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An Equity Council and the Struggle to Transform a School District

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ABSTRACT

Significant efforts at the national, state and local levels have focused on closing achievement gaps between student populations in public schools. Some research suggests that parents and community members can help hold schools accountable for meeting academic and other goals. The Equity Council serves in an advisory role to the Wilson County school board in a district in the southeastern part of the United States. The council monitors equity in the district on several measures, including the hiring of minority educators, student achievement and suspension rates. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand and describe the functioning of the Equity Council. Data from interviews, observations and artifacts were analyzed according to Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames. Critical theory served as the conceptual framework for the study. Findings suggest that the bylaws of the council and rules of discourse limit the autonomy of the council. However, the group also resists the limitations placed on it through actions such as negotiating improved communication with school district employees and inviting principals to present at council meetings. Additional questions were raised for possible future action research involving the council, including an investigation of media for communication, further study of student discipline, and public discussion of community issues.

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INTRODUCTION

Kids do not go to school because they want to fail—but many do fail. They may not read at grade level. They struggle in math. They may get into trouble at school, and while suspended, fall even further behind in their studies. Eventually, many lose hope and drop out of school. For decades, people have debated the best ways to teach and administer schools so that all students succeed. However, the urgency of these discussions has increased in recent years at national, state and local levels.

Schools have traditionally served many purposes such as preparing students for careers and passing on the values of society to young people, including a commitment to citizenship and belief in equality and justice. Parents and educators have encouraged children to take education seriously, endorsing it as an equalizer, in that regardless of poverty, race, gender or first language, with education and hard work, a person can accomplish almost any goal she or he sets. Education has helped many people overcome discrimination and poverty to become successful individuals. However, there is evidence in our schools and society that belie the ideals of opportunity and success. Assumptions about the purpose of schooling, school curriculum, pedagogy and many others often go unquestioned, thus helping to perpetuate the status quo and threaten the chances of countless students to lead the lives they want.

Students who attend high-poverty, high-minority public schools in the United States often have markedly different educational experiences than those who attend schools in wealthier communities with low minority populations (U.S. Department of Education, 2013; Kozol, 1991). Students in high-poverty, high-minority schools are often taught by inexperienced teachers (Lhamon, 2014), teachers who have been labeled as ineffective, or those who are not certified in the content area they are assigned to teach (Almy & Theokas, 2010). Students in high-poverty, high-minority schools often have fewer educational resources to use. Their schools may offer limited course options, and the curriculum within those classes is often not rigorous. The school facilities they attend may be poorly maintained (Lhamon, 2014). The reasons for these disparities, and the best way to address them have been debated for decades.

School systems have historically done a poor job of educating students from poverty, African Americans, and children whose first language is not English (Tyack, 1974). Today, many of the students who receive mediocre educational services are likely to be African American, students with disabilities, English Learners and students from poverty, which raises questions about equity. Equity in education can be assessed in terms of inputs and outputs (or outcomes) (Darden & Cavendish, 2012; Linton, 2011). Inputs refer to access to resources such as curriculum, teachers and instructional materials. Outputs often denote measurable student outcomes such as graduation rates, scores on achievement tests or suspension rates. Student access to opportunity also can be evaluated in order to determine the extent to which all

students have access to challenging curricula, qualified teachers, well-maintained facilities, and technology and instructional materials (Lhamon, 2014).

Most states have defined the knowledge and skills that students are expected to be able to demonstrate through academic standards (Tang, 2011). The numbers of students—many of whom are poor and minority—who leave school without demonstrating mastery of academic standards concerns those who monitor equity and those who look to the economic future of the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), as well as educators, parents and communities.

Context

Many scholars acknowledge the importance of equity in educational inputs and holding educators accountable for student outcomes. However, focusing on inputs and outputs does not take into account the larger context of the problems in education (Apple, 2004). Education in the United States has a contentious history and connections to many other entities such as the economy, culture, and the labor market. Some would argue that schools have historically served the labor market (and capitalist interests) by preparing students to become workers (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). Schools supplied workers to the labor pool by enrolling students—many of whom were from the working-class, immigrant and African American—into vocational tracks of study. Through tracking, schools also helped to maintain divisions in society along lines of race and class. However, history provides numerous examples of resistance to these purposes. For example, many schools were established to serve working-class youth and advocate for a transformation of society (Teitelbaum, 2009). As another example of resistance, African-American researchers

in the 1920s and 1930s conducted studies of IQ tests, with findings that contradicted the widely-accepted myths at the time about the low intelligence of African American students (Stoskopf, 2012).

Solely focusing on educational inputs and outputs also ignores the activities occurring inside the schools, such as decisions about what and how to teach, norms, culture and student resistance. The curriculum that teachers use is of particular interest to many scholars, because the choice about what to teach and what to exclude is an intentional decision that has political significance. In its historical beginnings, the field of curriculum developed for the purpose of social control, to maintain the privilege and interests of the elite classes of society and to socialize racial and ethnic groups (Apple & King, 1977). Two of the schools' main goals were to teach the values and norms of society and improve their own efficiency. These purposes still form part of the underlying foundation of curricular decisions. Beginning with their earliest experiences in schools, children learn values such as the efficient use of time, the proper use of materials, obedience, compliance, and numerous lessons about work. The academic content that schools teach also reflects the knowledge of the dominant groups that are in power (Apple, 2004). These examples illustrate that the values and knowledge that students are expected to learn in schools are significant in the discussion about students' educational experiences.

Parent and Community Involvement

Irrespective of the historical development of schools and their functions in society, schools have increasingly been held accountable for reducing disparities in the achievement and educational experiences of diverse student populations.

Numerous initiatives have been implemented to *close the gaps*. Many of these efforts have centered on improving the quality of teaching in schools and the analysis of data in decision making. However, federal legislation enacted in the 1970s enlisted the help of parents in holding schools accountable for student performance (Fege, 2006). This legislation required schools receiving federal Title I funding to include parents on school councils. On the councils, parents participated in school governance and decision making about implementation and evaluation of programs at the schools. Many schools still involve parents on councils that have the authority to make decisions about day-to-day operations in the buildings.

Community groups which form outside the purview of the schools also can provide accountability at the local level. Some researchers cite community organizing as a way to improve students' educational experiences and outcomes (Mediratta, 2007; Oakes, 2006; Warren, 2005). Several well-known groups and their affiliates are established in most of the major cities in the United States, including the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the People's Institute for Community Organizing (PICO), and the Association for Communities Organized for Reform Now (ACORN) (Shirley, 2009). Using the collective power, skills and knowledge of their members, these organizations can collaborate with and pressure school districts to equitably provide resources, qualified teachers and improved school facilities.

The Equity Council

The Wilson Equity Council[1] is somewhat unique in that it is neither a school council nor a community group. The council formed in the early 1990s in the Wilson

[1] Pseudonyms are used for all names of places, schools, groups, and publications of the council to protect the confidentiality of participants.

County School District, a mid-size district in the southeastern part of the United States. The group monitors the disparities in the educational experiences offered in the district as it works to raise the achievement of all students. The Equity Council serves in a formal advisory role to the Wilson County School Board. Since its formation, the council has examined district policies, practices and student outcome data through the lens of equity. The group has made recommendations to the district and board based on analyses of data and pressured school district leadership to make changes to close gaps in several areas, such as performance on achievement tests and suspension rates.

The council's first few years were characterized by drama and conflict, which the local newspaper captured in numerous articles. Gradually, the debates cooled and interest in the council faded, and the newspaper only printed a handful of articles about the group's work in the next ten years. However, recently, community interest in the Equity Council has renewed, and attendance at meetings has increased. The council's analysis shows that performance on achievement tests for the gap students in the district shows little improvement and these student populations still lag behind their white, middle class peers. The failure of the schools to close achievement gaps and improve in other measures such as suspension rates for student populations suggests that the vigil of the Equity Council is still important and needed.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the Equity Council and its work. I intend for this study to guide readers toward an understanding of the approach that the council has taken to improve education in the community and the

barriers the group has had to negotiate. I sincerely hope that the study also will be of practical use to the Equity Council.

Research Question

The research question for this study is:

How does an equity council function in a school district in the southeastern region of the United States?

I used evidence from interviews, observations and artifacts to describe the Equity Council. Bolman and Deal's (2008) structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames served as lenses through which the data were analyzed and provided a structure to organize and present the findings. Critical theory served as the conceptual framework for the study. I used critical theory to interpret the data, help answer the research question, and suggest possible implications of the findings.

Definitions of Terms

Close gaps—remove disparities between the performance or treatment of different populations of students

Colonize—taking over new territory by expanding into areas already occupied

Critical or radical pedagogy—teaching which has emancipatory goals and seeks to develop scholars with a concern for social transformation and the collective good.

Dominant—of or pertaining to those in power

Dominant narrative—communication that supports the beliefs, viewpoints and values of those in power

Epistemology--philosophical beliefs about what constitutes valid knowledge

Equity—fair distribution of inputs such as resources according to what students need. Fair treatment such that no student group is more likely to be suspended than another

False consciousness—internal beliefs that help maintain peoples' support of the status quo, even if they are hurt by it. For example, beliefs that things cannot change, or that they are for the best.

Gaps—disparities in measures such as suspension rates, scores on achievement tests, and the percentages of minority educators compared to the percentage of minority students

Gap group—collective group comprising students with disabilities, African American, English learners and students from poverty

Hegemony—power that is exerted by dominant groups over other individuals or groups

Ideology—a system of beliefs that convince people that social reality cannot change, and that they must conform. Ideology aids in the continuance of the status quo

Marginalized—people who are not completely accepted by the dominant culture, but who are not completely excluded either

Positivism—an epistemology that holds that there is an absolute truth and one can find truth by objectively using scientific research methods

Public sphere—a space in which people gather to discuss the issues that are important to them

Systems thought or methodology—a quasi-scientific, technical approach to education

which emphasizes standardization and a supposed neutrality or objectivity

Theories of reproduction—theories about the ways in which the inequalities in society are reproduced or perpetuated by institutions such as schools

Theories of resistance—theories about how resistance can lead to transformation

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This study addressed the following question:

How does an equity council function in a school district in the southeastern part of the United States?

This review is structurally divided into two parts: equity and the four frames, and critical theory. The first section begins with a brief historical discussion of how education systems arose in the United States and follow with literature that defines educational equity and relevant legislation. The study will address the research question by considering the Equity Council through Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames--structural, human resource, political and symbolic. Therefore, the review of literature will describe each of the frames and provide examples from the literature. Literature about community and parent participation in organizations such as school councils will also be reviewed, since parents and community members can pressure and collaborate with schools to create more equitable educational experiences.

Since this study was conducted through a critical theory interpretive framework, literature on critical theory will be discussed in the second part of this chapter. The review will focus specifically on literature that defines critical theory, its foundations and its purpose for two reasons. First, my interpretation of the data and the implications of this case are grounded in critical theory, so I wanted to be clear about the theory behind my thoughts. Second, I wanted to provide some

background about critical theory for readers if they are not familiar with it, with the hope that some of sources suggest possibilities for further reading.

Methods of the Search

The search for literature began with entering terms into an online search engine. The field of possible sources was narrowed based upon relevance to the topic and further limited search results to books and peer-reviewed journals. When a relevant study was located, I cross-referenced its sources to suggest more literature to examine. Later, after refining the topic and research question, I continued to search the literature using new terms. A repository of doctoral dissertations was searched. Since many news articles were printed about the Equity Council, I combed through an online archive of the local newspaper. These articles are included in the data collected for the study but information from the news articles is not included in this review of literature. I also located reports from government and nonprofit agencies about inequitable conditions in schools nationwide through an Internet search.

Scope and Coverage

Because equity and community participation are such broad topics, it is important to define the scope of the literature review. This study focuses on the efforts of an Equity Council in bringing about change in a school district. Therefore, I used sources such as books and peer-reviewed journal articles that studied the efforts of community groups that advocated for improvements to schools. Since the Equity Council monitors the distribution of funding to schools in the Wilson County School District, some information about equity in funding is provided in this chapter, but this topic is not a primary focus. Since this study assesses the actions of an equity

council, I located and discussed literature about similar groups that allow for parent and community participation in decision making, such as school boards and councils, especially when the study involved an analysis of the group's relationship with a school district or superintendent. I also reviewed books and peer-reviewed articles about critical theory and its relevance to education. The field of works about critical theory was narrowed to only include those that define critical theory and those that have to do with education.

Although some research about school leaders' roles in equity is mentioned, I did not include research on equity in school programs, such as bilingual programs or special education. Research comparing test scores, graduation rates and suspension rates of student populations were consulted, but I did not analyze it for use in this study. I read some works about critical theory and culture, but did not enter them into this review.

Equity

Early public schools replicated divisions along the lines of class and race that were present in society at the time (Ellis, 2011; Tyack,1974). African-American students attended separate schools from white students, with clear disparities. Specifically, the schools for African-American students received less funding than schools for white students; the teachers worked for less compensation, and students had fewer instructional resources to use (Ellis, 2011). The separate schools for African-American and white students were eventually abolished. However, many disparities in the educational experiences of these groups of students have continued in present-day institutions (Kozol, 1991).

Historically, educators have placed blame for student failure outside the school system (Deschenes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001). For example, teachers might suggest that some students do not succeed because of a lack of intelligence. Since everyone in the class received the same curriculum and instruction and many succeeded, they reason, some students were simply not bright enough, or did not try hard enough to understand the lessons. Educators also have blamed parents for their children's failures due to a presumed lack of involvement. They may assume that parents have not taught their children to value education. Finally, schools often have blamed students' backgrounds and cultures as a reason for failure, suggesting that students' home cultures have not prepared them for success in school. The implication for this blame is that the school system has fulfilled its obligations, and these students and their families must change if they want to be successful.

In more recent decades, although blame for failure continued to be placed on students, schools were increasingly held accountable for student performance (Deschenes, Cuban & Tyack, 2001). Particular attention has been drawn to the disparities in achievement between white, middle class students and the so-called gap students (students from poverty, students with disabilities, and racial minority students). Beginning in 1965 with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Title I, the federal government examined the academic achievement of students from poverty (Chenoweth, 2007; Gause, 2011). Later, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 established consequences for schools for the failure to meet annual performance goals and close achievement gaps.

Despite attempts to ensure that all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, succeed in school, disparities in achievement between student populations often persist. The presence of these disparities signals that some schools may not be providing an equitable education to all students (Linton, 2011). Equity can be defined as the attainment of an accepted standard, such as a benchmark on a state achievement test by students, regardless of a student's background, race, economic or disability status. According to this view, a school provides an equitable education if students are given the support they need to achieve or surpass the accepted standard. Although not all students may meet the standard, failure to meet it cannot be predicted by race, economic or disability status or English language proficiency. In other words, one student population is no more or less likely to achieve the standard than another.

Koski and Reich (2006) define two dimensions of the distribution of educational resources: the object of distribution and the distributional principle. The object of distribution refers to inputs and outputs. Inputs refer to access to instruction, curriculum, materials and resources. Outcomes are the measurable results of the educational experiences of the student and can include measures such as scores on achievement tests, graduation rates and suspension data. The second dimension, the distributional principle, comprises four different possibilities: adequacy, horizontal equity, vertical equity or neutrality. "Adequacy" is achieved from the specific amount of resources required for students to achieve educational standards. In contrast, when horizontal equity is achieved, every student receives the same amount of resources regardless of need; resources are distributed equally among all students.

When equity is vertical, resources are allocated based on need, so students who require more support get more resources. In the most radical form of vertical equity, resources are allocated in such a way that each student has an equal opportunity for an equal outcome. Neutral equity means that no differences in educational inputs or outcomes result from factors such as geographic location, school district wealth, race or gender.

Many states have shifted from an equity model to an adequacy model (Koski & Reich, 2006; Lefkowits, 2004; Tang, 2011). The problem with adequacy is that wealthier schools and districts are able to surpass the bare minimum of adequacy (Koski & Reich, 2006). Education is positional, some scholars argue—meaning that a person who has more and better education is in a better position to compete for college admission and career opportunities. Therefore, when poorer districts meet the bare minimum of adequacy and wealthier districts are able to provide more resources toward educational goals, inequity results. The adequacy model is further limited by the uncertainty in defining the quantity of resources that would be required to provide an adequate education. Some states that have adopted academic standards have performed costing-out studies to determine the amount of funding that would be required for students to meet the standards, but due to the difficulties in performing these studies, the amounts may not be accurate (Tang, 2011).

Schools that appear to have met the criteria for providing equitable educational outcomes for students share several characteristics (Chenoweth, 2007). At these schools, teachers and administrators take teaching and learning seriously, have high expectations for students, and use positive discipline. However, these

attributes are broad and could characterize any effective school. Brocato (2000) describes a process for evaluating seven equity dimensions that was used in the elementary schools in a school district in Mississippi. Each of the seven indicators was assessed using a rubric. Indicators included dimensions of equity such as resource equity, climate equity, treatment equity and performance equity.

Some studies suggest that parents and community members can collaborate with and pressure school officials to see that resources are distributed equitably, that students receive instruction from certified, qualified teachers and that school facilities are adequately maintained (Warren, 2011). These groups can, in effect, help to ensure that students are treated fairly and receive the support they need to succeed. In other words, community groups can help hold schools accountable for providing an equitable education for all students (Mediratta, 2007; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Warren, 2011).

The Four Frames

Organizations are complex. In trying to describe an organization, a person might overestimate the importance of some factors and disregard other significant information. The structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames are lenses or different perspectives through which an organization can be considered (Bolman & Deal, 2008). A more balanced description of an organization can be created by analyzing it through each of the four frames. In the next several sections, I will review the underlying premises of each of the frames, and review some examples from the literature that illustrate the underlying assumptions of each frame.

The structural frame. The structural frame has to do with organizational design, division of labor, core processes, goals and objectives, and the policies and procedures that govern behavior and work (Bolman & Deal, 2008). There are several principles behind the structural frame:

- The purpose of organizations is to meet established goals.
- Organizations function more effectively when they are governed by logic rather than by self-interest and outside pressure.
- Weakness or shortcomings in structure can cause problems which can be corrected through restructuring.

As an example, Frattura and Capper (2007) propose a framework that a school improvement team could use to examine, test and redesign the core systems of a school to make it a more equitable institution. Some structural changes that administrators make in schools might be relatively easy to implement, especially if they only slightly differ from standard operating procedure (Trujillo, 2012). In contrast, teachers, administrators and school board members can quickly derail structural changes that significantly threaten the status quo, even if the changes are intended to produce more equitable conditions at the school.

Laws, goals and guidance have been created to define the roles and responsibilities of parents and community members toward education. The federal government asserted that the main purpose of encouraging parent participation is to increase student achievement (Johnson, 1997). The government recognized that parents and community members could help hold schools accountable for student

performance (Fege, 2006; Rogers, 2006). Johnson (1997) identifies two roles for parents that have been identified through legislation:

- Parent impact, in which the school provides parents with resources and training so they can work more effectively toward school goals. This model emphasizes school-to-home communication and parent participation in school activities such as parent-teacher conferences.
- School impact, in which the structure of school governance is changed so that parents have decision making authority through participation on councils or governance teams

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, several legislative actions laid the groundwork for increased parent and community participation (Fege, 2006; Johnson, 1997). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and Title I provided federal funding to schools with high populations of low-income students. Title I was amended through two Public Laws that aimed to increase parent and community participation in local schools (Fege, 2006). In 1973, Public Law 93-380 established school councils in every district and in every school that received Title I funds. The 1978 Educational Amendments to Title I authorized more specific requirements for schools regarding parental involvement, including requiring districts to work with the councils on the planning, implementation and evaluation of initiatives. By giving formal authority to the councils, the laws symbolically increased their power and influence. However, schools often did not involve the councils as the laws intended. Furthermore, in a political move of their own, school administrators reacted to the requirements by complaining to lawmakers until the

laws were amended to only encourage, rather than oblige schools to involve parents (Fege, 2006; Johnson, 1997).

In 1988, the ESEA was amended to include specific goals and mechanisms for improving parent participation in schools (Johnson, 1997). This amendment reflected a shift toward a parent impact model in which schools were to provide parents with reports on their children's progress and opportunities to meet with teachers. The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 was another amendment to the ESEA. This time, the requirements for parent involvement were aligned more toward a school impact model, with the school council highlighted as an important way to involve parents in decision making.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) also relied on parents to hold schools accountable for student performance (Rogers, 2006). It emphasized raising teacher expectations for academic achievement over inequalities in resources. Schools also were to communicate test scores to parents so they would have a clear understanding of the problems at the school and how to best get involved. However, test data can be confusing for parents, especially when states have their own accountability systems in addition to NCLB. Although NCLB provided guidance on involving parents in activities such as developing parent involvement policies or training them on how to become involved, there was no provision for enforcing the guidance, so many schools did not implement the initiatives as the Act intended.

NCLB placed much of the blame for the disparity in test scores of gap students and white, middle class students on teachers' low expectations and lack of motivation (Rogers, 2006). It failed to acknowledge serious, underlying causes such

as declining local economies, high teacher turnover in low-performing schools and a lack of resources due to underfunding. If parents were not satisfied with their children's schools, NCLB provided the option to transfer to better schools, thus avoiding any involvement in public discussion about improvement.

However, rather than utilizing the school choice option advertised by NCLB, parents and community members in a community in California organized (Rogers, 2006). In partnership with a local university, group members learned about curriculum, standards and assessment through activities designed around critical questioning, dialogue and classroom observation. They analyzed data and developed protocols that other parents could use to evaluate their children's schools. The success of this group points to the limitations of NCLB to establish parents as change agents in schools, as well as ways that NCLB could be strengthened to involve parents more effectively.

The number of studies that focused on the structural aspects of groups that involve parent and community members was limited, but the literature offered a few strong examples. Beck and Murphy (1999) studied parent involvement on a site-based school council. They concluded that simply creating a structure (such as a school-based council) for increasing parent involvement will not necessarily empower parents to become involved in their children's education. They point to a need for commitment by educators to create a democratic community at their schools. Otherwise, the tendency to continue with the traditional forms of decision making, with the principal in control, tend to prevail.

Placier, Hall, McKendall and Cockrell (2000) studied the policy making process of a committee that was appointed by a school board. An incident involving racial conflict at a school prompted the school board to appoint the committee to draft recommendations about multiculturalism to the school board. Although there were some political maneuvers that complicated the policy making process, several structural problems occurred. First, the authors point out that a report on multiculturalism is not an appropriate response to racism, so the assigned task of the committee was not aligned with its purpose. Although the charges (tasks) were given to the committee, the roles of board members, committee members or administrators were not defined. Some committee members believed that they had long-term decision-making authority, which was not true. Finally, the district did not provide a definition of multiculturalism to the committee, so the goals were not clear to all members. The authors found that the policy intentions—or the beliefs that each group had about the role and purpose of the policy—was different for administrators, board members and community members.

A study by Smith and Roberts (2007) analyzed the perceptions of the faculty members at a college of social work about the college's diversity committee just before it disbanded after thirty years of operation. Some of the problems the study uncovered fell into the structural frame. Surveys that were sent to faculty members indicated a lack of consensus about the mission of the committee, even among committee members. In fact, no respondent was able to name the correct mission of the committee, which was to transform the college. The authors also point to problems with the role of the group. By placing all the responsibility for diversity on

this group, the rest of the college was not accountable for diversity. The authors recommend that committees such as the one described in the article ensure that the group's mission is clear, that it is understood by all members, and that it has been communicated effectively.

The human resource frame. The human resource frame has to do with the relationship between the organization and its members (Bolman & Deal, 2008). It encompasses the ways in which an organization provides for its members' needs, such as helping employees meet their personal goals and offering ways to include and value them as human beings (Bolman & Deal, 2008). The human resource frame is grounded in three basic principles:

- The primary purpose of organizations is to serve human needs.
- Organizations need the talents and skills of their people. People depend on the organizations of which they are a part to satisfy financial necessities and the need for self-fulfillment through meaningful work.
- When the needs of both people and organizations are met, both benefit.

Evidence of the human resource frame can be found in literature on community organizing in studies by Johnson and Pajares (1996), Medirtta (2012), Schultz & McGinn (2013), Warren (2005) and others. These studies describe ways in which participating in community organizing can build trust, leadership capacity, skills, knowledge and self-efficacy among members. In the following discussion, research that pertains to groups that involve parents and community members—and how they relate to the human resource frame—are presented.

In some districts, parent and community groups have formed to pressure and to collaborate with officials to make changes in schools (Mediratta, 2007). In this discussion, community groups are defined as those that share three characteristics as described by Mediratta (2007): 1) In addition to their efforts to improve schools, the groups have a history of striving to improve communities, such as in the areas of housing and the economy; 2) Groups function outside the school system; and 3) Groups work to build the skills and capacity of members to transform their communities. These external groups cannot directly cause change in schools since the teachers, principals and other practitioners are responsible for educating students (Warren, 2011). However, community groups can hold schools accountable for ensuring that students are educated equitably, and can build the capacity and desire for change.

Relationships are at the heart of community organizing (Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Warren, Hong, Rubin & Uy, 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Relationships can begin with conversations in which people share personal experiences, stories and concerns about their schools (McAlister & Catone, 2013). Groups begin to study some of the issues they have discussed, building research and leadership skills through the processes of writing proposals and delivering speeches. Group leaders identify goals for the group to work toward. As the skills and successes of members grow, the power of the group to attract new members increases. As members collaborate and learn together, they also build meaningful, lasting relationships. This process aligns with Ganz's three components of grassroots organizing (as cited in

Oakes & Lipton, 2002): building relationships, developing common understandings, and taking action.

Social capital refers to the ties and networks that people create (Warren & Mapp, 2011). Social capital is constructed through relationships. Within a group, members can build relationships with other members (bonding), and with external people and groups (bridging). Higher levels of bridging and bonding social capital are associated with improved effectiveness of school boards (Saatcioglu, Moore, Sargut, & Bajaj, 2011) and are important for community groups as they cultivate the support of members (Warren, Hong, Rubin & Uy, 2009).

Research on the efforts of community groups to negotiate with and collaborate with school district leaders calls attention to several benefits to members (Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Mediratta, 2012; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Parents and community members who worked together to demand improvements in their schools not only were able to bring about change, but they also experienced individual benefits from participating. They learned to conduct research and use evidence to substantiate their arguments. They built leadership skills. Members reported feeling more confident in their abilities and less intimidated when meeting with district officials.

Literature on community groups and school board-community member interaction in public forums offers the following recommendations:

- Strategies should be developed to help educators, parents, community members and district leaders work through conflict and mistrust (Warren, 2005).

- Schools need to go beyond one-way communication with parents and community members (Warren, 2005) and provide opportunities and guidance for them in developing leadership skills (McAlister & Catone, 2013; Schultz & McGinn, 2013; Warren, 2005).
- Schools should engage parents in learning about pedagogy (Beck & Murphy, 1999).
- School districts can help build trust in the community by increasing transparency--by being open and honest in communication and in decision making (Schultz & McGinn, 2013).
- Race is often absent from discussions (Warren, 2005). Discussions about race should be encouraged rather than avoided.
- College professors should increase their presence in discussions between community groups and school districts to ensure that the voices of parents, teachers and students are heard, and to lend support (Kretchmar, 2014).
- Teachers should join parents in community organizing efforts (Oakes & Lipton, 2002).

The political frame. The political frame is characterized by networking savvy and power relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Individuals and groups who are strong in the political frame find ways to secure the resources they need, even when resources are scarce. Politics also involves power, which can influence many events and decisions in schools.

Bolman and Deal (2008) identify five key assumptions undergirding the political frame:

- Organizations are coalitions that develop relationships with other groups.
- The members of the organization have different beliefs, values and perspectives.
- Some of the most important decisions organizations make involve the allocation of resources.
- Finite resources and the differences in beliefs and perspectives among members of the organization cause conflict. When conflict occurs, power becomes an important factor.
- Decisions and goals are not made in isolation by the leader. Instead, groups and individuals compete for their own interests, and thus negotiate decisions.

The assumptions about the political frame can be seen within schools and in the relationships schools have with other organizations. For example, if teachers oppose a new initiative at their school, they might complain to school board members to block the plan (Trujillo, 2012). Zeigler & Boss (1977) studied opposition between school board members and superintendents. The superintendent's main sources of power are educational experience (technical knowledge) and position power, while the board's main source of power is the legal authority to create policy. The superintendent and board have an interdependent relationship in which each needs the other's source of power. Decisions are made through negotiation between the two parties.

As Bolman and Deal (2008) indicate, the presence of politics and negotiation in organizations is not necessarily detrimental, and in fact should be viewed as the norm. This might be especially true in the school setting, where parents and

community members expect to have the opportunity to provide input, even if just to make a few comments at a school board meeting. When all members of a school board subscribe to the same set of beliefs, they may make decisions autocratically and in private, with no public contribution (Trujillo, 2013). When the board circumvents community input, its decisions might not reflect the will of the public it is supposed to represent.

The possibility of involving parents and community members in the decision making process could be a desirable goal, but existing structures of power and governance that complicate such efforts should not be ignored. Fusarelli, Kowalski & Petersen (2011) describe how a democratic environment could create conditions for authentic participation at a school, possibly increasing the effectiveness of the organization. Although the authors mention obstacles such as existing power structures, their proposal for creating democratic communities places the responsibility for creating the communities on the person already in power in the school: the principal.

Involvement of community members in spaces such as schools raises questions about the nature of participation and democratic ideals. Although the ideals of participatory democracy might demand the creation of public spaces where people feel safe in engaging in discussion with others, discourse takes place in a space organized by power structures, in which those who already have power may seek to maintain their control (Anderson, 1998). Anderson & Grinberg (1998) question arrangements such as school councils. These structures appear to increase participation but can actually create a different type of control—a concertive control--

in which members create new norms and rules that they enforce themselves (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998). The source of control may be less obvious but is still present.

Political conversations and relationships are complex. Those who take a political stand are taking risks by entering a territory of "social groundlessness" in which the rules that govern familiar social situations and relationships are not assumed to be true (Warren, 1996). The resulting ambiguity and the unfamiliarity of this territory discourage some people from participating. Furthermore, the isolation of groups along lines of race and class, mistrust and an unwillingness to discuss difficult issues contribute to the difficulty of meaningful, inclusive conversation (Horowitz, 1990). Democracy calls for the creation of spaces in which people can voice their opinions and work toward improving the educational experiences of all students (Warren, 1996). Roulier (2000) provides guiding questions for those who wish to work toward the implementation of democratic spaces, although this is not easily achieved, due in part to existing disparities in power and control (Warren, 1996). Knight-Abowitz (1997) suggests that the complexity of these political and power relationships complicate efforts to increase participation in school decision making (as cited in Anderson, 1998). In addition, the current policy focus encourages competition and individual achievement in schools over other worthy goals such as the creation of and participation in democratic communities (Kahne, 1994).

Bolman & Deal (2008) identify several sources of power, which have significant implications in the school setting:

1) Position power. The formal authority conferred upon people by their job titles.

2) Coercive power. The ability to defeat, force, obstruct or discipline others.

3) Information and expertise. Those who have more knowledge have more power.

4) Alliances and networks. Building alliances can help accomplish goals.

5) Access and control of agendas. Those who are involved in the decision making process ensure that their interests receive attention. The person who controls the agenda decides what will be discussed and what will not be discussed.

6) Control of meaning and symbols. The perspective or lens through which an idea is viewed shapes its meaning. The ability to control meaning and symbols gives a person the power to persuade or convince others.

Many studies explore the ways in which educators and community members use these sources of power. A superintendent could use all the types of power discussed above for various ends, such as socializing new school board members to conform to existing norms or manipulating new board members to legitimate the school system and its goals rather than their own goals or those of the community (Kerr, 1964). Examples of political strategies that might be used to maintain control of a decision arena are to select members with certain beliefs to participate on a committee, to reduce potential opposition by ensuring that the board exhibits a united front, and to present favorable reports on certain topics in order to eliminate the need for discussion of them, thereby guiding and limiting discourse (Finnegan & Lavner, 2011; Kerr, 1964).

Within schools, even when conditions are deliberately created to empower councils, members often revert back to norms that put the principal in control. Malen & Ogawa (1988) found that when factors such as training for council members, the

delegation of equal power through equal voting, and the authority to revise policy were provided, several other conditions prevented the formation of a true partnership to guide the direction of the school. Homogeneity in council member demographics, the view of the council as a channel for communication rather than a decision making entity, the submission to the principal's authority and a cultural expectation for politeness contributed to the failure of councils to significantly impact schools (Malen & Ogawa, 1988). Thus, even when parents and teachers are formally granted the same power as the principal (through equal voting) on a school council, the traditional power structure can prevail and prevent members from collaborating as intended.

Community leaders also have aspired to increase the political power of the groups they lead. By building the leadership capacity of members through training, networking, creating alliances and other activities, the political presence of the group grows. In some cases, community groups have successfully negotiated with district leadership to build new neighborhood schools and increased input in planning and designing the operation of those schools (Martinez & Quartz, 2012).

The symbolic frame. The symbolic frame involves values and meaning (Bolman & Deal, 2008). It uses symbols, stories and rituals to invoke emotional responses such as loyalty and passion. Play and magical elements also define this sometimes-overlooked but important frame.

