
Definition of Terms.....	6
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Logic Model .....	10
Overview of the Methodology .....	11
Interventions .....	13
Significance of the Study .....	14
Organization of the Dissertation.....	14
2 REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE .....	16
Equity in Education.....	17
Integrating Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.....	29
Professional Learning .....	37

Chapter Summary .....	47
3 ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	49
Rationale for Qualitative Research Design.....	50
Overview of Action Research Methods .....	51
Action Research Design.....	53
Context of the Study .....	63
Data Sources .....	69
Data Collection Methods .....	71
Interventions .....	76
Data Analysis Methods.....	78
Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability .....	81
Subjectivity Statement .....	84
Limitations .....	85
Chapter Summary .....	86
4 THE CASE.....	88
Context of the Study .....	88
Findings from the Case .....	93
Chapter Summary .....	111
5 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH CASE.....	113
Introduction.....	113
Research Question 1 .....	115
Research Question 2 .....	119

Research Question 3 .....	124
Chapter Summary .....	129
6 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES.....	132
Summary of the Study .....	132
Discussion of the Findings.....	133
Limitations of the Current Study .....	141
Implications and Recommendations for School and District Leaders.....	142
Implications and Recommendations for Policy .....	143
Implications and Recommendations for Further Research.....	144
Concluding Thoughts.....	145
REFERENCES .....	148
APPENDICES	
A Empirical Findings Table .....	159
B Action Research Implementation Team Initial Questionnaire.....	164
C Action Research Implementation Team Interview Protocols .....	168
D Action Research Design Team Focus Group Protocol .....	171
E Action Research Design Team Meeting Notes: September 29, 2023.....	174

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1.1 The Intervention Plan .....	13
Table 3.1: Action Research Design Team .....	58
Table 3.2: Action Research Implementation Team .....	60
Table 3.3: Action Research Timeline .....	62
Table 3.4: Key Performance Indicators for the Cultural Competence Goal.....	66
Table 3.5: KPI Methods for Cultural Proficiency Goal.....	66
Table 3.6: Interview Question Sample .....	72
Table 3.7: Questionnaire Question Sample .....	73
Table 3.8: Professional Learning Outcomes and Strategies for Implementation .....	77
Table 3.9: Phases of Thematic Analysis and Establishing Trustworthiness.....	80
Table 3.10: Triangulation of Research Methods .....	82
Table 4.1: Action Research Implementation Team Participation Status .....	91
Table 4.2: Action Research Design Team .....	92
Table 5.1: Summary of Themes Connected to Research Questions and Theoretical Framework .....	114

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1: Student and Teacher Race Comparison for 2022 .....	4
Figure 1.2: Transformational Learning Theory .....	9
Figure 1.3: Plan-Do-Study-Act Model .....	10
Figure 3.1: Action Research Process .....	52
Figure 3.2: The Spiraling Nature of Action Research .....	54
Figure 3.3: Plan-Do-Study-Act .....	56
Figure 3.4: Summary of the JCPS Strategic Priorities and Goals.....	64
Figure 4.1: Initial Questionnaire Results for “What Methods Help You Learn Best?” .....	96

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that districts across the nation continue to address the achievement gaps that exist among marginalized students. Policies have been introduced to close such achievement gaps; yet, these gaps still exist. According to the *Top 10 Issues to Watch in 2022*, equity–shifting mindset and strategy is the number one issue in education. The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (2021) cited:

Three challenges stand in the way of ensuring an inclusive educational and economic recovery for all Georgians:

1. Shifting demographics,
2. System inequities and structural barriers, and
3. Lack of bold, systemic, and coordinated policy action. (p. 1)

Equity, diversity, and inclusion have all become buzzwords in schools and districts nationwide. Berg and Gleason (2018) asserted terms like equity were “... used to signify a value that feels fundamental to our democracy and public education system” (p. 24). Equity reinforces the notion that the color of a student’s skin, the language a student speaks, the zip code a student lives in, or any other factor should not determine the type of educational experience he or she receives (Berg & Gleason, 2018). At the same time, equity seems hard to obtain.

Research has shown that teachers have more influence on student achievement than any other factor (Barth & CPE, 2016; Hattie, 2008). As a result, educators have the significant job of ensuring that every student receives the support needed to succeed at school and beyond.

Knowing that each child is unique and comes to school with diverse backgrounds and cognitive abilities - socially and emotionally - educators must recognize, value, and leverage students' differences to better meet their needs. It is no surprise that The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (2021) asserted one way to overcome the challenges equity presents is to confront structural barriers by "assess[ing] the capacity of staff to implement equity-focused strategies and to remove barriers that threaten student growth. Some of the gaps are related to instructional delivery" (p. 6).

To build equity-centered educators, Bukko and Liu (2021) believed one must first focus on equity-consciousness and that "a teacher's belief in the importance of equity and the commitment to ensuring all children receive an equitable and excellent education" (p. 3) is of paramount importance. One area of focus within equity consciousness is cultural competence. Cultural competence is recognizing, valuing, and leveraging differences to interact effectively and to better serve students, staff, and the community. Ultimately, by increasing educators' cultural competence, educators can describe, respond, and plan for the demographic and social shifts occurring in society (Lindsey et al., 2019).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In 2021, the Jolly County Public Schools (JCPS) appointed a new superintendent, Dr. Clarence E. Allen, after numerous years of successful leadership under the former superintendent, in which the JCPS developed a reputation for being a highly effective school system. As part of Dr. Allen's onboarding, he gathered feedback from multiple stakeholder groups to help build a new strategic plan. This strategic plan came to be known as the district's *North Star*. The district's five-year strategic plan took into consideration the needs of "every" child, reinforcing Hammond's (2015) belief that there should be a focus on "creating an

environment that feels socially and intellectually safe for dependent learners to stretch themselves and take risks” (p. 19). The *North Star* outlined four strategic priorities centering on empathy, equity, effectiveness, and excellence.

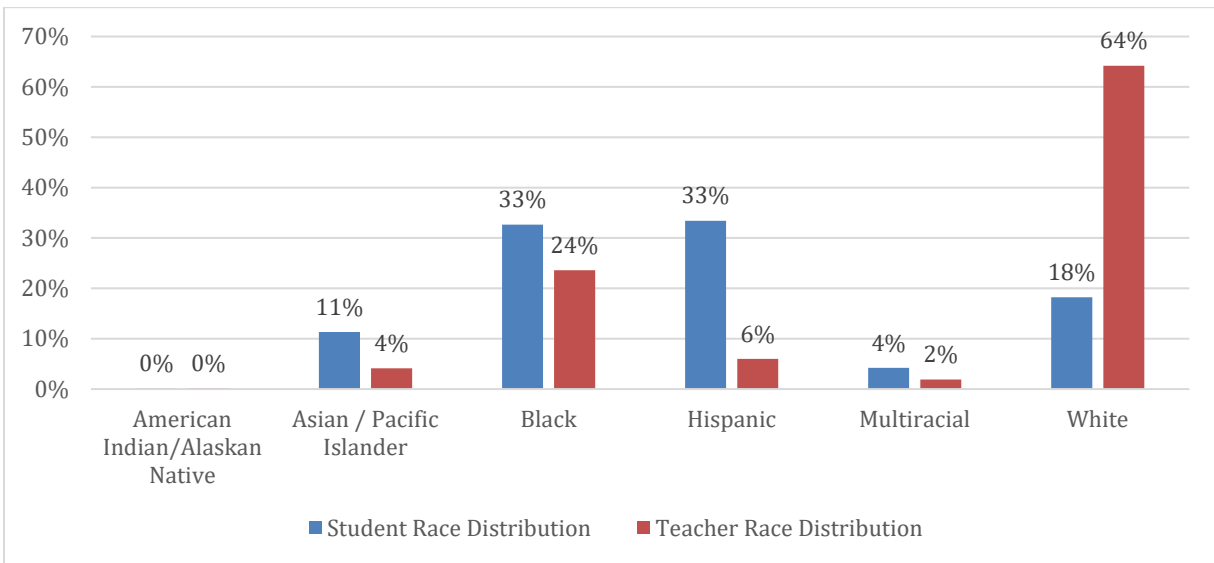
### *Overview of the Research Site Context*

The Jolly County Public Schools (JCPS, a pseudonym), an urban school district situated approximately 30 miles outside a major metropolitan area, had become one of the most diverse counties in the United States. JCPS’s students came from countries worldwide and spoke various languages. When considering the racial or ethnic distribution of the student population, 32% of the students were African American; 11% Asian or Pacific Islander; 19% White; 33% Hispanic or Latino; and 4% Multiracial. About 22% of JCPS students were English Language Learners (ELL); 13% were students with disabilities (SWD), and about 50% were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The JCPS had increased diversity across multiple student groups in a relatively short time.

When looking closely at the race or ethnicity of the teachers that served the diverse population in the JCPS, it was problematic that the demographics of the teachers did not mirror that of the students. As noted in Figure 1.1, in 2022 most of the teachers in the JCPS were white, but most of the students were Black and Hispanic.

**Figure 1.1.**

*Student and Teacher Race Comparison for 2022*



*Note.* Data pulled from Georgia Insights 2022 (rounded to the nearest whole number).

As the JCPS grew more diverse, achievement gaps between student groups continued to exist. For example, when analyzing student proficiency rates on the Georgia Milestones Assessment (GMAS) over the past 5 years, achievement gaps of 20% and higher existed between Asian and White students when compared to all other student groups such as Black, Hispanic, Special Education, Free and Reduced Lunch, and English Learners. The data showed that gaps between various student groups had remained constant, with the highest performing student group having over 75% of students scoring at the proficient/distinguished performance levels and the lowest performing student group having less than 20% of students scoring at the proficient/distinguished performance levels.

Overall, the achievement data based on GMAS data from the past five years showed that the JCPS was not reaching all students. As the district had become increasingly diverse, its

educators had not. This reality warranted a shift in the system’s work to ensure “every” child had what he or she needed to thrive.

With the new superintendent's appointment and the North Star's implementation, The JCPS had work to do around four main goals: empathy, equity, effectiveness, and excellence. The JCPS knew that empathy was the gateway to equity. Consequently, this study used the action research process to design a professional learning series for teachers focused on the goal of empathy. The JCPS (2022) defined empathy as “the ability to understand the feelings of another person and actually place yourself in their position, is the entry point towards creating a culture where staff and students feel a sense of belonging and safety” (p. 16). Ultimately, the aim of the professional learning series needed to lead to the increased cultural competence of teachers.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. This study examined teachers’ perceptions before, during, and after participating in a district professional learning series aimed to empower teaching and learning through cultural responsiveness. Teachers’ perspectives on how the professional learning series impacted their instruction, what structures and supports led to the impact, and what support or structures would have been beneficial to add to the series were sought.

The researcher approached this study with some overarching questions: What structures must be in place to ensure teachers implement their learning from a professional learning series? How can professional learning increase the cultural competence of teachers? How can district leaders support the growth of teachers as they work towards increased cultural competence?

How can an action research team use continuous improvement cycles to create a more effective professional learning experience for teachers?

### **Research Questions**

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?
2. How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following key terms are defined:

- **Cultural Competence:** Recognizing, valuing, and leveraging differences to interact effectively and better serve our students, staff, and community (JCPS, 2022).
- **Educational Equity:** Providing access to ensure all students have the knowledge and skills to succeed as contributing members of a global society, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, English proficiency, faith, socioeconomic status, or disability (JCPS, 2022).

- Empathy: The ability to understand the feelings of another person and place yourself in their position, is the entry point towards creating a culture where staff and students feel a sense of belonging and safety (JCPS, 2022).
- Equity: The conditions under which each and every child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential (JCPS, 2022).
- Inclusion: The practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunity and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who have physical or mental disabilities and members of other historically underserved groups (JCPS, 2022).
- Transformative learning theory: The process of effecting change in a frame of reference. This theory involves transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one's reflective insight, and critically assessing it (Mezirow, 1997).

Situating the study further is the theoretical framework.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This action research study combined Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory as the theoretical framework. This study centered on adult professional learning that aimed to shift the mindset or perspectives of educators that participated in a professional learning series. As a result, it was vital to consider how adults transform their thinking over time, in addition to considering what adults need as learners. When taking a closer look at transformative learning theory, Mezirow (1997) described transformative learning theory as “the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (p. 5). Adults have a lens or frame through which they view the world based on their past and lived experiences. Once this frame of

reference is set, biases are also formed. Thus, transformative learning “involves transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11). As participants in this study sought to become culturally competent, they had to become self-aware of implicit biases they may hold because of their own frames of reference.

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory relied heavily on adult learning theory, or andragogy (Brown, 2005). Through adult learning theory, the action research team designed professional learning experiences that allowed participants to transform their frame of reference. Knowles et al. (2005, as cited in Davis & Leon, 2011) described six principles of andragogy as:

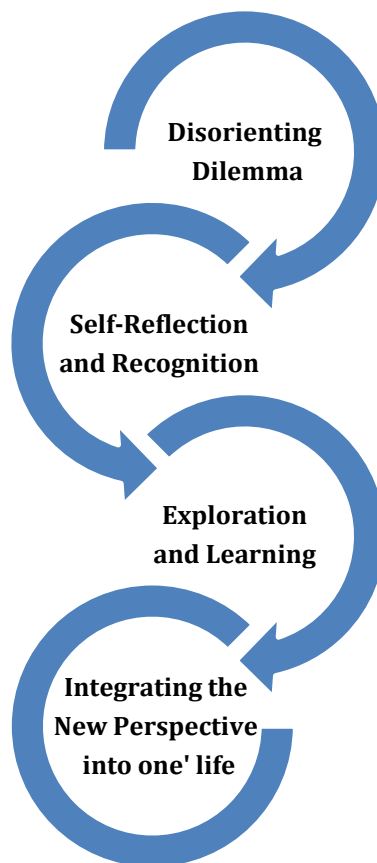
1. Knowing why. Adults need to know why something should be learned before attempting to learn it.
2. Self-actualized self-concept. Adults need to feel responsible for their own lives, decisions, and learning. They do not learn as well when learning is imposed upon them by others.
3. Accumulated life experiences. Adult learners possess a vast reservoir of life experiences that shapes their motivations, perspectives, needs, abilities, and styles. Adults define themselves by the experiences they have had.
4. Readiness to learn. Adults learn best when moving from one developmental stage to the next and within real-world contexts. The timing of learning activities is especially important.
5. Orientation to learning. Adults learn best when learning activities are problem-based and geared toward the development of practical skills.

6. Internal motivation. Although adults are responsive to certain types of external reinforcements, the most potent motivators are internal (e.g., desire to improve, to learn, to grow, etc.). (pp. 64–68)

Many of the ideas or concepts in adult learning theory are also reflected in transformative learning theory, as reflected in Figure 1.2. For this study, concepts from both adult learning theory and transformative learning theory were examined, resulting in the theoretical framework for this study.

**Figure 1.2**

*Transformational Learning Theory*



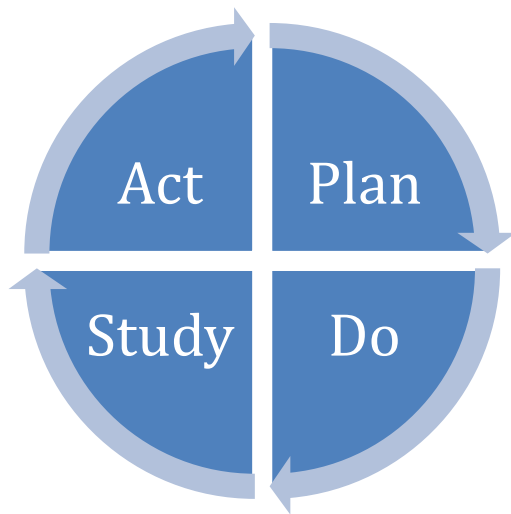
*Note.* Adapted from Mezirow (1997).

## Logic Model

In 2017, the JCPS adopted Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) as a management philosophy through which the organization could create and sustain a culture committed to continuous improvement. As part of the CQI process, the Deming Cycle, or Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA), derived from the Shewhart Cycle, was used to improve many methods and processes for the district (Walton, 1986). Since PDCA is engrained in the culture of the JCPS, this study used a slight variation of PDCA, known as Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA). As illustrated in Figure 1.3, the PDSA cycle consisted of four steps, used scientifically, that guided the inquiry and improvement process for a problem that had been identified (Bryk et al., 2017). The PDSA model can be repeated over several cycles, as each cycle produces new learning and action steps.

**Figure 1.3**

*Plan-Do-Study-Act Model*



*Note.* Adapted from Bryk et al. (2017).

The action research design team engaged in several PDSA cycles. During the Planning Phase, the action research design team identified the goals of a professional learning series,

defined measures of success, and brainstormed an action plan. This phase included designing the professional learning experience. During the Do Phase of the cycle, the action research implementation team presented the professional learning to teachers. After two professional learning sessions were facilitated, participants in the study were interviewed. As part of the Study Phase, interview responses were analyzed in addition to document analysis and observation. Analysis of data collected led the action research design team into the Act Phase, where information from what was learned was integrated or used to help Plan for the next professional learning session in the series. The PDSA cycle was repeated after delivering two out of four sessions in the professional learning series as part of the continuous improvement cycle.

### **Overview of the Methodology**

Action research allows leaders to take an investigative approach to solving a problem or issue within the participants' work environment. Its cyclical nature allows one to reflect and act on data that has been interpreted (Coghlan, 2019; Glanz, 2014). In the context of this study, the primary researcher and action research design team used preliminary data surrounding teachers' perceptions and current understanding of cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching practices, coupled with research on strategies to build the cultural competence of others to select a relevant problem. The action research design team then worked to frame learning opportunities to increase teachers' cultural competence and proficiency, ultimately with the goal of increasing student achievement across student groups.

#### *Action Research*

Action research was appropriate for this study because of its collaborative approach to solving a district-wide problem. The collaborative approach allowed a diverse group of educators

to partner to investigate, learn, and create positive change within the district. Corey (1954) asserted:

One of the psychological values in action research is that the people who must, by the very nature of their professional responsibilities, learn to improve their practices are the ones who engage in the research to learn what represents improvement. (p. 375)

Subsequently, members of the action research and implementation teams were able to discuss and reflect on the structures and support systems needed in a professional learning series to ensure learning transfer. Based on the action research implementation team's feedback, the researcher guided the team in selecting a focus to investigate further, then collected data that were later analyzed and interpreted to determine future action steps.

Masters (1995) shared four themes that derive from the various definitions of active research, which were, "empowerment of participants; collaboration through participation; acquisition of knowledge; and social change" (p. 2). A diverse action research implementation team enabled action research design members to gain a broader perspective of the tools or processes needed to increase teachers' cultural competence and how to design professional learning to support teacher reflection and growth effectively. The action research design team was comprised of the researcher, who also was the coordinator of the Educational Equity and Responsiveness (EER) program, two EER coaches who were situated in the Department of Staff Development, and the staff development director.

The action research implementation team (ARIT) consisted of seven teachers spanning K-12 who showed interest in participating in this research. This professional learning opportunity was open to teachers in K-12 and was voluntary. Teachers who enrolled in the course were then sent a follow-up email with information about the research project. Teachers

were invited to participate and selected to be part of the action research implementation team based on responses that signaled interest.

### **Interventions**

Teachers from grades K-12 who voluntarily enrolled in this professional learning series engaged in four professional learning sessions, as shown in Table 1.1, driving several PDSA cycles. Participants completed a professional learning assessment evaluating each session's quality and transfer of learning.

**Table 1.1**

*The Intervention Plan*

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Professional Learning Dates</b>	<b>Anticipated Outcomes</b>
<b>PL # 1</b>	August 30, 2023	Moving from Theory to Practice: Leveraging Our Critical Consciousness
<b>PL #2</b>	September 27, 2023	Increasing Family and Community Involvement and Engagement
<b>PL #3</b>	October 25, 2023	Social Justice in the Classroom and Community
<b>PL #4</b>	November 15, 2023	Leading Culturally Responsiveness with Authenticity

The action research design team analyzed data from each assessment. The design team noted trends and used the data to inform the design of the following professional learning session. During the middle and end of the professional learning series, interviews were

conducted with the action research implementation team to enhance the overall effectiveness of the professional learning series for the next cohort.

In addition to the professional learning sessions serving as a primary intervention for the action research study, planning time was embedded during each professional learning session as an additional intervention. The planning time allowed participants to apply their learning in an environment where they could collaborate and discuss ideas with other participants, as well as the session facilitators, solidifying and increasing the application of their learning.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study directly influenced the leaders in the JCPS's Staff Development Department by providing insights on structures and tools that could be utilized to increase the effectiveness of professional learning geared toward a series requiring participants to have a growth mindset to increase their cultural competence. Additionally, this study directly correlated with the district's five-year strategic plan and had implications for local schools wishing to design and implement educational equity and responsive professional learning. Educational leaders seeking to increase their teachers' cultural competence to increase school and classroom systems, structures, and processes that institutionalize and operationalize cultural competence can use and adapt the model implemented.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study of this dissertation and includes the research questions, the problem of practice, and the methods for the study. Chapter 2 reviews the related literature for the study and discusses the why behind equity, pathways to cultural competence, and elements of effective professional learning. Chapter 3 describes the methodology involved in action research and the qualitative methods related to this study. A more in-depth description of

the context in which the study was conducted is also provided. Chapter 4 examines the findings from the action research case.

Chapter 5 details the analysis of findings from the action research case based on the action research cycles related to the research questions that guided this study. This chapter also describes and analyzes the interventions the researcher and the action research team implemented. Chapter 6 summarizes the study, discusses the findings from the research questions, and offers implications for school leaders and further research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

The purpose of this study was to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?
2. How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series?

To examine the research questions, the researcher worked with an action research design team to design and implement an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series that aimed to increase educators' cultural competence and proficiency. A questionnaire, interviews, observations, field notes, and focus groups were used to better understand the impact of the professional development series.

To underscore the purpose of this study through the scholarly literature, the following chapter highlights a review focused on equity and cultural responsiveness in professional

learning. The review is divided into three sections with the first section providing a historical overview of equity in education and the implications of federal policies geared toward creating equitable outcomes for all students. The second section of the literature review highlights culturally responsive pedagogy and its implications for teachers and school leaders. The last section discusses best practices for implementing professional learning and includes an overview of best practices for equity-centered professional learning.

### **Equity in Education**

This section of the literature review examined how over time, the educational system and its policies have changed to serve minorities and disadvantaged students. The literature examined how conflicts among actors in the policy system perpetuated the state of the public educational system when considering disenfranchised students. This section included the historical case background of equity in education and discussed how policies and districts have worked to create equitable learning environments for all students.

#### *Historical Background*

The journey toward equitable education for all began with a series of historical events and policies. In his work, Pijanowski (2019) reviewed the history of such critical cases and scholarly theories that provided the foundation and informed current debates around educational policy proposals. Pijanowski (2019) asserted that the twentieth century caused education reform to create standardized educational opportunities for a growing immigrant population. As immigrants moved to the United States, education was used to help immigrants assimilate (Lindsey et al., 2019). Furthermore, to pay for the funding of educational systems, property taxes were heavily relied on, resulting in the rise of court cases aimed at reducing the amount of

property taxes used to fund schools and leading to a combination of both local and state tax revenue being used to pay for schooling (Pijanowski, 2019).

Another historical event greatly affecting public education was the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision which overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and declared that racial segregation of public schools was unconstitutional (Warren, 1954). As a result, schools began to desegregate and integrate. Although schools began to integrate, African Americans were often thought of as inferior to whites and incapable of high achievement (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Many white families moved to the suburbs to prevent their children from having to attend schools with blacks and even enrolled their children in private schools (Lindsey et al., 2019).

The federal government began to play an essential role in funding education during the Sputnik Revolution in 1958 and continued to expand when President Johnson's Great Society agenda helped pass the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965 (Pijanowski, 2019). This period was also at the height of the Civil Rights movement when advocates were fighting for desegregation and integration for equal access and equal rights (Linsey et al., 2019). The Learning Policy Institute (2020) described how the Elementary and Secondary School Act of 1965 (ESEA) was enacted to make educational equity a reality for students of color and low-income families.

ESEA provided over one billion dollars to public education, increasing the funding of education from the federal government from four to nine percent (Pijanowski, 2019). During this time, student achievement improved, and achievement gaps decreased. However, the Learning Policy Institute (2020) detailed that in the 1980s, the federal government released some of its power and mandates, resulting in the expansion of the achievement gap.

Fifty years after the passing of ESEA, President Barack Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, a reauthorization of ESEA, replacing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. DeBray and Blankenship (2016) shared:

NCLB tightened requirements for states sanctions on schools not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) according to a sub-group accountability model... As AYP levels rose, it became apparent that the system created under NCLB was unsustainable; eventually, nearly all schools would fail to meet AYP. (p. x)

NCLB proved to be ineffective at closing the achievement gaps. In 2015, President Obama signed ESSA into law, giving states more control over educational policies (DeBray & Blankenship, 2016). Fusarelli and Ayscue (2019) asserted, “ESSA was intended to fix NCLB’s many flaws, particularly its narrow emphasis on using standardized tests to measure school performance and hold educators accountable for student achievement” (p. 33).

Fusarelli and Ayscue (2019) articulated their concerns regarding ESSA providing more flexibility and power to states to determine their pathway to achieving educational equity and closing achievement gaps. Chu (2019) shared similar concerns regarding ESSA and its ability to adequately address equity issues and close the achievement gap between student groups that schools historically marginalized. Fusarelli and Ayscue (2019) pointed out that although ESSA contained parameters to protect and promote equity, many ESSA plans approved by the US Department of Education inadequately described or mentioned concrete steps to closing the achievement gap. Additionally, many states had included long-term goals for achievement, but goals and implementation plans varied widely between states.

In Chu’s (2019) qualitative content analysis of ESSA plans, he uncovered that although most states’ plans addressed equitable access, less than half of state ESSA plans addressed equity

in outcomes. Forty-eight states had an access-oriented equity stance, 23 states had an outcome-oriented equity stance, and 19 states had an access and outcome equity stance. The state of Georgia fell into the access-oriented equity stance.

Chu (2019) also pointed out, “SEAs [State Educational Agencies] were mandated by U.S. DoE to delineate in their ESSA plans strategies and provisions to ensure an equitable education for a variety of historically underserved students” (p. 11). However, because most states had an access-oriented equity stance, strategies selected by states seemed to fit into three categories: equitable funding, equitable access to effective educators, and equitable learning environments. Overall, the results of Chu’s (2019) study showed that there were discrepancies around the concept of equity in education which may have caused challenges in implementing the ESSA policy, ultimately affecting the advancement of equity. Fusarelli and Ayscue (2019) supported this idea by asserting, “Guardrails are effective only insofar as federal and state leaders engage in appropriate oversight” (p. 36). The next section of the literature review describes the role federal policies have played in advancing equity in school systems.

#### *Federal Policies Role in Equity*

With a fast-growing economy, it is imperative that the youth can think critically, problem-solve, and work collaboratively across cultures. The Learning Policy Institute (2020) offered four areas where federal policies could be advanced to support the need for equitable educational opportunities for all. The four areas offered are:

- support high-quality teaching and learning
- strengthen the education profession
- fund schools adequately and equitably
- reduce the effects of poverty on children’s learning

Historically, equity has been an issue in which public school systems continue to work toward.

Policies continue to push school districts to examine school practices and encourage states to implement strategies to close the achievement gap. Kostyo et al. (2018) stated, “Putting forward a plan is the first step in a process of acknowledging and undertaking the work to be done to produce greater opportunity and equity for students” (p. 2). This next section describes some of the plans and strategies being used to provide equitable learning environments for every student.

### *The Race Toward Equity in Education*

As the nation and school districts seek to provide learning environments that are equitable, no matter a student’s background, researchers seek to find strategies to support the fight toward educational equity. Bishop and Noguera (2019) argued:

If schools in high-poverty communities are to be more successful in responding to the educational needs of their students, they will need more resources, and they will need to be supported by a more integrated, ecological approach to policy that reinforces equity goals. (p. 136)

Ultimately, this meant that the local context of a school or district and addressing how factors such as poverty, race, and immigration affect schools must be considered. This argument was supported by findings from an analysis of California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and interviews with senior county leaders. Results identified that policies that address the whole child must be in place to address achievement gaps.

It takes equity-centered leaders to do the work described by Bishop and Noguera (2019). In fact, Khalifa et al. (2016) highlighted the need for culturally responsive school leaders when engaging in culturally responsive education or reform. It was evident that policy alone was not

enough to address and close the achievement gaps that existed. Educational leaders are integral to school improvement. Khalifa et al. (2016) stated, “Developing effective leaders becomes a vital part of recruiting and retaining the best teachers for children who have been marginalized” (p. 1273). Khalifa et al. (2016) identified four different behaviors for culturally responsive leaders to implement:

- critical self-reflection
- contributing to culturally responsive teaching and curricula
- promoting culturally responsive school environments
- engaging the community in culturally responsive ways

Ultimately, culturally responsive leaders would need to build their ability to empathize with others, listen, be patient, and be open to make the four behaviors a reality.

Bishop and Noguera (2019) further shared that to close the achievement gap that has continued to exist despite several waves of reform, school districts must partner with organizations in the community and build the capacity of educators to be more effective and responsive to the diverse needs of the community. This effort included the development of educational policies having stronger connections to existing health, child welfare, and juvenile justice policies (Bishop & Noguera, 2019).

There is not a single way to achieve equity, so a continuous improvement process must be used. Bush-Mecenas (2022) attested that the continuous improvement (CI) approach is widely used in education and has proved to be a powerful tool in achieving educational equity and social justice. One renowned CI approach developed by W. Edwards Deming is called Plan, Do, Check, and Act or the PDCA Cycle. Walton (1986) stated, “Use of the [PDCA] cycle will lead to continual improvement of methods and procedures. It can be applied to any process” (p. 88).

Bush-Mecenas (2022) analyzed how two organizations used CI to promote racial justice, allowing an in-depth understanding of successes and challenges when using CI to promote equity in schools. Although the organizations used different constructs and formalities when implementing CI, three primary structures were used: performance metrics, routines and tools, and performance norms.

When considering performance metrics for CI, Bush-Mecenas (2022) highlighted the need to use nontraditional success measures, including qualitative and quantitative data, to allow for a closer examination of problems of practice and to draw out potential causes such as implicit biases, unmet student needs, and lack of culturally responsive teaching. With CI routines and tools, it was found that when using the CI approach, users needed to have a common language and definition for concepts such as equity, racism, and implicit bias. Organizations with a standard and consistent understanding of equity could use the CI process with an equity lens more effectively than those without.

Research has found that language and terminology have a strong impact on equity-centered initiatives and clearly communicating their intended meaning (Bush-Mecenas, 2022; Galloway et al., 2019; Lewis-Durham, 2020; Turner & Spain, 2020). Galloway et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of equity-centered terms in their work, and they highlighted the misconceptions about the meaning and ideas presented by terms such as cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness. Galloway et al. (2019) stated:

research suggests that practitioners' conceptions of cultural responsiveness, cultural relevance, or other widely used terms like "diversity" and "multiculturalism" may center more on honoring difference, celebrating diversity, and ensuring representation, with less

attention to racism, injustice, or the systems and structures that create disparate outcomes for students of color and other minoritized groups. (p. 486)

Galloway et al. (2019) further claimed that school reform efforts are most successful when policies and change actions name race and intentionally examine how race influences student learning and outcomes.

Using tools and processes to facilitate conversations about race and encourage the creation of brave spaces is essential to ignite change (Galloway et al., 2019). Lindsey et al. (2019) provided tools such as cultural proficiency continuums to help propel school equity efforts forward. Lindsey et al. (2019) shared, “The Tools for Cultural Proficiency guide policy makers’ and educational leaders’ journey in understanding their values and behaviors and probing the assumptions implicit in schools’ and districts’ prevalent policies and practices” (p. 64). Bush-Mecenas (2022) found the plan-do-study-act cycle was a crucial process in implementing change to operationalize equity in educational organizations. Research findings support the notion that changing policies and practices, especially those centered on equity, require the intentional use of tools and processes in which race is discussed to inequities in the structural roots of the systems (Bush-Mecenas, 2022; Galloway et al., 2019; Lindsey et al., 2019).

Lewis-Durham (2020) examined how the language used in equity-supportive policies may inadvertently support neoliberal ideas and maintain a color-blind approach. Lewis-Durham’s research on New York City (NYC) district’s equity initiatives revealed that districts’ equity efforts could be distorted by their alliance with neoliberal ideas and the desire to maintain color-blindness in their policies to appease others. For example, Lewis-Durham (2020) found that the NYC Community Schools initiative used a discursive “bait and switch” tactic in which

language around educating the whole child was used in conjunction with language about performance. Khalifa et al. (2016) also highlighted how the idea of a color-blind pedagogy could lead to the assets of individual students being ignored or tapped in to support students learning. Khalifa et al. (2016) and Lewis-Durham (2020) believed in implementing color brave equity approaches.

Language also played an important role in the research conducted by Turner and Spain (2020) as they examined how non-tracking exacerbated tensions when working to create a more equitable learning environment for students. Turner and Spain (2020) used an interpretive approach and case studies of two urban districts to examine tracking policymaking in those school districts. The study revealed that district leaders were forced to rethink the meaning of equity when considering tracking as a method to serve students. Both districts in this study traditionally used tracking; however, due to achievement gaps and budget cuts, they looked at untracking as a strategy to meet these needs (Turner & Spain, 2020).

Although district leaders viewed untracking as an appropriate strategy to close achievement gaps and to cut spending, some parent groups did not agree. For example, parents of students who were identified as gifted were against untracking, stating that untracking marginalized the needs of their students. These same parents used verbiage from state and federal accountability policies around meeting the needs of “all” students to fight for tracking. These divergent points-of-view led to conversations around “equitable” tracking in these districts. Overall, this study revealed how leaders’ interpretations of equity policies could lead to inequities if not careful (Turner & Spain, 2020).

As states and districts seek to provide equitable learning experiences, the literature has illustrated that a common language and structures for implementation are imperative. In the next

section of this literature review, educational equity and how cultural competence are examined to illustrate a pathway to shifting the culture of a school or district in its journey toward equity.

Lindsey et al. (2019) declared, “Cultural proficiency is a mindset, a worldview, a way a person or an organization makes assumptions for effectively describing, responding to, and planning for issues that arise in diverse environments (p. 5).

### *Educational Equity*

Kostyo et al. (2018) asserted, “The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides states, districts, and schools with an opportunity to create greater equity for students in the provision of education, and to accelerate efforts to support historically underserved students” (p. v). Now, more than ever, school systems are searching for ways to close the opportunity gap and to increase equitable practices across the nation. Bukko and Liu (2021) shared, “authentic equity-based practices are grounded in intentional identification and removal of the barriers creating inequity; this requires knowledge of the systems of power within educational spaces and an understanding of what equity means” (p. 2).

To ensure an understanding of the term equity, versus equality, which Bukko and Liu (2021) asserted are often used interchangeably among educators, the definitions provided by The Center for Public Education are examined. The Center for Public Education (2016) stated, “equality in education is achieved when students are treated the same and have access to similar resources. Equity is achieved when all students receive the resources they need so they graduate prepared for success after high school” (para. 1).

To build equity-centered educators, Bukko and Liu (2021) asserted one must first focus on equity-consciousness or what is characterized as, “a teacher’s belief in the importance of equity and the commitment to ensuring all children receive an equitable and excellent education”

(p. 3). In Bukko and Liu's (2021) research study, educators became equity-conscious through equity-centered instruction and coaching during lesson simulations. Similarly, in her work, Aguilar (2020) also viewed coaching as a method for building equity-conscious teachers, stating "transformational coaching addresses a client's behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being" (p. 34). Bukko and Liu (2021) prompted "metacognition and self-awareness through questions designed to probe participants' assumptions about the teaching process, the learning needs of students, and the lived experiences of the diverse students they will be teaching" (p. 5).

In addition, Bukko and Liu (2021) provided equity-based practices to support culturally inclusive teaching based on participants' comments. Aguilar's (2020) work focused on how to coach for equity and the heavy role the coach plays in helping educators in identifying their current state or reality of the classroom, recognizing the root cause of problems occurring in the classroom, exploring emotions tied to this realization and establishing new practices. Both Aguilar (2020) and Bukko and Liu (2021) realized the transformational teacher mindset when coaching was a part of the learning process.

Research has proven the importance of educators being equity conscious and established that equity-based practices are teachable (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Carter & Richmond, 2019; Nadelson et al., 2019). Nadelson et al. (2019) defined an educational equity mindset as "the knowledge, beliefs, and dispositions supportive of advocating and working toward equitable education for all learners" (p. 27). In their research, Nadelson et al. (2019) identified six characteristics of an educational equity mindset, including

- engaging in culturally responsive teaching,
- having a sense of responsibility for promoting equity,
- ensuring a learning environment where all students can be successful,

- promoting student-centered learning,
- engaging in informal leadership roles, and
- knowing and understanding the student population.

These six characteristics represent the need for teachers to engage in ongoing professional learning where their mindsets around equity and cultural responsiveness can be challenged and built on.

Additionally, Carter and Richmond (2019) found that it was crucial for school systems to “leverage community knowledge in ways that infused cultural responsiveness throughout different programs and structures” (p. 126). To develop equity consciousness, educators should leverage the community in which they work, and the funds of knowledge students bring to the learning environment (Carter & Richmond, 2019; Nadelson et al., 2019).

When considering the research of Jacobs et al. (2020), they capitalized on their belief that “developing [an] equity lens involves teacher leaders engaging in critical self-reflection and consciousness-raising about their own beliefs and biases. Teacher leaders must understand how their experiences and beliefs influence how they view and interpret the world” (p. 104). To help teachers develop an equity lens, Jacobs et al. (2020) spent the first year of their work building teachers’ equity lens by focusing on culturally responsive teaching. This focus included reflections on the idea of culture, their own culture, and the culture of their students, which was accomplished through various selected readings and key activities. Hammond’s (2015) research supported the work of Jacobs et al. by providing a culturally responsive teaching framework that introduces self-awareness of one’s own culture and the culture of the students as a key piece to educating a diverse student population.

Nadelson et al. (2019) asserted, “An education equity mindset is fundamental to assuring all students are supported to achieve to their highest capacity” (p. 26). To create equitable learning opportunities for students, educators must first consider their own equity lens and develop equity consciousness. In fact, Jacobs et al. (2020) shared, “When there is a focus on equity with a PDS, there must be a continual focus on the self as a vehicle to focus on students” (p. 115). Of course, self-awareness helps to develop an equity lens in which further equity work can be supported and accomplished.

In the research highlighting the need for teachers to be equity-conscious, culturally responsive teaching was highlighted as a strategy of equity-conscious teachers (Berg & Gleason, 2018; Nadelson et al., 2019). In the next section of the literature review, the research about culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy are examined.

### **Integrating Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

This literature review section looks closely at what research shares about culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy, examining the difference between these two concepts. The review examines how the literature describes culturally competent teachers and the actions culturally competent teachers take to ensure high achievement for all students. The characteristics of culturally responsive leaders as detailed by various researchers is examined. Understanding cultural responsiveness and how culturally responsive teachers and leaders play an integral role in educating youth allowed the researcher to understand how a district professional learning series could increase the cultural competence of K-12 educators in one urban school district.

### *Culturally Responsive Teaching and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*

When conducting research on the meaning of cultural competence, research studies centered on culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching were pervasive. Although the terms are related, there are distinct differences between them. Gay (2013) described culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (p. 49).

Taking a slightly different approach, Ladson-Billings (1995) focused on culturally relevant pedagogy as being “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools perpetuate” (p. 469). Aronson and Laughter (2020) described the difference between culturally responsive teaching from Gay and culturally relevant pedagogy from Ladson-Billings succinctly: “Gay focuses on teaching, seeking to develop competency and methods and describing what a teacher should do to be culturally responsive. Ladson-Billings focuses on pedagogy, seeking to develop a posture that undergirds planning, instruction, and assessment” (p. 263).

### *Characteristics of Culturally Competent Teachers*

Ladson-Billings’ (1995) seminal research analyzed the practice of a group of eight teachers and sought to understand what specific actions they used to ensure academic excellence for their black students. Three successful teachers’ components were identified: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Ladson-Billings (2014) shared the following definitions of the three components of successful teachers:

Briefly, by academic success I refer to the intellectual growth that students experience as a result of classroom instruction and learning experiences. Cultural competence refers to the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of some fluency in at least one other culture. Sociopolitical consciousness is the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze and solve real-world problems. (p. 75)

Understanding terms connected to culturally responsive pedagogy and classroom practices helped to level-set and provide concrete actions of culturally responsive teachers.

A common language surrounding the characteristics of culturally responsive teaching surfaced throughout the research, including terms such as cultural competence, academic press, and ability to understand the sociopolitical consciousness of their students (Ford & Kea, 2009; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The work of Ford and Kea (2009) and Hammond (2015) identified the importance of culturally responsive teachers having a sociocultural consciousness, or the ability to examine their own sociocultural identities, as well as the sociocultural identities of their students.

Research also showed that culturally responsive teachers used a variety of strategies to ensure students' assets are capitalized (Ford & Kea, 2009; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, Ladson-Billings (1995) research presented that culturally responsive teachers found academic ways to incorporate students' knowledge and skills into the classroom. To understand students' identities and use them in the classroom, it was found that culturally responsive teachers also had a positive attitude toward students whose backgrounds were different from their own (Ford & Kea, 2009). Building relationships and learning about students

aided in culturally responsive teachers' ability to ensure all students' academic success (Ford & Kea, 2009; Hammond, 2015; Ladson -Billings, 1995).

Culturally responsive teachers used a variety of strategies to ensure academic press within a supportive class community. For example, culturally responsive teachers used collaborative learning structures allowing students to teach each other and support each other's learning (Hammond, 2015). Teachers also held their students to high expectations and provided appropriate scaffolds to help them reach expectations (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ford and Kea (2009) believed that culturally responsive teachers acted as change agents and had a constructivist view of learning where collaboration and scaffolding were used to promote higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills. Culturally responsive learning environments break down learning barriers and open the door to student success (Ford & Kea, 2009).

In Gay's (2013) research, she argued that specific actions were needed to implement culturally responsive teaching practices and provided five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching, including: "developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction" (Gay, 2002, p. 106).

Gay (2013) further stated:

Since teachers and students are often not from the same ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds, these cultural differences can create serious challenges to effective teaching and learning. A viable way for teachers to mediate these differences is to build bridges across cultural differences through culturally responsive teaching. (p. 67)

Gay (2013) argued that teachers' deficit perceptions of students of color must be replaced with positive ones to implement culturally responsive teaching. Hammond (2015) accentuated the need for teachers to have high expectations for students when she examined the idea of a culture of poverty and asserted that it is incompatible with culturally responsive teaching because it promotes deficit thinking.

In addition, Gay (2013) emphasized that teachers must be aware of the opposition to culturally responsive teaching. Gay (2013) asserted, "Two of the most common and recurrent forms of resistance to culturally responsive teaching manifest as doubts about its validity and as anxieties about anticipated difficulties with its implementation" (p. 56).

In addition to culturally responsive teachers developing positive beliefs about students of color and understanding the pushback for culturally responsive teaching, they must also understand the role culture plays in students' lives (Gay, 2013). Hammond (2015) further investigated culture's role in students' learning by examining and marrying neuroscience and culturally responsive teaching. Based on her research, Hammond (2015) designed a framework for culturally responsive teaching, operationalizing culturally responsive pedagogy. Additionally, culturally responsive teachers learn to incorporate students' cultures into their teaching (Hammond, 2015; Tanase, 2020).

In their research, Paris and Alim (2014) critiqued the idea of culturally responsive pedagogy, asserting:

Although it is clear that Ladson-Billings' formulation laid the groundwork for maintaining the heritage cultural ways of students of color and also for encouraging students to critique dominant power structures, we believe much of the work being done

under the umbrella of culturally relevant pedagogy has come up short of these goals. (p. 88)

Consequently, Paris and Alim, (2014) offered that the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy “seeks to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change” (p. 88). So, Paris and Alim’s concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy was built from Ladson-Billings’ seminal work, not downplaying its findings, but seeking to build upon it.

Research has found that culturally responsive pedagogy benefits all marginalized groups, although the principles of culturally responsive education are grounded in research based on race and ethnicity (Aronson & Laughter, 2020; Tanase, 2020). Aronson and Laughter (2020) argued, “as researchers explore intersections, what it means to be culturally relevant must adapt” (p. 272). In Aronson and Laughter’s (2020) synthesis of research on how principles of culturally responsive teaching fit into gender and sexuality equity, they found that both students and teachers must have instruction and modeling of equity content. Aronson and Laughter (2020) asserted that it is vital to look at intersectionality, or how “race, gender, sexuality, class, dis/ability, nationalism, religion, language, and geography intersect and contribute to a person’s experiences in the world as either/both privileged or oppressed” (p. 265).

Gay (2013) assured that becoming a culturally competent and responsive teacher “...is a developmental process that involves learning over time...” (p. 57). In addition, it is not an endeavor that is done independently. Professional learning can be used to help educators become culturally competent and responsive.

### *Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Leaders*

Being a culturally responsive leader is challenging and requires thoughtfulness (Chen & Yang, 2021). Genao (2021) shared:

While culturally relevant teaching emphasizes the teacher and what takes place in the classroom, culturally responsive school leadership emphasizes how administrators and other school leaders cultivate a school culture and climate, where all are welcome, and their values/beliefs are respected. (p. 167)

In many cases, culturally responsive leaders are also seen as transformational leaders (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016). Hooper and Bernhardt (2016) stated, “Transformational leaders must actively seek opportunities to recognize, understand, and leverage the assets and/or community capital linked to the unique and diverse cultures represented in the local community” (p. 105). Banwo et al. (2021) further stated, “One of the most significant objectives of culturally responsive school leaders is the humanization of minoritized youth in and out school” (p. 325).

One must wonder what makes a leader culturally responsive. One characteristic of culturally responsive leadership identified by Khalifa et al. (2016) was critical self-awareness. Khalifa et al. (2016) described critical self-awareness as having “an awareness of self and his/her values, beliefs, and/or dispositions when it came to serving poor children of color” (p. 1280). Genao (2021) also found critical self-awareness vital, stating that culturally responsive leaders must have a deep understanding of their own cultural identity and be able to develop and look at differences between their cultures and the cultures within their schools or community.

Marshall and Khalifa (2018) also found that culturally responsive leaders needed to unlearn certain behaviors and notions that were associated with traditional forms of schooling (i.e., that were not culturally responsive) (p. 537). Consequently, culturally responsive leaders

must also participate in professional development that replaces deficit thinking with asset-based thinking (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018).

A second characteristic of culturally responsive leaders described by Khalifa et al. (2016) was their ability to ensure their teachers were culturally responsive. This included being able to ensure there was an equity-centered vision supportive of culturally responsive teaching in place. Although their research was centered on higher education establishments, Chen and Yang (2021) brought up an important concept to consider when it came to schools having culturally responsive visions that must be considered. Chen and Yang's (2021) research showed how individuals often believed their school's vision and mission statements around diversity were superficial in implementation. As a result, it is vital for schools to make sure there is an action plan that coincides with and helps to make the vision come alive (Chen & Yang, 2021). Khalifa et al. (2016) shared, "This outcome can be achieved by recruiting and retaining culturally responsive teachers, securing culturally responsive resources and curriculum, mentoring and modeling culturally responsive teaching, or offering professional developments around [culturally responsive school leadership]" (p. 1281).

Research has shown that culturally responsive leaders exist at various levels, including local schools and various levels in the district (Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). However, for culturally responsive work to be implemented effectively, cultural responsiveness must be addressed systematically and have the superintendent's full support (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). The principal cannot be the only driving force behind cultural competency work. Marshall and Khalifa (2018) argued that the role of the principal has taken on a distributed approach, where leadership is distributed across an instructional leadership team which may include the principal, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders. Consequently, Marshall

and Khalifa (2018) found that instructional coaches also play a critical role in developing teachers' cultural competency.

Culturally responsive leaders also strongly emphasize inclusivity (Khalifa et al., 2016). Trust must be established for leaders to engage in meaningful, culturally responsive work with teachers (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). Trust increased teachers' openness and honesty when discussing equity and cultural responsiveness (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). Banwo et al. (2021) also noted how vital trust was in their research and asserted, "Our examination suggests that authentic explorations of power, race and difference served as an opportunity for individual and collective growth –while fostering problem-solving and trust" (p. 336).

This literature review section focused on culturally responsive teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, and culturally responsive leadership because it is directly tied to this action research study based on a professional learning series aimed at increasing teachers' cultural competence. The review highlighted cultural responsiveness from a classroom perspective by examining culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy. Leaders set the vision of their school buildings and can be the driving force, or hindrance behind a teacher's growth. This action research study considered what culturally responsive leaders do to gain an understanding of the supports needed to ensure a district-led professional learning series around cultural competence was effective and transferable into the classrooms of the teachers who elected to complete the series.

### **Professional Learning**

Learning Forward (2022) asserted, "High-impact professional learning is an essential improvement lever for schools, empowering educators to engage and teach every student in their schools and systems" (p. 7). Andrews and Richmond (2019) believed that professional learning

“is crucial to ensuring that teachers are able to learn and refine the pedagogies and practices needed to meet the academic and social needs of a culturally diverse student population” (p. 408). Building off the idea that equity-consciousness can be taught (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Carter & Richmond, 2019; Nadelson et al., 2019), this next section of the literature review describes a set of standards that districts use to create high-quality professional learning, examines strategies for planning professional learning with the adult learner in mind, as well as reviews professional learning processes and models. This section ends with synthesizing research on guiding principles for equity-centered professional learning.

### *Standards for Professional Learning*

Learning Forward (2022) developed a set of research-based standards to guide the content, processes, and conditions for implementing evidence-based professional learning. The professional learning standards are centered around three large themes: rigorous content for each learner, transformational processes, and conditions for success. These three themes coincide with Mockler’s (2022) assertion that professional learning should be an empowering improvement lever that is differentiated, collaborative, and contextualized.

Learning Forward (2022) broke down the overarching theme of rigorous content for each learner into three domains: equity practices; curriculum, assessment, and instruction; and professional expertise. Together, these three domains provide an outline of the learning adults need to improve student outcomes and to work together to ensure educators have the capacity to create culturally responsive classrooms (CAST, 2018). Learning Forward (2022) stated:

Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators understand their students’ historical, cultural, and societal contexts, embrace

student assets through instruction, and foster relationships with students, families, and communities. (p. 17)

Ladson-Billings (2014) work indicated the importance of educators understanding and embracing the cultures and assets that students bring to the classroom.

Andrews and Richmond (2019) also believed that professional learning should build the capacity of teachers to be able to use practices that build on students' cultural backgrounds.

When thinking about the rigorous content for each learner, we also must think about the importance of ensuring educators have the tools and strategies to understand curriculum and to implement instructional strategies resulting in student achievement (Poekert et al., 2020).

The Learning Forward (2022) theme of transformational processes is divided into four components: equity drivers, evidence, learning designs, and implementation. With these themes in mind, it is crucial that professional learning offers opportunities for participants to not only investigate their own biases and beliefs, but to also have opportunities to collaborate with diverse colleagues (Jacobs et al., 2020; Skerrett et al., 2018). Additionally, within transformational processes, designers of professional learning must be intentional in their use of evidence-based learning designs that lead to equitable outcomes and success for students (Cavendish et al., 2021; Learning Forward, 2022; Zepeda, 2019).

The last group of professional learning standards fall under the theme of conditions for success and includes equity foundations, culture of collaborative inquiry, leadership, and resources (Learning Forward, 2022). Learning Forward (2022) stated “educators recognize that high-quality professional learning can serve as a lever to achieve equity throughout schools and districts only when educators and students have access to and opportunity for rigorous and relevant learning” (p. 56). Research has shown that when teachers are provided with high-quality

professional learning, students are positively affected, and teacher efficacy increases (Andrews & Richmond, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2020; Skerrett et al., 2018). Understanding that there are standards to use to ensure high-quality professional learning is designed and sustained for educators, we now examine how to plan for professional learning.

### *Planning for Professional Learning*

Guskey (2014) asserted, “before thinking about the format and content of any professional learning experience, we must first consider the specific student learning outcomes we want to attain and what evidence will best reflect those outcomes” (p. 3). Thus, the first stage of planning for professional learning becomes determining the student outcomes or goals and the evidence that will be used to determine if those outcomes have been met (Guskey, 2014). Sawyer and Stucky (2019) provided questions that can be used to help with aligning professional learning to goals such as asking “What are the goals of this learning session? Are there goals related to the larger goals of the district’s learning plan?” (p. 73). Zepeda (2019) adds to this foundational stage in planning when asserting the need to use both formal and informal data to determine what learning is needed.