Several assumptions underpin the symbolic frame. First, events can have deeper significance in peoples' minds than the simple facts of what occurred, and people can interpret these events differently. Also, symbols can help create a sense of direction, hope and stability in times of uncertainty; sometimes they evoke strong emotional

responses. People seek symbols for reassurance that values are lasting even when things change quickly. Symbols can help unite people and create a sense of community, solidarity, and strength. The symbolic frame is concerned more with the noncognitive (what a symbol means to people) than with the rational or what is explicitly stated, observed or deduced through logical reasoning (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Quantz, 1999).

School closures can raise tensions as people remember their own educational experiences as children (Finnegan & Lavner, 2012). In such cases, the school can become a symbol of the community. As a board member working through a school closing process remarked, "'If you see a community turn out en masse over this concern, you're talking about something that means more to that community than bricks and mortar … What you're seeing may be a sense of how much life is there and that is something you don't want to take away'"(p. 145).

Kretchmar (2014) studied transcripts from public hearings on the proposed closing of 19 schools in New York City. Over 300 people spoke against closing the schools, including teachers, parents and students. The comments from community members indicated a difference in perspective between the community members and district leadership. Community members felt that they should have input into a decision that would affect them and their children, and many were angry about what they perceived to be an undemocratic decision-making process. The district responded by continuing to present data on graduation rates and test scores to support their decision to close the schools. To parents and community members, the schools represented more than numbers. Many spoke about ideals such as community and

democracy. The discord between the district's perspective from the structural frame and the community's perspective from the symbolic frame was captured in an audience member's comment that "'The bureaucrats at the DOE are playing with numbers, statistics but are out of touch with the real thing, real life at the school'" (Kretchmar, 2014, p. 19).

Rituals. Rituals are part of the symbolic frame, and they have been studied in the context of schools. Rituals can be defined as processes involving "the incarnation of symbols, symbol clusters, metaphors, and root paradigms through formative bodily gesture (McLaren, 1999, p. 50)" or as "procedures or routines that are infused with deeper meaning" (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 32). Though it may be difficult to measure their impact, when used to orient or initiate students toward creative, critical, intellectual processes, rituals can play an important role in education (Warnick, 2010). Some rituals are formal events that occur infrequently, such as graduation ceremonies. For example, Foley (1990) described rituals involving football and homecoming week that sometimes united the community and at other times underscored the racial divisions in a community in Texas. Lesko (1988) explored homecoming preparations and Mass and the messages that were communicated to students through these activities.

Some scholars believe that exploration of common, everyday rituals can provide great insight into the purpose and significance of rituals in schools (Bushnell, 1997; Quantz & Magolda, 1997). Rituals can help socialize people into new roles or organizational culture so they understand what is valued and important (Bushnell, 1997; McCadden, 1997; Shepherd, 2010). For example, McCadden (1997) analyzed

the daily rituals through which a kindergarten teacher led her students. These activities included songs that provided transitions from one activity to another, mats that students sat on and designated as their houses or personal space, and instruction around the use and care of classroom tools. Through these exercises, the teacher established control and her role as the authority, and defined the role of the student. The rituals also focused attention on values such as the importance of work, using tools correctly and taking care of these tools, and respecting the personal space of others. Even though morality was not explicitly taught, values were conveyed through the use of daily rituals.

McLaren (1999) explored rituals of resistance by students in an ethnographic study. These rituals were analyzed using the four stages of social drama according to Turner (as cited in McLaren, 1999). To rebel against the rigid, oppressive nature of classroom instruction, students created their own rituals of resistance, which included behaviors such as defying class rules, criticizing the teacher, displaying off-task behavior, sabotaging lessons, and incessant talking.

Deal and Peterson (1999) identify some other types of school rituals:

- Greeting and goodbye rituals intended to foster connections between people;
- Transition rituals that create bridges when changes to policy or procedure are being implemented;
- Battle preparation rituals, which help prepare people for upcoming challenges such as state tests;
- Initiation rituals which induct new members into the community; and

- Closing rituals which bring people together and provide support when events come to a close.

Culture.

Schein (2004) defines culture, another component of the symbolic frame, as

> A pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (p. 17).

A group is further defined as "a social unit that has some kind of shared history" (Schein, 2004, p. 11). School cultures develop over time and through the rituals, traditions and shared experiences of teachers, parents, administrators and students (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Deal & Peterson, 2009). In addition to rituals and ceremonies, organizational culture can be described by several other concepts such as group norms, espoused values, formal philosophy, climate, shared meanings, and unwritten rules (Schein, 2004). School culture can also be toxic, characterized by negativity and conflict (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Deal & Peterson, 2009).

New school board members may be socialized into the culture and expectations of the organization. In a study of school board members, Shepherd (2010) explored the rituals associated with a school board and the transition of incoming board members into their official, public roles. New board members were found to change from "history-driven" to "future-driven" members over time. In the former state, members used "ritual as a means of control, designed to communicate a

governmental structure whose meaning and value is not only fixed, but is 'good' and 'right'" (Shepherd, 2010, p. 122). After the transition to the future-driven role, members tended to become more open to changes to the ritual and policymaking tasks, and more interested in how they might help guide the district to improve.

Conclusion

The literature suggests that parent and community participation in the decision making process in schools can help create more equitable conditions, but creating spaces in which true collaboration can occur is difficult. Several studies show that politics and other factors tend to maintain rather than disrupt existing structures of power and control.

Organizations such as schools, school boards and councils can be analyzed through the structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames. Although some studies analyzed the actions of individuals and groups through one of the frames, none of the studies selected for review examined the groups through all four frames.

Critical Theory

In this section, literature about the history and premises of critical theory will be reviewed, followed by a discussion of literature on critical theory in education. Critical theory is a school of thought that originated in the Frankfurt School in 1923 and is associated with the work of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Critical theory was developed in a Marxist framework. Marxism can be defined in several ways—as a worldview, a doctrine, an ideology, or a belief system (Burawoy & Wright, 2001). Although there are several

types of Marxism, it can be generally thought of as "a theory of capitalism as a particular kind of class society" (Burawoy & Wright, 2001, p. 461). Marxist theory consists of three main parts: the development and future of capitalism, a theory of its reproduction, and socialism and communism as the liberatory alternatives to capitalism.

Early work in critical theory involved analysis and critique of capitalism and the ways in which differences in power emerge, creating power structures (Langman, 1991) as well as the domination of nature, the culture industry, and technocratic management (Ray, 1993). The Frankfurt School also studied Freudian psychology to determine how psychology might be used to inform their critique (Giroux, 1997c; Langman, 1991). When Hitler came to power, the critical theorists looked for answers in psychology to try to explain the reasons for the loyalty of followers to the Nazi party, which Marxism, as an economic framework, could not explain (Giroux, 1997c). As critical theory developed, the insights from psychology not only helped to illuminate power differences but showed how they create individual suffering (Langman, 1991). Freudian psychology offered insight into how people internalize oppression, and therefore participate in their own subjugation (Giroux, 1997c). In order for people to free themselves from oppression, they must understand the nature of oppression from outside and within themselves.

Critical theory is concerned with the historical analysis of power differences that result in the oppression of certain groups by dominant forces, and with developing a theory for how power structures are reproduced in the social and cultural spheres (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Power structures are inherent in politics,

culture, race and gender relations (Agger, 2013). When people understand the influence of these structures on their lives, they can work to change them. Critical theory seeks to deconstruct and critique the assumptions behind many social interactions that are accepted as common sense, exposing them as "contradictory and building hegemony" (Torres, 1999, p. 91), and also with the reconstruction of new possibilities (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Critical theory strives to reveal the unfair power structures which are hidden behind appearances (Langman, 1991); it is "ever a digging at foundations, a perpetual questioning" (Agger, 2013, p. 11).

Positivism. Critical theory is, in part, a critique of positivism (Agger, 1991; Langman, 1991). The positivist epistemology assumes that there is a universal truth and an objective reality that can be understood and explained through empirical, scientific methods. It emphasizes quantifiable measures and claims to be objective and value-free (Giroux, 1997e). It makes use of rules of logic that are assumed to be true regardless of context (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Critical theory rejects the positivist ideas which form the basis of science. Science unsuccessfully attempts to separate ideology from the empirical. This effort fails because researchers themselves approach their work with preconceived ideas and values that are not neutral (Torres, 1998). These values influence the purpose of the research, the choice of the research topic, and the methods used to research and analyze data. Although some researchers assert that positivism is no longer relevant, many of its assumptions still exist throughout institutions such as education (Kincheloe, 2008).

Many mainstream policymakers and analysts believe that politics do not belong in education (Torres, 1999). In education and government, technical action is

viewed as neutral, logical, based on empirical data and seeking truth. Political action is viewed as involving conflict, partisanship and attempts to win privilege for certain groups rather than a quest for truth and justice. This reasoning stems from a positivist epistemology, which critical theory challenges. For example, the business sector justifies its attempt to expand its market into the public sector by stating that the move will "take politics out of public institutions" (Apple, 2005, p. 102). However, Apple argues that the intrusion of business into these institutions also will cause them to become less responsive to political pressure from the public. Politics cannot be easily separated from education either (Giroux, 2001; Kincheloe, 2008; Torres, 1999). According to Giroux, educators must help students see that democracy must be constantly struggled over and "rewritten as part of an oppositional politics" (1997b, p. 153). Furthermore, trying to politicize teaching, rather than emphasizing its technical aspects, is needed as part of a larger struggle for positive change in society:

> Radical pedagogical work proposes that education is a form of political intervention in the world and is capable of creating the possibilities for social transformation. Rather than viewing teaching as technical practice, radical pedagogy in the broadest terms is a moral and political practice premised on the assumption that learning is not about processing received knowledge but actually transforming it as part of a more expansive struggle for individual rights and social justice. (Giroux, 2001, p. xxvii).

Systems. Systems thought is a "formal set or methodology" (Apple, 2004, p. 108) that can be used to address problems in education. Systems approaches are free of content, and their supposed neutrality allows them to be applied to many types of

educational problems that are often addressed with "the precise formulation of goals, procedures, and feedback devices" (Apple, 2004, p. 108). Systems approaches are promoted as neutral and applicable to any problem. However, systems approaches are not interest-free; they have definite aims to establish and maintain technical control and efficiency. They also require compliance and the absence of conflict. Apple (2004) states that "in order to be most effective, as many variables as possible—interpersonal, economic, etc.—must be brought under and controlled by the system itself. Order and consensus become strikingly important; conflict and disorder are perceived as antithetical to the smooth functioning of the system" (p. 108).

Since systems approaches appear to be neutral, they often succeed at reducing disagreement and achieving the consensus of those using or affected by the approach (Apple, 2004). To members of minority groups, systems language is often combined with the idea of holding educators accountable, in order to convince people that change will occur. Many members of the middle class and industry find value in the logic of systems thought, and they often support it. Systems language also is used to convince the public, funding agencies and the government that scientific approaches to improvement are being used, to maintain their support and financial backing.

While systems approaches are often applied to improve education, change usually involves some adjustment to the system of the school rather than a radical transformation; the foundation of the system is presumed to be sound and is not questioned (Apple, 2004). In summary, systems approaches are not neutral. They

ignore the underlying problems in schools and garner the continued support of the existing system.

Schools help to reproduce a culture of positivism (Giroux, 1997e). Positivism is manifested in curricula and in the ways that teachers view knowledge and present it to their students. Ways of knowing that involve "facts" are valued, while others are labeled as subjective, and therefore inferior. Educators may fail to understand that knowledge—including scientific knowledge—is not value-free. Designing curricula in schools is likewise not value free; it influences students by making moral, political and personal decisions about what students should learn (Apple, 2004). However, viewing curriculum design as a technical activity removes it from the political and moral context and conceals the magnitude of the educational decisions the teacher is making on behalf of students. Instead, teachers must critically question their involvement in curriculum decisions and the act of teaching, and must also resist the push to reduce teaching to a technical act and curriculum to a set of content standards (Giroux, 2012).

In summary, through a positivist lens, schools are simply places of instruction (Giroux, 2001). This view ignores the cultural context of schools and the struggle that takes place among different groups within school buildings. Schools are also sites for the reproduction of inequalities along the lines of race, gender and class (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2001). These aspects of schooling are disregarded in favor of the technical aspects of teaching and improving efficiency.

Business and the market. Business also has expanded its market into public institutions and education (Apple, 2005). When this occurs, public services that were

previously arranged and agreed upon through negotiation and compromise dwindle, thus eroding services and values that had been determined through democratic processes. The market is not neutral; it is political and unstable. It provides services in very disparate ways, which often fall along lines of race, class and gender. In education, the competition for credentials for students, and the focus on standardization, testing and results increase the likelihood of success for middle-class children, who already possess higher levels of cultural capital.

The market goal is to colonize, or expand into territories that were previously unavailable in order to open up new markets (Apple, 2005). To accomplish this goal, "as many aspects of our lives as possible, including the state and civil society, must be merged into the economy and economic logics" (p. 383). The move toward privatization includes public services such as education as well. Business people seeking profitable ventures develop charter schools, and in the process, "break unions, employ cheap and overworked teachers, and organize curricula and classroom pedagogy to teach business values and principles that legitimate the investors' own casino capitalist approach to public goods such as education" (Giroux, 2012, p. 57). Private interests profit from the failure of low-performing public schools (De Lissovoy, 2008; Giroux, 2012). When low-performing public schools close, opportunities for school "choice" arise when charter schools replace them.

Political and ideological preparations have to be made in order to accomplish the shift toward privatization (Apple, 2005). Public services are criticized and devalued, while everything pertaining to private business, such as competition, is promoted in positive terms. People who work in the public sector are disrespected,

humiliated, and characterized as selfish and inefficient (Apple, 2005; Giroux, 2012). Also, in order to bring an abstract concept like education into the market process, it must be understood as a commodity, or a product, the purpose of which can be defined in deliberate ways (Apple, 2005).

A professional and managerial middle class benefits from the marketization of state institutions (Apple, 2005). This group has technical skills and experience in management and efficiency, which strategically positions them to implement policies and strategies pertaining to measurement, assessment and accountability. This professional and managerial class thus personally profits from the marketization of the state, even as they convince themselves that they are "being endlessly responsive to 'clients' and 'consumers' in such a way that they are participating in the creation of a newly reconstituted and more efficient set of institutions that will 'help everyone'" (p. 387).

Ideology and false consciousness. Ideology and false consciousness are two important concepts in critical theory. Ideology "distorts one's picture of social reality" (Apple, 2004, p. 18) and helps to reproduce and promote the existing social order (Agger, 2013; Giroux, 1997d; Torres, 1999). Ideology is "any organized belief system that represents social change as impossible, even if it suggests modes of individual betterment within the frame of reference of the existing social system" (Agger, 2013, p. 9). Agger suggests capitalism as an example of an ideology in which individuals accept the "inevitability" of the system in exchange for the opportunity to advance in their careers and participate in consumer activities such as shopping. Ideologies are communicated for the purpose of legitimating the existing

social order (Langman, 1991) and obtaining peoples' acceptance of the dominant social order (Giroux, 1997d). Ideology is often communicated in rituals and ceremonies, but it is also embedded in the common, everyday practices that people rarely question (Langman, 1991). There is disagreement among theorists about the nature of ideology. In addition to the definitions above, some believe that ideology also can have positive functions because it is a system of shared meanings that provides a framework that can help people understand and clarify their world (Apple, 2004; McLaren, 1989). Therefore, ideology can serve the harmful purpose of distorting reality and endorsing the commonsense version of reality, or of clarifying it, which can prepare people for self-reflection and action (McLaren, 1989).

Marx described ideology as a false consciousness (Torres, 1999). False consciousness refers to "ideas that are actually false and work against people's best interests" (Agger, 2013, p. 216); it is a set of internal beliefs people have about the immutability and necessity of the status quo, and their perceived lack of power to effect change. False consciousness "is required in order to convince people that utopia is impossible and that 'this' is the best of all possible worlds in spite of its many imperfections" (Agger, 2013, p. 123). False consciousness is supported by some social sciences, which state as fact that society is governed by social laws. Since these laws supposedly cannot be changed, people must conform to them. Critical theory counters false consciousness by taking the position that people have the power to change their own lives, and when they join together, they have the potential to transform society.

Theories of reproduction. As the economy developed in the 19th century in the United States, work in agriculture diminished while factory production increased (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). A class system emerged, with the capitalist class controlling the means of production, and serving as employers of the working class. As the capitalist class grew in power, it exerted considerable influence over political, legal, cultural, and educational structures.

Theories of reproduction "focus on how power is used to mediate between schools and the interests of capital" and "how schools function in the interest of the dominant society" (Giroux, 2001, p. 76). Schools are not isolated from society; they are connected to powerful political, cultural and economic institutions which create inequalities and unequal access to resources (Apple, 2004). Schools help to reproduce these inequalities; the ideologies they embrace and the cultural and economic duties they fulfill validate and uphold the existing system, which helps some students and hinders others. As an example, the curriculum for students who are perceived to be a good fit for professional careers often emphasizes flexibility and inquiry, while the courses of students seen as future unskilled or semi-skilled workers often promote skills and dispositions needed for these careers, such as punctuality and responsibility.

In order to understand schools, one must understand the purposes they have historically served (Apple, 2004). In the 1850s, in New York City, a key purpose of schools was to protect the values and economic advantage of the dominant class while assimilating immigrants and African American students into the dominant culture. This purpose was pursued through bureaucratization, which entailed "the

seemingly commonsensical consolidation of schools and standardization of procedures and curriculum, both of which would promote economy and efficiency" (p. 64). These efforts were not limited to New York City or to a particular time period. Bureaucratization requires conformity, and schools came to be recognized and esteemed as places that produced people who shared the same traditional value, and who had skills that industry needed.

The purpose of education at the time—satisfying the needs of industry and the division of labor--required decisions to be made about the curriculum that would be taught in schools (Apple, 2004). The early curriculum theorists who pioneered curriculum work were white, Protestant and middle class. They used scientific management theory to develop a theory of curriculum construction that would address the requirements of adult life. Their views heavily favored homogeneity of values--the values of the middle class. They believed in differentiating the school curriculum to prepare students of different levels of ability for different outcomes, which yielded unequal levels of social power. They based the differentiation on the "scientific" attribute of intelligence rather than ethnicity. Apple states:

> In the context of the time, they no doubt believed that American society was more willing to deal with diversity in intelligence than diversity in ethnicity or race. But they undoubtedly felt secure in their belief that a "real" community could be built through education, one with "natural" leaders and "natural" followers, and one in which people like "us" could define what "they" should be like (2004, p. 74).

These curriculum theorists also were very interested in the efficiency of industry, the division of labor, and scientific principles (Apple, 2004). The supposedly neutral language of science and technology served some important purposes. It was used to describe the relationships between schools and society in a way that made sense to educators. This language also promised better control and improved efficiency of the educational process, prescribed action for the future, and legitimated the work educators had already been doing. It helped attract new people to the field of education who would support the system. The vestiges of many of these early decisions still remain in schools today; as Apple concludes, "if we are indeed serious about making our institutions responsive to communities in ways they are not now, the first step is in recognizing the historical connections between groups that have had power and the culture that is preserved and distributed by our schools" (2004, p. 76).

Schools help to reproduce the class structure in society (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). One way this has been accomplished is through tracking. Previously, the same curriculum was offered to all students. Later, in order to "meet the needs" of students, the schools developed special vocational curricula for working-class students. Many times, the students who were placed into these vocational tracks were African American, working-class and immigrants.

Intelligence tests have also played a role in the schools' maintenance of the divisions in society. The tests were developed by powerful corporate foundations (Karier, 1972). They were developed in a climate of belief in the associations between virtue and intelligence, and low morality with inferior intelligence. Some of

the major figures in the testing movement were advocates of eugenics. Although the tests were developed based on the ideals, experiences and knowledge of the privileged class, they were promoted as "scientific" and "objective." This claim legitimated the tests, and convinced many people from the lower classes that "their station in life was part of the natural order of things" (p. 119). The tests were biased in the questions they asked, as well as the questions they did not ask. Still, leaps of faith were made about their validity, under the assumption that the privileged class "who provided the objective standard upon which the tests were based, were there not because of privilege, wealth, power status and violence, but because of superior talent and virtue" (p. 121). By the 1930s, three quarters of schools were enrolling students in vocational tracks on the basis of scores from intelligence tests (Cohen & Lazerson, as cited in Bowles & Gintis, 1977). Even though tracking or ability grouping in schools based on test scores was challenged in a few court cases, the practices continued (Karier, 1972). Schools and employers liked the efficiency of the tests. Over time, testing became a powerful industry, a gatekeeper to entry to colleges and many careers.

Theories of reproduction help to uncover the ideology behind the "neutral" language used in conservative and liberal perspectives of schooling (Giroux, 2001). However, these theories have limitations (Apple, 1982; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Giroux, 2001). First, theories of reproduction are reductive, in that they only analyze examples of domination and do not seek out negative examples that contradict their position. Because they focus only on domination and do not recognize possibilities for resistance, these theories are pessimistic in nature. They also fail to recognize the

ways in which students exhibit resistance in schools, and the possibilities for radical pedagogy to create change.

Theories of resistance. Although schools may serve as sites of reproduction in that they play a role in perpetuating many of the inequalities in society, theories of reproduction do not recognize the acts of resistance or the possibilities for resistance to lead to transformative change. Students find many ways to resist norms and rules of the institution (Apple, 1982). For example, in an ethnographic study, McLaren (1999) describes the everyday rituals of resistance performed by students at a private school in Canada. Workers also engage in different types of actions to resist management and attempt to gain some control over their labor (Apple, 1982). Factory workers can cooperate to slow down the production line. When sales clerks complete enough transactions to meet management expectations, they might work on other tasks and ignore new customers. Apple (1982) suggests that these types of behaviors occur at a cultural rather than political level, since they are disorganized and lack a clear political intent. However, they illustrate that schools and workplaces are not exclusively sites of reproduction, but also of resistance.

Some oppositional behavior has a clear political purpose, while other behavior may be ambiguous or simply show a desire to destroy (Giroux, 2001). Hoy (2004) agrees with this contention and adds that oppositional behavior that is simply reactive does not articulate a purpose or a vision for desired change. This type of resistance "knows only how to say 'no,' not how to say 'yes' to a different view of society that would change the status quo" (p. 6). Giroux (2001) maintains that acts of resistance should seek to emancipate through a critique of domination, self-reflection, and

struggle for personal and social liberation. Giroux cautions that the term "resistance" should not be used loosely to describe any act of opposition. Oppositional behavior must be analyzed through the interpretation of the person exhibiting the behavior, or through the context in which it is displayed, to identify the interest that it serves.

Acts of resistance are expressed in many ways, some of which are cultural, and it is in these acts that "the fleeting images of freedom are to be found" (Giroux, 2001, p. 108). Resistant acts also could include lay readings of canonical texts, thus taking the authority to read and understand away from the so-called experts (Agger, 1991). By expanding access to texts that have previously been read and interpreted by intellectuals, texts become democratized. Counterhistory, a history in which those who are often marginalized are put in the center, can give insight into future political action (Kellner, Lewis, Pierce, & Cho, 2009). In a feminist perspective, transformative social change can occur when women are put at the center of change efforts (Lather, 1984).

Education has the potential to resist the hegemonic forces in capitalist society if the goal becomes to encourage critique and questioning. According to Marcuse, "Knowledge, intelligence, and reason are catalysts of social change. They lead to the projection of the possibilities of a 'better' order and the violation of socially useful taboos and illusions" (1968, p. 34). Marcuse does not oppose knowledge or reason. However, he advocates that instead of only preparing students for careers, the goal of education should be "the application of knowledge to the improvement of the human condition, and, the liberation of the mind, and of the body, from aggressive and repressive needs" (p. 34).

Educational critical theorists have spent little time exploring the internal contradictions within educational settings (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). These scholars have spent most of their time analyzing the current state within schools and less time on the factors that could present opportunities for resistance that could lead to change. Through a critical pedagogy, teachers can help students to question and challenge information that is presented as facts, and thus uncover that the basis of much of the knowledge that is presented to them is socially constructed, rather than objective (Giroux, 1997e). It should be emphasized that the critical theorists are not proposing that schools should become sites for indoctrinating students, because this would contradict the goal of developing their abilities to critique and think critically (Kellner, Lewis, Pierce, & Cho, 2009).

Critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy offers the possibility for resistance and transformation. Marcuse, one of the original members of the Frankfurt School, argues for deconstructing and re-constructing education, or *re-schooling*, which involves the transformation of all aspects of education, including curriculum design, evaluation, pedagogical method, and placing equal value on all content areas (Kellner, Lewis, Pierce, & Cho, 2009). From this perspective,

> All academic subjects need to be restructured toward democratic ends: Science cannot be simply instrumental knowledge and action, but must incorporate into its conception and practice a notion of the public good; history should include history of oppression and resistance; sociology should produce knowledge useful to the oppressed (Kellner, Lewis, Pierce, & Cho, 2009, p.22).

The main concern of critical pedagogy is in transforming "inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations" (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 47), to "promote democracy and social justice" (Stanley, p. 371), to create schools which "provide an essential public service in the construction of active citizens" (Giroux, 1988, p. 32), and which "serve as places of critical education in order to create a public sphere of citizens who are able to exercise power over their own lives and especially over the conditions of knowledge acquisition" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993, p. 9). Critical pedagogy is different from what most educators consider as critical thinking. In schools, critical thinking is usually defined as a technical skill in problem-solving (Giroux, 1997d) and identifying faulty logic and unsupported claims (Burbules & Berk, 1999).

Earlier in this chapter, some of the history of curriculum was discussed. Critical pedagogy is concerned with curriculum, which has a historical and political context (Giroux, 2001). The *hidden curriculum* is also analyzed; this term refers to the non-academic knowledge, the "unstated norms, values, and beliefs" (p. 47) found in school culture. Currently, many schools use a standardized curriculum and "the role of the teacher is to learn 'best practices' from the experts and to put their dictates into practice" without any evidence that these mandates will improve education (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 7). In this context, teachers become technicians, and the act of teaching becomes a series of steps to follow. The standardization of the teaching process and curriculum operates under the assumption that there is one correct way to teach that is true regardless of the place. This generalization disregards the complexity of students' experiences, school culture, and decisions about curriculum,

knowledge and teaching. According to this perspective, the teaching and learning process can be reduced to some easily measured variables, which simplifies the task of holding educators accountable. However, evaluating student learning is more complex than just measuring a student's mastery of a piece of content knowledge.

Although critical pedagogy is concerned with social change, this goal is balanced with developing students' intellectual abilities, guiding them to become "scholars concerned with learning for their own development and the social good" (Kincheloe, 2008, p.8) and students who can "think critically, take risks, and reflect on the connection between the knowledge they can and the obligations of civic and social responsibility" (Giroux, 2012, p. 68). Thus, the curriculum that students are taught in school and the act of teaching are areas of great concern and interest. Critical educators view knowledge as "a site of contestation and conflict" (p. 10), as opposed to a positivist epistemology in which knowledge is "worthwhile to the degree that it describes objective information that corresponds to or reflects the world" (p.22). The knowledge that is taught in schools should be questioned to find out who produced the knowledge; how and why it has been put into the curriculum; how the knowledge serves the needs of a capitalist society; what are other types of knowledge that come from other places, perspectives and peoples; and how we can "produce better informed, more rigorous knowledge"(p. 4).

In the critical classroom, students are viewed as individuals with their own experiences and backgrounds, and who have great capacity for learning and critique (Giroux, 2012). Teachers are the professionals who can educate students about the values and ideals of a democracy. In the critical classroom, students might work on

research papers or collaboratively on projects. They would connect their learning to events past and present, and would engage in critique and reflection.

Giroux (1997c) cautions that educators who wish to become critical educators should consider some of the risks. First, critical theory was developed in the context of culture, not education, so it does not neatly apply to the educational context. Educators should read the works of the founders of the Frankfurt School to understand how to use critical theory in their practice. Second, schools and classrooms are different, and there are no prescribed steps to take that apply to every context. Also, Giroux warns that there are many political and structural barriers in schools, such as resistance to change. These barriers could potentially place a teacher's job at risk if she became radicalized. However, withstanding the obstacles, the classroom teachers have the potential to become transformative agents, with the goal of turning schools into more democratic institutions (Giroux, 1997a).

The public sphere. The public sphere has the potential to create change (Apple, 2005; Giroux, 2001; Ranson, 1986). Giroux (2001) calls for the development of a discourse on how education could become more critical and thus serve the interests of the working class and other oppressed groups. The public sphere presents a way to begin to develop that discourse.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, during the beginning phases of capitalism, members of the bourgeoisie came together to discuss political and cultural matters (Giroux, 2001; Habermas, 1974; Hohendahl, 1974). This public sphere was separate from the state and the private realm (Hohendahl, 1979); it was "an intermediary system between state and society" (Habermas, 2006, p. 412). The purpose of the

gathering was to critique the actions of the state, including the practice of making decisions in secret (Hohendahl, 1979) and communicate the needs of the bourgeoisie to the state (Habermas, 1974). Dahlberg describes the public sphere as "a communicative space constituted by deliberation (rational-critical debate) over common problems" (2013, p. 22). Rational-critical debate is further defined as "reasoned, reciprocal, inclusive, equalitarian, sincere, and coercion-free argumentation" (p. 22) over contested issues. As the definition states, the public sphere is characterized by the equality of participants and equal access to participate in discussion that is free from domination.

The public sphere is situated at the periphery of the political system (Habermas, 2006). Courts and government agencies release decisions, policies, and rulings through their deliberative processes. The public sphere considers these actions, along with information and messages from a variety of media. The discussion leads to the formation of public opinions (Dahlberg, 2013; Habermas, 2006), which are used to guide and critique official decision-making (Dahlberg, 2013). The deliberative process is significant, because it identifies the important issues, develops arguments for and against the possible decisions about the issues, and delivers final "yes" or "no" responses (Habermas, 2006). These resulting public opinions define the understanding of different groups in society around controversial issues, which responsive governments and politicians monitor, because the public opinions "set the frame for the range of what the public of citizens would accept as legitimate decisions in a given case" (p. 418). These considered public opinions

"likewise present plausible alternatives for what counts as a reasonable position on public issues" (p. 418).

Over time, as capitalism developed, the public sphere changed (Hohendahl, 1979). The divisions between the interests of the bourgeoisie, society and the market became less clear, and conflicts arose. The public sphere disintegrated as people became more involved in consumer pastimes than in political activity. Culture, which had been separate from the market, was commodified and "consumed accordingly as leisure-time entertainment" (p. 90). In late capitalist culture, there is a lack of rational discourse, and "where this rational discourse is continued in the mass media, it too takes on the character of a commodity" (p. 90). In addition to a market-driven culture, the media's limited capacity for critical analysis contributes to the political indifference of the public (Giroux, 2012). Thus "social and economic issues are removed from: the historical context in which they emerged; the discourse and registers of power that produced them; and ultimately reduced to utterly privatized, emotional, and personal vocabularies" (p. 32). The idea of the public sphere is essential, but how to bring this concept to fruition is less clear (Hohendahl, 1974).

Many scholars have critiqued the work on the public sphere. Some maintain that there is not enough historical evidence that the bourgeoisie participated in a public sphere and the lack of a historical basis consigns the public sphere to theoretical and utopian realms (Hohendahl, 1979). They also point out other historical events that contradict or are not accounted for in the assumptions upon which the public sphere rests. Some theoretical critiques pinpoint the idea of exclusion (Dahlberg, 2013). One of the basic principles of the public sphere is that of

equality of participants and equal access to discussion. However, some scholars maintain that when the boundaries and norms of the public sphere are determined, the resulting exclusions will bar some voices from being heard. Furthermore, the requirements of equality of participants and equal access to participation are difficult to achieve because people possess different amounts of political power, or capital, and therefore differing abilities to influence others (Giroux, 2001; Habermas, 2006). Despite these criticisms, the re-creation of the public sphere still holds promise (Giroux, 2001) and is a worthwhile undertaking (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998; Apple, 2005).

Radical teachers are important actors in creating the public sphere (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Giroux, 2001). They can work within and outside the schools, "acting not simply as teachers, but as citizens" (Giroux, 2001, p. 239), making connections with the working class people, women and people of color who live near their schools to encourage them to become active in school policymaking, and building alliances with other teachers as well. Radical educators should become involved in many different types of groups that work for social change, such as workers' movements, peace movements, feminist groups, and environmental groups, in order to learn from their political struggles (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). These connections will help radical educators to work for change in education because they must "struggle simultaneously against the ingrained values of competition, individualism, patriarchy, racism, and ageism that permeate all levels of schooling" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993, p. 52.)

Ranson (1986) agrees that schools can become sites for encouraging active citizenship. Schools are accountable, in part, to the public. However, the performances and results for which schools are responsible should be decided by mutual agreement between the school and community. Student learning requires more than collaboration between parents and teachers; the school and community should establish a mutual agreement about the values and purposes of schooling. Once this agreement has been reached, schools can be held accountable for what they agreed they would accomplish. This process will "help to foster not only effective schooling but also the conditions for a more vital accountability for citizenship" (p. 96).

Giroux (2001) outlines some conditions and assumptions about schools and radical pedagogy. First, a critical discourse is needed that reflects the views and experiences of people from different social classes and their reactions to the limitations that affect them. Second, the negotiations and struggles inside of schools has to be acknowledged; schools are not only sites of domination. Although schools work to satisfy the needs of capitalism, they still have the potential to serve emancipatory interests. The third assumption is that the purpose of schooling and radical pedagogy must be connected to the goal of creating a new public sphere, which "represents a critical category that redefines literacy and citizenship as central elements in the struggle for self and social emancipation" (p. 116). The public sphere also serves the broader purpose of analyzing the depoliticization of the public and how the public could be re-engaged as active citizens.