Guskey (2014) stated the second “step in planning professional learning is to decide what instructional practices and policies are most likely to produce the student learning outcomes we want” (p. 4). In this phase of professional learning, protocols may be examined to help participants to create an environment where teachers are responsible for their learning. Sawyer and Stucky (2019) stated that protocols such as chalk talks “supports collaboration and active learning through brainstorming content around a particular topic” (p. ix). Job-embedded learning designs such as learning communities, coaching, book studies, and action-research are also strong vehicles for professional learning (Zepeda, 2019). In fact, Zepeda et al. (2022) concluded

“job-embedded professional learning is enhanced when teachers collaborate, inquire, and reflect on their practices, observe one another teach, and engage in conversations about what they are learning and the impact their efforts have on student success” (p. 12).

When deciding on which instructional practices to include in professional learning, the key is to create moments where participants can engage in inquiry, reflection, and collaboration (Jacobs et al., 2020; Sawyer & Stuckey, 2019). Tam (2015) also believed “collaborative learning activities such as reflection, observation, action research, and dialog provide a powerful learning environment which in turn leads to teacher change” (p. 37).

The next step in planning for professional learning is determining what type of organizational support will be needed to ensure the implementation of the professional learning (Guskey, 2014; Guskey 2021). Supports can come in many forms such as feedback from administrators or coaches, time, and funding (Andrews & Richmond, 2019; Guskey, 2014; Poekert et al., 2020). Learning Forward (2022) stated “support includes progress-monitoring tools and a process for analyzing observation data as well as principal and teacher input to inform professional learning priorities” (p. 65).

The last step Guskey (2014) outlined when planning for professional learning is to determine what knowledge and skills teachers will need to learn to implement the new instructional practices or policies intended to increase student achievement. This is where staying abreast research-based strategies is integral when designing professional learning opportunities. Research supports the fact that professional learning is most effective when the content is grounded in evidence-based research (Learning Forward, 2022; Skerrett et al., 2018).

### *Adult Learners*

Research has proven that adults' learning needs vary and can be different than the needs of students (Brown, 2005; Sawyer & Stuke, 2019). Zepeda (2019) and Aguilar and Cohen (2022) summarized the research of Knowles and described assumptions about adult learners based on Knowles' work. Both Aguilar and Cohen (2022) and Zepeda (2019) asserted that adults genuinely want to learn and are generally self-directed learners. Furthermore, Aguilar and Cohen (2022) and Zepeda (2019) stated adults bring their prior experiences to new learning experiences. Consequently, professional learning should provide opportunities for participants to share past experiences and stories relevant to the learning.

Zepeda (2019) further stressed, "adult learners' readiness to learn is linked to coping with real-life situations related to changing social roles" (p. 22) supporting Aguilar and Cohen's (2022) belief that "adults have a problem-centered approach to learning" (p. 126). Additionally, research found that adults' must have a clearly articulated purpose for learning and that purpose must be articulated and that adults must practice their learning for it to be internalized (Aguilar & Cohen, 2022; Zepeda, 2019). Guskey (2021) also highlighted the importance of providing support to adult learners as they learn and practice adapting what they are learning to work in the context of their schools and classrooms.

When designing professional learning for adults, it is critical to keep these principles in mind. One such strategy that Zepeda (2019) recommended based off these principles was to "give adult learners as much control as possible over what they learn, how they learn, and other aspects of their learning" (p. 39). In addition, considering the different learning styles of participants, just like teachers should do for their students, is crucial (Zepeda, 2019).

### *Assessing Professional Learning and Learning Transfer*

The purpose of professional learning is to create change (Andrews & Richmond, 2019; Learning Forward 2022; Zepeda, 2019). As a result, assessment of professional learning is an integral part of the professional learning design process (Zepeda, 2019). When assessing professional learning, Guskey's (2002, as cited by King, 2014) five levels of professional development evaluation can be used. These levels include:

1. Participants' reactions
2. Participants' learning
3. Organization support and change
4. Participants' use of new knowledge and skills
5. Students' learning outcomes

In addition to evaluating professional learning, Zepeda (2019) reiterated, when participants can practice their learning, the chance of implementation increases up to 95%. In addition, Zepeda (2019) emphasized the importance of follow-up support to ensure transfer of learning.

Coaching is one way effective to follow-up on professional learning (Brown et al., 2021; Cavendish et al., 2021). Sawyer and Stucky (2019) asserted, "inquiry couples with effective coaching and mentoring can lead to powerful professional learning in the classroom and learning environment and with the students that the change is meant to impact" (p. 94).

### *Equity Focused Professional Learning*

Research has found that equity-centered professional learning requires teachers to engage in self-reflection where they are able to examine their own beliefs and biases (Andrews & Richmond, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2020). Additionally, researchers found it particularly valuable when teachers had the opportunities to engage in reflection and collaborative discourse (Jacobs

et al., 2020; Poekert et al., 2020; Skerrett et al., 2018). In fact, Cavendish et al.'s, (2021) research analyzed the perspectives of teachers in a culturally responsive pedagogy program and found that the professional learning was most effective when there were multiple opportunities for teachers to collaborate and interact with other teachers.

Skerrett et al. (2018) offered several features of equity-centered professional learning, which correlated with aspects of adult learning principles such as incorporating teachers' professional knowledge and expertise in the learning. During professional learning, it was important that teachers could take on the role of both learner and teacher and find ways to contribute to their own professional learning or curriculum design (Cavendish et al., 2021; Skerrett et al., 2018).

Research also found that equity-centered professional learning should be connected to aspects of the curriculum, teaching, and learning that teachers identified as being areas that they wanted to grow in (Learning Forward, 2022; Poekert et al., 2020; Skerrett et al., 2018). This connects with the notion that adults want to learn; however, they want their learning to be relevant (Learning Forward, 2022; Sawyer & Stuckey, 2019; Zepeda, 2019). Honig and Honsa's (2020) research showed how using the teacher's workplace as the main learning setting for professional learning led to momentous change as they were able to participate in cycles of inquiry using their own classroom settings, and then share and receive feedback on their authentic work.

Riordan et al.'s (2019) research highlighted how equity-centered professional learning taught participants how to examine current issues and content with an equity-centered lens, even if it was not directly related to race or socioeconomic status, enabling students to make stronger connections to the curriculum. Overall, seeing strategies modeled during professional learning,

increased participants ability to implement the same practices in their classroom (Honig & Honsa, 2020; Riordan et al., 2019).

Professional learning must be sustainable over time for it to be effective (Learning Forward, 2022; Sawyer & Stuckey, 2019; Zepeda, 2019). Skerrett et al. (2018) found that their equity-centered professional learning was most effective when the learning was held over time. This ultimately provided participants with the opportunity to engage in collaborative discussions over time that led for deeper questioning and the building of more complex knowledge as they applied their learning in the classroom and brought it back to subsequent professional learning sessions (Skerrett et al., 2018).

In summary, for equity-centered professional learning to be effective, it must consider adult learning principles while aligning the content of the professional learning to equity and pedagogy, providing models of research-based instructional practices that promote equity, and providing an environment that is collaborative and open for participants to participate in inquiry-based learning opportunities (Riordan et al., 2019). Skerrett et al. (2018) found “professional learning in which teachers could take on roles as problem posers, co-teachers and co-learners, co-investigators, and designers of solutions to self-identified problems of practice found to produce fruitful learning for participants” (p. 143).

### *Asynchronous Professional Learning*

Asynchronous or virtual professional learning has proven to be an effective delivery method for professional learning (Buttimer, 2022; Brown et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, districts were forced to continue teaching and learning in virtual platforms, which also included professional learning (Bragg et al., 2021). At this same time, high profile news events such as the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, increased school

districts' need to address equity issues within schools (Buttimer et al., 2022). With the introduction of virtual learning, it became vital to consider how effective the use of such platforms was when it came to equity-centered learning.

Buttimer et al. (2022) researched the use of asynchronous professional learning structured around four pairs of equity mindset. Teachers ranging from K-12 engaged in professional learning that used direct teaching videos, video clips from the field, practice spaces, debriefing videos, and culminating activities. Buttimer et al. (2022) found that the design of this type of professional learning led to a significant increase in their equity mind-sets. Similar findings were found in a study conducted by Bragg et al. (2021) where participants found online professional learning beneficial when it fostered engagement, used activities that allowed for the application of learning, and considered various learning styles.

Likewise, research conducted by Powell and Bodur (2019) found “teachers' perceptions revealed the importance of specific design and implementation features including relevancy, authenticity, usefulness, collaboration and interaction, reflection, and context, thereby extending much of the current research from program evaluation to design and implementation” (p. 28)

Research on online professional learning identified several common indicators for success including the need for on-line professional learning to provide participants with multiple pathways to learn and engage with others (Bragg et al.,2021; Buttimer et al., 2022; Powell & Bodur, 2019). In addition, Buttimer et al. (2022) found it critical to provide participants the opportunity to practice in a low-stake environment. Bragg et al.'s (2021) research was able to identify learning supports that increased professional learning satisfaction. Supports such as interactive tools and peer-to-peer discussion were powerful. Of course, further research needs to

be conducted to learn about effective design and delivery of online professional learning (Bragg et al., 2021; Buttimer et al., 2022; Powell & Bodur, 2019).

Professional learning is a powerful vehicle to ignite and carry out change. Learning Forward (2022) reminded us that “the purpose of professional learning is to build educators’ individual and collective capacity to create successful learning experiences for each and every student” (p. 8). Thus, in this next section of the literature review, the organizational structures that are needed to integrate new learning into one’s classroom and school environment are examined.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter highlighted how educational laws and policies have been created in hopes of improving the American educational system for all students, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, disability, and more (Chu, 2019; Fusarelli & Ayscue, 2019; Kostyo et al., 2018). To provide equitable learning environments for a diverse student population, studies found that educators who were equity-conscious and culturally responsive were successful at meeting the needs of students from marginalized student groups (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Carter & Richmond, 2019; Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nadelson et al., 2019).

When considering pathways to grow the cultural competence of teachers, professional learning was looked at as a primary tool. In fact, researchers deemed professional learning as an essential improvement lever (Andrews & Richmond, 2019; Cavendish et al., 2021; Guskey, 2014; Learning Forward, 2022). When designing adult professional learning, however, it was recommended that adult learning principles be considered and guide the design of the professional learning (Aguilar & Cohen, 2022; Guskey, 2021; Zepeda, 2019). Two of the most critical components of equity-centered professional learning, was space to engage in self-

reflection and collaborative discourse (Andrews & Richmond, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2020; Poekert et al., 2020; Skerrett et al., 2018).

Additionally, the role of the school leader in supporting the growth of teachers' cultural competence and equity-centered mindset was crucial. Leaders must be culturally responsive and provide an equity-centered vision for their staff (Khalifa et al., 2016). Furthermore, Chen and Yang (2021) emphasized the importance of schools having an action plan to help visions of equity come alive in schools. It was noted that culturally responsive leaders do not and should not only exist in the local school buildings, but at all levels, including the district.

This study considered the research that showed how professional learning impacts adult learners and how professional learning can be used to build equity-centered educators that are also culturally responsive. Using the literature that existed, this study sought to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series facilitated by district leaders. Chapter 3 details the process used to complete the action research study.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Research has shown that teachers have more influence on student achievement than any other factor (Barth & CPE, 2016; Hattie, 2008). As a result, educators have the significant job of ensuring that every student receives the support needed to succeed at school and beyond. Knowing that each child is unique and comes to school with diverse backgrounds and cognitive abilities, socially and emotionally, educators must recognize, value, and leverage students' differences to meet their needs better. It is no surprise that The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (2021) asserted that one way to overcome the challenges equity presents is to confront structural barriers by assessing the capacity of staff to implement equity-focused strategies and to remove obstacles that threaten student growth.

The purpose of this study was to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?
2. How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?

3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series?

This chapter reviews the reasoning for the research design selected and provides specific details about the action research design. The context of the study, data sources and collection methods, interventions, data analysis methods, and trustworthiness of the study are described. This chapter ends with an overview of the researcher's subjectivity statement and the study's limitations.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

This study collected and analyzed data to understand the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series and its impact on participants. A recent qualitative study exploring the strategies culturally responsive teachers use in their classroom included teacher interviews in various phases of the research period to understand participants understanding of culturally responsive teaching and to determine the strategies they used in their classroom (Tanase, 2020). In an empirical study by Ladson-Billings, interviews, observations, and field notes were used to formulate ideas around culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Furthermore, Guskey (2002) shared that the assessment of professional learning should evaluate participants' reactions, learning, and use of new knowledge and skills. Following this trail of prior studies, , qualitative research lends itself to this study because teachers' perceptions of how a culturally responsive professional learning series impacted their cultural competence as educators can be gathered from interviews, focus groups, artifacts, and observations.

Qualitative research, according to Bloomberg (2023), “is suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants” (p. 70). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted, “basically, qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 15, emphasis in the original). These ideas correlate directly to one of the concepts of being a culturally responsive educator, which the professional learning series in this study aimed to address. To become culturally competent, educators must have self-awareness and understand how their past experiences create a lens in which they view the world.

This study sought to determine the structures and support systems in a professional development series while using action research to understand the perspectives of various stakeholders involved. Qualitative research was chosen because of its ability to help the researcher understand the impact of a professional learning series on teacher practice to guide professional learning structures and support systems in the future. Using action research methods that included questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, observations during professional learning sessions, and participant documents allowed the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the design elements leading to transformational district-led professional learning opportunities.

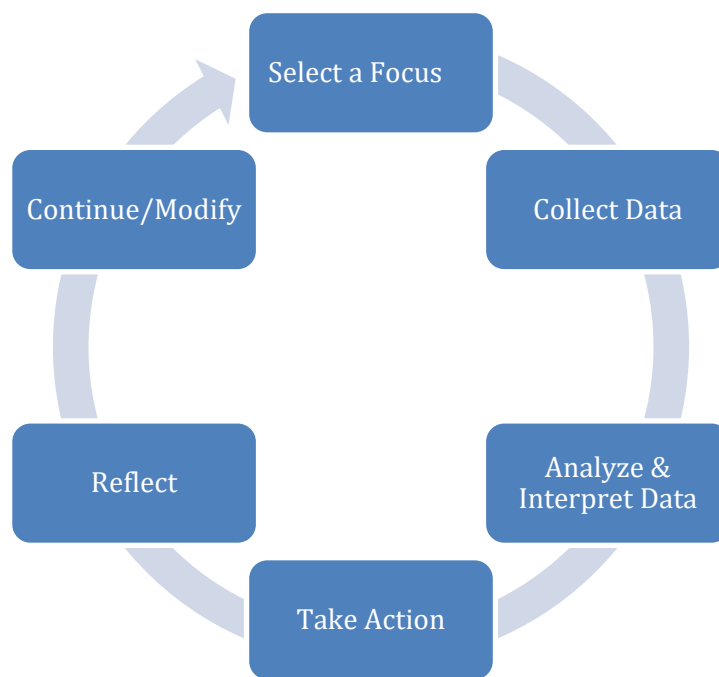
### **Overview of Action Research Methods**

Action research is a form of applied research in which the researcher is a practitioner addressing a problem within their social context (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Coghlan (2019) asserted that action research is collaborative in nature, usually “based on a collaborative relationship between researcher and members of an organization or community, which aims both to address an issue of concern to generate actionable knowledge”

(p. 53). Bloomberg (2023) articulated, action research was “iterative, cyclical, and participative in nature and is intended to foster a deep understanding of a given situation informing future action, starting with conceptualizing and particularizing the problem and moving through several interventions and evaluations” (p. 101). As shown in Figure 3.1, action research requires the researcher to be a reflective practitioner, in this study, assessing the needs of a program, identifying problem areas, and developing strategies to make the program more effective (Glanz, 2014).

Figure 3.1

*Action Research Process*



*Note.* Adapted from Glanz (2014).

This study specifically sought to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series for teachers. Although this professional development series was designed for teachers in one specific district, the series was designed and implemented by the district office. Glanz (2014)

described action research as a form of research that has been used to improve school organizations and as a process to support staff development. Thus, action research was ideal for use in this study since it allowed for the researcher to learn from doing. Additionally, Bloomberg (2023) explained, “action research focuses on specific situations that people encounter by engaging them in collaborative relationships and working on developing localized solutions” (p. 157).

Since this research used a combination of Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory as its theoretical framework, action research was the vehicle to propel these theories forward. Knowing that transformative learning “involves transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11), it was appropriate to use action research to investigate how teachers described the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency. Ultimately, this study took principles from both Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory and used them to help set up the first cycle of the action research design, and then through the collection and analysis of data, used the findings to refine the implementation of Adult Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory in the professional learning series. The next section provides an in-depth look at how action research was structured for this study.

### **Action Research Design**

Action research offered the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) an opportunity to improve a professional learning series in a systematic and dialogical manner (Coghlan, 2019; Glanz, 2014; Willis, 2014). In determining the structures and support systems needed to increase

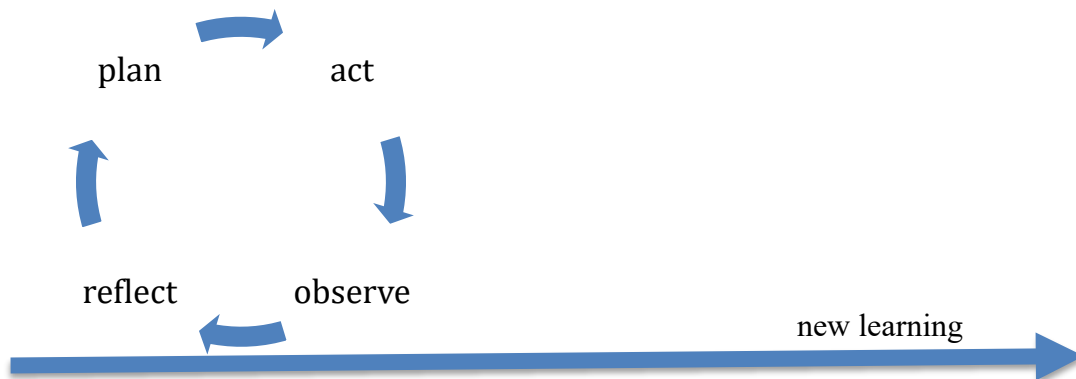
participants' cultural competence and proficiency, the ARDT engaged in several Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles. Each cycle allowed ARDT members to engage in rich discussions and analysis based on data, allowing for the next steps to be determined and implemented.

### *The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research*

Action research can be described as learning by doing (Glanz, 2014). With multiple action research cycles and cycles often having different time spans, action research is also cyclical. (Coghlan, 2019). Action research's spiraling nature calls for the researcher to be proactive and reflective throughout the study. Kuhne and Quigley (1997) shared, "since action research encourages an ongoing cycle of interventions that progressively define and solve practice problems, in one sense action research never really ends" (p. 25). Consisting of four core processes, as outlined in Figure 3.2, action research allows practitioners to respond to problems through problem-posing and problem-solving by planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kuhne & Quigley, 1997). Consequently, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) engaged in several spiraling cycles of Plan-Do-Study-Act to ensure participants received transformational and transferable professional learning.

**Figure 3.2**

### *The Spiraling Nature of Action Research*



*Note.* Based on Kuhne and Quigley (1997).

Action research calls for multiple forms of data to be collected and analyzed as the research cycles unfold (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data collected are then used to inform the next cycle and ultimately leads to new knowledge being formed for the context in which the study is being implemented. This research used qualitative research methods, including focus group interviews with the ARDT and questionnaires and interviews with the action research implementation team (ARIT).

The ARDT analyzed the data collected from the ARIT to inform the design of upcoming professional learning sessions. The questionnaire provided the ARDT with valuable information that was used when designing the first two professional learning sessions in the series. The follow-up interviews continued to inform the design of the professional learning, including the supports and structures used during each session. Bloomberg (2023) reiterated, “data collection and analysis are interwoven throughout the research process to produce understanding and inform future action” (p. 163).

Overall, action research’s systematic and cyclical process makes it ideal for problem-solving within an educational setting (Glanz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Bloomberg (2023) shared, “the research itself is an intervention because it seeks to promote actual change by informing and impacting a practice, procedure, system, or environment, thereby leading to the improvement of life for a desired targeted group of individuals” (p. 158).

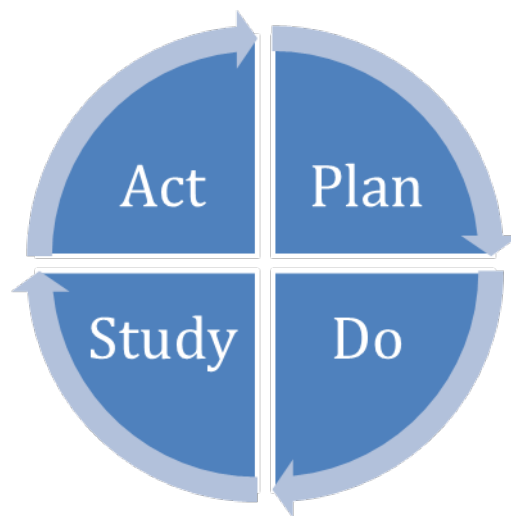
### *Logic Model*

This action research study, which determined the structures and support systems implemented in an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series, used Deming’s Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle to engage in continuous learning cycles. Each step allowed the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) to make predictions around what

structures and supports made the professional learning series effective and helped the ARDT to carry out the plan, study the data, and adjust based on new questions and findings (Bryk et al., 2017). The PDSA cycle, as portrayed in Figure 3.3, provided the structure for the ARDT to design a professional learning series, implement interventions to increase the transfer of learning, reflect on gathered data, and then integrate new knowledge in repeated cycles of action research.

**Figure 3.3**

*Plan-Do-Study-Act*



*Note.* Adapted from Bryk et al. (2017).

*Theory of Change*

This research sought to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. Consequently, this study was founded on the premise that for adults to integrate new learning into their lives, they must experience a disorienting dilemma, opportunities for self-reflection and recognition, exploration, and learning (Mezirow, 1997). The professional learning series served as the core intervention and was built on transformational learning principles. The Action Research Design Team engaged in designing professional learning that incorporated

Transformational and Adult Learning Theories and capitalized on data from participants to guide the interventions used throughout the four-part professional learning series. By embedding multiple opportunities for participants to engage in discourse with one another and framing the work in the context of personal experience, including experiences from the classroom, participants were able to transform their thinking and practice.

### *The Case*

The context of this study was a district-facilitated professional learning series that took place in an urban setting. The professional learning series was open to educators who had completed the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Intermediate Course. Bryk et al. (2017) emphasized, “improvement efforts need the good will and engagement of the people whose work is the subject of change” (p. 119). Consequently, participants ranged from K-12 educators across the district who enrolled in the course voluntarily. The professional learning occurred synchronously at the district support office. Participants represented elementary, middle, and high school levels across the district.

Overall, the case of this study was bounded on the experiences of the ARDT and ARIT as they designed, facilitated, and participated in a district professional learning series. This professional learning opportunity was created out of a need to support teachers in educating a diverse student population at a time when equity initiatives had also increased. The Jolly County Public Schools prided itself on a set of strategic priorities focused on empathy, equity, excellence, and effectiveness. Professional learning was an optimal intervention for the JCPS to use to work toward its strategic priorities.

*The Action Research Design Team*

Seeing that action research is “a systematic, collaborative, and democratic orientation toward inquiry” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 157), the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) shared control over the decision-making and interpretation of data collected during each research cycle. The ARDT, displayed in Table 3.1, was comprised of district personnel in the Department of Staff Development. Members included the primary researcher, the executive director of Staff Development, and two Staff Development instructional coaches that directly supported the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Program (EER).

**Table 3.1**

*Action Research Design Team*

Team Member	Primary Role at Jolly County Public Schools	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Coordinator for Leadership and Staff Development, JCPS	Researcher, designed and facilitated the Advanced EER Course
Kaliope Hunt	Instructional Coach for Leadership and Staff Development, JCPS	Designed and facilitated the Advanced EER Course
Tina Roland	Instructional Coach for Leadership and Staff Development, JCPS	Designed and facilitated the Advanced EER Course
Layla Sherman	Executive Director for Leadership and Staff Development, JCPS	Provided oversight and direction of the EER program; Fact Checker

The primary researcher served as the coordinator of the EER Program and was charged with expanding the program’s reach while adhering to the Professional Learning Standards and working toward initiatives outlined in the Jolly County Public School’s strategic plan, entitled the North Star. Ms. Sherman served as the Executive Director and provided oversight and input

into the direction of the EER Program. She served as a sounding board and helped look for biases in the ARDT's thinking. Both instructional coaches, Ms. Roland and Ms. Hunt, worked closely with the primary researcher the previous year to facilitate and implement equity-centered professional learning, including the professional learning for the EER Intermediate course. Together, Ms. Roland and Ms. Hunt provided insight into the content, structure, and delivery of professional learning sessions for the Advanced course, in addition to facilitating the professional learning for the course.

The Action Research Design Team members were chosen for their direct involvement in the Educational Equity Program. Since all members of the ARDT supported the EER Program by designing and facilitating professional learning opportunities that supported the vision and mission of the program, it was imperative to have them as collaborators in this study. During the first monthly meeting, the primary researcher provided an orientation for all team members, including the purpose of the study, research questions driving the study, an overview of action research, and their roles on the Action Research Design Team.

The ARDT collaborated to determine interventions, collected and analyzed data, and decided on the next steps throughout each action research cycle. The ARDT worked directly with the ARIT by facilitating the professional learning they received, observing participants, and analyzing participant artifacts.

#### *Action Research Implementation Team*

In August, completers of the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Intermediate Course were emailed about the opportunity to participate in the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Advanced Course. Participants who enrolled in the course were then sent a follow-up email asking them to participate in this study, which occurred in the 2023-2024 school

year. The Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) was comprised of seven teachers, three teachers from the elementary school level, three from the middle school level, and two teachers from the high school level. The make-up of the ARIT provided a cross-section of participants who enrolled in the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Advanced Course.

It is important to note that the ARIT members were teachers who had participated in an intermediate professional learning course during the 2022–2023 school year provided by the same department. Table 3.2 lists the members of the ARIT, the grade levels, and subject areas they taught, and the background of their teaching experience.

**Table 3.2**

*Action Research Implementation Team*

Educational Equity and Responsiveness Participant	Grade Level / Subject	Teaching Experience
Jazzlyn Sanders	Elementary / Special Education Interrelated	10 + years
Jessica Alvarez	Elementary / Instructional Support	10 + years
Rosalyn Huggins	Middle School / Special Education Interrelated	5-9 years
Denise Ritz	Middle School / Language Arts & Social Studies	10+ years
Sarah Stephenson	Middle School / Print Journalism	10+ years
Holly Smith	High School / History	10 + years
Claire Mozart	High School / Language Arts	10 + years
Jennifer Abbotts	High School / Language Arts	10 + years

### *Research Plan and Timeline*

Action research is solution-driven, requiring spiraling cycles of data collection, reflection, problem-defining, and action (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014). Bloomberg (2023) asserted that action research’s “cyclical framework enables people to commence on a shared and productive process of inquiry in a stepwise fashion and to build greater detail into procedures as the complexity of issues increase” (p. 103). Collaborating with the ARDT during the planning phases of each cycle was integral to the study (Coghlan, 2019).

For this study, the ARDT, which was the JCPS’s Educational Equity and Responsiveness (EER) Team, designed and implemented an Educational Equity and Responsiveness Advanced series geared to increasing the cultural competence of staff members in the district. Since the course was a district-facilitated professional learning offering, available to all district certified staff, it was imperative that the EER Team be purposeful when selecting the structures and support systems that the professional learning course would use. The EER Team wanted to ensure that the professional learning led to transformational change at each participants’ perspective schools and classroom. By gathering the perceptions of the ARIT at the beginning, middle, and end of the professional learning series, the ARDT was able to adjust the structures of the professional learning course to ensure the transfer of learning to practice.

The ARIT participated in the EER Advanced Course by attending in-person professional learning opportunities and implementing their learning at their local school. The EER Team gathered observational data during professional learning sessions and gathered documents such as the Staff Development Impact Survey data from each session and work completed and submitted to the instructors. Additionally, the ARIT provided valuable feedback when sharing their perceptions during interviews.

Throughout the professional learning series, the ARDT met monthly to analyze and discuss the data gathered from the ARIT. It was through these monthly meetings that the team was able to complete two cycles of Plan, Do, Study, Act. The primary researcher was able to use the focus group interview with the ARDT to synthesize data and to determine next steps and interventions. The action research timeline in Table 3.3 provides an overview of the action research cycles used in this study.

**Table 3.3**

*Action Research Timeline*

Date	Action Research Activity	
	Action Research Design Team (ARDT)	Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)
August 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Secured consent to participate</li> <li>Monthly meeting</li> <li>Observation Notes of Professional Learning sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Secured consent to participate</li> <li>Participate in Professional Learning Questionnaire</li> <li>Artifacts – Impact Survey, discussion board, asynchronous work</li> </ul>
September 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus Group Interview</li> <li>Monthly meeting</li> <li>Observation Notes of Professional Learning sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participate in Professional Learning</li> <li>Artifacts – Impact Survey, discussion board, asynchronous work</li> <li>Interviews w/ individuals</li> </ul>
October 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monthly meeting</li> <li>Observation Notes of Professional Learning sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participate in Professional Learning</li> <li>Artifacts – Impact Survey, discussion board, asynchronous work</li> </ul>
November 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus Group Interview</li> <li>Monthly meeting</li> <li>Observation Notes of Professional Learning sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participate in Professional Learning</li> <li>Artifacts – Impact Survey, discussion board, asynchronous work</li> <li>Interviews w/ individuals</li> </ul>
January 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appropriate follow-up activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appropriate follow-up activities</li> </ul>

## Context of the Study

Carr (2006) offered that action research “enables practitioners to test the assumptions implicit in their practice” with the knowledge that these assumptions have a historical or cultural context (p. 433). With this research being centered in an educational setting, it was imperative to consider the historical and cultural context in which the study was situated. This study was centered on the Jolly County Public Schools (JCPS), an urban school district in the southeastern part of the United States.

In 2021, the JCPS appointed a new superintendent, Dr. Clarence E. Allen, after numerous years of leadership under the former superintendent, in which the JCPS developed a reputation of being a world-class school system. As part of Dr. Allen’s onboarding, he conducted a *Look, Listen, and Learn* tour, where he gathered feedback to help develop a new strategic plan. This strategic plan became known as the *North Star for the Future: Building the Bridge from Empathy to Excellence*. The *North Star* outlined four strategic priorities: empathy, equity, effectiveness, and excellence. As summarized in Figure 3.4, these four strategic priorities were each supported by three goals. The three goals were supported with objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs).

**Figure 3.4**

*Summary of the JCPS Strategic Priorities and Goals*

Empathy	Equity	Effectiveness	Excellence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Cultural Competence</li><li>•Staff and student wellbeing</li><li>•Educator diversity</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Multi-tiered systems of support</li><li>•Opportunity and access</li><li>•Equitable resource allocation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Results-Based Evaluation System</li><li>•Talent Management</li><li>•Educational return on investment</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Preferred education destination</li><li>•Postsecondary and workforce readiness</li><li>•World-class communication and engagement</li></ul>

*Note.* Adapted from the Jolly County’s Public Schools North Star.

This action research focused on professional development for one of the strategic priorities, empathy. Under the strategic priority of empathy, the JCPS had three goals: cultural competence, staff and student well-being, and educator diversity. The professional learning series in this study was centered on cultural competence. The Jolly County Public School’s (2022) goal for cultural competence was to “increase the cultural competence and proficiency of our organization and individual staff members to improve service delivery, strengthen programs, and enhance engagement across the full spectrum of our diverse community” (p. 14). With the *North Star* as the county’s new direction and events in the nation impacting the community, the Department of Staff Development accepted the challenge to create a program that would help equip staff to be culturally competent.

*Profile of the District*

The Jolly County Public Schools (2022) asserted, “since 2000, [Jolly] had become one of the most diverse counties in the United States, while the school system [had grown] to be the

largest in its state, and the 11<sup>th</sup> largest in the country” (p. 5). The JCPS (2023) students came from 191 countries and spoke 98 languages. The JCPS served over 180,000 students in its 142 schools consisting of 81 elementary schools, 29 high schools, 7 specialty schools, and 1 charter school.

When considering the racial or ethnic distribution of the student population, the JCPS (2023) reported that 33% of the students were Black; 11% Asian or Pacific Islander; 18% White; 34% Hispanic or Latino; 4% Multiracial; and 0.2% American Indian. In May 2022, the Jolly County’s *JCPS By the Numbers* reported that 25% of its students received English Language Learners (ELL) services, while 14% received services through special education, 16% through gifted programs, and 47% economically disadvantaged.

While the student population in the JCPS was diverse in race distribution, the teacher race distribution was not. Georgia Insights (2022) reported that JCPS had 64.2% white teachers and 23.59% black teachers. Additionally, other racial groups had less than 6% representation in any racial teacher group. These data heightened the need for professional learning around cultural competence, considering that a predominately white teaching staff for the JCPS did not represent the students being taught.

It was vital to consider multiple data points or key performance indicators (KPIs) to help the district work toward its goal of building the cultural competence of its employees and students. This study considered data from five KPIs that fell under the strategic priority of empathy and the goal of cultural competence. As represented in Table 3.4, The Jolly County Public Schools used Educational Effectiveness Surveys (EES) to gather baseline data to measure the organization’s current reality of increasing individual staff members' cultural competence and proficiency. Target goals were set for the next five years based on baseline data.

**Table 3.4***Key Performance Indicators for the Cultural Competence Goal*

Indicator	SY2022 Baseline	SY2023 Target	SY2024 Target
Cultural Proficiency- Staff Survey	73.8%	74.3%	75.3%
Cultural Proficiency – Student Survey	82.6%	83.1%	84.1%
Cultural Proficiency – Family Survey	82.7%	83.2%	84.2%
Sense of Belonging – Student Survey	71.1%	71.6%	72.6%
Sense of Belonging – Family Survey	84.2%	84.7%	85.7%

*Note.* As reported in the Jolly County’s Public Schools *North Star*.

One KPI indicator was the staff survey which considered the percentage of staff that responded positively to the following cultural proficiency Educational Effectiveness Survey (EES): “We are provided training to meet the needs of a diverse student population in our school” (JCPS, 2022, p. 34). The professional learning that occurred during this research was a critical intervention in increasing the proficiency of staff members. This effort provided a pathway for teachers to enroll in training to provide strategies to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. As staff members’ cultural competence increased, this would ideally trickle down to students and families. As depicted in Table 3.5, EES survey items were linked to the goal of cultural competence to help the district gauge how it was performing in increasing the cultural competence of its employees.

**Table 3.5***KPI Methods for Cultural Proficiency Goal*

Key Performance Indicator	Method of Measurement
Cultural Proficiency- Staff Survey	Percent of staff responding positively to the following cultural proficiency EES Staff Survey item: <i>We are provided training to meet the needs of a diverse student population in our school.</i>

<b>Key Performance Indicator</b>	<b>Method of Measurement</b>
Cultural Proficiency – Student Survey	Percent of students responding positively to the following cultural proficiency EES Student Survey item: <i>I am comfortable interacting with people from a different racial or ethnic background (MS/HS) / I am comfortable interacting with people from different backgrounds (ES).</i>
Cultural Proficiency – Family Survey	Percent of families responding positively to the following cultural proficiency EES Family Survey items (weighted average): <i>(1) This school addresses issues of diversity in a timely and effective manner (2) This school respects the different cultures represented in our community (3) My student learns about the cultures of our community at their school (4) Adults in this school value and respect my racial/cultural identity (5) This school has a welcoming environment that embraces the diversity of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientations.</i>

*Note.* As reported in the Jolly County’s Public Schools *North Star*.

It was important to note that the *North Star* provided a plan for the entire county, including teachers and those who supported teachers. As a result, it would take every stakeholder playing their part to achieve the KPIs outlined in the *North Star*. This study attempted to support a need outlined in the Blueprint from a district lens.

*Department of Staff Development*

The Jolly County Public School’s district office existed to support schools. Operating out of the district office, and falling under Human Resources, was the Department of Staff Development. The Department of Staff Development provided high-quality professional learning opportunities and customized support and services designed to advance the system’s vision, mission, and goals by enhancing employee performance and developing employee capacity. Within the Department of Staff Development were several special programs set to meet specific needs in the district. One of those programs in which this research was situated was the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Program.

### *Educational Equity and Responsiveness Program*

The Educational Equity and Responsiveness (EER) Program was one of the programs operating out of the Department of Staff Development. This program started in Fall 2020, offering a foundational course around culturally responsive teaching, Building a Foundation for Educational Equity and Responsiveness. This course was offered to certified staff, including teachers and administrators. At the start of this study, 235 employees had participated in the Building a Foundation for Educational Equity and Responsiveness Course. Throughout the years, the course went through continuous quality improvement cycles in which the following objectives were at the center:

- Gain a heightened awareness of personal context filters, identify biases we hold, and create an action plan for positive change.
- Discuss what it means to create classrooms and schools with a culture of authentic belonging and dignity that supports our JCPS vision and mission.

In the Fall of 2022, the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Intermediate Course opened. This course was offered as a four-part series for educators. The prerequisite for the course was enrolling in the Building a Foundation for Educational Equity and Responsiveness. It was the goal that after completing this professional learning series, participants would be able to implement strategies to create an equitable and responsive environment through the following actions:

- Promoting diversity to engage students, families, and communities, disrupting biases, and supporting inclusive schools
- Developing skills to effectively recognize, respond to, and prevent microaggressions in educational and professional settings

- Creating equitable systems and structures that promote an inclusive and welcoming classroom environment
- Implementing pedagogical approaches that include the use of culturally responsive and transformative instructional practices

Since the start of the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Intermediate Course in August 2022, 29 educators had successfully completed this course. Consequently, this allowed for the same number of teachers to be invited into the newest course offering, the advanced course.

The Fall of 2023 was the first year of the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Advanced Course. This course was a four-part series designed to bring awareness and foster implementation around the following topics:

- Moving from Theory to Practice
- Family Engagement
- Social Justice in the Classroom and Community
- Leading Culturally Responsiveness with Integrity and Authenticity

The Educational Equity and Responsiveness Advanced Course was the professional learning series that this action research study focused on to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series.

### **Data Sources**

The purpose of this action research was to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. This professional development series was an optional, district-facilitated offering, opened

to K-12 certified staff that had completed previous Educational Equity and Responsiveness (EER) professional learning courses. Various data sources were used to ensure the integrity of this study in determining what structures and supports were needed to implement a transformational professional learning experience.

### *Participants*

This study centered on the perspectives of certified staff members who volunteered to participate in a four-part professional learning series, Educational Equity and Responsiveness, Advanced course. The professional learning participants were uniquely qualified as they had previously completed two educational equity and responsiveness courses, a foundational and an intermediate course. Participants selected were classroom teachers who had proven to be vested in the work by their desire to continue learning through enrolling in the Educational Equity and Responsiveness (EER) courses.

### *Selection Criteria*

At the beginning of the school year, an email informing previous Educational Equity and Responsiveness participants was sent out informing them that the EER Advanced course was now open for them to register for if interested. The email provided registration information, including the registration deadline, dates of the professional learning series, and course objectives. After participants registered for the Advanced course, a follow-up email was sent to participants informing them of the research study and asking if they would like to participate. The sample size depended on the total number of registrants for the course. All teachers who responded were selected to participate as part of the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), resulting in a sample size of seven teachers.

## **Data Collection Methods**

This action research study used qualitative data collection methods. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described, “a final principle of action research is that the researchers and coinvestigators collect and analyze multiple forms of data systematically as the research process unfolds” (p. 52). Additionally, the data collected must align with the research problem, questions, and theoretical framework (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The following qualitative data collection methods were used in this study:

1. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with participants of the EER Advanced course during the middle and end of the research study.
2. A questionnaire was provided to individuals participating in the EER Advanced course at the beginning of the study to gather initial perceptions and thoughts on the course.
3. Focus Groups were conducted twice with the EER team.
4. The primary researcher recorded observation notes during professional learning sessions.
5. The primary research kept a researcher’s journal to reflect on after professional learning sessions and EER team meetings.
6. Artifacts completed and turned in by participants in the EER Advanced course were collected for a document review.

Data collected during each action research cycle was then organized and coded into themes for analysis.

## *Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews with the participants of the EER Advanced Course were conducted in the middle and end of the professional learning series to understand how the professional learning series impacted teachers' cultural competence. Interviews allowed the personal stories and experiences of others to be collected through in-depth conversations (Bloomberg, 2023; Glanz, 2014; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, probing questions were used to follow up on participants' responses to several pre-planned questions reflective of the research questions for this study. Table 3.6 provides a sampling of the interview questions. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix C.

**Table 3.6**

### *Interview Question Sample*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
Q1 How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?	How has this course impacted your cultural competence and proficiency?  What strategies have you implemented so far? Please provide one or more examples of how these strategies impacted student outcomes.
Q2 How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?	What support from your facilitators helped you to implement your learning?  What additional support from your facilitators might have helped you in implementing your learning?

Due to the professional learning series being located at the district office and participants working at their local school buildings, interviews took place synchronously on Zoom. Based on research conducted by Gray et al. (2020), several recommendations for using Zoom to conduct interviews were followed. The researcher provided participants with a direct link to the meeting,

ensured participants were familiar with the Zoom platform, and planned for possible distractions that may have increased the time of the interview.

*Questionnaire*

A questionnaire was provided to the participants of the EER Advanced Course before the first professional learning in-person session. The questionnaire was predominately open-ended, allowing for participants’ perspectives of their cultural competence to be collected and interpreted as qualitative data. Additionally, the questionnaire allowed the researcher and the ARDT to understand what participants hoped to learn because of the professional learning series. Glanz (2014) described questionnaires as an easy-to-use method to understand respondents’ attitudes on a given issue. A sampling of the questions on the questionnaire is provided in Table 3.7. The complete questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

**Table 3.7**

*Questionnaire Question Sample*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
Q1 How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?	Please share one or more key ideas that you have implemented from the previous Educational Equity and Responsiveness series (Foundation or Intermediate course)?  What do you hope to learn in this course?
Q2 How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?	What type of support do you hope to receive from your session facilitators?

Considering that the questionnaire provided to participants was limited to what respondents put onto paper, not allowing additional probing, only one questionnaire was

provided. Bloomberg (2023) pointed out that it is best to include mostly open-ended questions in qualitative research, as it allows for the respondents' opinions to be captured.

### *Focus Groups*

Focus groups were conducted with the ARDT in the middle and end of the study to gather their thoughts on designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. Bloomberg shared, “focus groups, or group interviews, are facilitated group discussions and possess elements of both participant observation and individual interviews while maintaining their own uniqueness as a distinctive research method” (p. 284). Hennink (2014) offered, “the group environment enables a board range of insights to be gathered in a single sitting” (p. 2). In this case, the ARDT possessed a vast amount of knowledge on the planning and facilitation of the EER Advanced Course. Furthermore, the ARDT had background knowledge from previous EER courses, providing a unique perspective into the outcomes of the EER Advanced Course.

### *Observation Notes*

Observation notes were collected during each professional learning session to substantiate findings from other data collection sources. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out that observations can “provide some knowledge of the context or provide specific incidents, behaviors, and so on that can be used as reference points for subsequent interviews” (p.139). During the monthly ARDT meetings, observation notes were discussed to help inform the planning for future professional learning sessions and interventions.

Since the researcher was also a facilitator of the professional learning experienced by participants, the researcher took on a participant-observer role in which the data were recorded, but not all data. To collect observations, written descriptions were recorded. Glanz (2014) shared

that written descriptions should be “thick observations” that do not include inferences or judgments.

#### *Researcher’s Journal*

Coghlan (2019) stated, “Journaling is an important mechanism for learning to reflect on and gain insights into your preunderstanding” (p. 80). A researcher’s journal was kept throughout the action research to document the researcher’s meta-learning of what was happening during professional learning with participants and thoughts around design structures of professional learning as they unfolded. The researcher’s inferences or assumptions during the professional learning sessions were also captured. As Kemmis et al. (2014) noted, the researcher’s journal also provided a record that could be quoted later when analyzing and triangulating results.

#### *Document Review*

Elicited documents served as a supplementary source of qualitative data for the researcher. Bloomberg (2023) asserted, “The analysis of documents is potentially very rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting” (p. 290). Prior (2003) emphasized the importance of discovering how a document makes information learned visible. During the professional learning series, participants were asked to provide written responses, personal accounts, and artifacts showcasing the implementation of their learning. These documents were analyzed to determine how participants interpreted and internalized professional learning.

During the research cycles, the action research design team used the various forms of data collected to implement and revise interventions provided to participants. In the next section, interventions provided during the study are described.

## Interventions

Through cycles of action driven by a continuous improvement cycle of plan, do, study, act, the ARDT designed, implemented, and modified interventions driving this action research. Glanz (2014) described interventions as “a specific instructional practice, program, or procedure that is implemented by a researcher in order to investigate its effect on the behavior or achievement of an individual or group” (p. 64). The interventions for this research aligned with the study’s theoretical framework, transformational learning theory. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory relied heavily on adult learning theory, or andragogy (Brown, 2005).

While applying adult learning theory, the action research team designed professional learning experiences that allowed participants to transform their frame of reference. The interventions used considered research asserting that effective equity-centered professional learning considers adult learning principles while aligning the content of the professional learning to equity and pedagogy, providing models of research-based instructional practices that promote equity, and providing an environment that is collaborative and open for participants to participate in inquiry-based learning opportunities (Riordan et al., 2019). The ARDT analyzed multiple sources of data from the first action research cycle to adjust interventions driving the second action research cycle.

### *Professional Learning*

The primary intervention for this action research study was the professional learning series. Participants participated in four, two-hour, professional learning sessions. Each session was about four weeks apart to allow for implementation of the learning. Each professional learning session considered adult learning principles and allowed for participants to experience disorienting dilemmas, self-reflection, exploration and learning, and integration of new learning

into the educational setting. Professional learning structures were adjusted throughout the cycle based on participant feedback and facilitator observations.

*Planning Time*

As part of the professional learning series, participants were provided time within the professional learning series to plan for implementation of the strategies learned. The learning outcomes and strategies provided for participants to plan for are represented in Table 3.8. The session ended with participants sharing with the group what they had planned, or at least started to plan. Research found that equity-centered professional learning should be connected to aspects of the curriculum, teaching, and learning that teachers identified as being areas that they wanted to grow in (Learning Forward, 2022; Poekert et al., 2020; Skerrett et al., 2018). As a result, the integration of planning time was another intervention that allowed for professional learning participants to explore the new learning and integrate it into the context of their classrooms. This provided participants with structures to help internalize their learning.

**Table 3.8**

*Professional Learning Outcomes and Strategies for Implementation*

Professional Learning Session	Learning Outcomes	Strategies provided for Implementation
1	Moving from Theory to Practice: Leveraging Our Critical Consciousness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Develop students’ critical consciousness through lessons that engage students in:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Critical Reflection/ Social Analysis</li> <li>○ Political Efficacy/ Agency</li> <li>○ Critical/Social Action</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
2	Increasing Family and Community Involvement and Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Open communication</li> <li>● Develop trust</li> <li>● Support student success</li> <li>● Community partnerships</li> </ul>

Professional Learning Session	Learning Outcomes	Strategies provided for Implementation
3	Social Justice in the Classroom and Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move from individualistic to systemic thinking</li> <li>• Implement restorative practice</li> <li>• Curriculum integration</li> <li>• Community Partnerships</li> </ul>
4	Leading Culturally Responsiveness with Authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know and embody your values</li> <li>• Embrace belonging</li> <li>• Honor integrity</li> </ul>

As interventions were implemented, data were collected from a questionnaire, the researcher’s journal, interviews, focus groups, observations, and document reviews. The next section describes the step-by-step process used to analyze the data collected during and after the implementation of the interventions.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Once data had been collected using a variety of data collection methods, the next step in the data collection process was organizing and making sense of the data (Bloomberg, 2023). Saldana (2011) emphasized “since qualitative research’s design, fieldwork, and data collection are most often provisional, emergent, and evolutionary processes, you reflect on and analyze the data as you gather them and proceed through the project” (p. 90). Bloomberg (2023) further added that it was important to keep an open mind and to remember that qualitative research was about discovery. Consequently, as the researcher gathered data throughout the research cycles, data were well organized in folders by category, and read through to become familiar with the data.

Furthermore, the research questions and purpose of the study were consistently at the forefront of the researcher’s mind. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted, “The overall process of

data analysis begins by identifying segments in your data set that are responsive to your research questions” (p.203). Consequently, as data were gathered during the research cycles, data were read over multiple times to begin to determine words, phrases, and themes that connected to the overall research questions. This process led to the generation of initial codes.

### *Coding*

To analyze the data collected throughout the action research study, data were first coded based on words that aligned with the study’s theoretical framework. Bloomberg (2023) described coding as “a system of classification – the process of noting what is of interest or significance, identifying different segments of the data, and labeling them to organize the information contained in the data” (p. 342) As the researcher read through transcripts, the researcher’s journal, observations notes, and documents, words and phrases that were repetitive in the data were noted and organized. A coding scheme was then assigned to the words or phrases that connected to the research questions of the study. The researcher then wrote around the codes, citing examples to refer to during analysis. Codes were also carried across data sets.

### *Thematic Analysis*

As coding schemes were produced, the researcher grouped codes into categories and looked for overarching themes that had emerged from the codes, resulting in thematic analysis. Nowell et al., (2017) described thematic analysis as a qualitative research “method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set” (p. 2). The themes, also referred to as categories, represented “abstractions derived from the data, not the data themselves” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 207). The phases of thematic analysis used in this case are outlined in Table 3.9 and ultimately helped to establish trustworthiness for this study.

**Table 3.9***Phases of Thematic Analysis and Establishing Trustworthiness*

Phases of Thematic Analysis	Means of Establishing Trustworthiness
Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Prolong engagement with data</i></li> <li>• <i>Triangulate different data collection modes</i></li> <li>• <i>Document theoretical and reflective thoughts</i></li> <li>• <i>Document thoughts about potential codes/themes</i></li> <li>• <i>Store raw data in well-organized archives</i></li> <li>• <i>Keep records of all data field notes, transcripts, and reflexive journals</i></li> </ul>
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Peer debriefing</i></li> <li>• <i>Research triangulation</i></li> <li>• <i>Reflexive journaling</i></li> <li>• <i>Use of a coding framework</i></li> <li>• <i>Audit trail of code generation</i></li> <li>• <i>Documentation of all team meetings and peer debriefings</i></li> </ul>
Phase 3: Searching for themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Research triangulation</i></li> <li>• <i>Diagramming to make sense of theme connections</i></li> <li>• <i>Keep detailed notes about development and hierarchies of concepts and themes</i></li> </ul>
Phase 4: Reviewing themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Researcher triangulation</i></li> <li>• <i>Themes and subthemes vetted by team members</i></li> <li>• <i>Test for referential adequacy by returning to raw data</i></li> </ul>
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Research triangulation</i></li> <li>• <i>Peer debriefing</i></li> <li>• <i>Team consensus on themes</i></li> <li>• <i>Documentation of team meetings regarding themes</i></li> <li>• <i>Documentation of theme naming</i></li> </ul>
Phase 6: Producing the report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Member checking</i></li> <li>• <i>Peer debriefing</i></li> <li>• <i>Describing process of coding and analysis in sufficient details</i></li> <li>• <i>Thick descriptions of context</i></li> <li>• <i>Description of the audit trail</i></li> <li>• <i>Report on reasons for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entire study</i></li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from Nowell et al. (2017).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted, “Data analysis is not easy, but it can be made manageable if you are able to analyze along with data collection” (p. 236). Having a strong data analysis method allowed the researcher to conduct trustworthy qualitative research. Thus, in the next section, methods used to establish trustworthiness are discussed.

### **Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability**

Bloomberg (2023) asserted that one major challenge in qualitative research, as in quantitative research is ensuring the trustworthiness of the procedures used to collect, analyze, and interpret data. Nowell et al. (2017) further stated, “To be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative researchers must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis...” (p. 1). Several methods were used throughout this study to establish reliability, validity, and transferability.