Critique of critical theory. Many changes occurred during the decades since critical theory was developed in the Frankfurt School (Agger, 1991). Movements such as feminism and the effects of technological developments like the Internet had not yet occurred. For this reason, in later decades, it sometimes became difficult to use the original critical theory to explain modern situations. Some scholars criticized critical theory for being male-centered but recognized the potential for critical theory and frameworks such as feminism (Agger, 1991; Lather, 1984), poststructuralism and postmodernism to extend and complement each other (Agger, 1991).

Critical theory has also been criticized for being antiscientific, and for not being associated with a specific research method or program (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Also, many critical theorists use a complex, intellectual style of writing that might be difficult for practitioners to understand (Agger, 1991; Morrow & Brown, 1994). Critics also point to the detailed, lengthy analyses of problems which offer comparatively few solutions (Gibson, 1986; Miedema & Wardekker, 1999). However, Morrow and Brown (1994) counter that the problems critical theory examines are complex and require thorough analysis. Furthermore, there are no standard solutions that will solve all problems; people must reflect and act in ways that fit their own contexts (Gibson, 1986).

Summary of critical theory. Critical theory is associated with the work of the founders of the Frankfurt School, and has roots in Marxism. It originally developed as a critique of capitalism and culture. Critical theory also reacts against positivism. Positivism is an epistemology based on the assumptions that there is a universal truth, that reality is objective and can be understood by using scientific

methods, and that the rules of logic employed in positivism are valid in any context. Critical theory rejects the assumptions of positivism, including the supposed neutrality of research and knowledge production. Critical theory is concerned with exposing power structures that are often subtle and unquestioned. In education, theories of reproduction have explored the ways in which schools reproduce the inequalities in society, while theories of resistance analyze the ways in which people can oppose these forces and work toward personal liberation and for a more democratic society.

The influence of positivism can be traced throughout educational institutions. Systems methods and the logic of business and markets have attempted to standardize teaching methods and curriculum in education. The technical aspects of teaching and curriculum are emphasized. This allows for the control of as many variables as possible so that results can be evaluated and compared, but ignores the context of school culture and student background. Critical pedagogy questions the knowledge that is taught to students, to challenge its purpose, its source, and how and why it became part of the curriculum. There are several goals of critical pedagogy including developing students as scholars and preparing them to become active citizens in a democratic society.

The public sphere holds promise in transforming society by re-engaging the public in active citizenship. The public sphere refers to a space in which people gather to discuss topics that matter to them. Educational institutions do not exist in isolation or in a vacuum; they have connections to other political and economic

institutions. The public sphere reduces isolation and allows participants to learn from the struggles of others.

Critical theory has been criticized for being male-centered, although theoretical work has been undertaken to make connections with feminism. Connections with postmodernism and post-structuralism also have presented opportunities to strengthen critical theory. Critical theory also has been criticized for being unscientific, not having a set research methodology, being pessimistic, and being more concerned with the analysis and critique of problems than with specific recommendations for action.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter is organized according to the sections that Roberts (2010) and Merriam (2014) suggest for a Methodology chapter in a qualitative study. First included in the chapter are the design of the study, the role of the researcher, and the selection of the site and participants. A review of the data sources, data collection techniques and procedures, and data analysis process follow. Then, some of the ways the trustworthiness of the data was established will be described. The chapter concludes with the limitations of the study. The research question for this study is:

> How does an equity council function in a school district in the southeastern region of the United States?

Research Design

This dissertation research is a qualitative case study. Lichtman (2010) describes several characteristics of qualitative research. First, qualitative researchers seek to build an understanding of the human experience through description and interpretation. Rather than focus on a few variables, qualitative research focuses more on the entirety of a situation. It involves looking deeply at a few people or situations rather than a shallow examination of many people or phenomena. Data are gathered from observations and interviews, and thus are associated with words and themes, not numbers. The researcher collects data from the natural setting under study, rather than from a lab or other contrived location. The role of the researcher is

important, because she or he filters all of the data and constructs a reality of the research subject through her or his eyes and ears. Qualitative research also involves inductive reasoning, which moves from the specific to the abstract. Through the analysis of specific data, qualitative researchers arrive at an understanding of the situation being studied.

A case study is "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit" (Merriam, 2014, p. 203). The qualitative case study design was used because the purpose and intent of this research aligns with Merriam's definition and the characteristics of case studies that Creswell (2013) describes. For example, in this study, I wanted to develop an in-depth understanding of the case through description. Also, the Equity Council is a single, real-life case that is current and in progress. The case is bounded by membership on the council. Even though individual council members participated in the study, the unit of analysis is the council as a single entity. Morrow and Brown (1994) also state that case study methods are often used and appropriate designs for qualitative studies based in critical theory. These factors make the case study design a suitable choice for the design of this research.

This study presents the Equity Council as an intrinsic case. An intrinsic case "has unusual interest in and of itself and needs to be described and detailed" (Creswell, 2013, p. 98). The concerns of the Equity Council include the disparities in achievement levels of white students and students in the gap group, and disparities in suspension rates between these groups. These issues are significant at a national level to people within and outside the field of education. Second, the Wilson Equity Council is somewhat unique in its role. Unlike many groups that seek to change

educational institutions and practices, the Equity Council was established in an advisory role to the school district's board of education. I selected this case in part because of the significance of the council's work and because of the group's unique characteristics.

This study is based in a critical theory interpretive framework. Creswell (2013) explains that critical theory has emancipatory aims and seeks to empower people to transform their lives. Research based in critical theory might be concerned with a critique of social institutions or society, as well as with their transformation. In research based on critical theory, there is no set methodology (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Critical social research is eclectic and can include many different techniques for data collection and analysis, including those from the empiricist tradition. Using critical theory to inform methodology in research differs from empirical approaches. Empirical studies utilize a set methodology and follow expectations for how research should be conducted; these actions purportedly eliminate bias and allow the researcher to discover objective truth. In critical social research, the methods used cannot be separated from the theory and the problem. Also, it is understood that research is not ideologically neutral; the intent in critical social research is to further emancipatory goals.

Case study methods and the comparison of cases to other similar cases are appropriate and compatible with critical theory (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Willis' (1977) ethnography of the school culture of a group of working class male students serves as a well-known example of a study conducted in a critical framework. In this research, case study methods including interviews, group discussion and observation

were used. In the first part of the study report, Willis describes the culture of the students through the presentation of the data, and presents conclusions and implications in the second part.

Role of the Researcher

As previously stated, in qualitative research, the researcher filters the data through her eyes and ears as it is collected, and this process is influenced by her experiences, knowledge and skill (Lichtman, 2010). Furthermore, she also interprets and reports the data, constructing a reality based on what she has seen and heard. Some qualitative researchers believe that "what exists out in the world can be understood as it is mediated through the one doing the observing….there is no 'getting it right' because there could be many 'rights'" (p. 16). Nevertheless, in the "Trustworthiness" section I will describe some of the ways that the trustworthiness of my account of the Equity Council could be checked.

In this study, I was a nonparticipant in the work of the Equity Council. According to Creswell (2013), a researcher who is a nonparticipant is an outsider to the group being studied and collects data without being directly involved in the work of the group. However, even if the researcher remains outside the activity of the group under study, there are still relationships between the researcher and those who are being studied that should be examined. Apple (2000) describes his involvement in a "Friday Seminar" group that gathered weekly to discuss research and political issues. At the conclusion of his account of the group's story, Apple reflects on some questions about his role as the researcher. Although Apple was a participant in the group, and his role was different than my role in the current study, some of the

questions he asked himself could be relevant to this case as well, and they provide a transition to some ethical considerations. In reflecting on his account of the Friday Seminar group, Apple states that the story "is told from and through one voice: my own. However, my role in the group remains largely invisible in this account. Who am I representing? Have I exploited the group for 'academic' reasons?" (2000, p. 155). I will now answer these and other questions about my own role in the Equity Council study.

I was a high school teacher in three different public school districts, including the Wilson County School District, for a total of 17 years. I was not a radical teacher, though I had a radical inclination that might have emerged if I had known about critical theory. I went into education because I liked working with young people. For the first few years, my enthusiasm and naiveté obscured the callousness of the factory model of education. Eventually, trying to meet the needs of around 150 students each day drained me physically and emotionally. Though some teachers tried to soften the institutional nature of the schools, many students struggled, especially those from marginalized groups. Students often displayed oppositional behavior to the rules and expectations of the school and staff. Rather than acknowledging the ways in which students and teachers were suffering under the system and working to improve conditions and practices at the school, the administrative regime only became more oppressive. In retrospect, I wish that the faculty had joined together to demand changes at the school and more respectful treatment for themselves, but the fear of retaliation from the regime isolated and silenced us.

Like many people, I am deeply concerned about the attacks on public education in this country, including the move toward privatization, school choice and charter schools. I have been proud that my home state of Kentucky is one of only a handful of states that does not allow charter schools. Yet the day after he was elected, the new Republican governor announced that the teachers' professional organization had become too powerful in Kentucky and reiterated his pledge to bring charter schools to the state. Even in the absence of charter schools, business and systems models have colonized education in Kentucky, attempting to standardize the language and the teaching process from the most rural to the most urban schools.

Early in my doctoral studies, I became interested in educational equity, partly because of my professional experience in schools. I wondered if educators could make their schools equitable, given that schools originated under the most unfair and segregated principles. If educators alone could not make their schools more equitable, I wondered if a community group operating outside the system could pressure schools to change. I had attended several of the Equity Council's monthly meetings before embarking on this study, and thus began the work with some familiarity with the council's work. It is from the perspective and experiences described above that I approached the Equity Council study.

I stand to benefit from this study since it will help me fulfill the requirements of a doctoral program. However, at every step of the research process, I also have tried to think about how this work might benefit the Equity Council. In the ways the data are reported, my interpretations and especially in the implications, I tried to bring out points that are relevant to the specific context of the council's work. Nevertheless,

decisions about data collection, reporting and interpretation involve power differences, with the researcher in control of which information will be included and excluded, and how it will be interpreted and reported. Several scholars have written about the power differences in interviewing in qualitative research. I will describe their findings and the implications for the Equity Council study in the sections on data collection and analysis as well.

Sample Selection

Site. In qualitative research, purposeful sampling involves decisions about the site or participants to select for the study, the strategy that will be used, and the size of the sample (Creswell, 2013). The researcher selects participants and the site that can help answer the research questions. The Equity Council meets in the city of Buchanan[2], in Wilson County, in the southeastern part of the United States**.** Wilson County was selected as the site of this study because it has an Equity Council and because its geographical location was convenient to the place where I was living at the time. Thus, I employed purposive sampling. I had learned about the council through news articles. I started attending council meetings in January 2014, and based on initial informal observations, decided that I would like to learn more about the group. Equity council meetings are open to the public, so permission to observe the meetings was not required. However, as part of my application for approval from the Institutional Review Board, I obtained a letter of support from the school district for the research.

[2] Pseudonyms are used for all names of places, schools, groups, and publications of the council to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Participants. The council consists of fifteen members, all of whom were eligible to participate in the study because of their membership on the council. I planned to interview between eight and ten council members. During the study period, as I looked around the table during council meetings, I thought about whom was present that evening, whom had already been interviewed, and decided whom to approach. After the meeting concluded, if the potential participant was not already speaking with someone else, I went up, briefly explained my research, and asked if she or he might be interested in sitting for an interview for approximately one hour. If the person agreed, I asked for her or his e-mail address. In the next day or two, I then e-mailed the person to ask if she or he were still interested in the interview, and if so, to let me know a time and place that would be convenient. In all, ten of the fifteen council members participated in interviews.

This study was approved in late January, 2015. Since the council does not meet in July, and the June meeting is very short, I originally planned to finish all the interviews between February and May. However, I ran behind schedule on the interviews and had to extend the study period through June. The council meets once a month, so at each monthly meeting from February through June, I tried to speak with one or two potential participants. However, sometimes I was not able to speak with two or even one potential participant. When this occurred, I e-mailed one or two council members using a committee membership list that a district employee had given me. The e-mails briefly explained the purpose of the study and asked if the person would be interested in participating. Sometimes, the person did not respond to the e-mail, and after a few days, I e-mailed a different council member. I asked

fourteen of the fifteen council members for an interview, either in person or in e-mail. It appeared to me that one person did not wish to participate; I had just spoken with the council member standing next to her, who agreed to be interviewed. When I turned to ask the other person, she avoided my gaze and walked away, therefore I did not ask her. The other four council members did not initially respond to my e-mails. One of these four did later offer to be interviewed another participant was needed, but by that time the interviews had concluded. In all, two council members participated in interviews during each month of the study period.

I also had to make decisions about sampling of council activities for observation and artifacts. I discuss the rationale for the decisions about observations below and artifacts in the section on data collection.

Observations. As stated above, the time boundaries for the study were set for February through May, 2015, but were extended through June because the interviews were not complete. During the study period, I observed and took field notes at all five of the monthly council meetings between February and June, 2015. As mentioned earlier, all meetings of the Equity Council, including committee meetings, are open to the public, so approval to attend was not needed.

I also observed and took field notes at two of the council's committee meetings, in February and April. I did not have a pre-determined number of committee meetings to observe; these two meetings were selected because they occurred during the study period and I was able to attend. Some committee meetings occur on a regular schedule that was included on a list of committees a district employee gave me. However, on three occasions, when I arrived at the committee

meeting place on the day and time specified on the list, no one was there because the meetings had either been canceled or the meeting location had changed.

Some committees meet as needed and do not have a regular schedule. On a few occasions, I e-mailed committee chairs to ask when the committee would convene and was told that the group did not have any upcoming meetings. A couple of times, I had other obligations that prevented me from attending.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews. Qualitative researchers may use different types of interviews to gather information from participants. For example, in a structured interview, the researcher asks the same questions and uses the same format for each participant (Lichtman, 2010). In an in-depth, unstructured interview, the interviewer does not use a pre-determined set of questions and allows the participant to tell her or his own story. Interviews may also be unplanned, and happen by chance. In this study, I chose a semi structured interview format, in which I used the same general set of questions with each participant and varied the questions as needed.

I developed a list of open-ended questions to ask participants during interviews. The first questions were general, grand tour questions, as described by Lichtman (2010). The remaining questions were more specific, and each aligned with one or more of Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames. The four frames can help ensure that important aspects of an organization are considered. Creating questions that aligned to the four frames was intended to help me answer the research question and lessen the chance that important information might be overlooked. Before conducting the interviews, I asked two professors to look over the questions and

provide feedback. I then revised the questions based on their suggestions. The list of general questions can be found in Appendix A.

Ten of the fifteen Equity Council members participated in interviews in one-on-one, face-to-face sessions. Participants in this study all asked to be interviewed at their workplaces or at the Wilson County School District central office where council meetings are held. Upon arriving at the interview site, the participant and I would usually greet each other and chat for a few minutes. I asked each participant if she or he minded if I recorded the interview, and all agreed that I could (the informed consent form also stated that the interview would be audio recorded.) As my computer booted up, I briefly explained the purpose of the study. I explained what the informed consent form was, asked the participant to look it over, and if she or he agreed with its provisions, to sign. I then explained that I would type an interview transcript from the audio recording and offered to send each participant a copy of the transcript. I also offered to send each participant a copy of the final dissertation. Around half of the participants asked for a copy of their interview transcripts, which I sent to them, and all the participants but one said they would like a copy of the completed dissertation. Most interviews lasted for one hour or a little less, but a couple of interviews ran over by 10 minutes or so. No follow-up interviews were conducted.

Interview technique. I asked everyone the same general questions at the beginning of the interviews: What were some of the reasons why you decided to serve on the Equity Council? What is going well with the council? What could be improved upon with the council? After that, I did not necessarily ask participants all

the questions as written on the list in Appendix A. Sometimes, in responding to one of the general questions, an interviewee would bring up a topic that I wished to investigate further. Also, after a piece of information had been corroborated by other participants and through other sources of evidence, I preferred to spend the interview time on other topics. For example, it soon became clear that the participants knew the goals of the council. After I understood the goals as well, I stopped asking participants to provide the goals of the council. However, after reading more about critical theory, I saw the mismatch between the school district's educational goals for students and those embraced by critical pedagogy. I wondered what the council members believed to be the purpose of education, so I asked the last two participants about their views.

I had previously heard that interviewing is a more difficult and complex undertaking than novice researchers realize, so I wanted to learn all I could about interviewing before beginning the process. I read literature about ethical concerns in interviewing. Kvale (2006) questions the common practice of researchers who build trust with interviewees so they will disclose their private thoughts and experiences, because there is a potential for manipulation by the researcher. Kvale also challenges the notion of the interview as a dialogue, stating that the qualitative research interview is a "one-way dialogue, an instrumental and indirect conversation, where the interviewer upholds a monopoly of interpretation" (p. 484). Participants also can resist the research process by not answering a question, answering a question other than what was asked, saying what they think the interviewer wants to hear, or questioning the interviewer. Vitus (2008) describes the resistance of children who

were being interviewed. In the study, what appeared to be a lack of data obtained during the interviews resulted in an opportunity for analysis and reflection. While many researchers see participant resistance as a barrier to overcome, Vitus instead advocates for an approach in which participants' resistance is used "as a lens for studying the social relations at work in the research process" (p. 470). The framework is called the agonistic approach, and its goal is "to embrace opposing perspectives and differences in relation to the people we study" (p. 470).

Transformative interviews are those in which the researcher actively challenges participants' perceptions in order to de-mask issues of power (Merriam, 2014). This interview technique is oriented toward critical theory. Kvale (2006) proposes that interviews that allow participants to protest or object to the researcher's interpretations can contribute to the objectivity of the interview data. Kvale lists several types of interviews which recognize the power differences and conflicts in interview situations, and thus provide an alternative to empathetic interviews. I experimented with the actively confronting interview technique in this study. Inspired by Socrates, the actively confronting technique does not seek consensus between interviewer and interviewee. Instead, the interviewer critically questions the interviewee and seeks to uncover assumptions. Kvale suggests that Piaget used this technique in his interviews with children, as he actively confronted their conceptions.

Not all of the interview questions in this study were intended to challenge participants, but I did try to use the actively confronting technique in most of the interviews, where appropriate. I hoped that my skill with the technique would improve during the study period, but even by the last interview, it was difficult to

perform the mental tasks simultaneously. As each participant spoke, I tried to think about the meaning behind what she or he was saying. Then, I had to decide if the participant was expressing an assumption that should be challenged or whether I should wait to hear what the participant would say next. I also tried to listen for contradictions in what the participant said so I could ask about them. A couple of times I missed a contradiction, which I only realized later while transcribing the interview. I missed some opportunities to challenge because I needed more time to process the information the participant was conveying. However, even with my limited success with the technique, it seemed that the actively confronting interview did allow the participants to confirm or reject my interpretations of what they said. A few excerpts from interviews are included in Chapter 4 with my questions and participants' responses so that readers can get a sense of the context of the participants' responses and also evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of my questions.

Observations. Council meetings are held the first Tuesday of each month at 6:00 p.m. As explained previously, some committees meet on a certain day and time each month, while others meet as needed. I was familiar with the council meeting room because I had attended meetings there before the study began. I did not visit the committee meeting spaces beforehand, however. I usually arrived at council and committee meetings around ten minutes before the meeting began, before most people had arrived. I was able to choose a spot to sit where I could see most of the council members' faces and still be unobtrusive. As people entered the room before

the meeting, I jotted down notes in a field notebook. I stayed for the entire meeting time to observe and take notes.

I brought the field notebook with me to council meetings during the study period, and took notes using an observation protocol similar to the one described by Creswell (2013). This protocol includes a space for the date, and starting and ending time of the observation. I divided the page into two columns, and in the left-hand column, took descriptive notes of what I saw and heard. In the right-hand column, I wrote reflective notes, which included questions about what was observed, interpretations and conclusions. A copy of the observation protocol used in the study can be found in Appendix B.

During observations, I was a non-participant observer. A non-participant observer is an outsider to the group being studied who collects data from a distance without being involved in the group's activities (Creswell, 2013). At meetings, the Equity Council members, the superintendent and two liaisons to the Equity Council sit at the meeting table. School principals also presented during the meeting time. I took notes on what I saw and heard from the Equity Council members, superintendent, liaisons, and school principals. If any community members addressed the council during the public comments period, or if audience members spoke during the meeting, I also observed and took notes. Before meetings began, I took notes on what I saw and heard in the room. Observational data about council members and their interactions with audience members, district employees and each other during meetings helped to answer the research question of this study. The interpretations, reflections, questions and conclusions that I wrote in the right-hand column of the

observation protocol were also valuable in answering the questions because they helped me to develop an understanding about the case as the study period progressed.

Artifacts. Several artifacts were used as data sources for this study. First, as mentioned earlier, a district employee who works with the Equity Council provided me with a copy of the committee membership list. This document included the names of the committees, their charges, meeting schedule, names of members, and e-mail addresses of the members. This information was helpful in understanding the work of the committees. The contact information was used to e-mail a few potential participants that I was not able to speak with before or after council meetings. A participant in the study gave me a copy of the questions the principals were asked to address during their presentations. Although the questions were revised from the original that would have been used during presentations in the study period, the list nonetheless provided insight into the principals' presentations. A district employee who works with the council also gave me a copy of a report I had heard referenced in council meetings. The report had to do with disparities in suspension rates in the district. Although I skimmed the report, I did not use it in this study because it fell outside the scope of this research. Similarly, council members mentioned some reports that had been written about deficiencies in the district's special education program, but I did not seek them out because they dealt with a specific aspect of the district's work, not with the Equity Council. In addition to the artifacts participants and district employees provided, I also accessed a variety of artifacts on my own, which are described below.

News articles. Newspaper articles detailed some recent events involving the school district. Others described the council's beginnings and turning points in the council's past. Some of these artifacts provided historical information that I could not observe and council members may not have known. To access news accounts, I first searched the local newspaper's online archive. I reviewed the titles of the news articles that had been written about the Equity Council and some articles that had been printed more recently about incidents in the district. I listed the articles that I wished to read, along with the dates that they had appeared in the newspaper. Articles were accessed on microfilm at a university library. I used articles about some recent events in the district to provide the context in which this study. Articles which provided historical information about the council, including the group's bylaws, were also selected. There were some articles about the council that I read but did not use in the study. For example, years ago the school district had hired an equity monitor. I did not include news accounts of the equity monitor in this work, because they fell outside the scope of the study.

Online artifacts. The Equity Council has a page on the school district's web site. I viewed and downloaded several artifacts from this page and from the district's web site, including Equity Council documents, district and board policies, and the district's mission statement. I also accessed several significant artifacts online from the district's web site and the Equity Council's page, listed separately below. Where appropriate, I also list the artifacts which were not included.

- The council's bylaws supplied key information about the foundation of the group's work.

- The Equity Report may be the most significant document the group produces. It describes the goals and illuminates the values of the group and the district.
- The school district maintains meeting agendas and minutes from the past few years. I did not review all of them, but strategically selected those agendas and minutes from meetings that I was analyzing.
- To find out how much authority the school board has in determining the curriculum used in schools, I accessed the curriculum policy from the school district web site. I also read the district's discipline policy, but did not review policies on other topics.
- I looked at state regulations on curriculum and the authority of school councils in determining curriculum. Other regulations were not examined.
- I watched portions of video recordings of two Wilson County Board of Education meetings in which Equity Council members spoke. I looked at board agendas in order to see where the Equity Council presentation was located (e.g., toward the beginning, right after the budget report) and then found the Equity Council update in the recording.

I also accessed links to video recordings of meetings to transcribe narratives of council members and principals. Other types of data were also obtained from these recordings, such as the time spent on various tasks. I watched the video recordings of full meetings from February, March and April, and transcribed portions of the principals' presentations from these meetings. These three meetings were selected because they were typical meetings within the study period. The principals were asked to present on their schools' efforts to reduce gaps in either academic

achievement or in suspension rates, depending on the area in which gaps were most severe. I chose to focus mostly on the presentations about discipline simply because of my interest in this topic. The principals' presentations were consistent in their delivery and content. The excerpts which were selected were representative and typical of the principals' narratives. Since all the narratives could not be included, I had to make selections. First, narratives were chosen in which an idea was developed as opposed to isolated phrases. I also selected narratives in which principals either detailed the procedures schools use, explained the ideas behind those procedures, or communicated a value judgment. Narratives in which principals were describing their schools' specific data were not selected. I made these choices to provide a glimpse into practice, rather than a comprehensive report on the schools' disciplinary systems.

I also reviewed parts of other meetings that occurred outside the study period if something significant had occurred. For example, during the September 2014 meeting, the Equity Report had just been released, and although I had attended that meeting in person, I wanted to review the meeting recording to transcribe some of the council members' reactions and the discussion.

Managing and Recording Data

The data set in this study consisted of transcribed interviews, observation notes, and documents. I transcribed audio-recorded interviews using a word processing program. I saved the electronic copies of each interview transcript by date; more complete information, such as interview date and participant name, were maintained separately in hard copy and stored in a locked file cabinet. Interview

recordings and transcripts and documents were uploaded to a cloud-based site for storage. Observation notes were kept in the original field notebook and stored in the same locked file cabinet as the interview information mentioned above. I accessed the news articles on a few different occasions. At some point, the university library added a more user-friendly software program to the microfilm equipment, so at first I printed copies of news articles and later saved copies of others on a flash drive.

Data Analysis

During the study period, I was conducting interviews and observations concurrently. I also transcribed and analyzed interview data during the study period, in keeping with Merriam's (2014) recommendation that qualitative data analysis should be ongoing during the data collection process. As quickly as possible after an interview, I listened to the audio-recorded interview and transcribed it using a word processing program, and then began to analyze the data.

I used an open coding process to analyze the interview data, as described by Gibbs (2007). In this process, the researcher starts with no codes in mind, as opposed to the concept-driven coding, in which the researcher begins the analysis with a prepared list of codes. Even though I planned to eventually examine the themes through Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames, I did not begin with these frames as codes.

To begin the coding process, I read through each of the first four transcripts, line by line. When the participant had expressed an idea—whether in a few words or a line or two—a code, or descriptive label, was assigned to that chunk of text. Many of my codes were descriptive in that they used the participants' words to summarize

the idea represented in the chunk of text. When possible, I tried to code at the categorization and analysis levels. When categorizing, the researcher assigns a category that represents the text (Gibbs, 2007). At the analysis level, the researcher assigns a code that represents the implied meaning behind the participants' words. I inserted comments into the interview transcript using the word processing program and entered the codes in the text boxes.

After the fourth interview, I listed all the codes I had created thus far. Using the cut and paste tools of the word-processing program, I moved the codes around the page, grouping similar codes together. I looked over each of the resulting groups and composed a general theme that described each group. I then wrote a short description of each of the themes. According to Gibbs (2007), the value of developing a list of themes with descriptions is that it helps the researcher apply the themes consistently, sort of like a rubric, which increases reliability. When reading some interview text, I was able to decide how to categorize the text based on the theme description.

Next, I created a chart to organize the codes, as suggested by Gibbs (2007). Each row of the spreadsheet corresponded to one of the ten interviews. Each column contained data corresponding to one of the preliminary themes. At each column heading, I typed in the name of the theme and its description. This way, when I was coding an interview, I could read the theme descriptions as I was looking at the chart, which helped me decide where to place that code.

After transcribing the fifth and subsequent interviews, I coded line by line, creating short descriptive codes and typing them in the spreadsheet in the row corresponding to the interview number and in the columns corresponding to the

themes I felt they best fit. I included the line number with each code so that the text could be easily located in the original interview transcript. Occasionally, when a code did not fit well with any of the themes created thus far, I devised a new theme. Other times, I decided to combine themes, attempting to keep the new, combined themes at the categorical and analytical levels. Every time I combined themes or wrote a new theme, I revised or wrote a new theme description. Eventually, I ended up with eleven themes.

As the interview texts were coded, I used the constant comparative method to analyze the data. This method involves the comparison of different pieces of data to each other in order to find their similarities and differences, and to discern patterns in the data (Merriam, 2014). For this study, I used two strategies suggested by Gibbs (2007). First, I compared newly-coded data with data coded previously to make sure the themes were being applied consistently. Occasionally, as a result of this technique, I had to revise the theme definitions or move codes from one column of the chart to another. I also compared codes and text in the different interviews by reading the codes down each column of the chart, looking at the data across interviews. I examined the variation in the text across interviews for a particular theme, looking for patterns that suggested a deeper meaning.

After coding the last interview, I reviewed the data in the chart from all the interviews for each theme, making adjustments by moving codes from one theme to another, as appropriate. The eleven themes I had created seemed to fit the data well. A replica of the spreadsheet used for the data analysis is included in Appendix C.

Discourse analysis. In addition to the procedures described above, I also performed some exploratory discourse analysis on the principals' narratives. Critical discourse analysis is an approach to analyzing speech, written text, and other types of communication, and the ways in which discourse can challenge or reproduce dominance (van Dijk, 1993). A dominant group can control others through overt force and can influence their minds, manipulating and persuading people to accept the dominant perspective. This persuasion occurs through text and speech, sometimes in subtle ways that appear to be normal and routine.

I reviewed the recorded meetings from the February, March and April Equity Council meetings and transcribed excerpts from the principals' presentations. I then used some of the points from van Dijk (1993) and McKerrow (1989) to analyze the narratives. I did not exhaustively examine each excerpt, but instead focused on words and phrases that conveyed an underlying meaning. Van Dijk (1993) explains that discourse can be used to justify inequality by representing one's own group positively and another group negatively. In Chapter 5,a few of these strategies that I perceived in the principals' narratives are analyzed. According to McKerrow (1989), missing elements from a text can be as important as the information that is presented, so I also looked for absence in the narratives, or what principals left out of their presentations.

The Case Study Report

Before composing the case study report, I considered the audiences of this work. My dissertation committee will constitute a primary audience. I hope Equity Council members also will read the dissertation. Academic colleagues with knowledge about critical theory and education might constitute a third audience. I

tried to keep these various audiences in mind while writing the report. For example, Yin (2009) suggests that non-specialists might be more interested in the descriptive elements of the report and the implications for action, while the dissertation committee might scrutinize the methods used. I attempted to address the interests the three audiences identified above might have, although as Yin states, no single report can fulfill the requirements of all audiences.

Chapter 4 is organized according to Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames, beginning with the structural frame and a discussion of the findings from interviews, observations and artifacts. I emphasize when a particular finding is supported by more than one data source, as well as when data sources contradict each other, and try to be specific about which data sources support a particular finding. Data from the other three frames is presented in the same way. Each of the frames includes quotes from interviews with participants.

Each frame begins with a section called "Impressions," which describe my perceptions and thoughts as I sat in council meetings. The purpose of including this section was to give the reader a sense of what an Equity Council meeting is like when considered through each frame, as filtered through my eyes and ears. Although my role in this study has already been outlined, I also attempt to position myself in each of these sections. Creswell (2013) states that qualitative researchers should demonstrate reflexivity, in which an investigator shows awareness of her biases and preconceptions by making her position explicit. I follow Creswell's recommendations by discussing experiences that relate to the case and how these experiences might influence my interpretations and conclusions.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research can be enhanced through increasing its validity. Although scholars propose a variety of ways to think about the concept, the validity of a study can be defined as the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2013) or how well the findings match reality (Merriam, 2014). Merrian (2014) points out although an assumption of qualitative research is that there is no objective reality to be discovered, there are steps that researchers can take to increase the credibility of findings. Creswell (2013) proposes several ways in which validity can be established and suggests that researchers use at least two of the strategies in any particular study. In this research, data sources were triangulated to increase the validity of the findings. Triangulation involves using several data sources, evaluators, methods or theories that can substantiate each other (Denzin, as cited in Merriam, 2014). In this case, data from interviews, observations and artifacts corroborate and strengthen the findings; data from different sources and collected at different times are also compared and contrasted.

Creswell (2013) also states that revealing researcher bias at the beginning of the study can inform the reader about the researcher's position and how it might influence the research. This purpose underlies the "Role of the Researcher" section in Chapter 3 and is addressed in the "Impressions" sections throughout Chapter 4. In these accounts, I explained my background and relevant experiences and how they might impact this study.

Merriam (2014) proposes that when the researcher spends adequate time with the data, to the point of reaching saturation, the validity of the research increases.

Saturation means that the researcher begins to encounter the same findings again and again in data collection; no new information is presented. The amount of time needed to reach saturation varies. I believe that the saturation point was reached in this study.

I also searched for negative examples in the data. Creswell (2013) states that negative examples contradict evidence that has been collected. Through observation and interviews I had formed the opinion that the Equity Council almost exclusively uses quantitative data to judge the progress of the school district, and they value quantitative data to the exclusion of other sources of information. However, some participants provided evidence to the contrary. These negative examples were included in order to increase the accuracy of the findings and conclusions.

A fifth strategy was employed to increase the validity of the findings in this study. Creswell (2013) states that if a researcher provides "rich, thick description" (p. 252), readers can better understand the study. Researchers should offer details, make connections between the details, use the active voice and include quotes. I tried to use thick description in reporting this case so that readers can determine whether the findings and conclusions of this research apply or transfer to other situations with which they may be familiar.