One of the main strategies used to promote validity and reliability was triangulation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described triangulation as “using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods to confirm emerging findings” (p. 259). As depicted in Table 3.10, each research question guiding this study was supported by at least three different sources of data. By having a variety of data sources over the course of the study, saturation of data was also achieved. Saturation of data was an additional strategy used to promote the validity and reliability of this study (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Table 3.10***Triangulation of Research Methods*

Research Questions	Methods of Data Collection	Methods of Data Analysis	Approximate Timeline
RQ 1 How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?	Questionnaire	Coding/Analysis of Themes	August 2023
	Individual Interview Protocol	Coding/Analysis of Themes	September – December 2023
	Researcher Journal Notes	Researcher Reflection	August – December 2023
	Participant Observations	Coding/Analysis of Themes	August – December 2023
RQ2 How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?	Document Review	Coding/Analysis of Themes	August – December 2023
	Questionnaire	Coding/Analysis of Themes	August 2023
	Individual Interview Protocol	Coding/Analysis of Themes	September – December 2023
	Researcher Journal Notes	Researcher Reflection	August – December 2023
RQ 3 How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series?	Focus Group	Coding/Analysis of Themes	September 2023 – December 2023
	Researcher Journal Notes	Researcher Reflection	August – December 2023
	Document Review	Coding/Analysis of Themes	August – December 2023

In addition to triangulation and achieving saturation of data, member checking, peer reviews, researcher reflexivity, and having a fact checker on the ARDT were also used to establish validity and reliability. For example, after each interview and focus group was transcribed, members were provided the opportunity to review the transcriptions and to verify that the researcher captured participants' thoughts accurately. Creswell and Miller (2000) described this process succinctly stating that "throughout [member checking], the researchers ask participants if the themes or categories, make sense, whether they are developed with sufficient evidence, and whether the overall account is realistic and accurate" (p. 127). By capturing participants' thoughts during member checking, the credibility of the study increased.

Additionally, as data were collected and findings emerged, the researcher had discussions with the ARDT about the data and any initial interpretations. Creswell and Miller (2000) asserted that collaboration, in this form, further adds to the credibility of the study. Similarly, one member of the ARDT served as a fact checker, checking for bias across the ARDT as the study unfolded.

Rich thick descriptions were used as a strategy to promote generalizability throughout the study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the importance of "providing enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situations match the research context, and hence, whether findings can be transferred" (p. 259). Lincoln and Guba (1986) further supported using thick descriptive data such that others may determine to what degree the findings of this study may apply elsewhere.

Lastly, the researcher engaged in reflexivity and used a research journal to record critical self-reflections about assumptions and biases throughout the study. Reflexivity ultimately allowed for the researcher to examine and bring to the forefront any initial beliefs and biases,

allowing readers to understand the position of the researcher (Bloomberg, 2023; Creswell & Miller, 2000). This next section addresses risk reduction within the study by acknowledging the position, as well as biases the researcher held.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

Bloomberg (2023) shared, “Qualitative research is, at its core, about sharing, respecting, and most importantly authentically and ethically representing diverse voices” (p. 116). In this study, the researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and served as the coordinator for the program designing and facilitating the professional learning series this research was based on. As the coordinator for the EER Program, one of the major responsibilities of the researcher was to develop, facilitate, and coordinate-high quality staff development opportunities for teachers based on district needs. Guiding the development of the professional learning were Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning and adult learning principles.

This study centered around a course that was being built as part of a series of courses to address educational equity and culturally responsive teaching. The researcher had already facilitated several professional learning sessions for the EER Foundational Course and the EER Intermediate Course. Feedback in the form of staff development impact surveys were used to gauge participants thoughts and feeling on each professional learning session. The data were then used to continuously improve the course content, structures, and activities. Although data were s available to gauge the effectiveness of the Foundational and Intermediate EER Courses, the researcher still wondered about how effective the professional learning was at transforming classroom practices. At the same time, due to courses building on each other, and participants continuing to sign-up to attend these professional learning sessions, the researcher assumed that

participants were excited to continue learning about equity and culturally responsiveness education, and that participants were eager to internalize and practice their learning.

Before becoming a coordinator for the district, the researcher worked in a local school as an assistant principal. During her time as an assistant principal, the researcher was constantly challenged to determine the best way to increase the cultural competence of teachers and to ensure all students received the best education possible. As a coordinator for professional learning, the researcher has had the opportunity to make learning around cultural competence a priority and hopes that the work effects teachers and students across the district.

This next section acknowledges and addresses the limitations of the study.

### **Limitations**

Due to the nature of qualitative research, several limitations for this study existed. One major limitation of this study was the number of participants on the action research implementation team. Out of the 18 participants who signed up for the EER Advanced Course, seven participants agreed to be a part of the study. These participants reflected a small portion of the educators eligible to enroll in the course, and a significantly smaller portion of the district.

Additionally, limitations were presented by the dual role of the researcher. The researcher served as both a participant and observer. The researcher designed and facilitated professional learning for participants, while seeking to discover and make meaning of the experience. Consequently, the researcher used thick descriptions to increase the reliability of the research. Additionally, to ensure rigor and ethics throughout this qualitative study, the researcher engaged in ongoing self-reflectivity to remain aware of how personal biases and preconceptions may affect the research.

Interview and focus groups were conducted on Zoom and recorded. This structure presented a limitation regarding how the researcher was able to read body language and non-verbal communication during the interview. Additionally, since the researcher was also a facilitator of the professional learning series, interview participants may have wanted to be positive in their responses, knowing that they would see the researcher again during future sessions. As a result, the researcher expressed how valuable their responses were, and how their responses were integral in shaping the structure and supports offered in future sessions.

One last limitation of this research was the researcher's role as a district leader. As a district leader, the researcher worked to ensure that the professional learning being developed and implemented was engaging to a wide audience, including elementary, middle, and high school educators. In addition, participants came from schools with varied school cultures and demographics. Since each local school has their own leadership teams with initiatives and school goals reflective of the district's strategic plan, but still based on local schools' needs as well, the researcher had to take into consideration that all schools may not be knowledgeable or in a place to support their teachers learning around culturally responsive teaching.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter reviewed the research design including data collection and analysis methods, and interventions for this action research study. Providing the framework for this study were Transformational and Adult Learning Theories. The cycles of Plan, Do, Study, Act were described and enriched with a description and samples of data collected through a questionnaire, interviews, focus groups, observation notes, document reviews, and the researcher's journal. The researcher ended this section discussing strategies used to increase the reliability, validity, and trustworthiness of this research.

The next chapter presents the findings of the study conducted in the Jolly County Public Schools. The purpose of this study was to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. The action research cycles bound by a district-level professional learning series is described in detail.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE**

The purpose of this study was to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?
2. How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series?

#### **Context of the Study**

Jolly County Public Schools (JCPS) is a diverse urban school situated outside of a major city in the southeastern part of the United States. In July of 2022, the North Star was adopted by the Board of Education. This five-year plan outlined the transformational work needed to shift the culture of JCPS to be whole learner focused. In June of 2023, the district prepared a planning timeline for district staff providing leadership actions for implementing the North Star. Although several objectives from the North Star were represented on the planning timeline for the 2023-

2024 school year, one connected directly to this study. This objective was to cultivate school quality, climate, and culture that was student-centered and committed to the success of each and every child. One of the strategies that the district was to provide to support this objective was to increase the exposure to culturally responsive teaching and learning philosophies that support educator effectiveness and student success through culturally responsive teaching and competencies. This strategy directly represented the work of The Educational Equity and Responsiveness Program.

The Educational Equity and Responsiveness (EER) Program was one of several programs operating out of the Office of Staff Development. The vision of the EER Program was to provide high-quality learning opportunities that build the capacity of staff to create an equitable and culturally competent school climate that focuses on supporting the success of the whole learner, encourages student voice and agency, and promotes a culture of belonging. To make this vision flourish, the EER team worked collaboratively to build three different courses that would equip teachers with tools and strategies to create equitable learning environments. As a result, three courses were built, the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Foundations Course, a three-part learning series, the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Intermediate Course, a five-part learning series, and most recently, the Educational Equity and Responsiveness Advanced Course.

The Advanced Course debuted August of the 2023-2024 school year and was the focus of this action research study. Leading up to this study, the EER team worked collaboratively with a vendor to help prepare content that would be used during the Advanced professional learning series. This content aligned and built on Ladson-Billings' three tenants of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

Although the district's North Star included terms and concepts related to equity and cultural competency, this study occurred during a time where there was great tension around equity and topics related to equity such as culturally responsive pedagogy. In fact, a new "divisive concepts" law was passed in 2022 that instilled fear in educators about the consequences of talking about topics such as race and racism in the classroom. Additionally, there was a case in the news where an educator had been fired due to a ruling about a book she had read in the classroom. Hearing of another educator being dismissed from her job due to a book choice was a big conversation amongst educators everywhere.

In addition, this research took place following the Covid-19 Pandemic where district professional learning had ceased being in-person and occurred virtually from around May 2019-May 2022. As a result of the pandemic, many educators were using online platforms such as Zoom to teach and learn. In addition, online professional learning became a popular option for educators to attend professional learning, appealing to those who often could not make professional learning offerings occurring after school for a myriad of personal reasons. Although virtual professional learning was an option for this study, the professional learning series in this research took place in-person.

Also occurring in 2022, the JCPS Board of Education wrote into policy that at least 10 of the required 20 hours of professional learning for teachers be district-led professional learning. This new board policy was to ensure teachers engaged in high-impact district-led learning and to lessen the variability in classroom instruction. This action research was a course that participants could use to count towards the ten required hours of district professional learning. This next section details the participants in this action research.

*Action Research Implementation Team*

The Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) was selected based on participant’s initial registration in the 2023-2024 Fall Cohort of the Educational Equity and Responsiveness (EER) Advanced Course. Registration for the course opened July 24,2023, pre-planning week for the 2023-2024 school year. Registration for this course was only available to staff members who enrolled and completed the EER Intermediate Course the past year. All completers of the EER Intermediate course received an email about the opportunity to register for the Advanced EER Course. Participants who enrolled in the course were sent a follow-up email providing them information and asking them to participate in the study. A follow-up email was sent to participants who did not respond to the initial invitation to participate in the study.

Eight out of twenty participants agreed to be in the study. One of the participants withdrew from the course before the first class due to another opportunity that was on the same evenings of the course session. As a result, the participant only engaged in the initial questionnaire. Table 4. 1 highlights the ARIT members and their participation status throughout the study.

**Table 4.1**

*Action Research Implementation Team Participation Status*

<b>Educational Equity and Responsiveness Participant</b>	<b>Initial Questionnaire</b>	<b>Attended PL Session</b>		<b>Mid-Cycle Interview</b>	<b>Attended PL Session</b>		<b>Post Cycle Interview</b>
		<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	
Jazzlyn Sanders	X	X			X		
Jessica Alvarez	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Rosalyn Huggins	X	X	X	X	X		
Denise Ritz	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Educational Equity and Responsiveness Participant	Initial Questionnaire	Attended PL Session		Mid-Cycle Interview	Attended PL Session		Post Cycle Interview
		1	2		3	4	
Sarah Stephenson	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Holly Smith	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Claire Mozart	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Jennifer Abbotts	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

*Note.* X means completed.

#### *Action Research Design Team*

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) was selected due to working in the Office of Staff Development and being an existing member of the EER team. The EER team was comprised of the coordinator, who also served as the primary researcher, and two instructional coaches. The EER team was overseen by the executive director of Staff Development, who also served on the ARDT as a fact checker. Table 4.2 highlights key information about the ARDT participants.

**Table 4.2**

#### *Action Research Design Team*

Team Member	Primary Role at Jolly County Public Schools	Educational Experience	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Coordinator for Leadership and Staff Development, JCPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elementary Teacher</li> <li>• Assistant Principal</li> <li>• Gifted Endorsement</li> <li>• Coaching Endorsement</li> <li>• ESOL Endorsement</li> <li>• Masters in Reading &amp; Literacy</li> <li>• Specialist in Curriculum &amp; Instruction</li> <li>• Tier 1 Leadership Certification</li> </ul>	Researcher, designed and facilitated the Advanced EER Course

Team Member	Primary Role at Jolly County Public Schools	Educational Experience	Action Research Role
Kaliope Hunt	Instructional Coach for Leadership and Staff Development, JCPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 15 years as an educators</li> <li>• Masters in Education</li> <li>• Bachelors in English</li> <li>• Orton-Gillingham Certification</li> <li>• ESOL Certification</li> <li>• Gifted Certification</li> <li>• Coach Endorsement</li> </ul>	Designed and facilitated the Advanced EER Course
Tina Roland	Instructional Coach for Leadership and Staff Development, JCPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20+ years as a teacher &amp; instructional coach</li> <li>• Masters in Education</li> <li>• Bachelors in Elementary Education &amp; Bilingual Education</li> <li>• Reading Recovery Certification</li> <li>• ESOL Endorsement</li> <li>• Coach Endorsement</li> </ul>	Designed and facilitated the Advanced EER Course
Layla Sherman	Executive Director for Leadership and Staff Development, JCPS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 18 years in education</li> <li>• Specialist in Educational Leadership &amp; Policy</li> <li>• Masters in Literacy Curriculum</li> <li>• Bachelors in Elementary Education</li> <li>• Coach Endorsement</li> <li>• Gallup Strengths Certified</li> <li>• Strategic Business Partner Certified</li> <li>• Fierce Conversation Certified</li> </ul>	Provided oversight and direction of the EER program; Fact Checker

### Findings from the Case

Cycle 1 of the research study began with the planning of the first professional learning session of the series. To help with planning, the ARDT reviewed data collected from the initial

questionnaire. During this data analysis, two questions were used to help the ARDT read and analyze the data:

1. What are participants bringing to the Advanced Course?
2. What do participants want out of the Advanced Course?

Details surrounding the initial questionnaire that led into the first cycle are presented, followed by details that tell the story of the two cycles of research that guided this study.

### *Pre-Cycle*

After gaining consent from participants to serve on the ARIT, the researcher sent a questionnaire to participants to complete before the first professional learning session of the EER Advanced Course. The questions sought to understand participants perception of their cultural proficiency, as well as what strategy from previous EER courses they had implemented. In addition, the questionnaire allowed the ARDT to learn what participants hoped to learn in the EER Advanced Course, methods they learned best, and the type of support they hoped to receive from their facilitators.

The ARDT reviewed the results of the questionnaire together and used the data and noticed that participants were coming into the course with a lot of knowledge. For example, one participant was an anthropology major, while another had obtained a doctorate in educational equity and social justice. Other participants shared their experiences with delivering professional learning and being involved in family and community engagements at their local school.

Based on the data, it was evident that participants wanted to learn strategies to implement in their classrooms including strategies for building inclusive spaces, and social justice projects. One participant shared, “I am interested in learning more about social justice initiatives I can implement in my classroom or school community. I am teaching a journalism elective this year

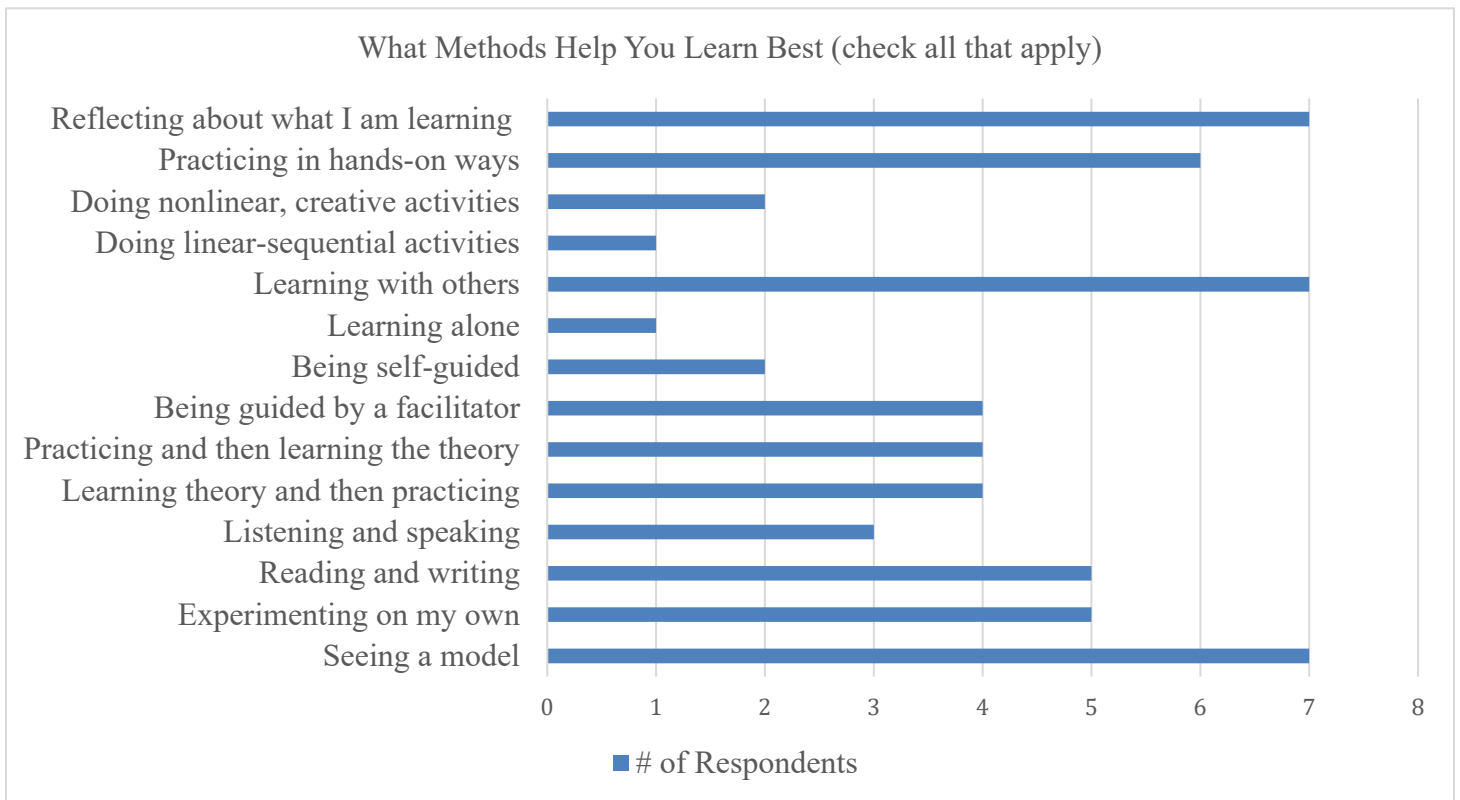
and sponsor our student government association. I think these venues may provide opportunity for social justice action”. Furthermore, several participants stated they were hoping to be able to extend the work from the course to their colleagues at their local school. For example, one participant responded, “I hope to dig deeper into Educational Equity and be able to share out the learning with the staff here at our school. We've recently implemented an equity committee within our school, so I plan on taking information back to them to better educate and support our staff”.

The initial questionnaire also showed that participants wanted to learn strategies to help both students and families advocate for themselves. One participant stated she hoped the course would provide her with “practical strategies [she] can implement on a daily basis in and out of the classroom”. Her statement summarized many of the comments other participants stated, when they shared, they wanted strategies to build inclusive spaces and engage students in social justice projects.

One of the questions on the questionnaire asked participants, “What methods help you learn best? (Check all that apply). The data for this question is represented in Figure 4.1 and provided the ARDT with rich information to think about when designing the different activities for the professional learning sessions. The most common methods selected were learning with others, seeing a model, and reflecting about what they’re learning. The methods that were least common were being self-guided, learning alone, and doing linear-sequential activities.

**Figure 4.1**

*Initial Questionnaire Results for “What Methods Help You Learn Best”?*



Lastly, the initial questionnaire inquired about the type of support participants hoped to receive from their session facilitators. Most responses indicated the need for a safe space for difficult conversations. Additionally, many participants wanted concrete examples and strategies that could be implemented in the classroom. One participant shared that she hoped to have “a support system of people who understand our challenges and changes and to guide us towards implementing all the strategies we were given.” A similar response stated that participants wanted “reassurance that the work is important and critical in the eyes of our district.”

The researcher’s journal, as well as notes from the ARDT meeting discussing the initial questionnaire data showed that participants were excited to continue their learning centered on equity and cultural responsiveness pedagogy and that they had used some of the strategies from

previous courses. This was exciting news for the ARDT and was the perfect piece of evidence needed to bolster the team into Cycle 1 of the study, which is presented next.

### *Cycle 1 Intervention*

During the plan phase of Cycle 1, the ARDT took what they learned about participants to plan the first professional learning session. During the August planning meeting, the ARDT reviewed the slide deck for the first advanced course session. During the review, the ARDT considered engagement strategies and processing time for participants. Some of the engagement tools highlighted were the use of a notetaker and discussion time. In addition, the ARDT considered the different types of learners and worked to ensure the slide deck and content delivery would appeal to auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners. To ensure participants' minds were open and primed for the learning, the ARDT included a connector unrelated to the content being taught.

The first professional learning session in the series occurred on August 30, 2023. The learning outcomes were:

1. Explore the tenets of Responsive Pedagogy in theory and practice.
2. Examine examples of how teaching through the lens of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy influences instruction, curriculum, and assessment and ultimately improves student performance.
3. Review instructional approaches to develop students' critical consciousness.

The researcher's journal noted several facilitator's moves that stood out during the professional learning session including providing numerous examples, time to process learning acquisition thus far by providing participants time to stop and reflect with their table group. This intentional strategy was used after learning a few strategies to develop students' critical

consciousness. In addition, it was observed that all participants used their provided notetaker to record their notes.

During the facilitation, the ARDT made a pivot at the end, where facilitators provided planning time for the EER Advanced course participants to think about how they could use one or more of the strategies for critical consciousness in their classrooms. Instead of having participants stay in their table groups, the facilitators advised like grade level bands work together. All elementary school teachers gathered around a table, all middle school teachers gathered, and all high school teachers gathered. The researcher's journal stated that this allowed for new perspectives to be considered when entering the planning phase.

At the end of the professional learning session, a ticket out the door was provided to participants. This exit ticket consisted of a set of standard questions provided to all participants at the end of any professional learning conducted by the Staff Development department. The following questions were on the ticket out the door:

1. Today's session promoted effective engagement and collaboration among participants. (*Strongly Disagree* 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Agree*)
2. The facilitator(s) created a positive learning environment during today's session. (*Strongly Disagree* 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Agree*)
3. Today's session met the stated objectives/outcomes. (*Strongly Disagree* 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Agree*)
4. This session deepened my understanding of today's topic(s). (*Strongly Disagree* 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Agree*)

5. When will the learning from today's session be applied within your school or role?  
(Immediately, Within 1-2 weeks, Within 1 month. More than 1 month, Not applicable)
6. What topic/activity from today's session did you find most relevant or significant to your learning?
7. Please feel free to leave any additional comments about today's session and/or suggestions for future sessions.

On August 31, 2023, the ARDT debriefed the professional learning exit ticket data from all participants. The ARDT also discussed observations from the session and suggested changes to enhance the professional learning session next time such as more accessible font size and visuals. The team discussed positive facilitator moves that made the session digestible such as reflection time, pause and process time, planning time, table group and grade level band discussions, and providing a variety of examples. The team discussed if notetakers promoted engagement or took away from engagement.

The ARDT then previewed the slide deck for the next session to discuss implications for delivery of content based on this first session observations and ticket out the door feedback. The ARDT team agreed on increasing the font on the slides to increase accessibility and making sure we provide examples that are classroom specific, as we engage in content centered on family and community engagement. The ARDT wanted the content to be practical, yet reach the wide audience in the session, so it was vital to provide both school wide scenarios and classroom specific scenarios for family and community engagement. One of the ARDT members reminded the team of the importance of connecting the work to the North Star, specifically the goal of empathy.

The second professional learning session was held on September 27, 2023, where participants engaged in learning centered on authentic family and community engagement. The objectives guiding this session were:

1. Define family and community engagement.
2. Explore the various ways families participate in the schooling process.
3. Develop trust through authentic family and community engagement strategies.

Participants had the opportunity to engage in a connector to help everyone acclimate to safe learning environment. During the session, participants were asked to consider their understanding of what family engagement is to them, before the facilitators level set by providing a definition. Participants had the opportunity to think about the provided definition of family engagement and were asked to discuss the following two questions:

1. How might a culturally responsive perspective impact the planning of family and community engagement opportunities?
2. What are the implications for schools, families, communities, and students?

Participants also were asked to audit their current family engagement activities and examined which activities allowed families to leave knowing more about what their child should know or be able to do at the grade level, and if they leave knowing how to employ a new tool or activity at home to support the learning goal. After discussion time, participants had the opportunity to self-assess their school based on the degrees of family involvement with level 1 being not involved; do not engage in school at all, and level 4 families being specifically involved in activities, such as music, sports, academic fairs, and art exhibits.

After the self-assessment, participants had another opportunity to discuss with their table groups the stories they are telling themselves about students and families based on the degree of

family involvement at their local schools. Participants were also challenged to consider and discuss alternate explanations or possible realities to these stories. The facilitators then provided research-based strategies that could be used to authentically engage families and communities. After learning about the research-based strategies in which the facilitator provided concrete examples and discussion time, table groups received 10 minutes of planning time, to either work independently or discuss with their table groups their next steps. The session concluded with participants completing the Staff Development ticket out the door. This professional learning session closed out the interventions for Cycle 1 of the study.

To close out Cycle 1, the primary researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with seven out of eight members of the Action Research Implementation Team over a span of five working days, after the 2nd professional learning session. One of the ARIT members did not attend her scheduled interview time and did not respond to the follow-up email to reschedule. Additionally, a focus group was conducted with the ARDT. Findings from Cycle 1 data collection are discussed next.

### *Cycle 1 Findings*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ARIT members following the second professional learning session. These interviews sought to understand how the EER Advanced course had impacted participant's cultural competence and proficiency thus far, in addition to gaining insights on the strategies they had implemented in their classrooms because of the course. Although the interview was designed to gain perspectives on the EER Advanced Course, participants could not only speak to the Advanced class, but often shared ideas originating from previous courses that led up to the EER Advanced class. For example, Claire highlighted the safe space the classes provided for real and deep conversations. She stated, "[class] is a safe space to

discuss tough questions [and] tough conversations...You have to be able to have those conversations before you can really start making change.”

The semi-structured interviews also sought to understand what activities from the professional learning session were beneficial at helping to increase participants cultural competence and proficiency, as well as the types of support from the facilitators that aided in the implementation of their learning. Holly made the point to share that there was no one specific activity that has helped to increase her cultural competence, but “...the interaction, camaraderie and the conversations and the discussions. Anytime we get to think first and reflect. But then also share with someone else at our table”.