In qualitative research, reliability refers to dependability and consistency (Merriam, 2014). If a reader concludes that the results of the study make sense given the data that has been reported, then the data are consistent with the findings. Since I was the only researcher involved in the study, reliability among researchers was not addressed. However, I did use a strategy to increase the reliability of the coding process. As suggested by Gibbs (2007), I defined the themes developed from the data

and used the definitions to help me apply the codes consistently, like a rubric, to increase reliability during the data analysis process.

Limitations of the Study

I tried to follow the indicators of quality qualitative research (Creswell, 2013) and indicators of exemplary case studies (Yin, 2009) in carrying out this study, but it has limitations. First, the study is reported from the Equity Council members' and my perspectives. Although narratives from some principal presentations and the district's contribution to the Equity Report are included, the perspectives of district employees and school board members are largely absent.

Second, I did not conduct a member check in this study. In a member check, the participants in the study have the opportunity to review the data, interpretations and conclusions before they are finalized (Creswell, 2013). The participants read drafts and provide feedback about the accuracy of the report; their input increases the validity of the findings.

Yin (2009) describes the development of a case study database as a way to enhance the reliability of a study. The database should include data sources such as narratives, documents and notes, and it should be kept separate from the case study report. Readers should be able to access the database, and their review and analysis of the data can increase the reliability of the findings. However, I could not make the data sources available to readers for inspection or confidentiality of participants could not be maintained. If I provided the news articles reviewed for the study, or gave links to the online artifacts which were accessed, the confidentiality of the participants would be compromised. Therefore, while I understand the value in

allowing other researchers to review the data sources to determine whether they agree with my findings, in this case the ethical requirement of maintaining confidentiality outweighed the potential increase in reliability.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The Wilson County School District[3] is a mid-size school district located in the southeastern region of the United States. Most of the schools are found in or near the city of Buchanan. People who feel that Buchanan is a good place to live and raise a family might offer as evidence the stable economy, the variety of activities and entertainment residents enjoy, and the general tranquility of the city. There used to be some large technology corporations in Buchanan, but one closed years ago, and the other laid off most of its employees. Some people in the community work at the hospitals, a few small colleges and a university, the schools or a few small factories. Besides these employers, much of the economy of Buchanan is built around entertainment like shopping and dining. In the summertime, weekly outdoor concerts downtown draw huge crowds. The local restaurant owners must love these events, because they make a killing selling beer at four bucks a brew, served up in dinky plastic cups. The residents of Buchanan are crazy about sports, too. If there is a single cause that might unify Buchanan, it could be the performance of the local college sports teams. People show their loyalty to the cause by waiting for hours in traffic as it inches slowly toward the game. On the south and east sides of town, the suburbanites flood out of their neighborhoods to shop in the malls and shopping

[3] Pseudonyms are used for all names of places, schools, groups, and publications of the council to protect the confidentiality of participants.

centers and dine in the plentiful modestly-priced chain eateries. There are cultural events in Buchanan too, like art exhibits, concerts, and heritage festivals.

There are several neighborhoods that are considered low-income areas in Buchanan. Past the downtown area of Buchanan, towards the north and west sides of town, the dazzling lights and glitzy store displays fade. High-fashion retail stores and restaurants are absent on the main thoroughfares, replaced by liquor stores, strip clubs, tattoo parlors and antiques stores. Overall, the population in this part of town is probably more diverse than anywhere else in the city. But even here, there are more affluent streets where the white and well-to-do generally reside, and areas where African-American, blue-collar whites, and Latino residents live. Small row houses and stately Victorian homes stand together in the old neighborhoods, often divided into apartments that rent by the week. The railroad tracks run through this area, past homeless shelters, gas stations, neighborhood revitalization projects, a trailer park and scrapyards. Trucks rumble through the neighborhoods to and from the scrapyards, filling the air with diesel fumes. Police cars, fire trucks and ambulances frequently race down the streets with their sirens wailing. Adjacent to a nearby neighborhood, there is a large, peaceful African-American cemetery with nineteenth-century headstones and a spacious green lawn. There are community centers, neighborhood gardens and parks where people come to play sports or attend concerts and other events. In the summertime, groups of children and teenagers walk toward the neighborhood swimming pool with towels in hand.

These neighborhoods are starkly honest in their daily struggles. It is not unusual to see prostitutes sauntering down the sidewalks. Sometimes a drug dealer

moves into one of the apartments, and people come on foot or park their cars close by, disappear into the dwelling for a little while and then discreetly exit. Buchanan has a large population of homeless people who also travel the streets of these neighborhoods. Many white, middle class people dismiss the area as unsafe and unsavory, though they may have spent very little time here. It is these diverse neighborhoods, and others like them, which many of the students in the Wilson County School District call home.

Wilson County is considered a good school district. The schools are well-funded and many students are highly successful. However, the district has been criticized for years because of disparities in performance and discipline of students. This study began in February 2015, during a period of uncertainty and transition in the school district. The superintendent had resigned a few months before, and the school board had appointed an interim superintendent as the search for a new leader began. A committee was undertaking major redistricting efforts; tension rose as attendance boundaries were debated. The Wilson County chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) publicly criticized the school district on a number of occasions for some of the same concerns the Equity Council had raised: distribution of school funding ("NAACP: Funding," 2015) and gaps in test scores and suspension rates between white and minority students ("NAACP Questions," 2015). Then, a high-ranking state education official sent a warning letter to the school board about the district's failure to close achievement gaps and unsatisfactory efforts to support its low-performing schools ("Education,"

2015). The letter threatened that the state would audit the district if the concerns outlined in the letter were not quickly addressed.

The Wilson Equity Council was founded in 1994 to monitor disparities in the school system and make recommendations for improvement. At the first several Equity Council meetings I attended beginning in January 2014, I was one of few people in the audience. However, attendance picked up when the annual Equity Report was released later in September and as the events described above occurred.

This study seeks to answer the following research question:

How does an equity council function in a school district in the southeastern region of the United States?

In this chapter, the findings from interviews, council documents, newspaper accounts, observations and video recordings of meetings will be presented through the structural, human resource, political and symbolic frames. I will discuss the eleven themes identified in interview data in the frames in which they were most apparent, as shown in Table 4.1.

The Structural Frame

Impressions. Equity Council meetings are held in the Wilson County School District central office, an older, well-maintained brick building near downtown Buchanan. The council meets monthly in a room on the second floor. This room could have been a classroom years ago; it is a long space with beige floor tiles and large, mullioned windows along one wall. The seating arrangements divide the space in half. The fifteen council members, the superintendent, an administrative assistant

and two liaisons to the council who are employed by the district sit on the meeting side at long banquet tables arranged in a rectangle.

Table 4.1

Interview Themes and Applicable Frames

Themes	Structural	Human Resource	Political	Symbolic
Strengths of members		X		
Diversity		X		
Interdependence		X	X	
Community			X	X
Respect and legitimacy			X	
Data	X			X
The unknown				X
Negotiation			X	
Goals	X			
Transitions	X			
Internal processes	X			

Council members place white cardstock table tents on their tables. Their names are printed too small to see from the audience, but I have learned most of their names as I attended meetings. White skirts are draped over the fronts of the tables, adding to the formality of the setting. Behind the table where the superintendent and council chair sit, audiovisual equipment will project slides and broadcast the meeting on the public access cable television channel. In the other half of the room, the audience observes the action of the council meeting from rows of hard plastic chairs.

The Equity Council conducts meetings in an orderly manner, following an agenda which varies little from month to month. The council members are polite and professional, and even when they are dissatisfied, often imply their frustration through a few courteously-worded questions. The council chair begins the February meeting by greeting everyone with a smile: "I see that we have a lot of special guests

in our audience, and so it's a pleasure to have everybody here. Even though it's a little chilly outside, we promise that it will be warm in here and that you will feel welcome." He then calls on a council member to read the mission statement. When there are few members in the audience, the chair asks them to stand, one by one, to introduce themselves. In a typical meeting, after the chair conducts housekeeping items such as approval of minutes, members of the public who have requested to address the council have a few minutes to speak. If no one has asked to speak, principals present information about their schools, and the Equity Council committees provide updates of their work.

Council meetings flow smoothly, like an ensemble following the musical score and direction from the conductor. Council members understand what is expected at meetings and comply with the norms for conduct and procedure. Before the school principals started presenting at meetings, the district employees usually said very little. This was a surprise at my first council meeting in January 2014. I kept waiting for the conflict to begin between the council members and the district employees, but instead, the meeting was cordial, formal and procedural. It was like heading out to a Metallica concert but ending up at the symphony. I was confused by the tranquility of the meeting and suspected that the school district had somehow silenced council members. However, as the months passed during the study period, I began to realize that the situation was more complicated than I had first assumed.

I served on a school council at one of the schools where I taught. I was excited at first. I imagined that we would brainstorm ways to make the school better, get feedback and ideas from the faculty, and together map out plans for action. But

during the first or second meeting, I realized the principal was in complete control of the council, and our main duty was going to be approving field trip and purchase requests. I was disappointed that with all the problems at the school that we could discuss and try to address, we were going to spend our time shuffling paperwork. Once, a council member challenged our arrangement in the nicest, most innocuous way. The principal reacted venomously. After that, I felt council meetings were just another meaningless obligation.

I believe that general observation of city council and school board meetings, and my experiences on the school council have caused me to become more attuned to actions that I would consider perfunctory. I do not have the highest regard for these duties, because I believe that while they might be necessary, they also can give the appearance that action is being taken, when in reality technical issues are being addressed, leaving the real underlying problems untouched. I need to be aware of my inclination to notice and focus on the routine, technical activities of the council to the exclusion of evidence of other types of action the group takes. Awareness of this tendency might be most important in the reporting of evidence and interpretations.

Role and responsibilities of the council. The council's bylaws place the group in an advisory role to the school board. The council is responsible for monitoring, assessing and recommending policies and programs that will increase student achievement. The group also is supposed to collaborate with the board of education to ensure the district meets its equity goals by providing guidance and recommendations for equity. The bylaws document the process for electing or appointing members to the council, the responsibilities of the committees of the

Equity Council, a protocol for meetings, the items to include on agendas, and the procedures for going into a closed session. They state that unless previously advertised, council meetings will take place in the meeting room at the district central office. The bylaws also provide for changes to the bylaws; they can be amended after a first and second reading at two consecutive meetings of the board of education, with a majority vote.

Although the council formed in the early 1990s, the bylaws were not developed and adopted until several years later. The move to create bylaws incited discord and alarm among council members. Newspaper articles reported the drama; the debate, according to an article from the local paper, centered on the amount of control the school board should have over the council ("Bylaws Plan," 2000). School board members at the time argued that when the council was created, the board had not clearly defined the role of the council, the duties of members, or explained how new members were to be elected. The bylaws were needed, board members and the superintendent claimed, to give structure to the council and increase the group's credibility.

Some council members agreed, but others reacted with distrust. They suspected that the board's real motive was to limit the power of the council by stating what the council could and could not do. One member observed that the council was at a crossroads. Another member stated that the board would not dare to abolish the council, but the real purpose of the push to create bylaws was to create dissention in the council, and thus impair its capacity to ask challenging questions.

I asked three current members about the bylaws, and the structure of the council as an advisory group to the board. Contrary to the concerns cited by previous council members in the news article, none of the three participants offered criticism. I asked Mr. Blakeman how the bylaws and the structure of the council affected the work. He confirmed the reporting relationship of the council to the board, and added "I really don't know what we could do with the bylaws or the structure of the organization that would help the work. I don't think they're particularly restricting."

I also asked Mr. Hampton about the role of the council as compared to other community groups that do not have a formalized role in the district:

> TR[4]: There are in some large school districts, parent and community groups that push very strongly for changes to education, and they are not affiliated with the district. And then the Equity Council has a formal structure with the district…Do you find that structure has taken away any freedom or ability to get work done?
>
> Mr. Hampton: I don't think the structure or the relational structure in and of itself has… I see the structure as we're sort of ongoing auditors of their movements relative to equity…I think there are more advantages than disadvantages to the structure. For that body that is not sort of contiguous to the district, or that educational sort of municipality, it may in perception give folks more freedom. But the way that I perceive the structure as it is now, I have full freedom to say and to express as if I would if I were in a structure

[4] TR = Tara Rodriguez

> that was not adjoined. The adoption of the structure, I think the symbol of the adoption of the structure is powerful.

Although not a member of the council at the time, Ms. Williams was familiar with the controversy that surrounded the adoption of the bylaws. Her beliefs aligned with Mr. Hampton's: before the adoption of the bylaws, the group had not enjoyed any special benefits that were lost when the bylaws were created. She described the transition, and the reasons why the council agreed to adopt the bylaws:

> What I think members of the Equity Council did was very carefully maintained their independent stance, and so they would do the work of the Equity Council and report it to the board. Because in essence, there wasn't anything other than that the Equity Council could do even when it was an external organization to the board, because the only other step it could take was a legal step, suing the school board or suing the district. But that wouldn't have gotten information on a steady stream fused into the district. So I think when the Equity Council looked at the fact that they could get a relationship that would help to sustain activities from the Equity Council into changes at the policy level of the school district, that you know—some people agreed and some people didn't—but it seemed like a better option at the time.

The council operates at the discretion of the school board, as pointed out by a news article ("Bylaws Plan," 2000) and some participants. The board also has influence over the council through its authority to appoint the majority of members to the council. In interviews, a few council members referenced the fact that the bylaws

allow the council to choose five of the fifteen members; the school board appoints the other ten. Only one participant mentioned that the council's lack of authority over the appointment of ten of its members sometimes presents a problem; this participant also said there was nothing the council could do about it. Other participants did not question or criticize this provision of the bylaws. A newspaper article printed during the time the bylaws were being drafted states that some council members had proposed changing the number of members each board member could appoint from two to one in an attempt to reduce the school board's control over the council ("Schools' Equity," 2001). If this change had been approved, the school board would appoint five members, and the council would appoint ten.

Goals. The main goals of the council are contained within the Equity Report, an annual joint project of the council and district. The title page of the fourth annual Equity Report states that the goal of the Equity Council is to eliminate race, poverty, disability and gender as predictors of success in the Wilson County School District. Each of the nine Indicators of Equity—student achievement, college and career readiness rates, graduation rates, dropout rates, suspension rates, identification for special education, participation in gifted and talented programs, enrollment in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses and programs, and staff diversity—represent goal areas for the council. The aim of the Equity Report, according to the letter from the council chair at the beginning of the document, is to monitor progress toward these nine focus areas.

The body of the report presents quantitative data on the nine Indicators of Equity. The first section addresses student achievement. Four graphs depict the

achievement of groups disaggregated by race, gender, free or reduced lunch status and identified disability status in reading, and four graphs show the achievement of these groups in math. Below the graphs, a few paragraphs of text explain the graphs and the data, and a bulleted list highlights the numerical gaps in achievement between various student populations. Afterward, the school district responds with several pages that list and describe the programs and other efforts being planned and implemented to improve the numbers. This structure is repeated for the other Indicators of Equity.

Since gaps are highlighted throughout the document (e.g., the gap between the assessment scores of white students and those of African-American students, the gap between the percentage of African-American students and the percentage of African-American teachers) it appears that the goal is to close all gaps, and presumably any decrease in a gap signifies progress. In interviews, participants identified the nine Indicators of Equity found in the Equity Report as the council goals.

Council members appear to know the goals of the group. Although participants felt positively about the goals the council has adopted, the group is working on a large number of initiatives, which may make it difficult to stay focused. Goals and initiatives also appear in several different places (nine Indicators of Equity, ten recommendations, assorted problems assigned to committees) which may contribute to difficulty in keeping track of the work.

The release of the Equity Report. The fourth annual Wilson School District Equity Report was released at the regular council meeting in September 2014. Observation and later review of the meeting recording shows the council member

who leads the creation of the Equity Report projecting the results of the report on a screen at the front of the room. The findings were disappointing; even after several years of effort, little progress was made toward closing the gaps according to the analysis. This council meeting was significant in that the group discussed future plans, and they expressed their frustration more strongly than I observed at any other meeting. The council chair said,

> It's pretty obvious that we've reached a point now where I think we all agree on one thing: we're not moving forward. And I think that all of us in the room wants that to occur; however, we've been talking and talking, but it's not happening.

The council began a discussion on what the group should do next. Ideas ranged from initiating conversation, to making recommendations, to imposing mandates. One council member spoke in favor of engaging school personnel in conversations:

> We need to start the conversation back from the schools, back and forth. It seems like all we've done is really make a recommendation to the board…I think that we need to take this another step and have the conversations with the schools.

The council chair expressed frustration because of the group's previous work that had been unfruitful. In his usual calm voice, he said,

> I'm not saying that there's no need to not have additional conversations, but at some point in time, you have to ask yourself, "When is it enough?" You know, either folks are going to do, and be held accountable, or either they're

> not….We've asked people, and we've tried to talk with different leaders, and as the data suggest, this is still not moving, and that's a large concern.

Another council member spoke out in favor of a mandate, saying that

> If it's not mandated, then we are waiting on a chance for them to have an overnight epiphany, and they'll start doing things. So I'm thinking that in spite of the push back, we need to push forward.

The school board chair who was at the table said that he would be amenable to council recommendations to end out-of-school suspensions in the district and mandate training in Culturally Responsive Teaching to all teachers in the district. After some discussion, another council member pointed out the gap in communication between the council and the schools. She felt there was a need to hold individual schools accountable for their results. She said,

> One of the things that we have in this [Equity Report][5] is an aggregate of all the schools in the district. I don't see that there's accountability from each school in that we ask the principals—the directors and principals…to come and explain their gaps. And I think that part of having accountability and measurable outcomes means that we have to engage at that level—the individual schools…It really means we need accountability.

Through discussion, the group began to craft a list of recommendations that it later presented to the school board. The discussion was calm at all times, and though members expressed their dissatisfaction, no one became visibly angry or upset. The board not only approved the council's recommendations, but by the November school

[5] [ ] means that I inserted text, either for clarification, or a pseudonym to protect confidentiality

board meeting, the meeting recording showed that the board had drafted and presented an implementation plan. The district's progress toward fulfilling the ten recommendations is communicated in two ways: it is posted on the council's web page (which is on the district's web site), and in the Equity Council report at school board meetings.

The ten recommendations also became areas the council and school board monitor, in addition to the nine Indicators of Equity in the Equity Report. I asked a few participants how council members decide on the recommendations they will make. Mr. Maxwell explained how the council determines the recommendations for the school board:

> We put together a group of things that we think are critical for us to make these improvements. For example, we decided to say, "We need to do something about minority hiring." We think that will help in a lot of ways for schools to be able to deal with cultural issues that they may not be aware of. We have to diversify the faculty and staff according to your student population. So we come up with a list of recommendations every year, at least we try to—that we think will improve in all these areas of concern that we have. Like for this year, one of the things--we need better minority recruiting and hiring. So we just found a position—we just filled that position for minority recruiting and hiring practices. We need better training for teachers on cultural issues so we came up with the culture training….So we make those recommendations as a group in terms of what we think needs to be in front of the board.

Participants generally seemed to have faith in the school board's capacity to effect change in the district. However, the school board does not have the authority to control every facet of practice within the schools. Individual schools have some autonomy through their school councils in several areas, including curriculum. On the district web site, the Wilson County School Board posts a policy on curriculum and instruction that states that schools must implement a multicultural approach in all programs and practices. The policy says that the approach must be documented in the schools' and district's improvement plans, and the Equity Council will have the opportunity to review this component of the plans and offer feedback. Results from the implementation of the multicultural curriculum and instructional practices will be measured by closing of gaps in performance on achievement test scores by race, level of proficiency in English, and socioeconomic status.

The board's curriculum policy also states that the school council at each school in the district must develop its own policy on curriculum; this responsibility aligns with a state statute on school councils. Another board policy regarding the district's school councils discusses the policies the councils must develop and adopt, and encourages each council to adopt a multicultural policy. Therefore, the school board does not have sole authority to determine the curriculum that schools will use; the state, individual schools and teachers also have some control in this decision.

The council works toward and monitors a large number of goal areas: the nine Indicators of Equity, the ten recommendations to the board, plus the other problems people bring to the council that go to the committees for study. A participant shared that the group also will start to work soon with project-based

learning, because educational experts have endorsed this approach as a way to engage students' different learning styles. Reactions from participants in interviews were somewhat mixed, but in general most participants had positive opinions about the council's goals. Ms. Davis pointed out the breadth of the topic of equity and the range of areas the council monitors:

> It goes from equity of faculty all the way down to the students, and it varies so much, you know, the businesses that we use, and we purchase products from, I mean, it's so wide-ranged.

When asked her opinion about the scope of equity goal areas under the council's purview, Ms. Davis responded,

> I think it is broader than I had thought it was going into it, but I think it's important. I think it's good because we're hitting every avenue, and I think that we make sure that we don't leave anything untouched. People on the Equity Council are really driven to make the district improve in that aspect, and I feel like it's good that we're so broad. Although of course, you know, that spreads us thinner, we have less time or focus on one area. But I think it's good we have covered every topic.

Mr. Maxwell felt that the council should have more goals than the current nine Indicators of Equity but should only concentrate on a few goals at a time:

> I think if we streamline our focuses, and start focusing on two or three items at a time, before we move on to anything else—let's fix two or three things…and then we move on to the next stages of it.

Table 4.2 summarizes the ten recommendations and the progress notes the district provided that are posted on the council's web page. Several of the ten recommendations consist of monitoring, reporting and task completion. For example, two of the ten recommendations have to do with adding the Indicators of Equity to agendas and reports. Two other recommendations have to do with adding minority educator percentages to board reports and the information sent to principals when they are hiring new staff.

Table 4.2

Summary of the Council's Ten Recommendations to the Board

Recommendation	Summary	District progress as of June, 2015
1	Create supports for attention to students' mental health issues. This recommendation was identified as a "primary need" for improvement in behavior, discipline and achievement.	Contracts have been awarded to mental health providers to work in schools. Training was provided to around 100 district employees in mental health first aid. Behavioral health screenings were conducted at three schools.
2	District Human Resources department should routinely send minority candidate information to principals and ask about steps being taken to make sure staff diversity reflects student diversity at the school. This information would be reported to the Council.	Human Resources is sending e-mails to principals when they request to hire. E-mails include the school's staff and student diversity data and a reminder from the superintendent on the importance of diversity.
3	Ensure that school leadership teams use the Equity Report as they create their school improvement plans.	The district leadership team compiled a list of goals for the district. The team used the district improvement plan and the

Table 4.2 (continued)

Recommendation	Summary	District progress as of June, 2015
		Equity report to create the draft.
4	Regularly analyze educator effectiveness data to ensure that teacher and principal quality is consistent across all schools.	The district is extracting data for a report on teacher/principal evaluation results.
5	Hire a full-time monitor for staff diversification who will report on progress to the Council.	Participation in job fairs in several states; development of a strategic plan for the Recruitment of Minorities Team.
6	District leadership team should put the nine Indicators of Equity on their bi-weekly agenda to report on progress.	Leadership team is using Equity Report to work on ideas to assist low-performing schools.
7	Create a review schedule for each of the nine Indicators of Equity and identify district personnel accountable for each area.	Draft of the fifth annual Equity Report is being reviewed by the Council, then will be sent to board for adoption.
8	Establish a transition setting for students who are re-entering the school system late in the semester after outside placement (e.g. upon return from alternative school, juvenile justice system).	Team members have discussed how to design a program and the essential components it should include.
9	Board report should include not only the percentages of minority staff members at each school but also the students, so school leaders can see which areas of staff population need to change in order to reflect the diversity of the student population.	This recommendation will be added to the reporting process to the board.
10	Principals and directors of schools with the highest gaps should be required to share their plans for closing gaps with the Council and school board.	Schools have been presenting to the Council at each monthly meeting since January 2015.

The council's meetings chiefly consist of updates of committee work and principals' presentations. Meeting minutes and observations show that after the chair greets everyone, he calls on someone to read the mission statement. Then, if a quorum of council members is present, they vote on whether to accept the minutes from the previous meeting. If a community member has arranged to address the council in advance, she or he is called to the microphone. Typically, either one or no community members address the council. When principals are scheduled to present, their reports come next. Principals are supposed to take around ten minutes to present, but they often take much longer. Sometimes, if the meeting is running long, the council chair will ask the principals, in a polite way, to please stick to their allotted time. Even then, he often has to gently remind them when their time is running short. After each principal presentation, council members take five minutes or so to ask questions. After the principals' presentations, committee chairs give updates on their groups' work. Sometimes, if the committee has compiled a report, the update might take twenty or thirty minutes. Usually, however, each update lasts five or ten minutes. Many times, one or more committees have not met that month. When that occurs, the committee leader either declines to give an update or tells the council chair when their next meeting will occur and the plans for that session.

Committees. As shared in interviews, council members must serve on at least one committee. The bylaws establish the five standing committees of the council and state that the committees are responsible for completing any tasks the council assigns them. Much of the groundwork of the council occurs in the committees. According to the bylaws, committees may research topics, gather input

from the community, and bring issues to the council. Committees each have several topics upon which they focus. I asked one of the district liaisons for a copy of the committee meetings list. The document includes each committee name, the topics it addresses, the name and e-mail of the committee chair, and the other members' names and e-mail addresses. Although a couple of committees have only one focus, most are assigned between six and sixteen topics, ranging from religious holidays to legislative action. If someone brings a concern to the council, the council may create a committee to study the problem and report back.

I observed a meeting of the Indicators of District Equity Committee in February 2015. The Indicators of District Equity Committee monitors quantitative data related to equity through the lens of race, socioeconomic status and gender. The council's committees list states that the findings from the Indicators of District Equity Committee can be used for accountability and inform the district about schools that are making progress toward student achievement goals. This committee also works with school district personnel on the collection of data that the district provides to be used in the Equity Report.

The committee meeting took place at the district central office but in a smaller room than the one where council meetings occur. The meeting began around 1:00 p.m. Three committee members and district employees from the data department sat around tables arranged in a horseshoe shape. The committee chair gave everyone three handouts: a list of student assessments, a monitoring schedule, and a table of contents for the next Equity Report.

The meeting was a work session in which committee members and the district employees discussed processes and procedures for getting the data for the Equity Report, timelines, and persons responsible for completing the tasks. The conversation stayed on topic, and the mood was relaxed and friendly; occasionally, someone would make a joke, and everyone would laugh. The dialogue primarily involved the committee chair and one of the district employees who works with data, but other attendees seemed to feel comfortable making comments and asking questions. By the end of the meeting, attendees had agreed on the process and tentative timeline that the district employees and committee would follow in preparing the data for the Equity Report.

Work processes of the council. In addition to the areas from the Equity Report that the council monitors, community members also contact council members with concerns they encounter with the district. When a problem comes to the council, members often analyze data, especially quantitative data, to research the problem and determine whether there is evidence to support that an inequitable situation exists. Ms. Stevens described the process the council uses to determine whether a situation constitutes unfair treatment using the council's work with suspension rates as an example:

> So obviously somebody in the council or the school system or community said, "It looks like you're suspending kids of color more than kids of not color." So then that became a charge to us. So we asked the school board to give us the data; we looked to see if there is warrant, and if there is, our job is to try to give some solutions, and to stay on it.

Ms. Williams' response agreed with Ms. Stevens' account of the use of data to establish whether the council is justified in investigating a problem. Ms. Williams also described how the council might respond if an inequitable situation were found through the data analysis:

> What the Equity Council does is gather data from all sources…wherever there are community groups gathering information about how these communities are functioning, if it impacts on the kids in our school district, the Equity Council will look at that. For example, one year a group of related service providers approached one of our committees and said, "Teachers and service providers are the ones who are spending their money to provide resources for kids in schools," because there is an inequitable distribution of moneys that the district would give to particular groups for occupational therapy, perhaps, for speech therapy, for teachers of English as a Second Language, for teachers of Extended School Year Services; they weren't getting equal sums to provide pencils, papers, crayons, whatever—I mean the basic things that kids needed—the kids that they worked with. So the Equity Council approached that issue, put it in one of the reports, and very quickly the district got on that, because it was a problem, I guess, of not recognizing the problem was there.

Ms. Williams' account shows how the council's attention to inequitable funding led to change. Her statements also show that the council sometimes obtains information through collaboration with other groups.

Summary of the structural frame. The council follows bylaws that establish many of the roles, responsibilities and processes of the group. The bylaws formalize the relationship of the council as an advisory group to the school board. The council is responsible for evaluating and monitoring programs and policies geared toward increasing student achievement, and for reporting this information to the school board. Participants overall seemed satisfied with the bylaws and with the structure of the council.

The council works toward several goals ranging from decreasing the number of suspensions in the district to increasing student achievement and the number of minority educators working in the schools. The nine Equity Indicators, which are found in the Equity Report, comprise the council's goals, although goals are not explicitly stated. In October 2014, the council sent ten recommendations to the school board. These recommendations were intended to catalyze improvement toward the nine Indicators of Equity in the Equity Report. In general, participants expressed favorable opinions about the number and scope of goals in the council's charge.

In addition to working toward and monitoring the goals and ten recommendations, the council members investigate concerns brought to them by community members and organizations. The committees often examine these matters, using data to research and analyze them to determine whether the problem is caused by an inequitable practice or policy, and whether it should be brought before the council.

The Human Resource Frame

Impressions. Before council meetings, the room looks and sounds like other pleasant gatherings, like family dinners and neighborhood meetings, when everyone catches up with the people they have not seen for a while. Small groups of well-dressed people converse standing around the room, while others sit in the audience and talk. A few sit around the table, looking over their meeting documents. The room hums with conversation. The council chair smiles, shaking hands and greeting people around the room. By the end of the study period, council members greet me as well, waving to me from across the room, or coming up to ask "How's the dissertation coming?" I grin and reply, "Slow, but I think it's going to be good!" District employees and council members smile as they chat; the mood is peaceful and content. Just before 6:00, people finish their conversations and begin to go to their seats in the audience or around the meeting tables. A few council members grab a bag of chips or bottle of water the district provides for them from the cart at the side of the room. Although meetings follow formal rules of order, council members, the council liaisons, and the school board member usually call each other by their first names. They use more formal titles to refer to or address the principals and interim superintendent.

The council members have treated me graciously during this study. At first, a few of them were understandably wary and curious about why I chose to study equity. I wanted to study equity because of what I was learning in my doctoral classes, but my personality and background also contributed to this decision. I grew up in a middle class, suburban household. I was always an excellent student, quiet and

obedient. As a teenager, I spent a lot of my free time alone. Over time, my loneliness turned to anger. There were several reasons for this, but here I will just share that I became aware of hypocrisy everywhere—from my family, my classmates and society. I had at first wanted to fit in and be one of the popular students at school, but trying to create an acceptable image to be noticed and pretending like I cared about the trivial concerns of the elite crowd was exhausting and not worth the effort. Over time, my critical nature became more focused. Instead of an indiscriminate anger, I learned to analyze problems. I found that once I understood a problem better, I might be able to think of some action I could take, which gave me hope.

The Equity Council is trying to improve education—something I care deeply about. Despite my high regard and appreciation for the council and its work, I did not think it likely that I would "go native" or side with the Equity Council members, completely accepting their viewpoints and interpretations in this study. In fact, because of my critical nature, I need to be aware of my tendency to look for fault, so that I also can be open to strength. I believe the potential for focusing on limitations to the exclusion of strengths will be most likely to occur in Chapter 5, where I interpret the data I have collected.

Composition and strengths of the council. The council is diverse racially and with respect to gender. Of the fifteen members, nine are African-American, one is Asian, three are Latino, and two are white. Eight members are female, and seven are male. While the membership of the council is diverse with respect to race and gender, the levels of education and income among members appear to vary less. Most, if not all members are white-collar professionals with high levels of formal

education. At least three people on the council have doctoral degrees; a few members are faculty at colleges. One is currently a teacher in the district, and others work in white-collar positions in nonprofit organizations, and city and state government. At least two members are retired, one of whom was a school principal in the district.

In interviews, participants mostly expressed respect and esteem for their colleagues on the council. Ms. Montgomery and Ms. Davis stated that it was an honor to serve on the council. Some of the qualities that were most often used to describe council members fell into the areas of expertise and diverse perspective, leadership, and community connections. Four participants identified member expertise as a strength of the council. This quality also was related to diversity in perspective, which participants seemed to value. For example, Ms. Davis stated that,

> We've got professors, and we've got people really focused in education who have been teachers for a long time, and people that are into the health aspect of things and the disability aspect of things…so we've got different kinds of people who do different things, that can bring something to the table.

Mr. Moore conveyed a similar view:

> I think that the chemistry that we have on the Equity Council is really good. Everybody is looking at the situations and discussions from different perspectives. At the end of the day, everybody's role is the same, which is, it's all about the kids. But just through all the discussions, the input that everybody is giving, is keeping everybody's minds turning and thinking and looking at things from different perspectives.

Mr. Maxwell shared that he would like to diversify the membership of the council further by including more educators:

> I would love to have more school leadership on the Equity Council, to bring that piece to the table. It's already good, with having a board member on there; a [Wilson County] board member is good to have, the superintendent on there, but I would also like to see school leadership involved—and when I say school leadership I mean principals, assistant principals—to serve on there. But I think we need to invite everybody to the table. And I'm not for sure yet that we have everybody around the table that needs to be around the table to get to true change, and I think it's going to fortify our partnership and our relationship.

Two participants referred to their colleagues as leaders. Mr. Fields felt that the leadership and tenacity of the council chair strengthen the group and the chair "has a mission and he's sticking with it. He has an agenda; he's pushing it as hard as he can."

Two participants mentioned council members' connections to the community as important, and a third said that when deciding on new members for the council, he would see value in a prospective new colleague's ties to the community. To illustrate this point, Mr. Hampton said,

> I consider that there are individuals on there that are very enmeshed in community work, and if I looked around the table and didn't see folks that have their finger on the current pulse of the community, I would be concerned.

Five participants referred to the high levels of passion, motivation or drive of the members of the council. However, two of the five participants noticed that some council members have less enthusiasm or drive to get the work done than others. One of these two participants believed that with more effort from some council members, more could be accomplished:

> I do think that if we had more than half a dozen people or so that were really dedicated to this we could get more done. And, you know, I believe that they all have good intentions. But when it comes to actually doing the work—and there are different family circumstances and whatever, some do what they're able to do, and they're not able to do much. But in my mind then they shouldn't be on the council. That's not to say it's adversarial at all. They are all—at least they're doing this.

Another participant also perceived a difference in the zeal of veteran council members and the newer members, saying that

> I don't think all of the members are on board, because obviously we rotate in and out. So you have a few members that have been on there for quite a while, and then you have a few members that are new, that still are on board but don't have that passion and haven't been through the fights, per se, as some of the older Equity Council members have been. So I think everybody is [on board] in a sense but some have a deeper fire than others.

At some meetings during the study period, I noticed that there were as many (or more) district employees at the meeting as council members. Council member attendance is inconsistent. At any given meeting, only a couple of members might be

absent. But the next month, this might change drastically. During the study period, there were two months when over half of the council members were absent. I wondered what kind of message the empty chairs were sending to the district. Directors and school principals had come at the council's request, and half the council was absent.

One participant singled out attendance as an area for improvement of the council, pointing out that although members may have legitimate reasons for missing meetings, when they are absent, they miss information. Furthermore, without a quorum, the council cannot vote, which causes delays. One participant explained her absences from committee meetings. Ms. Montgomery shared that committee meetings are often held during business hours, and she cannot leave work to attend. She expressed regret, saying that "I wish I could do more, but it is not possible for me."

Although participants expressed commitment to their work on the council, a few participants noted that some members show more dedication and willingness to work than others. Council member attendance is an area of concern. Even though members who have to miss may have legitimate reasons for absence, when there are high numbers of absences, the ability of the council to proceed may be hindered.

Motivation to serve. Study participants gave several reasons for serving on the council, such as a concern about the disparities in services students receive in the district, the desire to help students and the community, and requests from board members or others to serve. Two participants wanted to serve partly because of childhood experiences. One participant, Mr. Blakeman, said that he was the first

high-school graduate from his family; he said, "I don't ever forget where I came from. And that's part of why I need to give, I need to help people." Another participant, Ms. Davis, said that she wanted to work with minority students and their families in the district because of her own experiences as a minority student growing up in a mostly-white town. In describing the difficulties her parents had in working with the school she said,

> I feel like I could have achieved so much more had they been more informed, and I've always kind of carried that with me, and I thought this would be a good opportunity to kind of work with the school system to help promote that.

Opportunities to learn. Three participants identified the opportunity to learn about the schools as a benefit of participating on the council. Another participant added that that the committee meetings are a good place to learn about the work of the council. The district also employs two liaisons to the council, Ms. Jones and Mr. Hubbard.[6] These liaisons facilitate the work of the council in several ways. According to the council's bylaws, the role of the liaisons is to assist with council meetings, provide reports and updates to the council on district initiatives, and serve as a resource for council members. The liaisons also facilitate or provide training to council members at the yearly retreat. I asked Ms. Stevens what council members do at retreats. She said that

> Each retreat every year is a little bit different, because whatever we feel is a need is what we want to be trained about is what we ask [Ms. Jones] to go out

[6] Shortly after the study period ended, I learned in an Equity Council meeting that the district had dissolved the office of the two liaisons to the Equity Council. Another district employee subsequently took over some of their Equity Council responsibilities.

> and do. So last year we said, "We want to know the cultural training that you're going out and doing, so let us see and feel how it looks." So that's what they did, that was part of our training. This year she--she opens it up every year, "What do you want, to make you a better council member, what do you want?" and so those people who have ideas share it…So it's up to the council members.

Meeting observations show that Ms. Jones asks council members for their input as she plans the retreats. For the past two years, retreats have been held in the evening after the regular June council meeting.

Mr. Maxwell also identified having the opportunity to attend the same cultural responsiveness training as district employees as a benefit:

> I think that was a success and an improvement, because we have to see and hear the same things that I think the whole district is seeing. So I think that we can get an understanding of the culture of the district and the practices that are being used to move the district in a better place.

Mr. Harris said that meeting individually with principals has helped him learn firsthand about the schools while building relationships. He felt that meeting with principals would be beneficial to the council if members' schedules allow:

> Again, I recognize that a lot of people's jobs just don't give them that type of flexibility. They don't have that type of time to be able to go in and meet with the principal or go in and meet with a director or somebody of that nature. But if you can, it's going to be to your advantage. It'll just give you a better

understanding of exactly what's happening. Then, you can effect change. That's going to be the key.

As discussed in the structural frame, at least one council member feels at a disadvantage because of a lack of knowledge about the school district. Also, when I asked Mr. Fields how the council might improve, he said that he would like more training for council members, especially if the council could hear from experts and learn what is going on in education in different parts of the country.

Having access to support and the opportunity to learn and grow are important facets of the human resource frame. The council members indicated positive opinions toward the knowledge and capacity of their colleagues. Some participants noted that council members learn from participation on committees. Principals also provide information about their schools at meetings. Supports like the yearly retreat are available to members to build their knowledge and understanding of the district work, thus increasing their effectiveness as council members.

Relationships and discussion. I asked several participants how people on the council get along, and they all responded that relationships are good. However, most participants did not elaborate on this simple declaration; in spite of the high regard members generally have for each other, I did not see or hear evidence that most or all council members know each other very well. For example, a couple of participants did not seem to realize that one council member is currently a full-time teacher in the district, and another is a former administrator. One participant referred to council members as "my brothers and sisters." And when I asked Mr. Fields about relationships between council members, he replied, "I think they're very good,

positive, and very respectful. A lot of encouragement, 'Look, speak up, how do you feel, what do you think?' I've known-what I know is very positive, very encouraging." Nevertheless, overall, interviews did not suggest strong, personal connections between members.

The council meets once a month, and not all committees meet monthly. The retreat occurs once a year. Members may not have had or created many opportunities to get to know each other. Although they sit together around the table at council meetings, the formality of the setting does not encourage candid, deep discussion. I reviewed the video recorded council meeting from February 2015, and recorded the activities in which the council engaged and how time was spent. I selected this date because it was a typical meeting, and there was no special event on the agenda. Table 4.3 also shows the questions that council members asked.

Table 4.3

Council Meeting Topics and Questions

Time[a]	Activity
00:00:00	Welcome; reading of the mission statement; introduction of directors and guests; housekeeping items (annual award, inviting a student to each meeting, possible speakers at the annual retreat); chair thanks members for prompt responses to e-mails; member proposes for council to meet twice a month instead of once—no action taken
00:13:00	Update on district progress on the ten recommendations. Council member points out a correction that needs to be made; tenth recommendation is a segue into principal presentations—time allotted is 10 minutes for each presentation, 5 minutes for questions
00:16:00	Principal from Lincoln Elementary presents. Majority of presentation is about school's involvement in an innovation program and implementation of project-based learning
00:32:00	Council members ask questions, principal responds.

Table 4.3 (continued)

Time[a]	Activity
00:39:00	Principal from Adams Middle School presents on what school is doing to decrease suspension rates. Starts with data on school and teacher demographics, then longitudinal suspension comparisons. Talks about what the school does in behavioral RTI, Tiers 1-3
00:52:30	Council members ask questions, principal responds.
1:03:00	Committee updates—First committee. Chair not here, liaison gives report. Committee is writing a proposal that council could submit to board. No one has any questions.
1:06:00	Committee updates—Second committee. Committee did not meet this month. Committee is trying to get some firm deadlines for obtaining data from the district. No one has any questions. Committee updates—Third committee. Chair not present. No one else can report. Committee updates—Fourth committee. Committee did not meet this month, but moving ahead with planned presentation for March about the engagement of women and minority owned businesses in the county.
1:08:00	Committee updates—Ad hoc committee. Sign with school's name still has not been put up. $3500 needed to purchase sign. A few minutes' of discussion on why sign has not been put up. Council chair is meeting soon with principal, will ask.
1:11:00	Committee updates--Council members serving on other district committees: District school rezoning committee, two public meetings coming up, council members encouraged to come. Question 1: One of these days is a school holiday, will the meeting still occur? Question 2: What time are the meetings?
1:14:00	Committee updates—Council members serving on other district committees. Special advisory committee, council member has been out of town but will meet with another member. This member is in the audience, offers to give a monthly update at council meetings
1:15:00	Committee update on behalf of an absent member on suspension committee. They have developed a data template for principals
1:16:00	Council chair thanks two members for agreeing to serve on two new

Table 4.3 (continued)

Time[a]	Activity
	committees
1:17:30	Question and update on the status of the Educator Diversity position. Applicant field narrowed, four candidates interviewed, background checks performed, close to a hiring decision Question 1: So we're choosing a candidate in the fashion in which the Equity Council recommended and which was approved by the board?
1:23:00	Meeting adjourned

As mentioned earlier, observations, meeting recordings and minutes show that much of the council's meeting time is devoted to listening to committee reports and principal presentations. The conversation at the meetings often focuses on what committees are working on and timelines for task completion. Since the principals have been coming to speak about the initiatives at their schools, much of the meeting time is devoted to their presentations. Although council members ask some questions after the principals' presentations, the time for questions is short. After the questions, either the next principal presentation begins, or the committees report on their work. In most of the meetings during the study period, two principals came to present each month. As noted in Table 4.3, the time that the council typically spends on discussion is short compared to the time spent listening to reports.

The questions that council members ask of principals often reflect a desire for clarification and more information. This observation aligns with some participants' comments that they wish to learn directly from principals what is going on in the schools. Table 4.4 shows the questions that council members asked of principals after their presentations during the meetings from February through May, 2015.

While participants expressed appreciation for the diverse perspectives of group members, I did not hear or see much evidence that members have many opportunities to learn more about those perspectives, or to discuss, question or critique beliefs, perceptions or the future.

Table 4.4

Questions About Principal Presentations

Month	School	Questions[a]
February	Lincoln Elementary	Question 1: Could you elaborate on the difference between "Research and Development" and "Development and Research"? (In reference to a point the principal made during the presentation)
		Question 2: Follow up from Question 1: Is that similar to, if students were learning to swim, throwing them in the deep end?
		Question 3: Is there a component in your project-based learning program where you train parents?
		Question 4: Is your new model going to address summer learning loss, and if so, how?
	Adams Middle	Question 1: What is RTI?
		Question 2: Is Restorative Justice a national program?
		Question 3: You started talking about changing everybody's attitude. What did you find most successful that other schools could try or learn from?
		Question 4: How does this work relate to your achievement gap?
		Question 5: Do you have research-based information about student engagement models?
March	Washington High, Grant Middle (asked together)	Question 1: Your data shows the number of suspension and in-school suspension days. Does this mean that some students could have been suspended more than once? Do you know how many students were suspended?
		Question 2: Are you getting more bang for the buck in working with the staff, with the kids, or with both?
		Question 3: If we surveyed your staff, would they say 'Our

Table 4.4 (continued)

Month	School	Questions[a]
		school is safe," would they say "I feel like I'm a better, more understanding teacher," or if we surveyed the kids, what would they say, the school is a safer place, the bullying is down? Question 4: With everything you've been doing at Washington High, how are you measuring the success of the efforts that you've been putting in to reduce the suspensions? Question 5: What are your thoughts about what we could possibly do with kids that get in a fight or have extreme behaviors that need a temporary placement for the rest of the day? What is it that you need, or the barriers that you face? Question 6: How do you plan to use staff diversity to continue to improve discipline and reduce suspension?
	Jefferson Elementary	Question 1: You mentioned something about [course reviews]. Can you elaborate on that? Question 2: (Follow-up from Question 1) So is your point that you're actually doing better than your [course review] indicated because you didn't document some things? Question 3: Are you able to hold your staff, and then when you have new staff, train them? Question 4: I know that mental health was a concern. What's the status now? Have you been able to put a team together that's addressing that now? Question 5: How are you involving parents in the process? Question 6: What tools are you using to measure your success?
April	Roosevelt Middle	Question 1: Could you explain about cognitive coaching, and give a little more elaboration? Question 2: When you look at trying to mitigate any issues that you guys may have, who is involved on your support team? Question 3: How are you raising reading and math scores? Question 4: How are you measuring your staff's effectiveness, and whether it's working or not? Question 5: I was looking at your office referral data from last year to this year, and the first question I have is how many new teachers do you have

Table 4.4 (continued)

Month	School	Questions[a]
		this year versus last year? And what are you doing differently now to reduce the office referrals?
		Question 6: What tools have been given to the teachers to help them on referrals?
		Question 7: On the slide that said you had assisted teachers 2000+ times, how much of that would cultural training eliminate?
	Cleveland High	Question 1: You had mentioned research-based intervention strategies. How does that correlate to student achievement?
		Question 2: What is your school doing to prepare kids so that they're college and career-ready?
	Fillmore School (an alternative school)	Question 1: What's the current census at Fillmore, total?
		Question 2: The 17 referrals in the 5 months since November, is that a reduction, or is that consistent? Has the new process reduced the number of referrals?
		Question 3: There have been concerns about students getting ready to leave Fillmore, there is sometimes no holding place, because the home school doesn't have a seat for that kid. Are we going to be able to address that type of situation?
		Question 4: When a young person transitions from Fillmore, what are some of the options that you all see? (e.g., skills training)
May	Jackson Middle	Question 1: Question about Column 4 and Column 8, how did you come up with the ratio?
		Question 2: Do you think there is a direct correlation between the mismatch between the diversity of student population and educator population to the issues that may be tied to cultural conflicts and misunderstandings?
		Question 3: Based on the programs you described, and the ones in place, on a scale from 10, with ten being the highest, down to 1, how do you see your school closing the achievement gap?
		Question 4: When were your programs implemented?
		Question 5: You went from 42 kids suspended to 41 kids

Table 4.4 (continued)

Month	School	Questions[a]
		suspended. The distribution has changed…but I'm just wondering if you've thought about tracking how well they [the programs] work in terms of these students' achievement.
	Garfield Elementary	Question 1: Tell us what you see as the greatest barrier to closing the achievement gap, and what you see as your strength in moving the gap.

[a]Some questions were paraphrased for brevity and clarity.

I observed a second committee meeting, the Evidence of District Equity committee. The meeting took place in April in a small conference room in a building off-site from the district central office. Three council members, including the committee and council chairs, and a district employee, an invited guest, and I sat around a long rectangular table. The guest spoke first in a presentation on her background and new position as a diversity official at a university. After a discussion on possible future collaboration with the Equity Council, the guest left.

The meeting continued, and committee members began to talk about regular business: minority hiring in the district. The mood was relaxed, but serious. The fact that one of the discussants was a district employee did not seem to matter; the four people seemed very comfortable speaking to each other. This discussion was different from those I observed in many council meetings in that it was more of a conversation in which all four people participated. The topic still involved numbers and how the committee would determine acceptable numbers of minority educators in the district. However, committee members were seeking to arrive at an understanding, and there was a give and take of ideas and views that I did not frequently observe in council meetings. In a council meeting, a member might ask a question, but upon

hearing the answer, would rarely respond again with additional information or a different viewpoint.[7] Likewise, other council members would be unlikely to draw the topic out into a deep discussion. Mr. Fields made a comment that captures this idea when he says that during meetings, council members respond "as an individual." He said,

> We need to have times for meetings just for us to talk about the issues and where we want to go. Meeting once a month isn't always enough. There are times we need to meet more and try to talk as a council instead of individuals. We'll have a meeting tonight, and we will react as an individual. A lot of information will come to us, and we have not seen it. We can do better if we get the information and then talk about it next month because then we have had time to talk to each other.

Conversation was observed in one committee, but all committees do not meet every month. There seem to be few other opportunities for the full council to have thoughtful discussions. It should be noted that the council does communicate through e-mail, but interviews suggest the purpose of most of these messages is logistical, to arrange meeting times and spaces and distribute documents that members need to review. Like Mr. Fields, Mr. Maxwell also wished the council could meet more often. He identified some other benefits and some alternatives to meeting more frequently:

> And another improvement could be possibly meeting more often….But, you know, make the meetings every two weeks, and that will also create more of a

[7] An exception to this statement is the September 2014 meeting, in which the council engaged in a lengthy discussion about how the group should respond to the lack of progress revealed in the Equity Report.

> sense of urgency to get things done than just once a month, maybe twice a month….My fear is, you can't do as much as you could do if you had more time involved.

However, when I asked Ms. Williams about informal or private meetings, her answer disagreed with Mr. Fields' viewpoint. She seemed to feel an obligation to maintain transparency for the public's benefit:

> I don't think that we need private meetings, because the issues that come to us come from the public. And so they need to—*anyone* ought to be able to sit in on any of our meetings. Sometimes one or two people may come together and talk about an issue that needs to go to a committee, and then go to the Equity Council. And so in a sense, that might be an informal meeting. But any information that comes out of that meeting can be shared publicly. So there are no closed-door meetings, you know, if that's what you mean. All of the meeting reports are available to the public. You cannot have an Equity Council that's having secret negotiations or meetings, because then you become like the people you're trying to change.

Ms. Stevens' mention of the information and meeting reports supports earlier observations of the use of meeting time for listening to presentations and reports. The term "secret negotiations" contrasts with Mr. Fields' use of the phrase "talk about the issues and where we want to go." The bylaws settle the question about private meetings, stating that all council and committee meetings are open to the public—therefore neither the full council nor the committees can hold meetings in private.

There are also some restrictions on what the council may discuss in meetings. Before the bylaws were developed, the council had begun investigating some female employees' allegations about intimidation by a district supervisor ("Equity Council,"1998). This investigation caused controversy, and council and school board members discussed and debated the council's role. The school board said that the group must not delve into personnel matters, but some members felt that they should proceed with the investigation anyway. They were angry about the limitations they believed were being imposed on them and threatened to disband the council. Later, language about topics the council may not include on their agendas was included in the bylaws. The bylaws state that the group cannot discuss any issues related to pending litigation against the board or individual personnel issues. There are no other restrictions on topics the council may discuss, and anyone—including members of the public—can submit items for the agenda.

Summary of the human resource frame. Participants value and respect the strengths of their fellow council members. In interviews, they most often referred to the diverse perspectives, expertise, leadership and colleagues' connections to the community as assets. All the participants I asked said that relationships between council members are good, with one member adding that relationships are "positive," "respectful" and "encouraging." A couple of participants noted differences in the levels of enthusiasm or willingness to contribute amongst some members.

Although participants speak very highly of each other in general, I did not see or hear evidence that relationships between council members are particularly close. Evidence did not suggest that there are many opportunities for members to get to

know each other or learn from each other through discussion. The council currently meets once a month, and although there are committees that also meet, some of them do not meet every month. Furthermore, attendance at council meetings varies, and occasionally there are not enough members present for a quorum.

Although opportunities for council members to learn about district initiatives do exist, options are not available in an ongoing, planned program. Council liaisons, who are employed by the district, facilitate a yearly retreat for the council, in which members choose topics they would like to learn more about. Discussion at meetings is limited; most meeting time is devoted to listening to principal presentations and reports. When council members do ask questions, they are usually seeking clarification, which rarely leads to deep discussion.

The Political Frame

Impressions. Between January and May, 2015, fifteen principals presented information about their schools to the Equity Council. Principals often bring other members of their leadership teams with them, and they sit side by side in front of the microphone set up for guests, facing the council chair and superintendent. Even when principals come to the meeting alone, one of the school directors often sits with them when they present to the council, as if to lend support.

Some of the principals speak with bravado; one confidently proclaims, "We're on the verge of an epic win…that's where we're headed with our students." Other principals are more subdued, speaking in monotones. Council members listen intently to the presentations. They look at the principals, at the slides, and at the

handouts. If on the inside they feel any frustration, disbelief or boredom, on the outside they are unperturbed.

Today, the principal from a high school has come to present his suspension data. His is the second presentation this evening. They start to blend together for me after a while. The schools use similar strategies, and lots of them. Usually the principals speak about these initiatives with no explanation of what they are about, and the council members occasionally ask for clarification. Some principals personalize their presentations by sharing their schools' mottos and clever acrostics, but I pretty much feel like I have been listening to the same spiel over and over again.

The council chair seems very comfortable speaking in front of a group. He often uses humor when addressing the council and audience, especially at the beginning of meetings. He starts the meeting and says with a smile,

> First, we have some very important guests, so we want them to start getting prepared to come to the microphone. They said they didn't want to, but we said that we were not going to invite you to our house and not allow you to come up and say who you are. And so, having said that, we ask that first our mission statement is read, and so we're going to ask [council member], if you will, sir, read the mission.

After introductions, the principal presentations begin. The first speaker approaches the meeting tables to the microphone that is set up for guests at the far end of the rectangle facing the council chair and interim superintendent. A director sits beside him. The principal is probably in his 30s, white, clean-cut, and is wearing a suit and tie. He speaks authoritatively in a deep voice. Despite his confidence, it is

hard for me to ignore the irony that behind the walls of the school, he is the most powerful person in the building. But this is the council's house, and the council is in control. The principal has been summoned to give his deposition, but he is recognized as an expert and his viewpoint will be difficult to challenge.

One of the participants in this study became angry after reading the informed consent form before the interview began. This was one of the first interviews I had conducted. I was sick that day, but we had had some difficulty scheduling a time when we could both meet, so I wanted to keep the interview appointment. The participant was upset that under certain circumstances, such as a court subpoena, confidentiality of information could not be guaranteed. She demanded to see the list of interview questions. When I gave them to her, she proceeded to mark out the questions she did not want me to ask, all of which involved the political frame and the relationships between the council, school board and district, as this information might be detrimental to the search for the new superintendent. I was so taken aback I started to panic. I totally forgot the studies I had read about resistant interviewees, and the lessons from Vitus (2008) that resistance can present a learning opportunity and is not necessarily a setback.

I offered to cancel the interview, but the participant said she wanted to help me. We proceeded, and I only asked the questions that had not been marked out. When I came to the question about relationships between council members, and whether members trusted each other, the participant avoided the question and said that she did not know and that members were all there for the mission of the group. Later in the interview, the participant told me that the Equity Council was a good

activity for people who want to be involved with the schools but who do not want to become entangled in school board politics.

I describe this incident for several reasons. First, although there may be benefits to using the actively confronting interview technique described in Chapter 3, I do not think it is appropriate in all situations. In this case, the participant made it clear that she would not speak about topics that involve or might incite conflict, so I did not challenge her statements during the interview.

Second, the participant's negative reaction to political topics and the desire to avoid conflict bring up some interesting points. The Equity Council *is* a political organization. Before reading about critical theory, like this participant, I also had negative views about politics. I thought politics lured the sneaky, power-hungry, and selfish to conspire on underhanded deals that would benefit their own interests. However, from critical theory I learned that by taking a political stand people can cause change. People who care about democracy must become political, because democracy has to be continually struggled over—it is not a given.

The participant's negative reaction also illustrates the fear and uncertainty that taking a political stand can create. As Warren (1996), Horowitz (1990) and others have explained, politics can be unfamiliar territory for people. Power differences and mistrust can make political participation difficult. I have had some political experience of my own, which I will now discuss, along with the implications for the present study.

Around fifteen years ago, I started an animal rights group. The primary aims of the group were to raise awareness and protest local events such as fur sales and the

circus. Our group participated in tabling events where we handed out literature. We wrote letters, including to the editor of the local newspaper, elected officials, and company representatives. We created and distributed a dining guide with listings and short reviews of vegan and vegetarian-friendly restaurants in the area.

Our work was not easy. Many people reacted with anger. Letters we sent to the local newspaper were quickly rebutted. People made rude comments when we stood outside with signs in front of the venues where the circus or the fur sale were to be held. I remember how a man on a motorcycle pulled up as close to us as he could, then spit at us and drove away. After a few years, the group disbanded when one of the most active members started a family, and another moved out of state. I continued on my own for a while before withdrawing from political activity for the cause altogether.

It was hard for me to take a political stand that many people oppose. I have seen how angry people can become when they perceive a threat to their privileged status. In this case, my own political background and experience with oppressive administrators might bias me against those in the Wilson County School District who are in power, especially the principals and directors. I could blame them disproportionately for the lack of change in the district, which would disregard a multitude of other significant factors. This bias could become a factor during the interpretation of the data.

The struggle for respect and legitimacy. In order to better understand why the council asked principals to come and present during meetings and why this was such a significant development, one should know more about the context and history

of the council. In this section, I will describe the council's relationships to the school district, school board, and community, and describe the boundaries of authority within which the council operates.

Two participants mentioned that the relationships between the council and school board, and council and school district have improved over the last several years. They remembered that there had been a lot of conflict in the past, which aligned with newspaper accounts. Mr. Hampton observed that

> In fact, the Equity Council was birthed out of strife, and that's been an evolution that I've observed, that at one point it was fighting for credibility, and fighting for respect of the district, and I saw it. So it was a more tenuous, tense sort of relationship and atmosphere. At some point, I think about probably six years ago or so, it shifted to OK, no longer are you these folks that are hanging around, buzzing around, waiting to sting, but it was decided that we would just work alongside one another, and respect one another. So it moved from a more tense to a more mutually beneficial relationship on behalf of the children.

I asked Mr. Hampton to elaborate on what had caused the relationship to shift, and he responded that there is still conflict between the council and district:

> Well, there are still disagreements to this day. And if ever there are not challenges, I think, from the Equity Council, to what the district is doing, as long as there are mammoth gaps, there will be disagreements, and there will be recommendations for change. So that's really inherent to the existence of

> the council….Confrontation should always be there; that's a positive thing to me.

Mr. Hampton's comments suggest that the council has struggled for a long time—for respect, and in pushing for change from the district in order to close gaps.

Both Mr. Hampton and Mr. Blakeman credited a previous superintendent for helping establish the council as a partner, and for setting the expectation that the district would work with the council. Although he couldn't remember the specific superintendent, Mr. Hampton said, "At that juncture, it seemed that the Equity Council was invited, or seen as, and projected as, from the district level, an integral part of the way the district needs to do business." Mr. Blakeman's response aligns with Mr. Hampton's recollection of events. Mr. Blakeman said, "I think starting with [former superintendent] and through [another former superintendent], we've had superintendents that have kind of made this a priority with folks, and it took a long time for it to sink in with some, or to be accepted by some."

Mr. Maxwell confirmed that overall, relationships between the school district and school board with the Equity Council are positive. He said,

> I think people listen to the Equity Council. I think the superintendents we've had in the past have listened to the Equity Council. I think the board of education has listened to the Equity Council. We may not all agree on the urgency of some of these matters, it seems like, but I think they listen and our opinion is valued. And I think there is a lot of evidence that points to that.

Mr. Fields said that he believes that the district sees value in the council. However, when I challenged the idea that everyone in the district values the council, he qualified his answer:

> Mr. Fields: The district knows, I think this is an important committee. I think the district knows it needs help and support, and I think that we try to do that.
>
> TR: But not everybody feels that way in the district, about the Equity Council do they?
>
> Mr. Fields: No, they're a little scared of it, some people are, but I wonder why they're scared. All we want is for all children to learn at the same level; our mission is good. But they're afraid, I think, of being pointed out, or they may be railroaded or something. That is not our role.

Mr. Fields' comments underscore an opposition between district employees and the council: the council's role is not to put anyone on the defensive or mandate what they must do, but some district employees may be afraid that this is the council's intent. This tension will be explored further in this section.

Mr. Hampton had previously shared that the relationship with the school district had improved over the past several years. However, the district responses he noted show that the school district has resisted some of what the council has promoted:

> I'm under no illusion or delusion that the listening that occurs for the Equity Council is always being received with a great deal of credence. I think sometimes there are perfunctory actions that are taken, the entertaining of the

> Equity Council, at least I feel like that happens by directors and even superintendents.

These statements suggest that the council is still fighting for legitimacy with the school district, although as previously noted, the relationship has greatly improved.

Relationship between the council and school board. Mr. Blakeman also noted that the relationship between the council and school board was contentious at first but has improved substantially:

> I think in general on the board they have a great deal of respect for what we do, and they…want to do what we want them to do. They want to see a change as well. That is not something I would have said about the board of education ten years ago. There were clearly people that thought that we were a bunch of garbage. Not as individuals, but what we were doing was a big waste of time.

As discussed in the section on the structural frame, the bylaws establish the Equity Council as an advisory group to the school board. Ms. Stevens explained more about this relationship, including the fact that the board has the authority to dissolve the council. She said,

> We're there at the pleasure of the district and the board. So if they thought there wasn't a need for the Equity Council then they could easily just say "There's no council." But they see there's a need for the reason that the board member appoints somebody and a board member is on the committee.

In this last comment, Ms. Stevens is suggesting that the board sees the value in the council by virtue of the fact that board members appoint ten of the fifteen members to

the council and also sends a non-voting board member to meetings. Ms. Stevens also says that the council operates at the discretion of the school district. Although the bylaws give the board the authority over the council, as discussed previously, the superintendent plays an important role in determining the nature of the relationship the council and district will have, whether more collaborative or more adversarial.

I asked three additional participants whether they thought the school board would ever disband the council, and all felt certain this would not happen. Mr. Moore and Ms. Williams mentioned the council's value to the school board. Mr. Moore said,

> TR: So do you think that it would ever be possible that the board or the district would ever want to see the council abolished?
>
> Mr. Moore: No. No, because we do a lot of work for the board. We create a lot of proposals for the board. So we're the legs of the school board. So I don't see it ever being removed, because we do so much. We're actually the ones in the trenches…. We're the ones asking questions that everyone else is afraid to ask.

When I asked Ms. Williams if she thought the district or board could or would dissolve the council, her response confirmed what Mr. Moore said. She also spoke about the independence of the council:

> I think that at some point there was one superintendent who might have wanted to dissolve the Equity Council because the issues were just a little bit overwhelming for him, but that didn't last. That's the superintendent who moved on, because that resistance to the Equity Council didn't sit well with the school board. And that tells you how the Equity Council is in a position to

> be more overarching than just the superintendent. The board cannot really dissolve the Equity Council, because the Equity Council is to their benefit….The people who serve on the Equity Council are not employees of the district except for the ex oficio members who sit in on the Equity Council to provide a stream of information that must come from the school district. So the board can't fire the Equity Council because the Equity Council doesn't work for the board. And we're all volunteers who have expertise in our areas, and it's to their benefit to tap into that expertise and use it. And I think the people who are on the school board at the moment recognize that.

Mr. Moore and Ms. Williams singled out the council's value to the school board as a reason why they felt the school board would not dissolve the council. I asked a fourth participant, Mr. Hampton a slightly different question, about what had occurred that had contributed to the longevity of the group, and he replied:

> Definitely the foresight of those individuals that formed it, to put a structure in place that was sustainable. I think the diverse composition of it has helped sustain it. I think the caliber and capacity of the respective individuals that have populated the Equity Council has sustained it. I think the quantitative and structured documents and reports and relationship have helped sustain it. So you didn't just put together something that was just…fluffy and anecdotal, you put together something that was substantial. So that was really central to the foresight of its formation. Secondly, even though it was there, you know—the implication of the question is just because something is there doesn't mean it will always be there. And I think it probably wouldn't outside

> of through transitions and leadership at the superintendent level, someone always had their foot on the gas or their shoulder to the wagon in the transitional time, in which new leadership could come in and say, "What is this? We don't need it" and sweep it off the table. And so board support or board recognition has been a strong point of it as well. That is not to say there have not been individuals that probably did not, and probably individuals that still would like to see us go away. So there's that ever-present need to substantiate your value as a council.

Ms. Williams and Mr. Moore indicated that it would be in the board's best interest to keep the council because of the work that the council performs. Although Mr. Hampton mentioned several factors that have contributed to the council's longevity, he also indicated that the council cannot take its existence for granted, thus feeling the "ever-present need" to prove its worth. During times of transition in district leadership, the council also has relied on board support to bolster its political power. This implies that there is a mutually beneficial relationship in which the council contributes to the board through the reports members create, and the board lends its political support to the council. However, as members come and go from school boards, and as district leadership changes, the council may not be able to count on relationships to stay the same, and therefore cannot take support for granted. Mr. Moore indicated that the council's relationship with the current board is positive, but professional:

> Our relationship with the board is really is not as strong as people will think, because we don't really have a lot of interaction with them. We make

> suggestions, we send it to the board, they look over it and they send it back. We do attend some meetings from time to time, but I think that they trust us, have faith in us, and when we present things, that we're presenting needs because we see it as an issue. So I think that our relationship with the board is good, but it's in a professional way.