The last part of the interview allowed participants to provide feedback on what type of support they felt was needed from the facilitators to help them be able to implement their learning while providing space to offer any additional insight. One response that was heard in four of the interviews was the desire to have a space to continue to learn, grow, and share ideas after the course is over. For example, Holly stated, “It would just be nice if there was a place where I could and I can be like, okay, I hit a roadblock, I need some help, or I need some suggestions. It would be great once I implement a lot of the stuff I’m thinking about from this advanced course.”

A focus group was conducted with the ARDT to discover the strategies that were believed to have helped teachers participating in the professional learning series to be able to implement their learning. In addition, ARDT members shared what design elements and facilitator moves had been impactful for participants and how these elements impacted engagement. Throughout the focus group, members highlighted several strategies that were believed to have created success structures for teachers to be able to implement their learning.

One design element highlighted during the focus group was collaboration time. Collaboration time was also highlighted as an impactful facilitator move. Kaliope provided several examples of how the facilitators provide different methods of collaborating to increase engagement with technology tools such as Padlet and Jamboards. Kaliope asserted, “We're very intentional at making sure that [participants are] engaged and how they're engaged as we move through the presentation. We check for that.”

Tina stated, “We're also very thoughtful when we're planning when we think about who's in our audience.” The ARDT went through the fact that the audience includes elementary, middle, and high teachers, as well as teachers who serve in instructional capacities, as well as teachers who serve in support roles. It was noted that during planning, the ARDT constantly thinks about examples that reflect this wide range of audience so that connections from the content to teacher practice can be made easily. At the same time, processing time was also noted as a facilitator move, because it provides participants the opportunity to pause and digest the learning in small chunks at a time.

At the end of the focus group, the ARDT discussed next steps to consider as the team prepared to enter Cycle 2 of the research study. One big idea that was highlighted was creating a continuers platform where teachers could serve as thought partners to each other, as they continue with implementing their learning, after the complete course was over. In addition, it was highlighted that we could invite participants from the advanced course to future advanced courses to share how they have been able to implement the work from the class at their local schools. By having completers of the Advanced course return to share their work, new participants in the Advanced course would gain ideas and perspectives on how the class can be

implemented, but it also helps people who have finished the course, stay connected to equity and cultural responsiveness work.

One last next step the ARDT wanted to consider when planning for Cycle 2, were strategies to increase the equity of voice in group discussion times. It was shared that in some of the collaboration or group discussion times, there were groups where one or more participants did not get a chance to share in the time they were given. One ARDT suggested that the facilitators provide participants with a reminder of time once half of the allotted discussion time expired. For longer periods of discussion time, it was suggested that a more formal protocol be used.

After the semi-structured interviews and focus group interview were completed, the primary researcher shared the overall findings with the ARDT in a planning meeting that led the ARDT into Cycle 2 of the research study. Thus, the following section provides the story of Cycle 2 of this action research study.

### *Cycle 2 Intervention*

The third professional learning session in the EER Advanced course marked the beginning of Cycle 2. Based on data from Cycle 1, the ARDT continued to focus in on providing participants ample time to process and discuss the learning being presented. In addition, the ARDT added the use of timers to help with voice equity during small group discussion time. The third professional learning session on October 25, 2023, focused on Social Justice in the Classroom and Community. The learning outcomes for the session were:

- Understand inclusive processes to repair psychological harm.
- Learn how to shift the focus from discipline to community learning and healing.
- Develop a framework of inclusive environments that empowers communities.

The professional learning facilitators opened with a low context connector that allowed participants to warm up and discuss an opinion-based question. Participants enjoyed this activity and once again, it created an environment that allowed people to feel safe in sharing and ready to learn. After sharing the learning outcomes for the session, the importance of social justice in the classroom and community was established by sharing what social justice is and why it is important in education. The first activity participants engaged in was a Word Cloud to share up to five words they thought of when they heard the term “social justice”. After, a formal definition was shared, brief history on social justice was provided for additional context. Additionally, participants were able to extend their knowledge of social justice by watching a brief clip of Dr. Kumashiro’s framework to resist change.

Throughout the professional learning, participants had the opportunity to reflect on questions with their table groups that encouraged them to process the learning in chunks. The questions were reflective and forward looking at the same time. For example, participants were asked to connect the four pillars of social justice and Dr. Kumashiro’s framework for resistance as they responded to the following 3 questions:

1. How have we traditionally engaged in education **for** others?
2. How have we traditionally engaged in education **about** others?
3. How can we engage in pedagogical practices that **challenge stories** that fuel inequity to change society positively?

The participants also had the opportunity to learn about the interconnectedness between social justice and healing. Several statistics and sets of data were presented to highlight the impact of discipline disparities. Afterwards, participants discussed in small groups how social justice could be used to shift from traditional forms of discipline to community healing. After the

short discussion, the facilitators split participants into groups to read about three tips accompanied with strategies that could be used to shift from traditional forms of discipline to community healing. Groups read and discussed their assigned tips and strategies, then brainstormed ways to implement the provided tips and strategies. At the end of the small group time, each group was provided time to share their tips and strategies to the larger group.

The session ended with time for participants to reflect on ways they could support social justice. They were challenged to think about next steps, challenges to their next steps, and the enlistment of others. One of the facilitators made the comment to the group connecting social justice work to work outlined in the North Star. It was pointed out that although the North Star lists several indicators representative of social justice pillars, the term social justice is never used. It was presented that the term social justice is controversial for a myriad of reasons, with one being a misunderstanding of the term. The facilitator told participants to consider their context and if the term social justice should explicitly be used as they take the work back to their classrooms and schools. Participants ended the session with the Staff Development ticket out the door that is provided to participants at the end of many professional learning sessions.

After the professional learning session, the ARDT had a meeting to debrief the session and the exit ticket data to help inform the final professional learning. The ARDT noted that implementation of the third session was strong, and participants enjoyed being able to have concrete strategies and practices to use in their classroom. In addition, participants loved the various collaboration tools being used during the professional learning session. One change the ARDT made based on Cycle 1, was adding a timer to group discussions to help with voice equity. However, the ARDT felt that some of the timers took away the ability of the facilitators to change the times of certain discussions based on how events were unfolding during the

session. As a result, the ARDT decided to only use timers for the shorter turn and talks during the last session.

The ARDT then reviewed the slide deck for the last professional learning session and made a few adjustments to ensure adequate time for planning and collaboration. Based on several comments during professional learning sessions, participants were saddened that the upcoming session would be the last session. In addition, ARIT interviews were revealing participants' desire to continue having a supportive community after the Advanced course. As a result, the ARDT decided they would create a Continuer's Community for participants after the Advanced course. The Continuer's Community would be fleshed once the Advanced Course concluded. However, the facilitators would share with participants that a Continuer's Community was being created and to be alert for communication regarding the Continuer's Community.

The final professional learning session in the EER Advanced series was held on November 15, 2023. This session was titled: Leading Culturally Responsiveness with Authenticity and had the following objectives:

- Analyze research on authenticity.
- Examine examples of the influence of authentic leadership.
- Explore strategies and resources to create a culture of authenticity.

To help create a celebratory environment for the last session, the facilitators of the session allowed participants to bring in a snack to share during this class. Consequently, the connector allowed five minutes for participants to grab a snack and discuss their biggest takeaways from the series with their table groups.

The session learning started by establishing a shared understanding of authenticity and why authenticity is important for educators and culturally responsive leaders. Participants had the opportunity to engage in a talk and turn involving a time they experienced a barrier to authenticity. Afterwards, the facilitators used research from Brené Brown to explain common barriers to authenticity. Once again, participants were asked to discuss with their table groups two questions:

1. How do these barriers impact you, your students, and/or stakeholders?
2. Which one do you see showing up in your work the most?

Participants then used their discussion to brainstorm how the barriers discussed could be removed for various stakeholder groups using a Padlet. Participants were able to see several consequences to various stakeholder groups when authenticity was not honored.

The facilitators then took participants into learning that explored why leading with authenticity is crucial in supporting culturally responsive schools. This portion of the session was initiated using a Padlet discussion centered on the question: Why is authenticity important for educators in establishing a positive and inclusive learning environment? After the facilitators provided participants with reasons why authenticity is essential, they then provided three tips to lead culturally responsive work authentically. When providing participants with the tips, the facilitators provided opportunities for reflection, as well as supporting examples. For example, the first tip for leading culturally responsive work authentically, was to know and embody your values. After this tip was introduced, participants were provided time to complete a “Living Into Our Values” exercise from Brené Brown’s website.

The last activity for the session engaged participants in a self-discovery task that was designed to help them explore their commitment to authenticity and develop strategies to

cultivate and express it more fully in their roles as a culturally responsive educator. The task provided them with a series of reflection questions focused on their personal values, how their values aligned with their teaching practices, and examining barriers to being authentic in the workplace. Participants were asked to describe action steps they would take to support their journey towards authenticity. At the end, participants had the opportunity to share-out one of their action steps. One participant shared her plan to create a parent workshop specifically geared towards students with Individualized Education Plans, as she had noticed these parents were not represented in the regular occurring parent workshops at her school. Another participant shared that she was going to work on creating a student published editorial as part of her journalism connections class offered at her school.

At the end of the session, participants were congratulated on their dedication to becoming a culturally responsive educator and that the EER Team would be sending out information regarding a continuer's community. Participants were asked to complete the ticket out the door before leaving for the evening. The next session details the final data collection processes used to close out the final cycle of this action research study.

### *Cycle 2 Findings*

After the final professional learning session, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven out of the nine ARDT members. Two of the ARDT members were unable to complete the final interview after multiple attempts to schedule their last interview. The final interview sought to understand how the implementation of an equity professional learning course offered by the district helped improve the cultural competence of staff members at the local school. Like the first set of semi-structured interviews, interviews were scheduled ahead of time and set to last between 30 – 45 minutes. To ease any nervous feelings participants might have,

the primary researcher e-mailed the ARDT members the questions that would guide the conversation in advance.

During the final interview, ARDT members shared the aspects of the professional learning series that were most helpful to each of them. Participants were able to highlight specific modules that resonated with them, as well as aspects of the design of the professional learning sessions. Additionally, participants were asked to share how the course had impacted their cultural competence, as well as assign a rating on a scale of 1-5, with one being the lowest, and five being the highest. All participants rated themselves no lower than a 3.75 on the scale. Their reasoning varied, but many of them spoke to having a strong knowledge base, while acknowledging their commitment to being a life-long learner coupled with their desires to implement their new learning.

Participants were also asked to describe the most impactful activities and structures in the course that helped them to increase their cultural competence and proficiency, in addition to providing details about the support facilitators provided that were beneficial to their growth. Jessica shared, “For me, I think the reflection and the built-in reflection [time] that we did throughout the class with each new learning to stop and think, you know, how does this apply to us?”

The interviews ended with an opportunity for ARDT members to share their thoughts focused on how the course could be improved in the future, as well as any other thoughts that they felt were pertinent to share. One ARDT member emphasized to keep implementing the courses. Another participant shared that she enjoyed the diverse resources used throughout the course. Overall, the feedback from the interviews was overwhelmingly positive.

In addition to conducting final interviews with ARDT members, a final focus group interview was held with the ARDT. This focus group discussed ARDT members' experiences designing and facilitating the course and focused on what the ARDT members did as leaders to ensure a transformational learning experience for participants and to ensure teachers felt supported. Throughout the focus group experience, the primary researcher posed questions to the ARDT, and listened to their responses. Only then did she offer insights taking into consideration her dual role as primary researcher and ARDT member. This ensured that the primary researcher did not offer thoughts that could have steered the ARDTs responses in one way or another. In addition, the primary researcher had insight from the semi-structured interviews and did not want to lead ARDT members' responses in one way to ensure reliable data collection.

Throughout the focus group, ARDT members spoke of several aspects of the professional learning series that not only were impactful for participants, but also supported teachers in being able to implement their learning. Opportunities to collaborate, time to pause and process, and being provided concrete examples and models were some of the elements of the professional learning series that were mentioned. In addition, the team spoke to the psychological safety that was evident during each session. ARDT members were also able to share recommendations to future EER Advanced sessions based on the second cycle of the study.

### **Chapter Summary**

This action research study sought to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. The ARDT engaged in two cycles of research in which Plan, Do, Study, Act, were used to perpetuate the work forward. Throughout the study, data were collected from an initial questionnaire and two semi-structured interviews with the ARIT, two focus groups with the

ARDT, the researcher's journal, and document reviews from each professional learning session. Throughout the cycle, the primary researcher kept records of all data field notes, transcripts, and reflexive thoughts.

The last focus group with the ARDT members marked the end of this action research study. After the last focus group, the researcher continued to generate initial codes and search for themes, leading to the defining of themes. The process of coding and analysis of the data is described in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

The purpose of this study was to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?
2. How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series?

This research study included two research cycles using the Plan, Do, Study, Act model to drive each cycle forward. The first cycle started in July 2023 and the last cycle ended in December 2023. Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods including a questionnaire, individual interviews, researcher journal notes, participant observations, document reviews, and focus group interviews.

Themes, as documented in Table 5.1, were established through triangulation of data and the use of a coding framework. The primary researcher generated codes, diagrammed codes to

create themes, and then vetted themes with the ARDT. The theoretical framework and research questions guided the data analysis and the development of the themes. Table 5.1 demonstrates the connections within the theoretical framework and each of the research questions.

**Table 5.1**

*Summary of Themes Connected to Research Questions & Theoretical Framework*

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Transformational Learning Theory</b>	<b>Themes</b>
1. How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disorienting Dilemma</li> <li>• Integrating the New Perspective into one's life</li> <li>• Self-Reflection and Recognition</li> <li>• Exploration and Learning</li> </ul>	Theme 1: Reflective Practitioners
2. How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploration and Learning</li> <li>• Integrating the New Perspective into one's life</li> </ul>	Theme 2: Safe and Supportive Spaces
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disorienting Dilemma</li> <li>• Self-Reflection and Recognition</li> <li>• Exploration and Learning</li> </ul>	Theme 3: Empathy for Participants Theme 4: Collaborative Team Dynamics

This chapter presents the themes that were established after collecting data from multiple sources throughout two action research cycles.

## Research Question 1

The primary intervention in this research study consisted of an equity-centered professional development series geared towards increasing the cultural competence of participants. Research question one aimed to understand the impact of this educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on teachers' cultural competence and proficiency. The theoretical framework for this study highlighted the importance of transformative learning providing opportunities for participants to experience a disorienting dilemma. The content presented in the class, provided the space for participants to be able to self-reflect, explore and learn, and then integrate their new perspective into their educational settings.

The data collected showed that being a reflective practitioner was the underlying factor in the increase of participants' cultural competence after this professional learning series. Each professional learning session caused participants to engage in reflective practices, resulting in intentionality creating supportive classrooms and providing rigorous instruction. Throughout the learning series, participants took on the role of a continuous learner and knew that their learning would not end at the conclusion of this professional learning series.

### *Theme 1: Reflective Practitioner*

During the action research study, participants engaged in a mid-cycle and post-cycle semi-structured interview. During the interview, participants were asked to describe the impact of the course on their cultural competence and proficiency. Participants were also asked to share how they had implemented their learning thus far. After both the mid-cycle and post-cycle interviews the primary researcher went back through the recordings and transcriptions and coded words that stood out and connected to research question one. Some of the initial codes that

emerged, eventually collapsing into the theme of reflective practitioner, were improved classroom practice, confirming current practices, increased awareness of others, and lesson planning. As these themes emerged, the primary researcher looked to see if the same or similar themes appeared in the focus group interviews, as well as throughout the researcher's journal.

As the primary researcher went through the codes, a theme tying them all together came through, reflective practitioners. Throughout the interview, focus groups, and researcher's journal, strategies and actions were being taken to increase the amount of reflection participants were completing throughout the course. This theme was then vetted by the ARDT.

Throughout the interviews, each ARIT member spoke to the fact that the course forced them to reflect over their current practices and to see where they could improve by creating more culturally responsive lessons and building an inclusive learning environment for all. Jessica brought up the fact that the course was reflective in nature and "forced you to think about your practice and ways you could improve." Jennifer said, "My wheels are always turning as I'm sitting in class thinking of how I can take this and how I can actually put it into use in my classroom." Several of the participants agreed that the professional learning sessions had opened their eyes and provided them with strategies to interact with different people. Rosalyn described this new awareness perfectly when she stated:

It's opened my eyes to some of my short comings in dealing with people in society and dealing with diverse learners and diverse parents ... and it also has given something in my toolkit that I can use when I'm working with others; especially because we don't know their perspectives on life and the experiences they have had.

Members of the ARIT felt the course was affirming and reminded them of what they knew to be true when it came to equity and cultural competence.

Participants spoke to how the sessions provided a set of common language for participants to use to name and discuss the strategies they were using to create inclusive classroom communities. For example, during the first professional learning session, Sara shared how she has her students read about injustices in the world. Then, for one of her lessons, students are provided opportunities to discuss how the injustices they have read about impact students and how students can be empowered to change such injustices. After the first session of the EER Advanced course, Sara was able to connect what she was doing in her classroom to the cultural responsiveness tenet of critical consciousness. The ARDT also cited the level-setting of language is a successful strategy in supporting teachers. As highlighted by Layla, a common language “brings about clarity and a level of comfort”.

Claire emphasized the impact of reflecting on her practices and shared, “You guys provide a level set in thinking in our lessons. It kind of gets us all on the same playing field as to how we are defining concepts and terminology.” In an interview with another ARIT member, Holly was able to bring in how she has reflected on how to make the standards she is teaching more inclusive. Holly shared how she has been trying to use her time to “find a way to bring in other voices in world history, so it’s not just white male cisgender voices the whole year”.

Not only were participants able to reflect on how to create lessons that were inclusive and honored students’ cultural backgrounds and assets, but teachers also learned the importance of remaining open and curious as they engaged with students from diverse backgrounds. In an interview with Sara, she made the connection to cultural competence and remaining a reflective practitioner clear. Sara shared, “Cultural competency, it’s not really about the study of different cultures. It’s really just understanding students, just really getting to know them and understand

who they are and what they need. " The conversations in the sessions reflected this understanding as well.

Throughout the professional learning series, the facilitators and participants discussed strategies to meet the needs of the students in the classrooms. One important strategy teachers discussed was building trusting relationships with students. In an interview with Jennifer, she shared an activity she completed with her students after one of the sessions, involving a journaling activity where students had to write about the last time they cried. Jennifer was able to share how this one activity allowed her to get to know her students on a deeper level and opened the door to form a deeper connection with some of them.

In an interview with Claire, she provided several examples of how the course allowed her to create an inclusive classroom setting for her students. Claire mentioned her effort to support “neurodivergent students by having low-lighting and seating spaces that are different; inclusive signage and décor, so students can see what [she] believes without having to ask [her]; and having a diverse library with authors from different cultures, and books with characters where the main protagonist are not white”. It was apparent that participants had the time to reflect over their current practices during each session and to think about how they could connect or apply the learning for the session to their existing knowledge.

Throughout the interview and observation notes from each professional learning series, the researcher noted that the various activities during each of the professional learning series led participants to engage in reflective practices. For example, Jessica talked about how connecting with different people and getting their viewpoints and lenses was impactful. Denise also enjoyed the collaboration time in small groups, but also spoke of how impactful the articles and readings were, as well as being able to discuss and analyze texts in class. The learning experiences that

occurred during the class were a part of what led participants to reflect on their current practices. Participants were even shifting their focus during the professional learning due to the various activities. For example, Holly shared that the last session where the concept of authenticity was presented, forced her to look inwardly at her own identity. Holly said, “It had not even occurred to me. I know that sounds strange. I came into this focused-on student identity, not really mine. I’d never looked at myself that way.”

One of the interview questions posed to ARIT members, was to rate their cultural competence on a scale of 1-5 with one being the lowest, and five being the highest. Every participant rated themselves between a 3.75 – 4.0, and all the participants had similar responses of not wanting to score themselves a five because there was always room for improvement. Claire summarized her response this way, “I won’t ever give myself a five, because I don’t feel like it’s a one and done.” Participants responses showed that when working to increase ones’ cultural competence, it is an ever-learning process, in which one must be willing to live in the seat of a reflective practitioner.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question guiding this study was: How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development? In both the mid and post cycle interviews with the ARIT, the primary researcher posed three questions to help answer research question two. In addition, the ARDT was asked two specific questions to answer research question two during their mid and post cycle focus groups. After the interviews and focus groups, the primary researcher listened to the recording and reread the transcripts and began coding the data based on words that answered the research question. Some of the initial codes that emerged were trust, safe environment, comfortable, transparent, and inspired. As these

codes emerged, the primary researcher analyzed the researcher's journal and session artifacts to see if the same or similar codes were also emerging in those data sets.

After prolonged engagement with the data, the data from the study revealed one overarching theme, the creation of safe and supportive spaces was integral to the success of implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. Both the ARDT and the ARIT spoke to conditions that created safe and supportive spaces during their focus group and semi-structured interviews. In addition, the creation of safe and supportive spaces allowed participants to be able to engage in self-reflection, explore new learning, and plan for implementation of the learning.

### *Theme 2: Safe and Supportive Spaces*

During the semi-structured interviews, ARIT members were asked, what supports did your facilitators provide that were beneficial to your growth? Every participant responded positively when describing the role facilitators played in helping them to implement their learning. Clair emphasized, "You all do not make us feel stupid for not knowing, or less than. You all meet us where we are." Jennifer added to this by sharing that the transparency and authenticity of the facilitators was noted and appreciated. Jennifer stated, "You all established it was a safe space; and that we could be free to share our true ideas, and no one was going to be criticized for their questions or thoughts."

Several other participants spoke to how the facilitators created a safe and supporting environment by being responsive, personable, and excited about the work. Holly referenced how the facilitators were authentic during the professional learning session by "sharing all of [their] stories and including [their] own experiences in the sessions." Jessica stated, "You guys were so

transparent that I think it just allowed people to be a little bit more comfortable and to share our own stories because of the non-judgmental environment”.

During the focus group interviews, ARDT members also named how the facilitators worked to create an environment where everyone felt psychologically safe. Tina shared, “that safety allowed for them to be able to speak up during the sessions and show up as their authentic selves.” Kaliope went even further to point out how the relationship between the facilitators had a role in the atmosphere of the room, ultimately, “opening up the door for [participants] to be comfortable in the space with each other.”

When focus group members were asked to describe design elements that met the needs of participants, collaboration time was another element pointed out. This collaboration time was a supportive element. The lead researcher mentioned how the collaboration time allowed participants to hear diverse voices. This element was also mentioned by participants during their interviews. Each ARIT shared how the design of the sessions allowed for the professional learning environment to be open and collaborative. Participants valued the time and space they were provided to collaborate and plan. Denise emphasized, “the learning was not a sit-and-get... it was very rich with dialogue. Everybody had a voice.”

Another strategy named during the focus group interview that helped to create safe and supportive spaces for participants was how facilitators honored the experiences teachers brought with them to the professional learning. Holly echoed this idea in her interview when she shared, “You guys did a really good job of relating to us in our job.” Additionally, ARDT members cited the importance of collaboration time helping participants to process new information and make connections to their previous and current experiences within their educational settings. During the planning meetings, the ARDT had ample conversations where they wanted to ensure the

content was relevant to the diverse roles of the participants. As a result, during the planning meetings, the ARDT was intentional in providing teachers the chance to share their own experiences to connect with the content throughout each session.

Also, during the focus group interviews, both Kaliope and Layla emphasized how participants were provided with processing and planning time. Layla asserted that planning time “helped participants to see themselves as leaders in the work”, while Kaliope shared, “I think it's really important that they have time to figure out how they're going to implement [their learning] and have time to collaborate as they're figuring it out.” Susan, during one of her interviews, also shared how impactful the planning time was, as it “provided the space to plan action steps of where [they] are going to go from here.”

Furthermore, Tina brought out the impact of the connectors, stating “I think we are very intentional about our connectors that we use when we're starting our facilitation because I think our connectors help with building that safe space and breaking down the barriers so that we can do the work.” Denise, one of the ARIT members, also shared how the connectors were engaging and fun, and helped to set the tone for the class. During the sessions, the primary researcher noted the laughter and comradery that came from completing a connector activity at the beginning of the class. Participants were always wanting more and even spoke to how they wanted to try some of the connectors with their students.

The ARIT members were also asked what changes to the course would be beneficial for future participants. Many of the ideas they expressed also connected to the need to have safe and supportive environments outside of the professional learning walls. One concern that resonated in many interviews was the fear of not being able to implement their learning. Claire questioned, “If something happened, would we have the support from the district?” Denise summed this

same idea up by stating, “Teachers feel like they need permission to do this work.” Sara shared that one fear in the work is “People may think that we are indoctrinating children.” In all, participants showed they wanted to be engaged in equity and culturally responsive work but feared the lack of support from others.

The interviews continued to show that although support from the facilitators of the professional learning was visible, support from local school administration was also needed. Denise indicated wanting support with increasing the sense of urgency around educational equity and cultural responsiveness at her local school, especially from the school leadership team. Another participant also wanted to know how to bring the learning back to her school, while other participants inquired about promoting the EER courses across the district because “everyone needs this learning”.

In an interview with Claire, she spoke to how the facilitators of the EER course came to observe her classroom. She stated, “Asking to come observe her class was a huge part of confidence building.” Claire shared with her administration team when the EER facilitators were coming, which made administration aware of the work she was doing and how the course was impacting her classroom practice. Although classroom observations were not part of the professional learning sessions, the observation occurred based on a conversation that occurred during the classroom and Claire implementing strategies from the course and sharing about her actions in class. This one act of coming to observe was valuable to Claire and demonstrated support outside of the professional learning walls.

For participants to engage in educational equity and cultural responsiveness work, safe and supportive communities within the professional learning space, and outside of the professional learning space were a documented theme apparent throughout the data collected.

Connecting to the theoretical framework guiding this study, the safe and supportive environment created the conditions for participants to transform their current beliefs through reflection and exploration.

### **Research Question 3**

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) worked alongside the primary researcher to analyze data and design the interventions in this study. Research question three sought to understand how the ARDT described the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. For research question three, data from the focus groups were used to derive an initial set of codes. ARDT members were asked three different questions to help answer question three. After each focus group, the primary researcher watched the recording, reviewed the transcript, and began to search for any initial codes. Some of the initial codes that emerged were pause and process time, safety, chunking, relationships, empathize, collaboration, backgrounds of participants, and critical conversations. These codes were cross-checked across the researcher's journal notes and document reviews. In addition, codes were vetted by the ARDT.