Mr. Harris observed that the council may need to work closer with the board, which supports Mr. Moore's comments about the council's level of interaction with the board. Mr. Harris said,

> I think that we're at a point now where we realize that we've got to work even closer with the board of education. You know, so it used to be that there was—for lack of a better word—a separate entity established. You had the Equity Council, then you had the board of education. Well, if we are seriously going to be the ones that monitor, analyze and advise the board of education, then we've got to have more meetings with them.

Mr. Harris' statements support my earlier assertion that because school board membership and district leadership often change, the council must continually work to build alliances.

Two participants mentioned that the board and district do not always act quickly on council recommendations. Mr. Maxwell appreciated the speed with which the school board had approved the council's ten recommendations, but added,

> We always want them to act with even more urgency than they have. You know, can we get feedback more quickly, because when we're bringing

> recommendations in front of the board, we always feel like we can get a response faster.

Mr. Hampton also expressed that he wanted the school board to act more quickly. He mentioned pressure as a possible council response to delays. He said,

> I feel like that when there are concrete things that we have proven would be beneficial to the school district and the schools and the principals and the kids, or the teachers and the kids they teach, I think the recommendations should be swiftly transferred into recom-mandates. And if something is not done, and within the time frame that we say or prescribe, I think that there are times that we maybe could have turned the heat up higher, quicker.

Responses and limits of authority. I asked three participants about actions the council might take in response to conflict, criticism or inequitable situations that come to the council. One participant said that the council responded with the ten recommendations that were sent to the board. Another said the council tries to listen to people, and this is one reason why the principals have been invited to council meetings to present. Mr. Hampton said that the council also responds by raising community awareness of issues:

> I think some responses have been exposure and awareness to the public of some of the practices and some of the existing conditions…you know, recommendations are just that, until they are activated or responded to. So a recommendation in and of itself is really not that effective; there's got to be some action and response to it. So there have been times I think the council has had to employ public awareness, because a lot of people don't know of

> some of the…inequitable practices particularly like with the mbe's and wmbe's, you know, the millions of dollars that go out of this district per year and the miniscule percentage that goes to minority and women-owned businesses is ridiculous. And exposure has to be done there. Even on the gaps, it wasn't until five years ago when the [Equity Report] was being created, and so it was that awareness that it was free and reduced lunch, and African-American students and in particular African-American males that were falling at the bottom of the pile in reading and math levels in the district. That's not different than in some other places. However, that awareness had to be raised.

Mr. Moore also mentioned raising awareness in the context of inequitable rates of student suspension. He said,

> But just through awareness, through our dialogues to make people more aware, we think that suspension really hasn't been taken seriously—it's been taken seriously, but not seriously. And now what we're finding out is that now because people understand that we're looking at these numbers, principals are really like, "Oh, what's the situation with this?" They're really kind of monitoring each individual child now…so you know, it's just being aware, you know, us making the principals be aware.

The previous statements from participants show that the council may respond in several ways to inequitable situations or delays to desired actions. The council might react with pressure, listening, providing recommendations, and raising awareness. Two participants said that the council's responses do not include blanket

endorsements of board or district actions, underscoring the council's role as a dissenter:

> Mr. Hampton: We don't have like a rubber stamp or ivory tower advisory group.
>
> TR: Explain what you mean by "rubber stamp."
>
> Mr. Hampton: It would just be there to co-sign any procedures or policies that were set forth by the board or district that it's set to monitor. A puppet group, a group that gathers to be gathering, and a group that simply corroborates whatever is put before it, and challenges nothing.

Mr. Blakeman also brought up the idea of a "rubber stamp," contrasting the role of a rubber stamp with a group that is trying to work collaboratively with the school board and district. He said,

> I think just our activities, and the way we advocate, and the way we're trying to be positive partners, although that does not mean we're just—we're not—we will never be rubber stamps. The board will never be able to point to the Equity Council and say, "Everything's fine because they're OK with it," because we have, just recently, started pushing back a little bit. We have a good relationship with the board, but we're not happy with some of the decisions that have been made and with some of the things that have been done, and we're not happy with these achievement gaps.

Previous sections have explored council actions such as taking the initiative to improve communication by arranging for a council member to attend principals' meetings. Participants' responses indicate that the council may respond in various

other ways, from listening, to making recommendations, raising awareness, and pressuring. Two participants point to the independence of the group and its refusal to accept, without question, proposals from the school board and district if they feel these actions will not lead to a more fair, equitable education for students.

When I asked about council responses, participants also brought up the limits of authority of the council. In addition to telling me what the council does, several participants also defined the limits of authority of the council by explaining what the council could not do. No one directly questioned or criticized these boundaries. In defining the limits of the council's authority, interviews clarified that the school board has the authority to make policies and the district has the responsibility for making the changes.

According to three participants, the council can "raise awareness, they can gather the evidence, they can submit evidence, make recommendations," "send recommendations to the board," and work to "monitor what's going on in the school system and to keep the board accountable." Two of these participants said what the council cannot do: "We can't give any kind of mandate," "We can't do things unilaterally, except stand outside of meetings and stomp our feet if we choose to do that…"

Ms. Williams summarized the authority the council has in its role with the school board:

> So when that goes to the school board, there is no way we can initiate anything except raise that groundswell of mass support and have that conversation more open, and put the school board in the position where they

> actually have evidence they could use to make policy to change habits and behaviors within the district.

Although the council cannot change or create policy, the group has other ways that it can influence decisions, such as providing information and evidence, raising support and trying to make conversations more open, inclusive and transparent.

Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Fields summarized the council's authority in working with schools. Mr. Maxwell indicated that the council clarifies the areas for improvement, and offers support, but schools must do the work to improve. By having the principals come to present, the council learns about the schools' efforts and can offer assistance:

> But I think you have to let people come up with their ways to fix the problem. Say, "Here's the problem," and give them the opportunity to fix it. We can all agree that there's a problem, you won't have many people to disagree that there was a problem. They recognize that the numbers are true, they're solid. So you let each school fix those particular problems. We just want to hear that you're fixing it, and if there's anything we can do to support you, let us know.

Mr. Fields' response supported Mr. Maxwell's view. He described the council's persistence but reiterated that the school district is responsible for making the improvements:

> Well, see, it's the district's responsibility, we really have no authority. We are just the conscience. We are just saying, "Well, you're still not there yet, you need to keep doing this," and that is what we do. Now, we have no authority

> over the district. We can't make the district do one thing. We can talk in the school board's ear, we can make those recommendations, so if they don't follow it we're still right there with our agenda saying, "It's still not working, you need to re-look at this" which is what we do. [The council chair] is good at that. He's done a good job with that.

Although these participants recognized the district's authority in improving the schools, the council uses its power to influence the school board in developing policies and making decisions that will affect the schools. Therefore, although the council cannot directly exert control over schools, through its relationship with the school board the group can indirectly contribute to effect change.

Resources. During interviews, one participant shared that the council receives no funding for its activities, and several participants said that council members are unpaid volunteers. Four participants mentioned the district's use of resources. Two of these participants, Mr. Moore and Mr. Maxwell, saw the distribution of resources as a key component of an equitable education and having the opportunity to help monitor the distribution and access to resources played a role in their decision to serve on the council.

Although the council itself receives no funding, the group does monitor how the district allocates its resources. Ms. Williams and Mr. Blakeman described the council's interest in the district's allocation of resources. Ms. Williams gave an example of a low-performing school in the district and how the inequitable distribution of resources could be a barrier:

> You always hear the conversation about [Pierce High School], why [Pierce High School] has these issues, so committees look at whether or not there is equitable distribution of resources among all the schools. They look at overcrowding of schools, so whatever is the issue that's impeding achievement of students that's not an equitable accommodation for students—the Equity Council looks at. So it's not just looking at race and ethnicity and economics, it's looking at what are the barriers that are in place in the school system that prevent equitable delivery of service for all.

Mr. Harris shared that monitoring the distribution of funds is a council goal. He contrasted the "equal" and "equitable" distribution of resources, and illustrated that sometimes schools need other types of resources besides money:

> We have to keep on concentrating on the reallocation of resources, because the way that the resources are distributed now is not effective. You've got [fair] schools over here, and then you've got [good] and [great] schools over here. And if you give these schools ten thousand dollars, and you give these schools ten thousand dollars, everybody thinks that that's the fair way to do it. Well, that's not effective, because these folks don't need ten thousand dollars over here, and these folks don't need ten thousand dollars over here. They think money is the answer. It's not. You've got to look at what the resources are that are needed. Sometimes it's to get parents involved. Well, that's not a money thing.

I asked Mr. Blakeman to describe a conflict or disagreement in which the council had played a role, and he told me about a delay in filling a position the

council felt was important, again showing the council's concern with resources. Mr. Blakeman said,

> And then we lost a person whose job was to do minority recruitment, and they don't fill it for two years. And, you know, or they talk about consolidating it with another job. That's just not acceptable, and we make it known that we don't think it's acceptable. We can't tell them how to spend the money, but we can strongly recommend what they don't do, and by cutting crucial positions….I think this current board is quite responsive to us but they have fiduciary responsibility, they have money issues….the board has—there are true financial decisions that have to be made, and that's what they get paid to do, basically, that's what they were elected to do. But we can still push and suggest that this is where we really need some resources if you want to solve this problem.

Mr. Blakeman's response shows another example of the different types of questions the council might investigate. Some of these areas may be directly related to student achievement, while others are more indirectly related. The incident Mr. Blakeman describes also illustrates how the council works within the boundaries of its authority. His last comment suggests that he feels that gaps in the Indicators of Equity represent problems that resources can help to solve.

The tenth recommendation. When the council released the Equity Report in October 2014, the results showed little improvement. Mr. Maxwell described the council's reaction to the news:

> So that was a big issue, where we began to see some of these categories continue to decline in the wrong direction, and then we see, you know, some groups that are making really slow progress, and so there's still a lot to be concerned about. We've still got a long way to go, and I think when those numbers came out we felt still disappointed. We're still not meeting the expectations that we know we can meet.

As described in the section on the structural frame, the council quickly responded by developing a list of ten recommendations (presented in Table 4.1) to send to the school board for approval. The tenth recommendation was for principals—especially those from schools with the largest gaps in the Indicators of Equity—to come to share information about their schools during monthly council meetings. Beginning at the January 2015 gathering, principals began to attend every month, with two or three schools represented each time.

During interviews, five participants brought up the topic of principal presentations, suggesting that this was an important event. Overall, participants viewed the development very positively. Mr. Maxwell explained the significance of the change:

> We also have required or asked principals to come to the Equity Council meetings and present what they think their successes are, what their failures are, and what we think could be done to improve in areas such as suspensions and gaps in test scoring and performance. So that's something we've never done before but we're now doing. So that's been huge. We've never had

> principals to come to the Equity Council meetings. So that is the best way, I think, that we've found to engage principals.

Ms. Stevens explained one of the reasons why the council decided to invite the principals to the council meetings. Her comments reflect the importance the council places on numerical data and how the group uses it to make decisions:

> They [the principals] have always been invited, but since the numbers hadn't really been changing, we had to find out a more direct—instead of us looking at numbers, now let's put faces on these numbers and have them come in and talk to us about their numbers. But if the numbers had changed, we would have said "OK, you know, it looks like we're moving." But we weren't moving, and there were the ten recommendations to the board.

As Mr. Maxwell and Ms. Stevens explained, the council asked principals to present at meetings to increase their engagement, and because data showed little progress in closing gaps in achievement, suspension and other measures the council monitors. Participants also mentioned building relationships, improving communication, and understanding problems better as additional reasons for inviting principals. Mr. Moore acknowledged that the relationship between the council and school principals and directors has been contentious in the past but is improving:

> We're trying to relay and to reach out to them on a regular basis. And right now we do get some--the majority of the time we do get some negative feedback, you know, because they're thinking, once again, they're thinking that we're out to hurt them, or out to make them look bad. But it is changing. I do see a change. But it's going to take some time, because this is something

> that, you know, this relationship between us, the directors and the principals, on the negative side, has been there for a while.

In the response above, some principals appear to distrust the council's motives in requiring them to present at meetings, although Mr. Moore states that this negative perception is changing. In addition to building relationships with the school principals and directors, council members also want to understand the work of the schools beyond what the data show. Mr. Moore explained why it was so important for principals to come to council meetings:

> We're trying to build a stronger relationship with the directors and the principals. Right now a lot of the directors and the principals feel that we are against them and not with them. So we're trying to change that perspective and make them understand that we're just wanting to do the things that are best for the kids and to improve things for the kids. We're not out to hurt, or, you know, we're not out to hurt, disrespect anyone at all….What we're coming for is to let you discuss your side of the story. All we're doing in our committee is looking at numbers. We don't know the root of the numbers. You know, and as one of the principals said, there was a high percentage of Latinos that got suspended from her school. Well, there was a food fight. The majority of them were in the food fight. We wouldn't have known that if that principal hadn't come and shared that with us. All we were seeing is that they had a high proportion of Latinos being suspended.

Mr. Moore uses an example to show how the data the council reviews does not always represent what is actually occurring in schools. Since council members are

not in the schools, asking principals to come and present may help council members arrive at a better understanding of schools. However, there is an undercurrent of accountability to the council's invitation to present. Once the school board adopted the recommendations, including the tenth recommendation, principals were told to come and present; this does not appear to be optional. The council seems to be looking for a balance between increasing trust and holding principals accountable.

The council took the initiative to improve communication in an effort to build relationships with principals. In interviews, participants shared that council members cannot directly contact district employees such as principals or teachers. According to Mr. Moore, in the past, when messages went through established communication chains, sometimes they had changed by the time they reached the intended recipient, and occasionally, messages that were supposed to be returned were not relayed. Mr. Moore said that now a council member is able to attend principal meetings to directly communicate important information to principals and answer any questions they have. Mr. Moore felt that going directly to the source had improved communication between the council and principals. Mr. Blakeman's response aligned with what Mr. Moore said about the principal presentations, relationships, and communication. Mr. Blakeman said that before, the communication chain was not working well, and as a result,

> The principals are thinking we're the bad guys….now, we are starting to get direct access to the principals; like at the last meeting, we had a couple of principals there, and there's going to be some more coming to talk to us. So I think we're trying to build more positive relationships directly with the people

> in the buildings where it counts instead of going through the administrative chain here. We still follow the rules, and like my committee, if I want to talk to somebody in the district, a principal, or a school director, somebody, I still go to [Mr. Hubbard] and request that he arrange it; I don't go to them directly.

Although Mr. Moore and Mr. Blakeman mention building relationships as a primary reason for asking principals to come and present, the fact that council members cannot directly contact school personnel suggests that boundaries have been established for the relationship. However, the council is trying to improve communication with principals and directors and is thus pushing against the established boundaries.

Council members acknowledge that they are trying to hold the district and school board accountable for improvements in the Indicators of Equity. The preface to the fourth Equity Report confirms this intention, stating that the council will monitor all the Indicators of Equity in the report throughout the year and will hold the district accountable for results. In all, four participants used a variation of the word "accountability." These participants said that "…the council is looking at things and asking them [people] to be held accountable," "our job is to monitor what's going on in the school system and to keep the board accountable," "…we're trying to get accountability out of the directors and out of the principals," "…we're holding schools and teachers more accountable for if they [students] didn't get it." A fifth participant, Mr. Harris, explained how the council is an ally rather than an adversary to the district, but must also be honest, even if the truth is uncomfortable:

> I think that now--the council was viewed—and I underline the word "was"—was viewed as an adversary who was not on the same side of the district and the board. So [the council chair's] role has been to go across that bridge, if you will, to allow people to understand that "We're not against you," that clearly, we're on the same side. But we are going to call this what it is. We're not going to sugar-coat it and try to act like the baby is real pretty when the baby is not, at this point in time. We have some serious concerns, and we're not going to be at a point where we just say, "Well, OK, this is really just a situation that's just getting better, and—if it's not getting better, we're going to say it's not getting better. If it is getting better, then we're going to say it is getting better. And we're going to give you the clear picture of exactly the areas where it is getting better, as opposed to the areas where it's not.

These statements corroborate two points that were also previously mentioned by other participants: first, the council uncovers and points out the inequities in the school system, and second, the council wishes to be a collaborative partner with the district and board. In negotiating the positions the council will take, the group also is establishing its power and the balance between pressure and support. The council will pressure the school system and the board to improve, but at the same time, wishes to work in conjunction with these entities because they all have the same goals.

The principals speak. A council member provided me with a list of questions that principals were asked to address during their presentations. These questions were in use beginning in September, 2015 and are revised from the original

list that was used during the study period but still give an idea of the content principals are asked to share. The questions are:

1. What are your gap reduction goals within your plan, and how will you reach them? (For presentations about suspensions, "What is your suspension goal(s)?")
2. How does cultural proficiency impact your plans? (For presentations about suspensions, "How are you planning to reach your goal(s)?")
3. Any research based practices? Which research?
4. How often and by whom are your data analyzed, why those people (or person), and why that frequency?
5. Where have you made progress and how and why? What evidence supports the growth?
6. How do you define achievement? (For presentations about suspensions, "How do you address the academic void for students during suspension?")
7. What do your data imply about the current status and progress of your plan?

Principals are given around ten minutes to address the seven questions in their talks (though some take substantially longer).

During their presentations, principals usually provide some background about their schools and share data, displayed either on slides which are projected on a screen, or in handouts. The data often include demographics of the student population. Demographics for teachers and administrators are broken down by race. The principal usually brings data on achievement test scores or suspension data as well, depending on which area the council has asked them to focus.

I transcribed excerpts from the principals' presentations from meeting recordings to illustrate some of the information presented above. These excerpts were selected because I felt they conveyed the perspectives of the speakers and gave a peek at practice within the school. I feel these excerpts are typical of the information that principals provided. The principals' narratives also give an idea of the information the council members receive during the presentations. The content and format of the principals' speeches were very consistent, perhaps in part because the schools appear to use some similar practices, and partly because they were all addressing the same questions from the list the Equity Council provided. For the sake of brevity, and because it is a topic in which I am interested, I chose to concentrate primarily on discipline. However, some of the strategies the schools use, such as the use of data and monitoring were common to academic and behavior presentations. I include two excerpts from the presentations on academics to illustrate this point.

Academics. Most of the principals spoke about their schools' use of data to improve student achievement. The principals at Jefferson Elementary and Cleveland High School stated that they use data to monitor the academic progress of their students. The principal from Jefferson Elementary illustrated the importance of using data, saying that the school maintains

> A laser-like focus on our data. We have to know where our kids are at all times. When you have so many kids struggling you've got to know every minute, every day, what skills they're mastering and whatnot, and then we can plan our instruction.

The perspective of the principal at Cleveland High School agreed with that of the principal at Jefferson in emphasizing the importance of monitoring and data:

> We believe passionately in our systems. As a school of this size, I can't be the monitor of all different areas; I have to have teams underneath that are working with very intentional targets. The key is building the filters and giving them the information to monitor, and it's amazing what types of supports you can provide for the students when you know their names….but knowing who the students are, you can go into every single one of my senior English classes, and they will tell you which students have not met college-readiness benchmarks yet. They know them; they are constantly monitoring that. Likewise in those math support classes, they own that data. And that's critical.

Discipline.

Many schools in the Wilson County school system use similar strategies in preventing student misbehavior. For example, most principals spoke about ways that students learn about the expectations for behavior at the school. The principal at Adams Elementary said,

> I wanted to talk a little bit about the discipline structures that we have at Adams...One of the things that we do, we do a four-and-a half week—what we call the [Adams Action] class for sixth graders, where we just teach and drill not only expectations, but organizational skills, study skills, middle school survival skills. We do a two-week version of that for seventh and eighth grade, kind of an abbreviated version each year.

The principal from Grant Middle School shared that students who meet behavioral expectations are rewarded through monthly celebrations and notes sent home to parents.

Several principals described systems they have put in place that use data to monitor student behavior. As the principal at Adams Middle school shared,

> We've developed what we think is a very sophisticated marks documentation system for in-class behaviors. It's a tracking system that are non-referrable behaviors so that we can actually dissect data on student behaviors before it's even an office referral. Then we use that to target and identify kids for various interventions that we do.

The principal at Grant Middle School described some of the types of data the school collects about student behavior and how that data are used:

> The discipline committee and they look through—it's not just--it's gender, it's grade level, it's the type of behavior, the time of day, the day of the week, the ethnicity. It's every type of data that you can pull…they put it in a nice, neat, understandable chart that teachers can look at and then discuss and analyze…For example, the last three months, the most referrals were written from three to four o'clock….But from three to four o'clock, now that we know that, we can start planning for it, because now we can predict it.

Schools may sometimes employ more intensive behavioral interventions. The Adams Middle School principal said that if students exceed a certain number of behavioral infractions in a specified time period the school re-teaches the school expectations to them:

> In our Tier 2…we do have a [Adams Addition] class…and when I talked about the marks system a little while ago, we do identify every four-and-a-half weeks, we review those marks and we target students based on the number of marks that they've gotten in a four-and-a-half week period, and those students go through a two-day [Adams Addition] class, and that's either taught by myself or [the assistant principal], where we go back and we re-teach expectations to kids. We go back and we just tell them, "Here's how you play school."

The principal from Grant Middle School described another approach being used with students who have a large number of discipline referrals to the office:

> What we did last year is we looked at our students who got multiple referrals per month and it came down to about 20 students, and they happened to all be boys. And so with that data we formed this [behavior] group…because now we know who they are, and we can predict what they've done in the past and work with that.

The principal from Cleveland High School described how the school might involve the parents of students who have a large number of office referrals:

> For anyone who exceeds one to five referrals, they fall into our Tier 2 level of intervention, and anyone who exceeds five referrals over the course of the year, they kick into Tier 3 intervention and each student in Tier 3 gets an individualized plan…We know the names of those kids, we know who they are, we know where they're at in our building, we know who their parents are,

> and we work with their parents to try and support them on improving their behavior in their school.

Students who committed offenses that were not serious enough for suspension might be sent to a designated in-school suspension room at the school. The principal from Washington High School briefly described this alternative to suspension at the school:

> We have analyzed our [in-school suspension] program to include an educational component beyond just the receiving work and doing work. It's basically a component that deals with the affective domain, "How could you have done this differently," you know, to cause the kids to think about the reasons that led to them being in [in-school suspension] and so forth.

Some schools implemented a peer mediation program as another way to approach student discipline. The Adams Middle School principal said that

> We have a very effective peer mediation program…that really takes it off the counselors and the administration from dealing with things—just typical, what we call middle school drama; stuff that's going to die off in a day but for that period of time it's a big deal to the kids…. So we let our eighth graders handle those things, and obviously there's adult supervision, and [the behavioral specialist] runs that program for us.

The principal at Roosevelt Middle School described a similar peer mediation program, saying that

> We have created a [student conduct committee], and this is where we want to give the power to our student body because certainly in most school buildings,

> but definitely in middle school, our peers' opinion is the most important opinion. And so we have created a body of leaders in each grade level who came in and were trained on confidentiality and there are low-level offenses, being silly in the cafeteria…where the student can choose to sit before that conduct committee, which is a committee of their peers, or they can receive a consequence from the principal….That has proven successful as students begin to help monitor one another and move forward.

As these excerpts show, schools collect and monitor student behavioral data. When students accrue a certain number of disciplinary referrals, they might be placed in an intervention class. Students who comply with the rules are rewarded. Some schools involve students in the disciplinary practices of the school.

Relationships with the community. Three participants mentioned that people often contact them about concerns they have with the school district. One participant said that council members can accompany parents to meet with principals if requested, after checking with one of the district liaisons. Another participant shared that he answers questions from people who need information or advice, but since the Equity Council focuses more on the district as a whole, he tries to avoid investigating individual cases. The third participant said that people often recognize him in public and ask him questions, like why there aren't more African-American teachers in the district or questions about bussing.

Some council members work with other groups besides the council. In addition to increasing awareness about the council, Ms. Stevens commented on the connections she has made with people in other organizations in Buchanan:

> So it allows me to just make sure that people in the community are aware that there is a council within the board that deals with equity issues. And by my being there I know some of the ones we have dealt with so if I hear someone talking about that I'm able to say, "Well, that's something we have dealt with before and maybe I can help you, or maybe I can have [Mr. Hubbard] to call you and help you," so it's kind of like a network system.

When I asked Mr. Blakeman what could be improved upon with the council, he thought about the ties the council has with other groups in the community and how these alliances might be strengthened:

> We have links within the community, but they're not organized links. There are other… groups that are interested in the same issues that we're interested in, but we don't have any formal ties with them. They tend to be informal….That might be something that would be useful, to have more formal ties and activities with other groups, and I don't know why we haven't done that, and I don't know why I didn't even think of it before now, but that might be something that we could do that could—more people that would have our back, basically.

The observation that "more people would have our back" alludes to the political power that increases when networks and coalitions are built. I asked Mr. Hampton if the council has a way to educate or inform people in response to criticism from a member of the public. Mr. Hampton mentioned the importance of the council working with other groups and how he felt communication should occur:

> And so we have these various groups…that are seeking to move the needle in reference to equity in education. If we're not in collaboration, it could be less effective. And so, relative to your question, 'If someone has an issue, if an editorial letter went out,' or whatever, it is critical, I think, that it is communicated through the Equity Council, or at least with the Equity Council, because we are the body that's identified as working with the district on equity issues.

Mr. Hampton's comment about collaboration with other groups also aligns with the idea of a coalition. The thought that information about educational equity should be communicated through or in conjunction with the Equity Council highlights the special position that the council has in its relationship with the school district.

Summary of the political frame. The events described above underscore the struggle for legitimacy and respect in which the council has engaged. Comments from participants illustrate the complicated nature of the relationships between the council, school district and school board. Council members want to work collaboratively and emphasize that they are on the same side as the school district and school board--yet they also challenge the accepted practices that allow inequitable situations to continue. The council is now experiencing greater acceptance and collaboration from the school board and district than ever before, although interviews suggest that respect for the council is not universal.

There are power relationships among the council, board and school district. Council members were aware of the group's authority, as well as that of the board and district. They did not question the limits of their authority. Although the school

board could dissolve the council, participants felt that this would not happen because of the work the group does for the board.

The recent development of inviting or requiring principals to come and present at council meetings marked a significant milestone for the council. The council took this step to improve communication and build relationships. In addition, the gaps in the Indicators of Equity showed little progress in closing, so the council sought to deepen their understanding of what schools were doing by listening and speaking to principals firsthand. There is a dimension of power to these presentations in that principals must attend. Interviews showed that the council is continuing to negotiate a balance between holding principals accountable and building trusting relationships with them.

The council also has relationships with people in the community and informal networks with other groups. Some participants mentioned that individuals contact them with concerns about the school district. Two participants saw a potential benefit in fortifying and formalizing networks with other groups because this collaboration might help advance equity goals.

The Symbolic Frame

Impressions. The council chair and the superintendent always sit next to each other at council meetings at the front of the room. They are like the leaders of two countries at a summit, flanked by their ambassadors, negotiating a peace treaty. The long walls of the room do not display flags of countries but rather several paintings by students. Many of the works portray scenes from nature: trees, dolphins, an owl, a peacock, a boat floating adrift in a lake surrounded by mountains. Other

pictures depict a snowman, brightly-colored mittens hanging on a clothesline, the American flag.

The principals are the ambassadors for the district, the educational experts who have the authority to speak for the schools. They put on convincing performances. They speak authoritatively and persuasively; they express confidence that the systems and strategies they have in place will close gaps and reduce suspensions. One of the more bold principals, in addressing the school's goal to improve reading and math scores said,

> We have a very lofty, very strong goal there, and we feel that with the program that we're trying to build, with the way that we want to work with our children to learn, that we have a very realistic chance of getting there….We are done sitting back, admiring the problem, and trying to figure out what some possible avenues are. We're taking it on. We're jumping in; we are ready to go.

Most of the principals tell the council about how they and their staffs care about the students, which they demonstrate through initiatives such as mentoring and rewards programs. Sometimes they smile as they talk about the successes of students who have been impacted by the school's efforts. The principal from Jefferson Elementary juxtaposed the care teachers have for the students with the demands of accountability. He described a conversation that he has with the teachers at his school:

> And we love our kids, but sometimes it's not enough to love them. You've got to come in there and make some things happen. You can love them all

> day long, but can you teach? Can you move those kids? Can you teach mastery of the standards? That's the type of staff we need, and we've made it clear to them that it's not about you needing a job, or having bills to pay, because we all have that. Is this the place you want to be? Is this the population you want to serve?

The council is a polite audience during the performances. I wonder what the members think about the presentations, but I cannot tell from their expressions, or even from the questions they ask at the end. When the principals answer questions, council members seem to accept their responses, at least on the surface. Occasionally council members offer praise for the principals' efforts, but they are silent about any reservations or frustration they may feel. Council members rarely talk about race, although in a meeting outside the study period, a council member asked several pointed questions about disparities in suspension rates between white and African American students.

The principals are likewise silent about any frustration or worries they may have about their schools. They briefly acknowledge that their schools face challenges but spend more time talking about their programs and their data rather than delving deeper into the problems. Regardless of the questions council members raise, the principals appear to have solutions already in place (or at least in the works) for almost every concern, though they admit they still have work to do in some areas.

Behind the head of the table, and at every council member's place, the audiovisual equipment silently and unobtrusively captures and broadcasts the meeting. No matter where I sit I can sense the camera's stare, but when I become absorbed in

the meeting I am less aware of its presence. I cannot tell if the equipment bothers anyone else; I have not heard anyone mention it.

I often had students who had given up on school. A few of them said to me, point-blank, "I suck at school" or "I'm dumb, I'm a rock-head." Others said nothing, but their lack of engagement and low grades suggested they might feel the same way. I would disagree with the students who told me they were no good at school, but years of failure or mediocre performance had convinced them that they could not measure up to the school's standards. Still, every year, teachers like me would attempt to persuade them to keep trying. Sometimes students would make an initial effort but would quickly give up again. Many of them earned enough credits to graduate, but others dropped out. Even if they did graduate, they would soon have to compete with other individuals for a job or a seat in another school and would be judged against new standards.

I know there are many reasons why kids give up on school, but I think the way schools and society narrowly define intelligence automatically condemns a lot of students to failure. Students know how their academic ability compares to that of their classmates. I believe students hear messages frequently about how they measure up, and internalize them from an early age. That is one of the reasons why I believe schools need to be much more careful with their use of data. I have nothing against numbers or science. In fact, I got my Bachelor's degree in chemistry. However, I feel that in many cases, the schools' use of achievement test data is reckless. Numbers may be extrapolated or extended to conclusions that are not justifiable or supported by the data. I do not believe that a few numbers can reveal much about

students. I fear that trying to make evaluative statements about students based on a few measures could cause lasting harm to them. The implication for this study is that my bias against some of the ways schools use numerical data could prevent me from seeing the positive uses of it. Also, I might be especially sensitive to data. During the data analysis and while working on interpretations and conclusions, I need to be aware of the possibility that I might focus on data and minimize the importance of other evidence.

An equity council begins. In 1993, the school board appointed a task force to study inequities based on race and economics in the district ("Equity Panel," 1993). The nine-member group interviewed many people and conducted several public forums to collect data for the report. The task force presented its findings at the December school board meeting ("Race Issues," 1993). The report included at least 19 recommendations, which included eliminating tracking of students, requiring cultural sensitivity training for staff, addressing the over-representation of African-American and students from poverty in special education classes, creating a position for a full-time equity monitor, and forming a 15-member equity council. The task force urged the board to act with haste on its recommendations. However, after a public meeting in January, the board agreed to adopt a few of the recommendations including hiring an equity accountability officer and forming an equity council ("Discussion Pushes," 1994).

I asked seven participants if they knew how the council had started. Three participants did not know, but four participants could recount details—some more, some fewer. All the participants' accounts substantiated each other and aligned with

the newspaper accounts about the community forums. One participant shared that somewhere there is a handbook that tells about the beginning of the council, but I could not locate a copy. Mr. Maxwell explained how the council began. He said,

> It was started by two community leaders here in town. And they were concerned about the same issues that we're dealing with right now, how minorities are performing, how mentally disabled students are performing, how our free and reduced lunch students are performing, you know, are they getting the resources that they need to be successful? Are they being treated equitably? So the same issues that we're dealing with right now were the core reasons why the Equity Council was started in the beginning.

Two other participants confirmed what Mr. Maxwell said, but in addition to the two community leaders, they mentioned several religious organizations and other groups in Buchanan that also had joined the conversation. One of these participants, Ms. Williams, said that the conversation "started out where the community looked at the school board—looked at the school district and saw inequities that weren't being addressed. And so they got together and started talking about it."

The council gives an annual award which is named after one of the original members. The award recognizes a person who has worked to improve educational achievement in the Wilson County School District. Apart from the award and the handbook which I could not locate, evidence did not suggest that the founding of the council is frequently celebrated or that there are any other traditions associated with the group's beginnings. Although a few of the participants were able to tell the story about the beginning of the council, and two participants were able to give names of

the founding members of the group, observations, artifacts and interviews did not suggest that all council members are aware of the group's history, or that the council routinely tells the story of the group's beginnings to others.

Transitions. The council does not have clear procedures for dealing with transitions in membership. The attrition of members may cause the council to lose historical information and knowledge that could benefit the group. Mr. Blakeman was the only participant who brought up this piece of information:

> We've also lost some expertise, some ties to the old days…there's about six of us that have been on longer than the rest. And we kind of tie back to the older generation. And new is fine; new blood and new ideas, that's all great…but I think we lose something when some of those people are just, they're not on the council so now, they're gone, you know, don't go to our meetings.