The ARDT collaborated and settled on the final two major themes that appeared throughout the coding of the focus group transcripts, research journal notes, and document review. One theme centered on designing with participants in mind, while the second theme summarized how the collaboration between ARDT members was a critical part of the planning process. Both themes aligned to the theoretical framework as they honored the process the ARDT engaged in to create a space for participants to experience a disorienting dilemma, self-reflect, and explore and learn. These themes are discussed in detail next.

### *Theme 3: Empathy for Participants*

During the first focus group interview, ARDT members were asked to describe the design elements they believed the team had been intentional in implementing when building and creating this professional learning series. All the comments and notes pointed back to how the ARDT empathized with participants throughout the planning process by considering participants' backgrounds and what adults need as learners. For example, every ARDT member pointed out specific design elements that the team was intentional with during planning meetings. Tina noted that the team ensured that concrete examples were provided and that the diverse participant group could connect to at least one or more of the provided examples. By providing concrete examples, participants would be able to make stronger connections between the content and their practice.

All the ARDT members pointed out design elements that would ensure the active engagement of participants during the session. One of the most common design elements mentioned was time to collaborate. Kaliope even connected how the previous mentioned strategy of providing participants with concrete examples aided collaboration when she stated, "I feel like because we gave them concrete examples that can be used in their settings that it set them up to be able to think about how they can collaborate."

Both the focus group transcripts and researcher's journal showed the inclusion of processing time as an important strategy for participants. Kaliope pointed out, "I think the processing time is important. I know we were very particular about having processing time that was individual and collaborative." Additionally, Tina added that the ARDT ensured participants had different tools to help them process such as individual reflection time, writing responses on a Padlet accessible to everyone, and processing within smaller groups. These design elements were

also mentioned by ARIT members during their semi-structured interviews. For example, Jennifer shared during one of her interviews:

I love the way you guys like really make us think. So, you have these little questions that you guys put in there and it just really makes you stop and think about it. The way you format it, like you know, we've got the Jamboards and the Padlets. You know, your name doesn't pop up on the screen, so you think you can take that risk.

Another tool discussed by the ARDT was providing advanced notetakers to participants. The advanced notetakers provided guided note sections for participants to complete activities and write down important information from the session.

During several of the ARDT meetings, the facilitators questioned if the notetakers hindered participants from engaging fully in the professional learning or aided their engagement. During the focus group interview, however, Layla noted the advanced notetaker represented a tool that allowed people to process information, as well as to recall and summarize their learning later. The idea that the notetakers were helpful for participants attending the course was confirmed during several interviews with ARIT members, when they shared that the notetaker was an important tool that supported their learning.

The research journal also described how intentional the team had been with including planning time for participants during the session. Conversations noted that teachers were overwhelmed and often did not have time to get the daily activities for their classrooms completed during the work time, so how could the sessions include time for teachers to really think about how to implement what they were learning. This was also captured in the focus group interviews when the primary researcher highlighted the inclusion of planning time and the desire to ensure that planning time was honored during each session. Kaliope agreed that the

planning time was valuable for participants and stated, “I think it's really important that they have time to figure out how they're going to implement this and collaboration with other people can help with planning.”

Lastly, when considering how the ARDT empathized with participants, the design team consistently spoke of the need to create a psychologically safe space for participants to be able to learn. Tina shared:

I think we as facilitators created an environment that everyone, all our participants felt psychologically safe. That safety allowed for them to be able to speak up during our sessions and show up as their authentic selves. They didn't have to hold back. They were able to just ask freely whatever was on their mind. And, when you're doing this work, that's crucial and critical.

The focus group transcripts provided several examples of strategies that the ARDT implemented to increase the psychological safety of participants such as implementing connectors at the beginning of each session to allow for laughter and to break down barriers. Kaliopé mentioned how the facilitators showed up as human beings, “erasing the hierarchical lines.” The primary researcher added how the ARDT members did not pretend to have all the answers, showcasing their own vulnerability, while remaining open to diverse perspectives in the room.

#### *Theme 4: Collaborative Team Dynamics*

The second theme that emerged from the data collection was the importance of having an ARDT that was collaborative in nature. First, Layla noted that calling upon an additional voice and partnering with a leader who spends a lot of time and effort in the field of equity and cultural responsiveness was vital in building this course, as this partnership provided the content for the course. Kaliopé pointed out that because of this partnership, the facilitators were able to provide

the why, or the theories and research to support the examples that were provided during the facilitation of the professional learning sessions.

In addition, throughout the process of working with a leader outside of the district who was an expert in the field of educational equity, the ARDT worked collaboratively to discuss each of the slide decks that were provided by the outside consultant. The ARDT would read and make notes independently and then come together to review the slides and notes. Kaliopé pointed out:

I did like how we took time to review each deck individually, then reviewed it together to add our comments, and to discuss everything as a team because it gave such insight. Like a lot of times, Tina might see something that you and I don't see. And vice versa, right? Because we all have different perspectives. So, I really like that we did that and then we discussed and hashed things out. We didn't always agree where everything was going, but we were able to have a critical conversation about what we thought should happen, even if there was disagreement, and then we were able to come to a consensus.

Additionally, the ARDT took time between each session to check slide decks for accessibility and engagement. The ARDT was diverse in talent and thought pattern, enriching the conversations that happened when planning each session. Tina noted that the high emotional intelligence of team members allowed for a safe space on the ARDT, creating the space where differing opinions were valued. For example, during planning sessions, one member may have noted the need for more individual processing time within the professional learning session and asked for the inclusion of that time due to how they themselves process information; while another ARDT member may have asked for more collaborative processing time based on how they process information.

As noted in the primary researcher's journal, dialog was always discussed about the best activities based on the varying learning styles, and everyone was always open to the opinion of others. This made it easy to plan for each professional learning session. The primary researcher emphasized that the ARDT was truly a collaborative learning team that thrived on the safe space between each member.

The way the ARDT worked together, and collaborated not only ensured effective professional learning sessions, but also played a role in how the facilitators showed up during the professional learning sessions. Kaliope mentioned that the ARDT worked as a high functioning team, ultimately "[opening] up that door for them to be comfortable in that space with each other. So, I think [the facilitators team dynamics] made a huge difference in the environment and I guess the atmosphere of the room." Several ARIT members mentioned the team dynamics in their interviews as well. Jessica shared how the facilitators were personable and excited about the work, which made a difference in the class environment. In an interview with Denise, she mentioned how each facilitator was an expert in the segment of the session they presented, and how the facilitators supported each other in a natural and inviting way. It was evident that the ARDT could not have designed and facilitated this course without a strong collaborative team environment.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. Based on the data analysis, there were four overarching themes connected to the research questions. The first research question explored how teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to

increase their cultural competence and proficiency. Qualitative data from interviews, researcher's journal, and observation notes revealed one overarching theme, participants become reflective practitioners. In the words of Sara, "This course allowed me to learn theory, connect it to my practice, and begin to implement my learning. It has given me tools to think about when planning." The professional development series allowed participants to reflect over their current practices and begin to integrate new learning into their educational settings.

The second research question aimed to determine how district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development. The theme that emerged for this question was the importance of leaders providing a safe and supportive community for participants. Holly worded it this way, "I feel like we all, [facilitators and participants], empowered each other in a way to take steps that we wouldn't normally take." Holly described how the facilitators shared openly and then provided the space for participants to share openly as well. However, it was important to note the safe and supportive community could not just exist within the professional learning community but needed to stretch into the local school buildings in which teachers worked. Denise summed this thought succinctly, "[This professional learning] needs to be in the fabric of our district".

The final research question sought to understand how an action research team describes the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. Two themes emerged from the data for this research questions. First, ARDT members must empathize with participants. Empathizing with participants means planning with the learner in mind. Considering their current contexts and experiences and acknowledging the adult learning principles was key. In the words of Tina, "We empathize with participants and try to see the learning from their lens, to make it accessible to all stakeholders."

The second emerging theme connected to research question three was the importance of having a truly collaborative ARDT team. It was crucial that the ARDT felt safe enough to voice their opinions and bring in their own lenses when planning, to design the best possible learning experience for participants. Kaliopé stated it this way, “We all have different perspectives... We didn't always agree where everything was going, but we were able to have a critical conversation about what we thought should happen even if there was disagreement and come to a consensus.” This reiterates that for effective professional learning to occur, the design of the professional learning should include multiple voices and the members planning should have a working relationship that allows each of them to contribute, even when opposing ideas surface. Planning in this manner allows for a product to be created that considers a diverse group of learners.

With these themes in mind, Chapter 6 presents the conclusions of the study and discusses implications and recommendations for practice.

**CHAPTER 6**  
**CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP**  
**PRACTICES**

The purpose of this study was to determine the structures and support systems implemented to foster an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series. To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?
2. How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?
3. How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series?

This chapter begins with a summary of the study, followed by a discussion of the findings, including how the findings were supported by literature. This chapter concludes by outlining the limitations of the study and providing implications and recommendations for school and district leaders, policy, and further research.

**Summary of Study**

This study took place in an urban school district in which their North Star provided a strategic plan where empathy, equity, effectiveness, and excellence served as priorities. The

Educational Equity and Responsiveness (EER) Program, operating under the Office of Staff Development, took on the responsibility to provide optional educational equity and cultural competence courses to staff members across the district. This study included educators who enrolled in the EER Advanced Course, after completing two different prerequisite courses.

Throughout the study, the ARIT, consisting of participants enrolled in the EER Advanced Course, participated in four different professional learning sessions designed and facilitated by the ARDT. During this time, the ARIT participated in an initial questionnaire and a mid and post-cycle individual interview in which their thoughts on the course and its impact was gathered. The ARDT took part in two focus group interviews occurring between the two research cycles and then again at the end of the second research cycle. Data from these data sources were collected and analyzed developing four themes that connected to the theoretical framework and research questions guiding this study.

This chapter presents the discussion of the findings of this study and offers implications for practice. A discussion of the findings of this study are provided next.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

### *Discussion of Findings Related to Research Question 1*

*Research Question 1: How do teachers describe the impact of an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series on their ability to increase their cultural competence and proficiency?*

#### *Theme 1: Reflective Practitioners*

Research has found that equity-centered professional learning requires teachers to engage in self-reflection where they are able to examine their own beliefs and biases (Andrews & Richmond, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2020). The findings from this study supported the idea that self-

reflection is critical when it comes to increasing one's cultural competence. Research shows that self-reflection can occur through multiple paths. For example, researchers found it valuable when teachers had opportunities to engage in reflection and collaborative discourse (Jacobs et al., 2020; Poekert et al., 2020; Skerrett et al., 2018). In fact, Cavendish et al.'s, (2021) research analyzed the perspectives of teachers in a culturally responsive pedagogy program and found that professional learning was most effective when there were multiple opportunities for teachers to collaborate and interact with other teachers. Throughout this study, participants in an equity-centered professional learning had multiple opportunities to reflect independently and collaboratively. Findings showed that teachers found the discourse during professional learning beneficial to their growth and ability to transfer their learning.

When considering the research of Jacobs et al. (2020), they capitalized on their belief that “developing [an] equity lens involves teacher leaders engaging in critical self-reflection and consciousness-raising about their own beliefs and biases” (p. 104). Bukko and Liu (2021) promoted “metacognition and self-awareness through questions designed to probe participants’ assumptions about the teaching process, the learning needs of students, and the lived experiences of the diverse students they will be teaching” (p. 5). The findings of this study support that professional learning opportunities must create a space where participants are provided the opportunity to engage in such metacognitive processes. When reviewing the data from this study, participants were provided opportunities to learn theory centered on various culturally responsive teaching topics. Teachers would learn about the theory through relevant examples, readings, and videos. Teachers engaged in activities that allowed them to examine their own perceptions and how their current reality supported the new learning or how it could support the new learning in the future.

Throughout this study, participants ultimately had the opportunity to develop an educational equity mindset, knowing that the journey towards equitable education for all is not a one-size fits all strategy. In their research, Nadelson et al. (2019) identified six characteristics of an educational equity mindset, including:

- engaging in culturally responsive teaching,
- having a sense of responsibility for promoting equity,
- ensuring a learning environment where all students can be successful,
- promoting student-centered learning,
- engaging in informal leadership roles, and
- knowing and understanding the student population.

This study found that although professional learning providing strategies geared towards these equity mind-set characteristics were crucial, it was the reflective nature on how to continuously work towards implementing and living these characteristics that was most beneficial. During the action research process, participants discussed how the conversations with others provided them with ideas on how to put their learning into practice. Once again, the ability to reflect on their practice while hearing the stories of others was critical.

Gay (2013) assured that becoming a culturally competent and responsive teacher "...is a developmental process that involves learning over time..." (p. 57). In addition, it is not an endeavor that is done independently. Additionally, this study highlights how the elements of transformational learning theory, such as the ability of the learner to self-reflect and recognize a need to change, is critical when it comes to transforming one's lens to be a more effective, culturally competent teacher.

## *Discussion of Findings Related to Research Question 2*

*Research Question 2: How can district leaders support teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development?*

### *Theme 2: Safe and Supportive Spaces*

This action research study found that participants in a district equity professional learning series needed to have a safe and supportive environment in which to engage. The data and findings supported what others in the field of education have found to be true as well. For example, Khalifa et al. (2016) emphasized how culturally responsive leaders strongly emphasize inclusivity. Furthermore, trust must be established for leaders to engage in meaningful, culturally responsive work with teachers (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). Trust increased teachers' openness and honesty when discussing equity and cultural responsiveness (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). The findings in this study emphasized how participants valued the ability to voice their thoughts without judgment from the facilitators or their colleagues. Participants had an inclusive safe space. It was through the safe space created that educators were able to speak openly and freely, allowing the space for them to reflect and implement their learning. It is through this safe and supportive environment that the components of transformational learning theory were able to come alive.

Research has shown that culturally responsive leaders exist at various levels, including local schools and various levels in the district (Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). However, for culturally responsive work to be implemented effectively, cultural responsiveness must be addressed systematically and have the superintendent's full support (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018). This case revealed that participants believed it was beneficial that the cultural competence professional learning was provided through the district office. Interviews showed that

participants felt the implementation of the strategies would be supported at their local schools since the professional learning was a district offering. At the same time, it was crucial that local school building leaders were aware of the work of the district to support the teachers who were engaged in this work, taking into consideration the teachers were trying new strategies that may not be the norm at their local schools.

Learning Forward (2022) stated, “Educators recognize that high-quality professional learning can serve as a lever to achieve equity throughout schools and districts only when educators and students have access to and opportunity for rigorous and relevant learning” (p. 56). Research has shown that when teachers are provided with high-quality professional learning, students are positively affected, and teacher efficacy increases (Andrews & Richmond, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2020; Skerrett et al., 2018). Since participants felt safe, they were able to let their guards down and experience a disorienting dilemma in which they could self-reflect, explore new learning, and integrate their new learning into their practice.

Professional learning must be sustainable over time for it to be effective (Learning Forward, 2022; Sawyer & Stuckey, 2019; Zepeda, 2019). Skerrett et al. (2018) found that their equity-centered professional learning was most effective when the learning was held over time. This study proved that the professional learning series occurring over four different sessions allowed for a safe and supportive environment to be built amongst facilitators and participants over time. This ultimately provided participants with a transformational learning experience. Skerrett et al. (2018) described a transformational learning experience as one in which participants having the opportunity to engage in collaborative discussions over time, allowing for deeper questioning and the building of more complex knowledge as learning is applied in the classroom and brought back to subsequent professional learning sessions.

When professional learning participants have a safe and supportive environment, they can participate in the learning without fear, creating a space where their minds can be disturbed or challenged to think differently. It is through these moments that new learning can take root and grow.

### *Discussion of Findings Related to Research Question 3*

*Research Question 3: How does an action research team describe the process of designing and implementing an educational equity and culturally responsive professional development series?*

#### *Theme 3: Empathy for Participants*

Research has proven that adults' learning needs vary and can be different than the needs of students (Brown, 2005; Sawyer & Stuke, 2019). Zepeda (2019) and Aguilar and Cohen (2022) summarized the research of Knowles and described assumptions about adult learners based on Knowles' work. Both Aguilar and Cohen (2022) and Zepeda (2019) asserted that adults genuinely want to learn and are generally self-directed learners. Furthermore, Aguilar and Cohen (2022) and Zepeda (2019) stated adults bring their prior experiences to new learning experiences. Consequently, professional learning should provide opportunities for participants to share past experiences and stories relevant to the learning. This study embodied the adult learning principles and showed how participants valued opportunities to share and hear the stories of others. The research findings highlight the importance of professional learning designers and facilitators to consider who their audience will be when planning. That is, think about the participants, what are the background experiences they are bringing and how are those experiences going to be honored.

Additionally, when designing professional learning, designers must constantly think about who are the learners that will engage in the professional learning and what structures and

strategies can be used to engage their diverse needs and voices. In this study, the ARDT spoke to how they kept participants at the focus of their mind when planning and ensured that relevant examples and scenarios were embedded in the professional learning. In addition, the ARDT was purposeful in including different collaborative approaches to appeal to the diverse needs of the participants.

Research found that equity-centered professional learning should be connected to aspects of the curriculum, teaching, and learning that teachers identified as being areas that they wanted to grow in (Learning Forward, 2022; Poekert et al., 2020; Skerrett et al., 2018). This connects with the notion that adults want to learn; however, they want their learning to be relevant (Learning Forward, 2022; Sawyer & Stuke, 2019; Zepeda, 2019). This study corroborated these statements when participants spoke to how they were able to take the learning from each session and have time to think about how they would apply their learning in their personal contexts. Providing planning time within the professional learning session was another way the ARDT empathized with participants, allowing space and time within the professional learning session to plan to use what they had learned. Keeping participants in mind when planning and empathizing with them as learners was a successful strategy when designing a district led equity centered professional learning series.

#### *Theme 4: Collaborative Team Dynamics*

This action research study also found how critical the collaborative team dynamics played on the ARDT. Guskey (2014) stated one “step in planning professional learning is to decide what instructional practices and policies are most likely to produce the student learning outcomes we want” (p. 4). In this phase of professional learning, protocols may be examined to help participants to create an environment where teachers are responsible for their learning.

When deciding on which instructional practices to include in professional learning, the key is to create moments where participants can engage in inquiry, reflection, and collaboration (Jacobs et al., 2020; Sawyer & Stuke, 2019). Tam (2015) also believed “collaborative learning activities such as reflection, observation, action research, and dialog provide a powerful learning environment which in turn leads to teacher change” (p. 37).

Throughout this study, the ARDT engaged in collaborative discourse when designing and implementing the professional learning course. The ARDT did not always agree on what activity or protocol to use, when, but it was through collaborative conversations that a decision was made. It was crucial that all ARDT members felt their thoughts and opinions were valued and heard. It was vital that ARDT members felt safe enough to push back on ideas when needed as well. Collaboration in which all voices are heard allowed the ARDT to be able to design and implement an equity centered professional learning series.

There is not a single way to achieve equity, so a continuous improvement process must be used. Bush-Mecenas (2022) attested that the continuous improvement (CI) approach is widely used in education and has proved to be a powerful tool in achieving educational equity and social justice. One renowned CI approach developed by W. Edwards Deming is called Plan, Do, Check, and Act or the PDCA Cycle. Walton (1986) stated, “Use of the [PDCA] cycle will lead to continual improvement of methods and procedures. It can be applied to any process” (p. 88). During this study, the ARDT used the PDSA process to engage in continuous improvement cycles. Through the study of the data collected as part of the action research process, the ARDT was able to refine the interventions being implemented after each professional learning session. The data helped to drive the collaborative nature of the team.

### **Limitations of the Current Study**

The findings from this study represented a small district department in one urban district supporting over 100 schools. The primary intervention in this study was professional learning as part of an EER Advanced course. Participants had voluntarily participated in two previous EER courses before this course. As a result, the participants enrolled had vested interest in the course and topics centered on educational equity and cultural responsiveness. Consequently, the results from this study reflect the thoughts of participants who found the professional learning objectives of interest to them.

The primary researcher also served as the coordinator of the EER program. As a result, the primary researcher was vested in the success of the course and its outcomes. The direct connection to the interventions and serving as the primary researcher on the ARDT may have presented biases when interpreting the data collected. To combat biases, data analysis and themes were vetted by the ARDT.

Additionally, this study started at the end of July 2023 and culminated in December 2023. The professional learning sessions occurred once in each month between August and December 2023. Many of the concepts presented in the sessions were concepts that could take time to implement when thinking about the course of a school year. In addition, the course was a district facilitated course in which the facilitators did not observe the day-to-day interactions of participants in their local school setting. The data collected was from interviews and observations during professional learning sessions. There is a possibility that the ARIT members were not completely honest in their communications with the primary researcher during their individual interviews, which could have affected the findings.

Lastly, the sample size of this study was relatively small, consisting of eight teachers representative of all three levels of elementary, middle, and high school. The eight teachers came from eight different schools across the district. Although each teacher attended the same district EER course, their experiences and levels of support at their local schools were all different. In addition, some of the teachers in the sample size were not classroom teachers, but served in support roles such as a Student Support Team Coordinator. The variability in roles and school contexts may have affected the study's findings. A larger sample size would have increased the study's reliability.

### **Implications and Recommendations for School and District Leaders**

This study had representation from all three levels of schools, elementary, middle, and high. However, each person was the only representative attending this EER Advanced course from their school. It is important that district leaders ensure that all educators are aware of the myriad of professional learning opportunities available to them throughout the year. Courses should be branded in a manner that is easily accessible to all educators. One recommendation to ensure district professional learning opportunities are accessible to all staff is to house all staff development opportunities in one catalog in a common place. For example, a professional learning icon could be located on the employee landing page for all staff to be able to access easily.

One last recommendation for district leaders is to adopt and/or adapt a culturally responsive teaching framework that all departments leverage district wide. This would ensure common language across the district and across programs. In addition, an adopted culturally responsive teaching framework would support the district's strategic plan, while providing

direction for all stakeholders. It would communicate to employees a district-wide message on the implementation of culturally responsive teaching.

Furthermore, it is vital that local schools support teachers who are attending district professional learning. Support could be offered through observation and feedback, individualized coaching conversations, and teacher leadership pathways. For this to happen, local school administration would need to be abreast of the professional learning opportunities their staff members are attending. This would allow them to better support their staff members' learning. At the time of this study, JCPS employees' approved professional learning hours were recorded on a common platform. Participants could log into the platform and access their transcripts for any professional learning they had completed in the district. Administration teams could also look up employees' transcripts one at a time. As a result of the findings of this research, one recommendation is to have a monthly recurring report sent to administrators with the names of employees and the professional learning they have completed. This could lead to greater amounts of support being provided to staff members at the local school based on district level professional learning employees are participating in.

Lastly, school leaders need to be culturally responsive leaders themselves. Leaders must take the steps to be and remain culturally competent. This includes awareness of self, and awareness of those they are leading including students, staff members, families, and community members. Participating in ongoing equity and culturally responsive training themselves will also communicate to others the importance of being responsive to all students' needs.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Policy**

Providing a roadmap to Federal Educational Policy today is ESSA (2015). Fusarelli and Ayscue (2019) pointed out that although ESSA contains parameters to protect and promote

equity, “Guardrails are effective only insofar as federal and state leaders engage in appropriate oversight” (p. 36). This study was centered on professional learning that was voluntary. However, throughout this study, participants mentioned how equity training should be mandatory training for all employees. At JCPS, employees complete a set of required training such as Human Resource compliance training, Title IX training, and safety and security training at the beginning of each school year. Perhaps, it is time for states or Boards of Educations everywhere to consider an annual mandated equity training so that all employees, no matter their interest level, receive some degree of learning on topics that support diverse student populations.

Additionally, it is now time to consider revisiting the standards in which teacher and leader effectiveness is measured. How can state and national standards be revised to include indicators that suggest that all educators should be culturally responsive educators. If the teacher and leader effectiveness standards are revised to reflect this mindset, college courses, and district professional learning opportunities across the state and nation will also have to update their courses and include more offerings to ensure teachers have access to the learning they need.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Further Research**

This action research study was situated in a large urban school district and focused on one specific professional development offering provided by the district office, which was educational equity and cultural competency. Educators in this study participated in two previous EER courses before self-enrolling in the EER Advanced Course. This study occurred during the time the course was facilitated, July 2023 through December 2023. As a result, this study measured the immediate perceptions and effects of the course and its initial impact on teachers’ classroom practices. To expand this research, future researchers could investigate how teachers who have participated in equity professional learning implement their learning and the impact of

the learning on student growth throughout the school year. Questions that may be used to guide such research efforts could be:

- How do teachers build their cultural competence within their classrooms?
- How do teachers plan for the diverse needs of their students?
- What structures must exist at local schools to build the cultural competence of teachers?

To expand this same research study in the future, classroom observations with feedback could be included as an intervention. Classroom observations would provide the opportunity for researchers to see specific actions that are being taken to promote an equitable and inclusive learning environment for all. Observations could then be connected to specific elements of the course to provide feedback to course content and design elements. Specific, individualized feedback could be provided to participants to further support their growth and reflection.

This study was conducted with a relatively small group of teachers in a large district. This study could be replicated with objectives centered on cultural competence and educational equity with a larger group of teachers to confirm findings. It would also be helpful to repeat this study with a local school in which the administration and instructional coaches are also part of the learning. Having an entire school be a part of such a professional development series would increase the amount of support being offered and could help confirm how integral safe and supportive communities are for district professional development offerings.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Research has shown that teachers have more influence on student achievement than any other factor (Barth & CPE, 2016; Hattie, 2008). As a result, educators have the significant job of ensuring that every student receives the support needed to succeed at school and beyond. At a time in education where shifting demographics and system inequities pose a challenge to

ensuring an inclusive education for all (Georgia Partnership for Excellence, 2021), it is up to school systems and districts to determine how to equip their teachers to be able to provide an excellent education to students who may look different, have different background experiences, and even different values. One way school districts can work to create inclusive learning environments for all students is by ensuring staff members build their cultural competence.

Cultural competence is recognizing, valuing, and leveraging differences to interact effectively and better serve our students, staff, and community (JCPS, 2022). Professional learning is one tool that can be used to increase the cultural competence of staff members. When educators have opportunities to engage in reflective practices within a safe and supportive community, they are better able to modify their instructional practices and mindset to meet the needs of a diverse student group. This means that teachers must have ample opportunities throughout the school year to be a part of learning that challenges them and encourages them to share their perspectives within groups. It is through these group discussions and collaborations that new innovative ideas emerge. Ideas that can help teachers better connect and engage with their students.

Professional learning is a vehicle in which transformation can occur when done right (Aguilar & Cohen, 2022; Learning Forward, 2022). Whether the professional learning is being implemented at a district or local school level, it is imperative that the educators designing and facilitating the professional learning experiences take the time to empathize with their participants. It is through empathy that excellence can unfold. Professional learning must be a collaborative endeavor. Multiple perspectives during the design process allow for rich conversations to occur, resulting in learning experiences that consider diverse learners. Each

professional learning session or experience then presents the opportunity for continuous quality improvement as educators take time to study and act on the data that has been collected.

To provide equitable learning environments for a diverse student population, studies found that educators who were equity-conscious and culturally responsive were successful at meeting the needs of students from marginalized student groups (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Carter & Richmond, 2019; Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nadelson et al., 2019). How do school districts develop the cultural competence of its teachers? Professional learning, occurring within safe and supportive communities, and in which reflective structures are capitalized, is one path that can increase the cultural competence of its participants.

## References

- Aguilar, E. (2020). *Coaching for equity: Conversations that change practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Aguilar, E., & Cohen, L. (2022). *The pd book: 7 habits that transform professional development*. Jossey-Bass.
- Andrews, D.J.C., & Richmond, G. (2019). Professional development for equity: What constitutes powerful professional learning? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(5), 408–409.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487119875098>
- Aronson, B., & Laughter, J. (2020). The theory and practice of culturally relevant education: Expanding the conversation to include gender and sexuality equity. *Gender & Education*, 32(2), 262–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1496231>
- Banwo, B.O., Khalifa, M., & Seashore Louis, K. (2021). Exploring trust: Culturally responsive and positive school leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 60(3), 323–339.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-03-2021-0065>
- Barth, P. (2016). *Educational Equity: What does it mean? How do we know when we reach it?* Research Brief. Center for Public Education. <https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/cpe-educational-equity-research-brief-january-2016.pdf>
- Berg, J.H., & Gleason, S.C. (2018, January 1). Come together for equity. *Learning Professional*, 39(5), 24–27. Retrieved December 19, 2022, from  
<https://learningforward.org/journal/october-2018-vol-39-no-5/come-together-for-equity/>
- Bishop, J.P., & Noguera, P.A. (2019). The ecology of educational equity: Implications for policy. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94(2), 122-141.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1598108>

- Bloomberg, L.D. (2023). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Bragg, L.A., Walsh, C., & Heyeres, M. (2021). Successful design and delivery of online professional development for teachers: A systematic review of the literature. *Computers & Education*, 166. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2021.104158>
- Brown, C., Correll, P., & Stormer, K. (2021). The new normal: Re-imagining professional development amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. *Middle School Journal*, 52(5), 5-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2021.1978787>
- Brown, K. M. (2005). *Transformative adult learning strategies: assessing the impact on preservice administrators' beliefs*. *Educational Considerations*, 32(2), 17–26. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1242>
- Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- Bryk, A.S., Gomez, L.M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2017). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.
- Bukko, D., & Liu, K. (2021). Developing preservice teachers' equity consciousness and equity literacy. *Frontiers in Education*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.586708>
- Bush-Mecenas, S. (2022). The business of teaching and learning: Institutionalizing equity in educational organizations through continuous improvement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 59(3), 461-499. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312221074404>
- Buttimer, C. J., Littenberg-Tobias, J., & Reich, J. (2022). Designing online professional learning to support educators to teach for equity during COVID and black lives matter. *AERA Open*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211067789>

- Carr, W. (2006). Philosophy, methodology and action research. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 40, 421-435. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2006.00517.x>.
- Carter Andrews, D.J., & Richmond, G. (2019). Professional development for equity: What constitutes powerful professional learning? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(5), 408-409. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487119875098>
- CAST (2018). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2. Retrieved January 6, 2023, from <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>
- Cavendish, W., Barrenechea, I., Young, A. F., Díaz, E., & Avalos, M. (2021). Urban teachers' perspectives of strengths and needs: The promise of teacher responsive professional development. *Urban Review*, 53(2), 318–333. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00569-9>
- Center for Public Education (2016). Educational equity: What does it mean? How do we know when we reach it? Retrieved April 24, 2022, from <https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/cpe-educational-equity-research-brief-january-2016.pdf>
- Chen, D., & Yang, X. (2021). Talk the walk and walk the talk: Gearing toward a culturally responsive leadership approach. *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 31(3), 285–295. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-021-00560-2>
- Chu, Y. (2019). What are they talking about when they talk about equity? A content analysis of equity principles and provisions in state every student succeeds act plans. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(158). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4558>
- Coghlan, D. (2019). *Doing action research in your own organization* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Sage Publications.

- Corey, S.M. (1954). Action research in education. *The Journal of Education Research*, 47(5), 375–380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1954.10882121>
- Creswell, J.W., & Miller, D.L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory Into Practice*, 39(3), 124–130. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1477543>
- Davis, S.H., & Leon, R.J. (2011). How not to prepare school principals. *Planning and Changing*, 42(3–4), 274–287. <http://education.illinoisstate.edu/planning/articles/vol42.php>
- DeBray, E., & Blankenship A.E. (2016). Foreword. In: Education Law Consortium. *Education Law and Policy Review* (Vol. 3). Education Law Consortium.
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (1965). <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/essa-act-of-1965.pdf>
- Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177>
- Ford, D.Y., & Kea, C.D. (2009). Creating culturally responsive instruction: For students' and teachers' sakes. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 41(9), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.17161/foec.v41i9.6841>
- Fusarelli, L.D., & Ayscue, J.B. (2019). Is ESSA a retreat from equity? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 101(2), 32-36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721719879152>
- Galloway, M.K., Callin, P., James, S., Vimignon, H., & McCall, L. (2019). Culturally responsive, antiracist, or anti-oppressive? How language matters for school change efforts. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 52(4), 485-501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1691959>
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003>

- Gay, G. (2013). Teaching to and through cultural diversity. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1), 48-70.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12002>
- Genao, S. (2021). Doing it for culturally responsive school leadership: Utilizing reflexivity from preparation to practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 16(2), 158–170.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/19427751211002226>
- Georgia Insights. (2022). Georgia Insights. Retrieved February 25, 2023, from  
<https://www.georgiainsights.com/>
- Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (2021). *Top ten issues to watch in 2022*.  
Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education. <https://gpee.org/partnership-reports/top-ten-issues/>
- Glanz, J. (2014). *Action research: An educational leader's guide to school improvement* (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gray, L.M., Wong-Wylie, G., Rempel, G.R., & Cook, K. (2020). Expanding qualitative research interviewing strategies: Zoom video communications. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(5), 1292-1301. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4212>
- Guskey, T.R. (2002). Does it make a difference? Evaluating professional development. *Educational Leadership*, 59(6), 45-51. <https://www.ascd.org/>
- Guskey, T.R. (2014). Planning professional learning. *Educational Leadership*, 71(8), 10-16.  
<https://www.ascd.org/>
- Guskey, T.R. (2021). Professional learning with staying power: Six steps to evidence-based professional learning that makes a difference. *Educational Leadership*, 78(5), 54–59.  
<https://www.ascd.org/>

- Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.
- Hattie, J. (2008). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.
- Hennink, M.M. (2014). *Focus group discussions*. Oxford University Press.
- Honig, M.I., & Honsa, A. (2020). Systems-focused equity leadership learning: Shifting practice through practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 15(3), 192–209.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775120936303>
- Hooper, M.A., & Bernhardt, V.L. (2016). *Creating capacity for learning and equity in schools: Instructional, adaptive, and transformational leadership*. Routledge.
- Jolly County Public Schools. (2022). Blueprint for the future: Building the bridge from empathy to excellence. [unpublished strategic plan]. Jolly County Public Schools.
- Jolly County Public Schools. (2022). JCPS by the numbers. Retrieved February 25, 2023 from [https://www.gcpsk12.org/cms/lib/GA02204486/Centricity/Domain/12075/2022-23\\_GCPS\\_By\\_the\\_Numbers\\_Oct.5.eq.pdf](https://www.gcpsk12.org/cms/lib/GA02204486/Centricity/Domain/12075/2022-23_GCPS_By_the_Numbers_Oct.5.eq.pdf)
- Jacob, S.A., & Furgerson, S. P. (2012). Writing interview protocols and conducting interviews: Tips for students new to the field of qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(42), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1718>
- Jacobs, J., Burns, R.W., Haraf, S., Perrone-Britt, F., Bellas, A., & Holt, M. (2020). Equity-based teacher leaders facilitating change within an urban professional development school. *School-University Partnerships*, 13(3), 101-122.  
<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/equity-based-teacher-leaders-facilitating-change/docview/2472180303/se-2?accountid=14537>

- Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2014). *The action research planner: Doing critical participatory action research*. Springer.
- Khalifa, M.A., Gooden, M.A., & Davis, J.E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 1272-1311.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316630383>
- King, F. (2014). *Evaluating the impact of teacher professional development: an evidence-based framework*. *Professional Development in Education*, 40(1), 89–111.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2013.823099>
- Kostyo, S., Cardichon, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2018). Making ESSA’s equity promise to close the opportunity gap. *Learning Policy Institute*.  
<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/essa-equity-promise-report>
- Kuhne, G.W., & Quigley, B.A. (1997). Understanding and using action research in practice settings. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, 1997(73), 23.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7302>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that’s just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory Into Practice*, 34(3), 159–165.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849509543675>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: A.k.a. The Remix. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 74-84,135. <https://www.hepg.org/special/navigation/her-main/current-issue>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Fighting for our lives. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 206-214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487100051003008>

- Ladson-Billings, G. (2021). Three decades of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogy: What lies ahead? *The Educational Forum*, 85(4), 351-354, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2021.1957632>
- Learning Forward. (2022). *Standards for Professional Learning*. Author.
- Learning Policy Institute. (2020). The federal role in advancing education equity and excellence. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/advancing-education-2020-brief>
- Lewis-Durham, T. (2020). All lives matter: How districts co-opt equity language and maintain the status quo. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 28(141). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.28.5248>
- Lindsey, R.B., Robins, K.N., Terrell, R.D., & Lindsey, D.B., (2019). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders* (4th ed.). Corwin Press.
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1986). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions for Program Evaluation*, 1986(30), 73–84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1427>
- Marshall, S., & Khalifa, M.A. (2018). Humanizing school communities: Culturally responsive leadership in the shaping of curriculum and instruction. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 56(5), 533–545. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-01-2018-0018>
- Masters, J. (1995). The history of action research. *Action Research Electronic Reader*, The University of Sydney, on-line <http://www.behs.cchs.usyd.edu.au/arow/Reader/rmasters.htm>
- Merriam, S.B., & Tisdell, E.J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. (4th ed.). Wiley.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education Directions*, 1997(74), 5-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401>

- Mockler, N. (2022). Teacher professional learning under audit: Reconfiguring practice in an age of standards. *Professional Development in Education*, 48(1), 166–180.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1720779>
- Nadelson, L.S., Miller, R., Hu, H., Bang, N.M., & Walthall, B. (2019). Is equity on their mind? Documenting teachers' education equity mindset. *World Journal of Education*, 9(5), 26-40. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wje.v9n5p26>
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2016)
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E., & Moules, N.J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85–100.  
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.9821873k2ht16m77>
- Pijanowski, J. (2019). Historical policy influences on balancing educational equity, adequacy, and local control. *eJournal of Education Policy*, 18(2),1-10. <https://in.nau.edu/ejournal>
- Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)
- Poekert, P.E., Swaffield, S., Demir, E.K., & Wright, S.A. (2020). Leadership for professional learning towards educational equity: A systematic literature review. *Professional Development in Education*, 46(4), 541-562.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1787209>
- Powell, C.G., & Bodur, Y. (2019). Teachers' perceptions of an online professional development experience: Implications for a design and implementation framework. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 77(1), 19-30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.09.004>

- Prior, L. (2003). *Using documents in social research*. SAGE Publications.
- Riordan, M., Klein, E. J., & Gaynor, C. (2019). Teaching for equity and deeper learning: How does professional learning transfer to teachers' practice and influence students' experiences? *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 52(2), 327–345.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1647808>
- Saldana, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Sawyer, I., & Stuckey, M.R. (2019). *Professional learning redefined: An evidence-based guide*. Corwin.
- Skerrett, A., Warrington, A., & Williamson, T. (2018). Generative principles for professional learning for equity-oriented urban English teachers. *English Education*, 50(2), 116–146.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26492545>
- Stuckey, H.H. (2016). *The second step in data analysis: Coding qualitative research data*. Methodological Issues in Social Health and Diabetes Research.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H.S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85–100.  
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.9821873k2ht16m77>
- Tam, A. C. F. (2015). The role of a professional learning community in teacher change: A perspective from beliefs and practices. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(1), 22–43.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2014.928122>
- Tanase, M. (2020). Is good teaching culturally responsive? *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 4(3), 187–202. <http://dx.doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2020063333>

- Turner, E.O., & Spain, A.K. (2020). The multiple meanings of (in)equity: Remaking school district tracking policy in an era of budget cuts and accountability. *Urban Education, 55*(5), 783-812. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916674060>
- U.S Department of Education. (n.d.). Every student succeeds act (ESSA). Retrieved October 17, 2021, from <https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn>.
- Walton, M. (1986). *The Deming management method*. Perigee.
- Warren, C.J.E. (1954). Brown v. Board of Education. *United States Reports, 347*(1954), 483.
- Weiner, J.M., & Lamb, A.J. (2020). Exploring the possibilities and limits to transfer and learning: examining a teacher leadership initiative using the theory of action framework. *Journal of Educational Change, 21*(2), 267–297. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-020-09378-z>
- Willis, J. W. (2014). *Action research: Models, methods, and examples*. Information Age Publishing
- Zepeda, S.J. (2019). *Professional development: What works* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Zepeda, S.J., Wang, F., & Yildirim, S. (2022). Professional learning: Views from China, Turkey, and the United States. *Kappa Delta Pi Record, 58*(1), 8-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2022.2005425>.

## Appendix A

### Empirical Findings Table

<b>Author (Date)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Major Findings</b>	<b>Implications</b>
Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., LeMahieu, P. G., & Harvard University, G. S. of E. (2015)	Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better	To provide a foundation for Plan-Do- Study-Act as the logic model for this study.	Plan-Do- Study-Act was used in different settings with documented improvement in various systems. This text documents such cases in which systematic actions led to scientific inquiry and improvement	The Plan-Do- Study-Act cycle is a method of inquiry in improvement research that allows a network to learn and move faster. Each cycles builds on the learning from previous cycles.	Plan-Do- Study-Act can be used to guide improvement cycles in the field.

<b>Author (Date)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Major Findings</b>	<b>Implications</b>
Cavendish, W., Barrenechea, I., Young, A. F., Díaz, E., & Avalos, M. (2021)	Urban teachers' perspectives of strengths and needs: The promise of teacher responsive professional development	To determine if professional learning is an appropriate model to increase staff cultural competency.	This study examined urban high school teachers' perceptions of their strengths and needs in supporting diverse students in their classrooms.	A responsive professional development model built on culturally responsive student-centered teaching and focused on teacher involvement that includes collaborative decision-making, collective construction of effective practice, and a growth driven approach can increase the cultural competence of participants.	Professional learning can be an avenue to increase teachers ability to support diverse student populations.

<b>Author (Date)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Major Findings</b>	<b>Implications</b>
Ford, D. Y., & Kea, C. D. (2009)	Creating culturally responsive instruction: For students' and teachers' sakes	To determine qualities of culturally competent teachers.	To propose guidelines and strategies for creating culturally responsive instruction and culturally competent educators.	Culturally competent teachers need a variety of skills such as an appreciation and respect for diversity, awareness of self, knowledge of students' identities, and ability to consider issues from multiple perspectives.	Being a culturally competent teachers requires a specific mind-set. Specific strategies must be into place to help shift mindsets that are open, patient, and empathetic. If using professional learning to shift mindsets, it will take time for people to evolve.

<b>Author (Date)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Major Findings</b>	<b>Implications</b>
Ladson-Billings, G. (1995)	But that's just good Teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy	To propose culturally responsive teaching as a framework or method to increase the cultural competence of educators.	This study analyzed what a group of eight teachers, did to ensure academic excellence for their black students.	Teachers found academic ways to incorporate students' knowledge and skills into the classroom, utilized collaborative learning structures, held their students to high-expectations, and provided appropriate scaffolds to help support students in reaching the expectations	There are certain strategies that can be used in the classroom to ensure the success of black and brown students.
Mezirow, J. (1997)	Transformative learning: Theory to practice	To set the stage for transformative learning as the theoretical framework for a study that uses professional learning as its main intervention.	Mezirow connects adult learning theory to the transformative theory of it.	Mezirow describes transformative learning theory as "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference" (p. 5).	Transformative learning can be used to help participants reflect and change their practices.

<b>Author (Date)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Major Findings</b>	<b>Implications</b>
Poekert, P. E., Swaffield, S., Demir, E. K., & A, S. W. (2020)	Leadership for professional learning towards educational equity: A systematic literature review	To set the stage for professional learning as an avenue for equity based professional learning.	A systematic review of recent research was conducted to determine the intersection of literature on educational leadership, professional learning, and educational equity.	This study provided leadership approaches to shaping the professional development and ongoing learning of educators which supports more equitable outcomes for students.	Professional learning can be used to create more equitable schools and classrooms, resulting in improved outcomes for students.

## APPENDIX B

### Action Research Implementation Team Initial Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This initial questionnaire will provide the research team with an understanding of any initial perspectives about your cultural proficiency, in addition to helping us understand what you hope to learn because of this course. Please know that the data collected is for the sole purpose of the action research study. Your responses are confidential, and your identity will be protected throughout the study.

**\* Required**

1. How many years of experience do you have in education? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- 0-1
- 2-5
- 6-9
- 10 +

2. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your cultural proficiency? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

Low

1

2

3

4

5

High

3. Please provide one example to support your rating in item 2. \*

4. What methods help you learn best? (check all that apply) \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Seeing a model
- Experimenting on my own
- Reading and writing
- Listening and speaking
- Learning theory and then practicing
- Practicing and then learning the theory
- Being guided by a facilitator
- Being self-guided
- Learning alone
- Learning with others
- Doing linear-sequential activities
- Doing nonlinear, creative
- activities Practicing in hands-on
- ways Reflecting about what I am learning

5. Please share one or more key ideas that you have implemented from the previous Educational Equity and Responsiveness series (Foundation or Intermediate course)? \*

6. What do you hope to learn in this course? \*
  
7. Ideally, how will this professional learning result in change for your students? \*
  
8. What type of support do you hope to receive from your session facilitators? \*

## Appendix C

### Action Research Implementation Team Interview Protocols

#### *Mid-Cycle Interview*

*Note: ARIT members will participate in an interview taking place between cycle 1 and cycle 2 of the research study.*

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview to share your perspectives and experience about how the Educational Equity and Responsiveness professional learning for the Advanced course is impacting you as a teacher. I am going to ask you some questions about your experience in the course, focusing in on what you are learning and implementing in your classroom. Please know that the data collected during this interview is for the sole purpose of my action research study. This study does not aim to evaluate your techniques or experiences. Rather, I am trying to learn more about the implementation of equity professional learning courses offered by the district and district leader practices that help improve the cultural competence of staff members at the local school.

This interview will be recorded to ensure I capture all the information provided. Please feel free to ask me to repeat any questions if needed. I may ask follow-up questions to ensure I capture as much of your thinking as possible. Please know that I want you to be open and honest in sharing your opinions and perspectives during the interview.

Your responses are confidential, and your identity will be protected throughout the study.

Any questions before I begin?

Great, let's start.

1. What is your name? Where do you work and what do you teach?
2. How has this course impacted your cultural competence and proficiency? (RQ1)
3. What strategies have you implemented so far? Please provide one or more examples of how these strategies impacted student outcomes. (RQ1)
4. What type of activities have helped you to increase your cultural competence and proficiency? (RQ1)
5. What support from your facilitators helped you to implement your learning? (RQ2)
6. What additional support from your facilitators might have helped your in implementing your learning? (RQ2)
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Note: Follow-up questions may be asked as needed.

### *Post-Cycle Interview*

*Note: ARIT members will participate in an interview taking place at the end of the professional learning series.*

### **Introduction**

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this follow-up interview to share your perspectives and experience about how the Educational Equity and Responsiveness professional learning for the Advanced course has impacted you as a teacher. I am going to ask you some questions about your experience in the course, focusing on what learned and implemented in your classroom. As I shared before, this study does not aim to evaluate your techniques or experiences. Rather, I am trying to learn more about the implementation of equity professional learning courses offered by the district and district leader practices that help improve the cultural competence of staff

members at the local school. Please know that the data collected during this interview is for the sole purpose of my action research study.

This interview will be recorded to ensure I capture all the information provided. Please feel free to ask me to repeat any questions if needed. I may ask follow-up questions to ensure I capture as much of your thinking as possible. Please know that I want you to be open and honest in sharing your opinions and perspectives during the interview.

Your responses are confidential, and your identity will be protected throughout the study.

Any questions before I begin?

Great, let's start.

1. What aspect of this professional learning series was most helpful to you? (RQ1)
2. What impact has this course had on your cultural competence and proficiency? (RQ1)
3. Now that you have finished this course, on a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your cultural proficiency, with 1 being low and 5 being high? And why (RQ1)
4. What strategies have you implemented? How have these strategies impacted student outcomes? (RQ1)
5. What were the most impactful activities or structures in the course that helped you to increase your cultural competence and proficiency? (RQ1)
6. What supports did your facilitators provide that were beneficial to your growth? (RQ2)
7. What changes to the course might better support future participants? (RQ1, RQ2)
8. Concern about implementing some of the work was shared during this course. How did we help ease those fears? How could we help ease those fears in the future? (RQ 1 & 2)
9. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Note: Follow-up questions may be asked as needed.

## APPENDIX D

### Action Research Design Team Focus Group Protocols

#### *Mid-Cycle Focus Group*

*Note: ARDT members will participate in a focus group taking place between cycle 1 and cycle 2 of the research study.*

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group to share your perspectives and experience about how the Educational Equity and Responsiveness professional learning for the Advanced course is being designed and implemented. I am going to ask you some questions about your experience designing and facilitating the course, focusing on what you have done as leaders to ensure a transformational learning experience for participants, in addition to ensuring teachers feel supported. Please know that the data collected during this interview is for the sole purpose of my action research study.

This focus group will be recorded to ensure I capture all the information provided. Please feel free to ask me to repeat any questions if needed. I may ask follow-up questions to ensure I capture as much of your thinking as possible. Please know that I want you to be open and honest in sharing your opinions and perspectives during the interview.

Your responses are confidential, and your identity will be protected throughout the study.

Any questions before I begin?

Great, let's start.

1. What is your name and what has been your role in the design and facilitation of this course?
2. What strategies do you feel have been successful in supporting teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development? Why? (RQ2)
3. Are there any other strategies we should incorporate to ensure teacher implementation? Why?(RQ2)
4. What design elements have we been intentional with in building this course? (RQ3)
5. What have you noticed about the engagement of participants? (RQ3)
6. What facilitation moves do you feel have impacted our participants the most? (RQ3)
7. Is there anything else that you would like to add? (RQ3)

Note: Follow-up questions may be asked as needed.

#### *Post-Cycle Focus Group*

*Note: ARDT members will participate in a focus group taking place at the end of the professional learning series.*

#### **Introduction**

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this focus group to share your perspectives and experience about how the Educational Equity and Responsiveness professional learning for the Advanced course was designed and implemented. I am going to ask you some questions about your experience designing and facilitating the course, focusing on what you did as leaders to ensure a transformational learning experience for participants, in addition to ensuring teachers felt supported. Please know that the data collected during this interview is for the sole purpose of my action research study.

This interview will be recorded to ensure I capture all the information provided. Please feel free to ask me to repeat any questions if needed. I may ask follow-up questions to ensure I capture as much of your thinking as possible. Please know that I want you to be open and honest in sharing your opinions and perspectives during the interview.

Your responses are confidential, and your identity will be protected throughout the study.

Any questions before I begin?

Great, let's start.

1. What aspect of this professional learning series was the most impactful for participants? (RQ3)
2. What strategies do you feel were successful in supporting teachers' implementation of equity-centered professional development? Why? (RQ2)
3. Are there any other strategies we should have incorporated to ensure teacher implementation? Why? (RQ2)
4. What specific design elements do you feel best met the needs of participants? (RQ3)
5. How did the facilitation process impact participants' experiences? (RQ3)
6. How would you describe the process of designing and facilitating this course? (RQ3)
7. Is there anything else that you would like to add? (RQ3)

Note: Follow-up questions may be asked as needed.

## APPENDIX E

### **Action Research Design Team Meeting Notes: September 29, 2023**

#### Session 2 Debrief

#### Noticings:

- This topic was right on time as noted by the application being applied immediately
- Topic - engaging families and community
- Community Partnerships - during the activity in the session, many teachers were unaware of community partnerships
- Question -about changing the tool being used to measure family engagement
- planning time & brainstorming
- All 5's for the positive learning environment

#### **Observations from Professional Learning:**

- Need to increase the collaboration time - aids to processing time (find a way to honor the processing time we have already built in)
- Like the extra notes for the standards for Tina's part, we need to carry over that to the next section that Kalioppe facilitated.
- Engagement Action Plan was a little vague - could we add more directions to ensure clarity for participants
- Participants use and value the notetaker - important for processing and remembering what was gained from the session to implement

- Degrees of Family Involvement discussion - changing wording to ensure clarity for participants
- What are alternate explanations/situation - what are the possible realities
- How are we offering possible solutions to the “realities” - maybe change column 3 to a now what? Alternate ways to support
- Another way to look at it is their current reality - how I interpret that (story) - what’s it my sphere of influence

**Inferences / Next Steps:**

- Making the planning time sacred
- Tangible examples
- Collaboration time
- Protocols for some of the larger discussions to ensure voice equity
- Conditions for PL are honored, but exemplified for this type of learning (no judgment / open)
- Denise - could she help to research for parent involvement for other student groups
- Connector was long, but great in creating the positive learning environment - should we have 10 minutes (comradery shows in this place)
- Accommodation for our friend who has a hard time seeing. - black/white
- Add as a tag line - if accommodations are needed please contact one of us
- Completer’s Community - mentioned during session and interviews
- They value the collaboration as it gives them energy to keep going...
- An unconference / collaborative space is cool/ TLs leading book clubs - all cool.
- Let’s rebrand completers community
- A question that comes up is - support from district if “something goes down”