The lack of procedures for transitions also applies to members who are joining the council: there is no formal process in place to "onboard" or orient new members to the work of the group. I obtained a copy of the handbook that new members receive; it is simply a copy of the group's bylaws. I asked five participants how they learned what was expected of them when they were new to the council. Two participants responded that they learned little by little as they went, with one adding that she learned from people who were already on the council, and the other sharing that the yearly retreat occurred soon after she joined, which also helped. A third participant said that he already had many personal connections with people on the Equity Council and the community, and was familiar with the district work, which

all helped him transition onto the council. Mr. Moore said that new members are asked to join a committee and through the committee work they begin to learn about the council.

Ms. Davis, the fifth participant I asked, felt that a formal orientation would have helped her understand the work of the council. Her unfamiliarity with the terminology and concepts being discussed (e.g., the different types of assessments given to students in the district, the acronyms, the organizational hierarchy of the district and who reports to whom) made it difficult for her to contribute as much as she felt she could have with a better understanding of the work of the council and the district. She stated several times during the interview that she was "still learning" and that there was a lot she didn't understand:

> I've kind of had to research everything myself and kind of learn as I go. Had I had a formal kind of training, a couple of weeks or something, where they went over just the basics of what we did, and kind of went into detail on the [Equity Report] and things-- I had no idea what that meant --I think that I would have had a better understanding earlier and would have been more active. So even still to this day you know, there are portions—I'm still learning. There's a lot that I don't know. And I would love to have, you know, the opportunity to have like a training session so that we can discuss the things that I guess most people already know if they've been serving for five years or whatnot--somebody new coming in that doesn't know the school system.

The lack of a process for transitions may hurt the council in two ways, through the loss of expertise when experienced members leave, and through the time it takes for new members to acclimate themselves to the work of the council and district.

Community connections. Participants seemed to care about the Buchanan community, and often spoke about the community during interviews. Occasionally, they used metaphors to refer to the council's relationship to the community. Ms. Stevens used a metaphor, saying the council is an "ear for the community." When I asked her to explain, she said that when community members contact her with a concern about a situation at school,

> Our job is just to be there to listen, to hear, and our job is not—we can't have authority over a teacher or a school, so our job is just to be the ear and if we hear something that doesn't sound right then we'll probably come back and talk about it with our committee. And if the committee thinks there could be an issue at that school then we'll talk about it at the Equity Council.

Mr. Hampton used a similar metaphor and example to those Ms. Stevens provided. He said that council members are "multiple microphones or recorders" in the community:

> And so several people talk with me about issues and concerns that they have, some in no uncertain terms. So the Equity Council [members] are multiple microphones or recorders in the community of individuals that are being directly impacted by any inequities. So they tell us that. So we're able to take it back and synthesize it. When I speak, I'm not speaking for a community,

don't get me wrong there, but I am speaking from information that often times I have gathered from normal community folk.

The metaphors and examples above provide evidence of the connection and responsibility these participants feel toward the community. Although the two examples illustrate individuals from the community who seek council advice, other participants also expressed a strong commitment to the larger community: "We're saying that as community participants that we want to see the school district improve for all of our kids," and "These are our children, this is our community…we're trying to make a contribution for the community."

A few participants mentioned that the council was made up of community members or that community was represented on the council. For example, they said "You have these different backgrounds that make up the community that are represented around the table. And so our thinking is that at least that's a portion of the community represented." "It's a community equity council, people on the Equity Council come from the community," and "We represent different areas of the community, different backgrounds, we have different specialties, we have different experiences that we can bring to the table and discuss."

The council also sets aside time for members of the public to speak, as required in the bylaws. In observations, community members sometimes took advantage of the opportunity to speak. Occasionally, a representative from a community group might speak for a few minutes about a program the group was establishing. A few times, a teacher from the district spoke about her work in closing

achievement gaps. In meetings I observed where community members spoke, the council welcomed and treated these guests with respect.

Council members valued the idea that the public could come to meetings. Mr. Hampton had said that the Equity Council was not an "ivory tower advising group." The "ivory tower" implies that a person or group acts in isolation with little connection or communication to the community. On the contrary, participants hoped that community members would come to meetings or would consider serving on the council. They made comments such as "the Equity Council individually and corporately invites folks to come be aware of or express their opinions," and "I think the council is a good thing, an opportunity for people in the community who want to help their school."

Ms. Stevens mentioned that some years ago the council wanted to contribute in some way to the school district and decided to adopt a school. This relationship was confirmed in meeting observations and minutes. Ms. Stevens described how the council forged the relationship with the school:

> The Van Buren school principal happened to be at an Equity Council meeting when we were talking about "How can we give back to the district? Each one of us should be able to give something back"….So there was a principal being in the audience hearing that the council wanted to do more than just sit here and look at data. We want to give back into the school. And she took us up….So we adopted that school, and we stayed at that school for three years. And we're still at that school even though the principal has passed away and there's a new principal; we've still been invited back every once in a while for

> the academy when they have their graduation, but we're not as active in the school as we were when we first started.

Participants valued the idea of community and of people working together to make the school system better. However, communities are made up of many different individuals who may have different viewpoints. I asked Mr. Fields if he felt the Buchanan community was divided on the topic of equity, and he responded

> No, I think they would tell you the right thing on equity. But they're a lot more intense if there's equity issues that are actually touching them or their family or their kids or something. If there's not an equity issue that is actually touching them, they want to just talk more philosophy. I don't see a big push from the community saying, "Boy, you need to do something about the equity here." I've never felt that. I have felt that push from individuals or individual groups but not from the community itself.
>
> TR: So you feel a lot of people in the community are satisfied with the way things are, and would be satisfied to leave it alone?
>
> Mr. Fields: Yeah, and they don't know what it is or if there are problems or issues. Or they assume that there are issues and always have been, and nobody can do anything about it.

I asked Mr. Hampton what he says to people who might not feel the problems the Equity Council works on are important, and he replied

> So I talk to the folks, or folks talk to me, in both those groups you just described. And usually, depending on which group I'm talking to, I will help them remember that the other group exists, so, and that the other side of the

> coin does exist. Wilson County Public Schools does some things right, and so when folks are talking to me about the things that are wrong…I'll remind the individual that's always doubting that may have reason to doubt the system and program, that there are some good things going on, and that your involvement is critical. And I'll remind the folks that think that everything is peachy, because it's peachy for them, that there is a large group that is not being served as well as they should be.

At the October 2014 Equity Council meeting, one month after the release of the Equity Report, the council chair began the meeting in front of a packed audience. The meeting recording shows that the chair greeted everyone, then said, "It's been a good day because we were able to wake up and continue to move forward, so that's always good news, don't you agree?" Several audience and council members responded with a strong "Yes!" and "Amen." This time, the council chair read the mission statement, which includes language about the council's duty to analyze and advise the board on equity issues in order to support the achievement of all students. When the chair reached the word "all", he said it slowly, with emphasis. He continued,

> I want everybody to just be aware of what our mission truly is. I think that there's been some folks that are really not clear on what our intent is. And so I want to ensure the listening public understands what the Equity Council's mission truly is…It's not just African-American students, it's not just Hispanic students, it's not just those who are special education statements, it's for all students…I've heard from several folks that believe that the Equity

> Council is here to attack the leadership team, the principals, the teachers, and I want to say to you, please ma'am, please sir, that is not our intent. What we're trying to do is to partner with you because we simply believe that there are some good things that are going on in this district….Now, that doesn't mean that we're going to back away from what the data says, because the data is saying some things about our district that we need to pay attention to.

The council chair's statements support that there is a perception among some people in Buchanan that the Equity Council is primarily interested in inequities involving certain groups of students. I asked a few participants about this perception, and they were aware of it. Mr. Blakeman said,

> I've seen stuff after the Equity Report, and I've seen letters to the editor that we're only interested in helping poor, black kids, that sort of thing. That's not true at all, but that tends to be what people hear because that's where most of the problems are that we're trying to fight.

Mr. Blakeman then went on to say "that's a sign that maybe we're not doing a good job of explaining what we do to the public." He also gave an example of a time when the district was considering cutting funding to the gifted and talented program, and the council opposed this action showing that the council is concerned about all students.

Mr. Harris spoke about how the topic of equity can divide the community, because some people want to ignore or dismiss what they see as someone else's problem. He said that there is a "myth that's out there is, 'Oh. Black problem. Hispanic problem. Downtown school problem.' Furthest thing from the truth." He

pointed out that many of the schools with low student achievement are located throughout the school district. He also explained how problems with the education system affect the community as a whole, in addition to individuals:

> So, well, now we're going to start pointing fingers: well, it's the school system's problem. It's those peoples' problem. It's the parents' problem. Everybody wants to start pointing fingers instead of really rolling up their sleeves and saying, "No, this is a community problem. And we've got to look at how *we* are going to solve it." Not them or those people. How *we* are going to solve this. Because that's what's going to happen. Business and industry have to look at it and say, 'This is going to be a concern, because if we don't get kids to a point where they're college and career ready, then they're not going to be able to be workers for us. So now, our return on investment is not going to work well, because we're giving money to our tax dollars to the schools.' So, this has to matter to them. It has to matter to the faith community. It has to matter to parents. It has to matter to every population that's in here.

Mr. Hampton echoed the idea that when some students are not succeeding in the school system, everyone is affected. He also touched on the council's educator diversity goal and explained how a lack of diversity in the faculty and administration of schools affects all students, including the ones that are succeeding in the system:

> Everybody on the Equity Council knows and believes that there's no such thing as one side of the boat leaking, and if our side is leaking, so is the other side. And we are conscious of the entire boat. That we are conscious of the

> entire boat, and we will work for the entire boat with the understanding that there are obviously some folks on the boat that are eating a little better than others. But at the end of the day, if we don't have a system where all kids are being educated, we don't have the most effective system for those kids that you think *are* being educated, because they're not getting a world-class education. They're not interacting with a diverse group of educators in their primary education time. They're not being exposed to the cultures, the histories, the experiences of a diverse body of people which in terms of impact--in fact it's ill-equipping them to be able to perform in this global society.

Ms. Williams' response agreed with Mr. Hampton's earlier statement that "your involvement is critical" as she explained more about why people should get involved with groups that work for fairness, such as the Equity Council. She also described how education can be part of the process toward building a fairer, more inclusive community. She said that Wilson County (the county and city, not just the school district)

> Has a history of not appreciating diversity on its many levels….Wilson County has been feeling exclusive for a while. And so, you know, that conscience of the people who disagree with that kind of separation in the community—we want to be that conscience. We want to be the people who raise those issues and discuss those issues and get that information on the table in a conversation rather than having what happened before where people on the ground discriminated against special groups. And so for people of

> conscience, people who believe in fairness, for a fairness community, and for Wilson County to stay a fairness community, you have to be those people who can rise to that situation and have those people serve on the Equity Council and bring their information together…because when you start in your school district educating kids to be exclusive and separate, that's when you raise a community that's not fair.

Data and the symbolic dimension of the Equity Report. Much of what council members know about the schools is based on their work with the quantitative data the district provides. Data are more than just a tool or one way to know or understand; they are symbolic due to their importance to the council in providing them with information they cannot otherwise easily get, and evidence of what happens in the schools that they cannot directly observe.

In interviews, participants mentioned data and numbers numerous times. Many times, data were referenced as one of the processes the council uses. But in its symbolic dimension, data increase credibility because they shed light on truth. Four participants referenced data in this way. Mr. Moore said, "Numbers do not lie. Anybody can give us any story that they want, you know." Mr. Harris said, "I think the data doesn't lie. And so what we have to do is continue to put the data out there and then it's not Tara, it's not [Mr. Harris'] opinion, no. This is the data that simply says that this is where the district is." When I asked Mr. Hampton how the council substantiates its worth, one of the examples he provided was the council's use of data: "As the adage goes, 'In God we trust, all others bring data.' If you're doing a dissertation you understand that cliché, so that goes a great deal in substantiating."

Ms. Williams echoed the idea that data increases credibility, and an understanding of the data can help schools know what they need to do to improve:

> The Equity Indicators, data pulled for the achievement gap, really makes a big difference I think in how the school board can say to principals and schools in the district, 'Here's where you are. Here are where those gaps are. Let us know how you're going to fix them. Or what you need to get that done.' So I think that's one of the major successes of the Equity Council, that they provide that data every year, or every two years, and that data is really based on the evidence that the district provides and that can be used to make a difference, to make changes.

Participants' remarks above suggest that people can have confidence in quantitative data; a person or group who supports their arguments with data is more believable and credible than those who do not. With credibility, one has more influence. Ms. Williams' remark, "Let us know how you're going to fix them" shows a belief among some participants, as seen earlier, that gaps are problems to fix or solve.

Participants felt that data provide a way to understand the current education system in the district, although two participants said that data do not provide all information. I probed for more information about data, asking Mr. Harris about his comment "then it's not Tara, it's not [Mr. Harris'] opinion." I include a longer interview excerpt here, to show an example of the actively confronting interview technique:

> TR: Talk to me about data. You mentioned that it's not opinion. Does that mean it's a fact, and what does that tell you?

Mr. Harris: Data can be used both ways. Data can be used to illustrate your point, and it's a good thing, but data is not the only way to measure things, you know…

TR: But you all—you seem to use data for everything. Numerical data. For suspensions, for hiring of minority educators, and so on. There's a lot of data. Can you talk about that and maybe some of the other kinds of data that you look at?

Mr. Harris: The data is definitely one that shows us exactly where things are as far as suspensions are concerned, you know. It shows us where everything is as far as staff diversity is concerned. It shows us where the groups are. This is the group that is college and career ready, this is the group that is not. But data doesn't by itself tell you who has learned versus who has not….Because if I can't take the test, suppose I had a bad day. Does that really say that I know or don't know?

Mr. Harris suggests that numbers cannot always explain the reasons why something occurs, for example, why a student did poorly on a test. However, he still talks about "measuring" and how data gives an accurate picture of "where things are." The response implies that data can provide the council with some but not all information about the schools.

Mr. Moore also spoke about the limitations of quantitative data when he said that "All we're doing in our committee is looking at numbers. We don't know the root of the numbers." He also said that by asking the principals to come and explain their data, the council can develop a better understanding of what is happening in

schools. The council might use a school's data as a starting point for asking a principal to explain the reasons behind the numbers. Mr. Moore explained,

> Then when those principals come to us to talk about their school, then that's when we're able to take these questions and say…"Why did your numbers go up? Please explain that to us." And that's why, that's the dialogue that we have, to allow the principals to actually tell us what happened since we're not in the school to actually see. What we're trying to find out now is, is it the same teacher that's suspending kids on a regular basis? Is it the same teacher sending kids to the office at the same time every day? Is it the same kids that are getting suspended at certain times?

Mr. Moore went on to say that by asking these questions, and by having principals ask themselves these questions, some of the reasons why individual students are being suspended might be discovered.

Mr. Harris said that when he meets with principals individually, he also finds out more than the data show:

> Mr. Harris: Well, what I'm finding in going out and talking with each one of those principals…You'll find that School A's needs are completely different than School B. The data won't show you that. It'll just show you that they're not doing well.
>
> TR: So you're getting a more complete picture by looking at the data and by talking to the principals?
>
> Mr. Harris: Exactly.

A contradictory view of data emerges. On the one hand, Mr. Harris and Mr. Moore both recognize the limitations of quantitative data. However, observations show that the council and some of its committees regularly collect, analyze and discuss quantitative data. In interviews, participants frequently mentioned "data" and "numbers." Also, when the principals come to present, they often introduce the council to their schools through data on demographics, achievement and suspension.

The Equity Report, which presents comparisons of quantitative data, also has a symbolic dimension. First, it is jointly created by the council and the school district, so it represents the collaboration of council and district. Although some of the committees produce reports to present to the council and school board, the Equity Report is a project that is unique to the whole council. Only two of the ten participants I interviewed did not mention the Equity Report, and of those two, one indirectly referenced it in talking about the Indicators of Equity and the gap data the council compiles. The fact that almost every participant at least mentioned the report underscores its significance.

Mr. Blakeman saw the Equity Report as a starting point for conversations between educators. He said,

> This is what we hope the [Equity Report] is getting people to do, we're hoping people are sitting around talking about this stuff and what they can do about it in individual schools. During staff meetings, are they talking about this stuff?

His use of the word "hope" and the question "Are they talking about this stuff?" implies that he does not know if school personnel are using the report.

Mr. Maxwell alludes to the value of the Equity Report as a standard against which progress is measured. He said,

> A part of what we're doing now is based on the [Equity Report], getting the principals to the Equity Council meeting, talking about successes, best practices, things they need to improve on, for us to make note of those things and benchmark them. But it's all a part of improving that [Equity Report]. What can we do? Where are we lacking?

His comments align with those of other participants who said that principals were invited to the council meetings in part because the gaps in the Indicators of Equity were not closing. Mr. Maxwell's statement that "It's all a part of improving that [Equity Report]" supports a view of the Equity Report as a standard against which success can be measured with numbers. Mr. Moore maintained this perspective in speaking about student suspension data, and that when principals share their successes during presentations, the council could

> Then take that information and be able to hopefully share with other schools to maybe help them to bring down their numbers as well. So this is going to be a joint effort, but it's not going to be something, with the way our numbers are, it's not going to be something going to be a big gap overnight, it's going to take time, but as long as we see the numbers coming down, and then stabilizing, we will be happy.

Mr. Moore's remarks also illustrate the idea of sharing best practices, to scale or replicate them across schools. Although Mr. Moore did not specifically reference the

Equity Report, his comments show the council's focus on data as the judge of success. Mr. Blakeman expressed a similar view when he said,

> Nothing's going well, though, until we see the numbers change. There's relationships that are better, there's—we have access, where before we were just this group that met once a month and said angry things, and we were ignored; we didn't have access to the people we needed access to. So those are positives, but I don't know that anything is better until the numbers change, until we see real improvement in the district, and that we haven't seen.

In agreement with Mr. Maxwell's views, Mr. Hampton also discussed the importance of the Equity Report in showing where the district is making progress and where gaps still remain, as the interview excerpt below shows:

TR: Can you think of any other things that you feel are going well with the council?

> Mr. Hampton: Obviously that we have a valid, quantitative document that evaluates the district's progress or lack of towards closing the achievement gap, specifically relative to those that are in the gap—black, brown, free and reduced lunch, in large part--that we have that document, that irrefutable document that simply analyzes the data that *is*, I think that is, that's invaluable. That's invaluable, because it validates what we often say anecdotally, that there are some kids that are being undereducated, or uneducated, so that's also an asset.

Mr. Hampton's use of the adjectives "valid" and "irrefutable" shows the high value he places on the Equity Report and supports the idea that it is a symbol. He also

implies that the report offers evidence of the achievement gap and adds validity to anecdotal evidence.

The unknown: The future. As mentioned earlier, the council has limited access to the day-to-day activities that occur inside schools. They instead must use sources of evidence of student and school progress such as quantitative data on the Indicators of Equity, the presentations from principals, and information provided by community members. In addition to the unknown that happens within the walls of the schools, the likelihood of success for the council in closing gaps is also uncertain.

It is appropriate to review and expand upon what the council defines as success. The council works to close gaps in the nine Indicators of Equity. I asked the last two participants I interviewed, Mr. Fields and Mr. Harris, what they believed to be the purpose of schooling. Mr. Harris pointed to the nine Indicators of Equity as areas that schooling should address "in order for a student to be able to learn and excel. All of their needs in each one of those areas has to be met. And if we don't do that, then we're really failing the students." In the selection below, Mr. Fields took a more broad view:

> Mr. Fields: The population needs to be educated to make good decisions about government and the country. Every citizen needs to have at least a basic education that the school offers. And it needs to be at a level that they can go out and function in society and culture, and make a contribution, and also make a living and have happiness….
>
> TR: So I think I had two purposes, to understand government or participate in government, and to make a living. Those are the two purposes.

Mr. Fields: Yes, and also the pursuit of happiness too, that you can understand about the world, and that you can enjoy life and what it means, and that you're a good neighbor and citizen, and that you have those skills to function.

TR: How well do you think the district prepares students for those three pursuits, those three things you mentioned?

Mr. Fields: I think they do a good job if they get kids that come with the attitude, "I want to learn, I will listen, I will sit down, I will not be a bully, and I want what you have to offer," they do a great job. It's children that have issues that they seem to fall down on.

Mr. Fields' answer that students should be able to "make a living" aligns with Mr. Harris' response that students should "learn and excel." Mr. Fields also implies that he feels that students who comply with school expectations and rules and who engage in the schools' programs can succeed in the system.

Statements from the introduction to the fourth Equity Report and the council's and district's mission statements all underscore the goal of increasing student achievement, which aligns with what Mr. Harris said, in that students should "learn and excel." The Equity Report begins with a preface and then presents two introductory sections, one written by the council chair, and the other written by the superintendent. The introductions frequently mention the goals of raising student achievement and closing gaps and the importance of data. The preface states that the report gives a "snapshot" of current data and will illuminate the way to a world-class education for every student. It states that "factual data" can motivate people to close

gaps. The preface lays out a pathway to closing gaps: once the awareness of these gaps has been raised, one can determine the reasons for the gaps through interpretation, and finally take action. The preface concludes by saying that "the numbers are real."

In his introduction, the council chair writes that he hopes that schools will use the Equity Report to review and update their improvement plans, and that these efforts will hopefully close achievement gaps. He also prescribes some actions to take, saying that progress must be measured so that intervention plans can be put in place when needed. When success occurs, practices that led to success should be replicated. If gaps still exist, strategies and interventions should be reviewed so the gap can be narrowed and eliminated. District leaders should ask themselves questions that have to do with what students are learning to allow students to compete in a global society, provide accountability for implementation of curriculum and standards and the achievement of academic excellence, and keep students motivated and inspired so they can achieve, regardless of race. Finally, he says that the challenge of the community is to disaggregate data and eliminate policies and processes that pose barriers.

In his introduction, the superintendent acknowledges that the district is not reaching all kids, but then points out the high academic achievement of some students. He then suggests that the school system should evaluate itself based on data. He states that the district has set aggressive goals to eliminate gaps and he knows that if the district follows the path that is specified in a tiered system of supports, all students will succeed. Finally, he thanks the council for holding the district publicly

accountable. The ideas expressed in both introductions and the preface place high value on data, accountability and following research-based or best practices.

The district's mission statement (from the web page) says that students will be prepared for high levels of achievement and to excel in a global society. The Equity Council's mission statement refers to advising the school board on equity issues and advocating for the achievement of all students. These statements show that the council and the district agree on the importance of student achievement.

Most participants seemed to have positive feelings about the council's work. A few of them offered opinions about the likelihood of success in closing gaps. Ms. Montgomery wondered how gaps could close without the support of parents. From her perspective, family support is crucial:

> The school system needs to be based on the family. We cannot work apart, to me, we need to work together…The family needs to support the school….Teach them [students] to be responsible, respect teachers, whatever it is, respect teachers, show good manners. You know, that's education. And education starts at home.

This view suggests that parents can support schools by ensuring that students are prepared to learn. The implication that parents and students should comply and engage with the system aligns with Mr. Fields' observation that when students obey rules and comply with expectations, they can be successful according to school standards.

I asked Mr. Fields about who has the answers of what should be done in making the educational system in the district more equitable:

TR: If the school district knows what to do, why haven't they done it?

Mr. Fields: See, they really don't. They may know, "Well, we're not there" but they don't really know what to do….

TR: So if the district and the teachers don't know what to do, and the Equity Council either doesn't know or doesn't have the authority to tell them, what is the answer?

Mr. Fields: Well, we are like a patient, I guess, advising a doctor. We really don't know, as a patient, what the doctor needs to do, but we try to be a good patient, we try to do our part, we try to encourage them to keep reading, to do research, to consult with each other, to use all the technology possible. That's what we can do. We do not have to be experts the way the doctor is. We just help them to be the best that they can be. And I think that's our role with the school board and administration as well.

Mr. Fields' analogy of the council as patient and the district as doctor, and the comment that "we do not have to be experts the way the doctor is" suggests that he believes the council can advocate for students without having the same educational knowledge as educators in the district.

I asked Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Hampton what they thought of the principals' presentations, and their responses differed:

TR: So when you're listening to the principals talk, do you think that they are going to get the results that they are hoping for, from what you're hearing?

Mr. Maxwell: Yes, I think it's attainable, if they are sincere, which we're hoping they're sincere. I think they'll get the results. And there's a lot of

> proof out there where people that are implementing these strategies that are really strategic in their thinking, they're going to get the results. We're confident that the problems that we're seeing can be turned around. And I think it's attainable. I know it's attainable.

Mr. Maxwell's remarks imply that strategic thinking and implementation of targeted initiatives can solve problems such as closing gaps. This viewpoint aligns with the introductions to the Equity Report. Mr. Hampton took a more ambiguous position toward the principals' presentations. He was glad that the principals are answering the council's questions. However, he also questioned the district's capacity and commitment to close gaps. Like Mr. Fields, he used a medical metaphor:

> I don't think that everybody understands the gravitas of what's going on in the district. District employees, and that includes some folks in the district administration, top administration that includes some of our district directors, that includes some of our principals, that includes many of our teachers. I don't think they understand, or it resonates, or they empathize with what we're seeking to do, that there are thousands of children that are not receiving education or not receiving instruction in a way that is helping prepare them for positive life outcomes. And I believe there's a group that does not fully understand and/or care about that. I believe there are still principals who are hiring who they want to hire. I believe there are principals that are going through the proverbial motions, whether it be from day to day in their school, or when they come and present to us at Equity Council….Because to me the definition of 'terminal' is when you have done everything you can do, but the

> condition still exists. That's *terminal*. And so we have principals coming before us, and they're presenting all the stuff that they've done, the data says that they've still got kids in achievement gaps and disproportional and disparate suspension rates for young African-American boys, then that's terminal. So I either need to go to Johns Hopkins Principal University and get some better care, or I need to resolve that it's a dead situation.

To Mr. Hampton, the educators who do not know about or care about the inequities and the unsuccessful attempts to close the gaps raise doubts about the future success of the council's mission. He does seem to feel that there is hope, but the comment that the district needs to "get some better care" or "resolve that it's a dead situation" implies that the council and district may once again be approaching a crossroads.

Summary of the symbolic frame. Participants indicated that community is important to them. They see themselves as part of and connected to the community. They also feel that they are working to improve the community for everyone by making the school system more equitable. The council began as a group made up of community members. Although a few participants could tell the story of how the council started, several participants did not know. Observations suggested that the council does not often celebrate its history in ceremonies or in other ways.

A few participants felt that there are misperceptions among some community members about the purpose of the council. These beliefs reflect a tendency to exonerate oneself by blaming others for problems. Participants emphasized that when some students do not succeed in the system, the entire community should be concerned, and council members welcomed input from the community.

Data, and especially the Equity Report, are highly regarded among council members. Observations and interviews suggested that analyzing data is one of the few ways that council members have to understand the work and progress of the schools. The Equity Report had several meanings for participants. It lends credibility to the council through the data comparisons it contains. It also contains the standards by which success is judged. Two participants clarified that data cannot tell the council everything about the schools, and the council must use other methods, such as communicating with principals, to better understand problems.

One of two participants' beliefs about the purpose of schooling aligned with the goals and ideals expressed in the preface and introductory statements in the Equity Report. In the first few pages of the Equity Report, the council chair and superintendent frequently use terms related to data, accountability and student achievement. The introductions promote using data to monitor progress, holding people accountable for results, with the ultimate goal of raising student achievement and closing gaps.

In addition to the unknown elements that occur within schools, the probability of successfully closing gaps was also uncertain. Participant speculation about the future was mixed. One participant felt confident that the council's goals could be attained with strategic thinking. Another participant believed that educator apathy and the district's lack of progress toward closing gaps cast doubt on the likelihood of future success.

Summary of Chapter 4

The case of the Equity Council was presented through the four frames of Bolman and Deal (2008). Data in the structural frame show that the council's bylaws establish the role of the council as an advisory group to the school board. The bylaws also specify procedures for meetings and for electing members. The bylaws can be amended by a majority vote of the school board. Participants who were asked about the structure of the council did not find it limiting or constraining.

Observations in the structural frame revealed that council meetings are formal gatherings. In addition to the fifteen council members, the district superintendent, the school board chair, and two district liaisons to the council also attend. Council meetings are orderly, purposeful, and participants treat each other with civility. The council's goals include the nine Indicators of Equity which are found in the annual Equity Report. The group also monitors the district's progress toward ten council recommendations. In interviews, participants understood their roles and the goals of the council.

In the human resource frame, interviews showed that participants generally have a high regard for each other and value the diverse perspectives of their colleagues. Although the council is racially diverse, there is more homogeneity with respect to education level. Meeting observations showed that council members do not have many opportunities for discussion; the majority of their meeting time is spent listening to committee reports and principal presentations, with comparatively short periods of time to ask questions or participate in deep discussion.

Council members have limited opportunities to learn about the work of schools and the district. They participate in a yearly retreat and are able to choose what they would like to learn about during this time. They also gain an understanding about the work of the schools in the committees in which they participate, but all committees do not meet every month. Furthermore, two participants stated that they must frequently miss committee meetings because they are often conducted during business hours.

In the political frame, I explored the relationships between the council and school district, school board, and community. The council's relationship with the school district has improved over time. Partly in order to build relationships with school principals, the council began asking principals to come to council meetings to present information and answer questions about their schools. Most participants felt that this was a significant development for the council and were optimistic about the change.

The council's relationship with the school board is also positive. Participants felt that the school board values the council's input and appreciates its work. Two participants said the board does not always act on council recommendations as quickly as the council would like, and one said that the council should have pressured the board to act more quickly in the past.

Participants defined the authority of the council when they discussed actions the council takes or cannot take. Actions the council has taken in the past to advance its work include pressure, raising awareness, listening and giving recommendations. Participants said that the council cannot directly contact principals or teachers but

must instead go through the district liaisons. The council cannot create or change policy. Council members can, however, gather evidence and make recommendations for action to the school board. Participants did not question or criticize the limits of their authority.

Evidence from the symbolic frame suggested that participants value the community. Community members often contact council members with concerns about the school district. Council meetings include a public comments period. However, a few participants spoke about a perception among some in the community that the Equity Council is mainly concerned with only certain groups of students. These people may refuse to see inequity as a community concern but rather as a problem that belongs to only those groups who are affected. Participants emphasized that the entire community is affected by educational inequity.

The council uses data frequently as one of the primary ways to understand the current performance and progress of the school system toward closing gaps. Participants' frequent mentions of the Equity Report, and the meeting time devoted to reviewing this document, signaled its importance as a key artifact. The introductions and preface to the Equity Report also mention data and other terms related to accountability and student achievement, showing the prominence of these concepts to the council and district.

Participants' offered varied perspectives on the future success of the council in closing gaps. One participant believed that the district does not know what to do to address the gaps and the council must encourage educators to keep trying. Another participant felt that the gaps will not close without the support of parents. A third

participant felt confident that the gaps could be closed. The fourth participant was also doubtful and highlighted the barriers to significant change.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This case study aimed to answer the research question:

How does an equity council function in a school district in the southeastern region of the United States?

In Chapter 4, the research question was addressed by presenting the data collected from interviews, observations, recorded Equity Council meetings, and artifacts such as reports and newspaper articles. The data were organized using Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames. In Chapter 5, some key themes which emerged from the data will be examined through a critical theory lens to explore the limitations placed on the council and how the group works to overcome these constraints. I also will discuss the significance and implications of the council's efforts.

In this study, meeting observations provided insight into the council's work. Council members perform some duties individually and in committees, such as gathering information or reading reports, but at full council meetings, everyone comes together to share information, creating the possibility for critique, dialogue and collective action. Although participant interviews helped to clarify what was observed in meetings, the meeting observations, which also included a district response in the form of principal narratives, were especially significant. However, unlike the ideal of a public sphere in which everyone participates in a free exchange of ideas, the burden of norms and structure in council meetings and unwritten rules of

discourse limit the possibility of open discussion. This chapter will include an analysis of some forces that limit the council, some of the ways that the group consents to these controls, and actions the council has taken to resist limiting forces.

Structure and Bylaws

There is an incongruity between the written mission of the council as stated in the bylaws and the transformation that many council members expect to occur. The bylaws task the group with monitoring and analyzing gaps, advising the school board, and serving as the conscience of the board on equity matters. The council meets these obligations by compiling information, analyzing data, bringing in issues from the community for discussion, and providing recommendations to the board. Some in the group expect that transformational change can occur as a result of the council's and the district's efforts; as Mr. Maxwell said, "people that are implementing these strategies that are really strategic in their thinking, they're going to get the results. We're confident that the problems that we're seeing can be turned around." When the gaps do not close on the Indicators of Equity, council members are disappointed over and over again.

Equity Council members value the relationship the group has with the school board. Despite the many disappointments, they feel that with faster adoption of recommendations, closer monitoring and greater accountability of directors, principals and teachers, gaps will close. However, the group may be placing too much faith in the power of the school board to create transformational change. Although the board may develop policies with the best of intentions, top-down mandates often lead to resistance and compliance from those who must fulfill the requirements. In

this case, there was an undercurrent of resentment from the school principals when they were obliged to come forward and explain and defend their efforts to close gaps in achievement and suspension rates; as Mr. Moore shared, "Right now a lot of the directors and the principals feel that we are against them and not with them," a perception the council was trying to change. Policies are important but may not be enough.

Participants in this study expressed faith in the authority of the school board to create change in the district. As Ms. Williams stated, the council provides information to the board that helps to "put the school board in the position where they actually have evidence they could use to make policy to change habits and behaviors within the district." However, as discussed in Chapter 4, although the school board is an important actor in creating the rules of the district, it does not have complete authority in all areas. For example, the school board does not have sole control of the curriculum that is taught in schools. Although the state has adopted academic standards and the Wilson County School Board also has a policy on curriculum, some of the authority to develop policies around curriculum lies with each school council, as established in state law and in district policy. Furthermore, the individual teachers have some choice in what and how they teach. Therefore, the board does not have the power to mandate change in all areas.

The advisory relationship the council has with the board has provided some benefits to the group. The visibility of this relationship and the endeavors of the council to increase awareness have brought attention to the disparities in educational inputs and outcomes in the district that otherwise may have gone unquestioned. By

being invited to the table, the council has enjoyed greater respect and an opportunity for input into board decisions that relate to equity, but the relationship was built on the board's terms. The board exerts control over the council in several ways, many of which are established in the bylaws. The bylaws may have been in effect for so many years that council members have become accustomed to the restrictions they impose. Although several participants mentioned that some council members are appointed by board members and others are elected by the council members, only one pointed out the council's lack of authority regarding appointed members, but seemed to accept this limitation. On the contrary, some of the former members who sat on the Equity Council at the time the bylaws were being developed strongly protested the implementation of these rules, which they saw as constraining.

The school board can exercise power over the council simply through its ability to control the majority of the seats on the council. The bylaws also state the exact day, time and place the council must meet, and any meetings outside of those times must be publicized. The bylaws outline activities in which the council is allowed to engage, and those which are prohibited. To remove any doubt about the board's power, the panel that created the bylaws authorized only the board to amend the bylaws. In summary, when the advising relationship with the school board was formalized through the bylaws, the council relinquished substantial freedom, even though it gained legitimacy, respect, the opportunity for collaboration and an uncertain promise of results. The bylaws place the council in an advisory role; however, interviews and observations suggest that the council occasionally tests these

limits, such as asking principals to speak about their schools at meetings. The ways in which the council resists and pushes to redefine its role will be discussed later.

The bylaws impose a few explicit limits on the topics the council may discuss. The council may not delve into individual district personnel matters, pending litigation against the school board, or any topic barred by the school board attorney. The bylaws appear to encourage or even require discussion among members; they state that agenda items must be discussed before decisions are made and each council member must have an opportunity to express an opinion. The bylaws also allow members of the public to submit items for meeting agendas. These provisions appear to be democratically-inspired, encourage community participation, and ensure that all council members have a voice in decisions. However, the bylaws create some conditions, many of which involve time, that limit discussion. First, the full council only meets once a month, as established in the bylaws. Some of the time in meetings is spent on required housekeeping items, such as approval of minutes. The bylaws state that the purpose of the council is to monitor and assess policies and programs in the district that have to do with equity, recommend programs that will boost student achievement, provide guidance around school climate and culture that has to do with equity, and recommend strategies for removing barriers to teaching and learning. By establishing the council's responsibilities, the bylaws help determine how the council will spend its time, and the topics it will discuss. As shown in Table 4.3 in Chapter 4, more of the council's time is spent on committee updates and listening to principal presentations than on discussion.

The bylaws also set up the five standing committees of the council. These committees are named in the bylaws, but the specific topics that each will address are listed in a committee membership document. The committees report to the council at every meeting or as requested by the council. The establishment of the committees and their areas of concern further define the topics that the council will address. The list of topics the council and committees address is long; each committee is assigned between six and sixteen topics, except for two committees that have only a single focus. The wide breadth of topics to which the council and committees attend and the procedural actions the bylaws prescribe may dilute the group's efforts. For example, according to the committee member list, one of the committees' primary focus is equity participation. This committee is assigned sixteen areas including at-risk programs, students with disabilities, transportation, meal programs, curriculum and instruction, tracking, and misidentification for special education, among others. Any one of these topics could engage a committee full-time. Each committee seems to choose an area of specialty, but still the work is often oriented toward tasks such as gathering information, reporting out to the council, and collecting data. Study participants seem comfortable in working on these tasks and appear to believe that this is the work they should be doing. None of the study participants mentioned a desire to approach the council's work in a different way. The council's time is thus accounted for in the completion of housekeeping items, listening to principal presentations and reports from committees, and in working to fulfill the responsibilities established in the bylaws.

The council is subjected to many of the same limitations as a school board, and it engages in many of the same activities: compiling and presenting reports, gathering and analyzing data, and making recommendations. The group works within the boundaries and authority it has been given by trying to make sure programs and practices are fair. However, these activities have not thus far yielded the results the council members await. The bylaws, which current members generally do not challenge, limit the council's ability to significantly disrupt *business as usual* in the Wilson County School District.

Positivism and Data

The use of data allows the Equity Council to make important comparisons. Observations and interviews show that the council uses these comparisons to gauge the progress of the district to close gaps in areas such as student achievement, the percentage of minority educators relative to the percentage of minority students, and the numbers of suspensions of different groups of students. Through the analysis of data, the council uncovers disparities that might otherwise remain hidden. Some participants mentioned that the council uses the comparisons to raise public awareness of the disparities in the school system, and encourage people to become involved in the discussion. The council also makes recommendations to the board for action based on the analysis of data.

Although the group also uses other sources of information, data convey authority or credibility. The school district employees are recognized as the experts in pedagogy and administration, and their knowledge gives them power. By using data, the council also increases their credibility, because they use the same vocabulary

and metrics the district uses to speak about education. The value the council places on data and the processes used to monitor and analyze it suggest a positivist epistemology. The Equity Council uses strategies such as analyzing and monitoring data, prescribing recommendations for change, and holding educators accountable, with the expectation that gaps will close through these processes and the district's reform efforts.

Further evidence of the positivist epistemology can be found in the Equity Report, which illustrates the current status and progress of the district in closing gaps. The report, with its many graphs, supports the observation that the council and district place a high value on data and the assertion that they are working from a positivist perspective. Narrative about factual data, an unambiguous picture of inequity, outcomes based on data, assessment data that provide a supposedly objective measure of whether the district has accomplished its mission, intentional progress monitoring and data collection, frequent collection and analysis of data for decision-making, and many more examples, situate the council and district in a scientific, systems-based perspective.

Comments from interviews confirmed the high value the participants place on data, such as two participants who said that the data and numbers "do not lie." Mr. Harris suggested that the data the council collects gives an accurate picture that "simply says that this is where the district is." Mr. Hampton also referred to the Equity Report as an "irrefutable document" that "validates what we often say anecdotally." The belief that data and scientific processes can lead to a single, objective, absolute truth aligns with positivism.

Participant comments about the truth value of quantitative data conflicted with other interview statements about the limitations of data. Two participants, Mr. Harris and Mr. Moore, mentioned that data can only provide some—not all—information about schools and student learning. The council is attempting to learn more about the inner workings of the schools by inviting principals to present at meetings, because as Mr. Moore said, "All we're doing in our committee is looking at numbers. We don't know the root of the numbers." Mr. Harris alluded to context and the limitations of quantitative data when he said, "Because if I can't take the test, suppose I had a bad day. You know, does that really say that I know or don't know?" He also said that when he speaks individually with principals, he finds that "School A's needs are completely different than School B. The data won't show you that. It'll just show you that they're not doing well."

Council members may be aware of the limitations of numerical data and the significance of context and listening to other perspectives, but these factors are overshadowed by the prevailing procedures of data analysis, reporting and monitoring. In keeping with a positivist perspective, the assumptions behind data monitoring are reductive. These processes involve the selection of a few easily-measured variables to judge whether the district is improving the fairness and quality of the entire educational experiences of thousands of students. Analyzing mostly input and outcome data from a school does not take into account what actually happens inside schools. Input and outcome data say little to nothing about context, including the curriculum students are taught, school culture, student cultures, the norms in the school and how they developed, or student resistance. Schools are more than sites of

instruction; they are also cultural sites and "arenas of contestation and struggle among differentially empowered cultural and economic groups" (Giroux, 2001, p.74). However, in the positivist perspective, problems are treated as if they exist only in the present moment, in a vacuum, isolated and devoid of context and history. Several participants referred to gaps as problems that could be solved, through comments such as "Let's fix two or three things," "Let people come up with their ways to fix the problem," and "Here are where those gaps are. Let us know how you're going to fix them." Thus, "political issues are translated into technical problems" (Giroux, 2001, p. 43), which supposedly can be successfully addressed with technical solutions.

The council's reliance on data may have arisen partly from necessity. For example, a few participants mentioned the limitations that make it difficult for the council to learn about what is going on in the schools. Council members cannot directly contact school employees or go to the schools without first making arrangements with the district liaisons. They have to learn about the schools from the sources that are available to them, such as community members, school principals, and data. Also, the school district is immersed in data-driven processes, which may partly explain why the council also uses data. However, there may be other ways council members could learn about the work of the schools, such as attending public school council meetings. At these meetings, council members could learn about each school and meet school employees, parents and teachers.

The Principals' Narratives

In this section, I will highlight some examples from the principals' presentations that I think will provide further evidence of the positivist epistemology

in the Wilson County schools, the faith in data to provide a true picture of reality, and the subtle pressure to accept the principals' accounts of the schools' disciplinary practices. In addition to the district's response within the Equity Report and a few artifacts from the district's web site, the principals' presentations provided a valuable source of information about practice within the schools. I will briefly discuss how the principals' narratives serve to reinforce dominant beliefs and restrain criticism from the Equity Council.

The majority of principals who spoke described their tracking and monitoring procedures as routine; their comfort in speaking about these practices imply that they are accepted and widely used, and they promote an ideological perspective that the disciplinary practices are necessary and for the good of all. The principals' narratives, replete with supporting evidence, attempt to convince listeners that their disciplinary systems have everything under control and are fairly administered. The content that principals present, their confidence in their systems, the neutral, technical language they use, and their credibility as educational experts validate their disciplinary practices, rendering additional questioning unnecessary and maintaining the status quo. Principals show their faith in scientific and business strategies such as systems and numbers to manage student behavior through their comments. For example, one principal said, "We believe passionately in our systems." Passion is a strong emotion. Systems are technical and supposedly objective. Juxtaposing belief and a strong emotional response with scientific rationality may elevate systems to a symbolic role. From this view, systems are not simply tools, they are symbolic and powerful because of the educators' faith in them. As discussed in Chapter 4, the council also ascribes a

symbolic role to data, because data give the group credibility. Thus, data fortify the council and make it stronger. The pride and the passionate belief in systems also allude to their worth. The principal goes on to say that "I can't be the monitor of all different areas; I have to have teams underneath that are working with very intentional targets." This statement emphasizes the status of the principal at the top of the hierarchy in relation to the nameless, unidentified teams that are underneath. The word *intentional* suggests that nothing is left to chance, reinforcing that educators at the school have everything under control thanks to their expertise with systems. This principal, like most of the others, tended to use the active voice rather than passive, again showing agency and control.

Another principal stated, "We've developed a…very sophisticated marks documentation system." The word *sophisticated* alludes to the technical expertise of the educators who developed the system. Another principal said, "They put it [data] in a nice, neat, understandable chart," suggesting that this system is valuable because it is efficient, and it can simplify a messy, complicated concept such as behavior. The implication behind these narratives is that if principals, who are accepted as educational experts, believe this strongly in systems and data, then so should listeners. Also, the schools are using many similar strategies, some of which have been adopted by the district, such as the tiered behavioral and academic systems and the accompanying data management. The principals' narratives validate and legitimate these practices because the principals are the acknowledged educational experts, and they are using and confidently endorsing many of the same strategies that are used district-wide. Principals also frequently use acronyms and terms like *tiers*. The use

of educational and scientific jargon further serves to convince listeners of the principals' status as experts and discourages critical questioning.

Principals described their disciplinary practices so thoroughly that it appears that they are addressing every possible situation, sometimes even before incidents occur. Principals use data not only to track previous behavior and behavior in progress, but also to predict student infractions based on the data, which allows them to pinpoint individual students for monitoring or interventions. For example, the Adams Middle School principal said, "We can actually dissect data on student behaviors before it's even an office referral. Then, we use that to target and identify kids for various interventions that we do." The use of the word *dissect* suggests careful, scientific examination of the student behavioral data. The principal implies that the predictive powers of the analysis justify students being sent to interventions, even before they have committed an infraction. The words *target* and *identify* again suggest that this process does not randomly or unfairly select students for interventions. On the contrary, the data analysis justifies the placement. The words *target* and *identify* attempt to convey a neutrality which is more acceptable than saying that students are *singled out and labeled* according to their behavioral data.

My intent through this analysis is not to condemn the schools' disciplinary practices. However, I believe that the scientific, technical language the principals use serves several purposes. First, it suggests that the principals are justified in their actions because they are using scientific methods. Because district employees and council members accept the truth value of quantitative data, there is less reason to question the principals' methods. The technical language also objectifies the students

as numbers, making it easier to overlook or accept some of the district's practices. Consider the statement of the principal from Grant Middle School who said that the discipline committee looks at different data sources: "It's gender, it's grade level, it's the type of behavior, the time of day, the day of the week, the ethnicity. It's every type of data that you can pull." These students are known by their names, their demographic data, and their behavioral infractions. Though principals may try to talk with students and learn about them as individuals, the number of students in the school and the volume of discipline incidents may require educators to monitor behavioral data such as the numbers of office referrals and numbers of suspensions. To maintain efficiency, the principals use data—and in using data to speak about students, they are objectified.

The educators have collected and control all the information about the students. Some principals said that they know students' names, but the names are usually associated with test scores and behavioral data. For example, the principal from Cleveland High School said, "We know the names of those kids, we know who they are, we know where they're at in our building, we know who their parents are…" The principals' narratives contrast *us* and *them*. The educators are the adults; they are experts in their field who make objective decisions based on data, not emotion. They also have the power to collect information about students and use that information to make decisions in what they think are students' best interests. The students, on the other hand, often make poor choices and require intervention. The evidence suggests, therefore, that the principals are most likely right, and students who disagree with their decisions must be wrong. The possibility that the principal or

the school are fallible, or that disciplinary practices are not always fair, is not addressed in the presentations. I will revisit this idea later in this chapter.

Schools sometimes implement structures that appear to be participatory, decentralize power and seemingly give people control over decision-making (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998). For example, a school committee may be given the authority to self-govern without supervision from administrators. However, supervision still occurs as group members begin to monitor themselves and each other. Therefore, by giving members the authority to govern themselves, the organization appears to be more democratic and the control of the organization is less visible, even though it is still present. Some schools in Wilson County have created peer mediation or student conduct committees, giving selected students the authority to impose consequences on their peers for minor behavioral infractions. The principal at Roosevelt Middle School said that the program "has proven successful as students begin to help monitor one another and move forward." The principal highlighted the effort to decentralize some of the power at the school saying that "This is where we want to give the power to our student body" in creating the student conduct committee. In this context, students appear to have more power; however, this strategy is itself a disciplinary practice. Students appear to be empowered, when the main source of power—the administration—is simply practicing a more subtle form of control. Giving some students the authority to discipline others also creates divisions and hierarchies of power among those who have the authority to punish and those who do not. Principals did not discuss the criteria used to select students to be peer mediators. Although oppositional behavior--especially when it involves

violence--is cause for concern, the reasons for the behavior, and the system's response to it, including the purposes and nature of the interventions being used, should be questioned.

The stated purposes of collecting and tracking student data should not be uncritically accepted. The monitoring and tracking that Wilson County principals described in such clinical, emotionless terms reinforces the institutional aspect of schools, in line with the medical metaphors two study participants used. Giroux (2012) comments on schools' "mindless infatuation" with data and testing, and contends that "public schooling increasingly enforces this deadening experience with disciplinary measures reminiscent of prison culture" (p. 3). Some of the principals' comments did evoke images of institutions like boot camps or prisons. For example, one principal commented about the school's interventions class in which "We just teach and drill not only expectations, but organizational skills, study skills, middle school survival skills." Words such as *drill*, *survival skills*, *monitor*, and *track* contribute to an image of schools as institutions. The words *teach and drill* show adults acting upon students in a one-way show of force, in contrast with other types of activities that could be used such as discussion, listening, questioning and critique.

Principals and teachers may monitor student behavioral data as a starting point to investigate patterns so they can learn about the reasons for oppositional behavior. However, the monitoring of student data could easily lead to labeling of students. When educators label students according to their behavior or academic performance, the student's entire relationship with the school can be affected, influencing how she or he is treated, and treats others (Apple, 2004). The student is blamed for difficulties,

rather than the institution, and change efforts center on the student rather than the school. Labeling is a "moral and political act, not a neutral helping act" (p. 129), as evidenced by the fact that labels are applied much more frequently to students from poverty and those from minority groups.

Principal narratives included in Chapter 4 showed that data allow schools to "target and identify kids for various interventions" and "target students based on the number of marks that they've gotten." This supposedly objective data efficiently determines the treatment students will receive, whether rewards, punishment or interventions. The disciplinary practices described are based in a positivist perspective and systems logic. Behavior and learning are complicated, but the practices described by the principals ignore these complexities, simplifying them to a few variables that can be easily measured and monitored.

As shown in Table 4.4, the council asks the principals questions about the data—for example, why a certain number of students was suspended last year, and why more were suspended this year. They have not yet questioned the principals about the purposes of the disciplinary practices of the schools, the implications of some students having the authority to give consequences to others, the constant tracking of student data, the possibilities for school personnel to monitor and reflect upon their own disciplinary structures, or external review of disciplinary practices. The council is performing some external review through the examination of suspension data and the investigation into some individual student cases.

The Purpose of Education

As discussed in Chapter 2, market logic and systems thinking have infiltrated education, treating teaching like a technical process to follow and ignoring context, history, school culture and the many interactions between students and teachers. This perspective emphasizes individual achievement and preparedness to compete. The Wilson County School District and the Equity Council appear to agree on the purposes and goals for educating students which are in line with the business and systems perspectives. The Equity Report states that the school district should prepare students to compete in a global society and keep them motivated and inspired so they can achieve. The district's mission statement pledges to prepare students for high levels of achievement and excel in a global society. These purposes should be discussed by the council and within the community, rather than determined by the school system alone.

Several scholars reject the idea that amassing credentials in school will lead to future success. Fine (1989) cites a study that found large gaps in earnings between white and African American high school graduates. The study found that many more opportunities existed for white males, even those without high school diplomas--yet the schools kept promoting the idea that the attainment of a diploma would lead to equal opportunity for all. Burbules and Berk (1999) agree that schools promote "false myths of opportunity and merit for many students" (p. 50). Willis (1977) also criticizes this false promise and asks schools to "recognise the strict meaninglessness and confusion of the present proliferation of worthless qualifications" (p. 188), and to "recognise the contradiction of a meritocratic society and educational system where

the majority must lose but all are asked in some way to share in the same ideology" (p. 188).

The purposes for which students are being educated can be debated and amended. They should not be perceived as permanent. These purposes do not have to be limited to the market ideals of individual achievement and competition, especially in light of the critique of the myths of opportunity and success. For example, Mr. Fields identified some other possible purposes of education, such as preparing students to "make good decisions about government and the country," to "function in society and culture, and make a contribution, and also make a living and have happiness." Critical pedagogy also proposes several purposes of education that I described in Chapter 2, such as guiding students to become active citizens and "scholars concerned with learning for their own development and the social good" (Kincheloe, 2008, p.8). The purposes for which students in Wilson County are being educated should be questioned, along with the notion that the attainment of credentials such as diplomas leads to economic success and personal fulfillment.

Limitations of the Council

As discussed earlier, the bylaws of the Equity Council specify the council's roles and responsibilities. These guide the group toward the same types of tasks as the school board, which is understandable since the council serves in an advisory role to the board. Although there are few explicit limits on what the group may discuss, by defining the work of the group, the bylaws focus the group's time on certain topics and indirectly steer it away from others. In addition to the bylaws, there are other factors which may limit discourse.

Although they have the right to speak out, question and criticize, council members may have to carefully choose their words if they wish to continue the conversation with the board and district, and maintain the relationships they have worked to put in place. If they criticize too harshly, disparage individuals, or frame their words or questions in an accusatory manner, they could jeopardize some of the rights and privileges for which they have fought. Mr. Blakeman contrasted the benefit of the current relationship with the district to the tense relationship the council experienced when it strongly voiced its criticism in the past, saying that now, "We have access, where before we were just this group that met once a month and said angry things and we were ignored." If the council were to strongly criticize school practices during principal presentations, principals could complain to the superintendent and board, potentially leading to an ultimatum to either tone the criticism down or forfeit the principals' presentations. If the council began to ignore the boundaries that have been established for its work, the board could distance itself from the council and delay implementation of its recommendations. Detractors could challenge the council and force the group to defend its position or back down. And, as discussed in Chapter 4, the board could dissolve the council entirely. The likelihood of any of these scenarios occurring is lessened if the council works through established processes, does not challenge the schools' and district's practices too vigorously, and abides by the expectation for politeness.

Discourse can be limited by unspoken rules. The rules of discourse, which would include the norms and expectations for meeting conduct the council follows, appear to be understood by all. According to McKerrow, the rules of discourse are

used intentionally to limit speech, and are accepted by those who must stay within the established boundaries:

> These restrictions are more than socially derived regulators of discourse; they are institutionalized rules accepted and used by the dominant class to control the discursive actions of the dominated. The ruling class does not need to resort to overt censorship of opposing ideas, as these rules effectively contain inflammatory rhetoric within socially approved bounds—bounds accepted by the people who form the community (1989, p. 93).

The principals' narratives are examples of a dominant discourse, because principals control their schools, and they are accepted as the educational experts. One of the main purposes of the dominant discourse is to legitimate and convince people to accept the dominant view (Herman & Chomsky, as cited in van Dijk, 1993).

Data and the technical language of systems also limit discourse. The supposed neutrality of systems depoliticizes the Equity Council's work and council meetings. For example, council members and school district employees can discuss race in the neutral context of a comparison of numbers of suspensions or scores on achievement tests, which circumvents a deep conversation about race, thus dodging contested areas and conflict. However, if there is a tacit agreement between the district, council and school board to avoid disputes it comes at a price: silence, with no chance for discussion that might lead to new understanding and change.

What is Left Unsaid

The council selected the principals to come to present information about their schools. As the chief representative, the principal should be most familiar with the

written policies and procedures in the school. The principal is also the person who is most responsible for the school's progress. The council wanted to increase the accountability of individual schools, so the principal was the logical choice as a school representative. However, the principals have a strong interest in protecting the images and reputations of their schools. The information they present likely emphasizes the positive aspects of their schools and minimizes the negative aspects. Sometimes, what is left unsaid is as important as what is said (McKerrow, 1989). Whenever a discourse is developed, some information is included, and some is left out, such that "Any resulting story is never the *full* story" (Dahlberg, 2013, p. 29). The information given might be accurate but incomplete (McKerrow, 1989). For example, when speaking about the in-school suspension program, the principal from Washington High School said that

> We have analyzed our [in-school suspension] program to include an educational component, beyond just the receiving work and doing work; it's basically a component that deals with the affective domain, "How could you have done this differently," you know, to cause the kids to think about the reasons that led to them being in [in-school suspension] and so forth.

It is not clear whether the in-school suspension program is actually analyzed, but if it is, information about who was involved in the evaluation, how it was analyzed, and how often the evaluation occurs, is absent from this narrative. The principal gave scant information about what students actually do in the in-school suspension program, and most of the principals provided even fewer details. The schools are trying to suspend fewer students and are sending some of them to the in-

school suspension program instead. Principals did not explain how they can be sure that the in-school suspension room is not just being used to make the suspension data appear more favorable.

The administration expects students to reflect on their actions while in the in-school suspension room but does not appear to encourage critique of the school's disciplinary system. Thus, students are presumed to be at fault while the disciplinary structures are sound. Students must learn to comply with the system, and those who do not will be eligible for interventions and classes "where we go back and we re-teach expectations to kids" and "we go back and we just tell them, 'Here's how you play school.'"

Principals did not provide any information about what parents or students can do if they feel a suspension was unfair. A board policy about suspensions located on the district's web site said that due process must be followed. In this process the person who is suspending a student (superintendent, principal or assistant principal) must notify the superintendent or board of education and the student's parents. The student also must have a chance to present his or her side of the story. However, after the decision has been made to suspend, the policy did not mention any process to appeal suspensions. Parents and students have little recourse if they feel a suspension was unfair. They might complain to a different administrator or the superintendent, try to investigate on their own, call an attorney, and sometimes, as mentioned in Chapter 4, they call the Equity Council. The disciplinary practices at the schools seem to be protected from outside inspection, and there appears to be a lack of questioning or evaluation of these practices from within the school, beyond looking at

the numbers of students suspended or targeted for interventions. Thus, blame for student non-compliance with school rules is placed on the students themselves or on teachers who are presumed to be in need of cultural responsiveness training.

The Equity Council asks principals certain questions about their suspension goals and data, and the principals answer these questions. Above, I have pointed out some information that the principals have *not* provided, since they were not specifically asked. Principals also were not asked about expulsions, arrests or physical restraint of students, and for the most part, have been silent about these topics. Student arrests have been frequently mentioned in national news articles over the last couple of years, as some schools appear to have students arrested for minor incidents. The principals have not spoken about student arrests or described the role of school resource officers in disciplinary practices.

As stated in the previous section, the principals have an interest in presenting their schools in as favorable a light as possible. If they allow criticism to go unanswered or if they do not have a communication or public relations plan to help maintain the reputations of their schools, criticism can grow, and their jobs may someday be jeopardized. The desire to project an image of the school as stable, under control and free of conflict limits the principals' speech. They remain silent about negative aspects such as conflict, apathy, racism, sexism, isolation, addiction, criticism from students or parents, and bullying. Principals overwhelmingly present the positive aspects of their schools and the initiatives and strategies they are undertaking to improve their schools. Although they acknowledge they still have work to do in some areas, they are silent about the frustration, disappointments and

fears they experience. They are paid to be the experts. They appear to have all the answers, and they rarely, if ever, acknowledge they do not know what to do. They are largely silent about their own shortcomings. They have not provided information about student or parent resistance to disciplinary practice. They have not discussed ways in which disciplinary practices may have changed in response to criticism. Sharing these details might expose the weaknesses of the school and in the principals themselves, which would make them vulnerable to criticism.

The Equity Council members listen politely. For the most part, they seem to be trying to better understand the work of the schools by listening to the principals and asking questions that serve to clarify and inform rather than challenge. Council members are mostly silent during meetings about any negative reactions to what they hear. They do not often give the principals advice about what to do.

The principals' presentations were an important development for the Equity Council. The council invited principals to meetings for two reasons: to build relationships with them through improved communication and hold them accountable for results. However, the usefulness of the presentations in deepening the council's understanding of the work in the schools has been eclipsed by the principals' obligation to serve as positive ambassadors. The principals project an image of the schools as places where negative incidents may occur, but teachers and administrators are aware and working to address problems. Their narratives also emphasize the stability of the schools. The narratives imply that the likelihood of major conflict and disruption is minimized due to the preventive programs, interventions, rewards for compliance to rules, and tracking and monitoring. However, stability does not

necessarily mean that everyone is satisfied with the school or agrees that the school's practices are fair. The absence of conflict can also mean that criticism is silenced, whether subtly or overtly. In an ethnography of a school in Manhattan, Fine (1989) writes that silencing "constitutes the practices by which contradictory evidence, ideologies, and experiences find themselves buried, camouflaged, and discredited" (p. 154). According to Fine, public schools "quiet student voices of difference and dissent so that such voices, when they burst forth, are rendered deviant and dangerous (1989, p. 153). Ignoring criticism, or labeling those who critique as troublemakers (or worse) in order to discredit them does not change unfairness or persuade those who protest that they are wrong. Instead of a goal of stability in which rules and processes are institutionalized and immutable, schools should recognize that democracy is not a fixed, static state, but is rather "a struggle for extending civil rights and seriously improving the quality of human life." (Giroux, 1988, p. 40). Acknowledging the challenges that the council, students and parents raise should not be seen as a sign of weakness but as evidence that the schools are willing to reflect on their own practices, listen to marginalized groups, and commit to substantive and ongoing change.

Broadcasts and Recordings

The public nature of the meetings also may limit discourse. Several council members mentioned that members of the public can participate in Equity Council meetings by either asking to speak during the public comments period, watching the council meeting as it is broadcast, or watching recorded meetings. The availability of the recorded meetings was invaluable to me in conducting this study. The broadcasts

allow people who are interested in the council's mission, but who cannot attend in person, to stay up-to-date. However, the usefulness of the broadcasts in encouraging people to get involved in the discussion is unclear. The meeting broadcast is one-way communication. Watching the meeting on the district's cable television channel is not the same as attending a public forum in which people are invited to participate in a conversation. Watching the broadcasts or meeting recordings allows detractors to criticize council members' views without any examination of their own beliefs. Contrary to a gathering of people coming together to discuss a topic of importance to the community, the broadcasts allow people to watch in isolation in their homes.

Although one study participant stated that he has full freedom to express himself in council meetings, there are elements in council meetings that may cause some people to self-censor their speech. In addition to the limits on discourse discussed previously, the presence of the camera and microphones may be a deterrent to free expression. People could remain silent, leaving some comments unsaid or questions unasked, because anyone could be watching and monitoring the discussion. Furthermore, the meeting will be recorded for later viewing, so the documentation for exactly who said what will be easily accessible. Therefore, although they may overall serve a positive purpose, the broadcasts and recordings also could provide another way for those who are already in power in the district to monitor the actions of their detractors.

The broadcasts are controlled by the district, not by the council. The district owns the audiovisual equipment, the web site and the right to use the cable television channel that broadcasts the meetings. Van Dijk (1993) discusses the parallelism

between power and access to discourse in that "the more discourse genres, contexts, participants, audience, scope and text characteristics they (may) actively control or influence, the more powerful social groups, institutions or elites are" (p. 256). The district controls the media that is used for communication, and therefore, it controls the messages that people receive.

Links to recorded council meetings are advertised on the district web site. The broadcasts and recordings offer no accompanying discussion, interpretation or commentary on the meetings. The Equity Council's page on the district's web site is simply a repository for links to meeting agendas and recordings; the Equity Council has not used (or been able to use) the district media to communicate their own messages to the public. As described in Chapter 4, the council chair did emphasize the group's mission at the beginning of a recorded meeting, stating that "I want to ensure the listening public understands what the Equity Council's mission truly is." However, the broadcasts mostly capture the procedural activities, reports and principal presentations at meetings. The broadcasts appear to be politically neutral, because they simply transmit the audio and video of the meetings. However, in light of the preceding discussion about limits on discourse, these broadcasts are not neutral. They send an implicit message that the district is serious about equity and working to close gaps. The principals' narratives reinforce the dominant narrative that all concerns are being addressed using a systems approach. Therefore, the potential for meeting broadcasts to be used as a mode of communication for the council has not occurred and may not be realized as long as the district maintains control of the means of communication through the web site and the television channel.

Resistance and Envisioning the Future

Equity Council members do not act in opposition to some of the rules and norms to which they are held, but they do challenge others, including the idea that the district is doing satisfactory work overall. First, the fact that there is an Equity Council that has lasted for over twenty years attests to a rejection of dominant beliefs about education in the Wilson County School District. Over the years, the council has had to persevere to be heard and finally be accepted. Mr. Hampton and Mr. Blakeman alluded to the resistance of the council when they said the council would never be a "rubber stamp." Mr. Hampton counted a success in that "The Equity Council *is*, and is expected *to be.*" However, he also recognized the "ever-present need to substantiate your value as a council," which implies an awareness that the council must continually establish its credibility and affirm its worthiness of a seat at the table where decisions are made.

When the principals state that their schools are improving and under control, council members point to the data, which provide evidence that contradicts the principals' official account. Despite the limitations of the Equity Report, it also rejects the dominant narrative, because its purpose is to uncover facts that would probably otherwise be suppressed. Inviting the principals to present to the council was, in part, intended to give them an opportunity to explain their schools' data so council members could learn more about the reality of the schools. As some participants shared, the council tries to raise peoples' awareness of the inequities in the district, which shows resistance to the ideology the district promotes.

Participants expressed a desire to work collaboratively with the school district, but some were also steadfast in their belief that the council must be willing to pressure the district to change. For example, some participants expressed a willingness to confront the district, as shown by Mr. Hampton's comment that "confrontation should always be there; that's a positive thing to me" and Mr. Moore's statement that "we're the ones asking questions that everyone else is afraid to ask." The council's resistance is political, in that they use their hard-won legitimacy and its accompanying power to make specific demands. For example, the council succeeded in its efforts to pressure the district to fill a vacant minority educator recruiter position. Also, the school board approved the council's ten recommendations. Although the council cannot force the school board to adopt the recommendations, there is an expectation for action. Some participants mentioned that they would like for the board to act more quickly on the council's recommendations, with Mr. Hampton stating that in the past he felt that the council could have "turned the heat up higher, quicker" when the board delayed taking action.

When the council discussed the release of the Equity Report and the disappointing findings, members proposed several ideas for action, showing the council again protesting the reality of inequitable outcomes, and the dominant narrative that the schools are doing all that they can to close gaps. Within that September 2014 discussion, members suggested having more discussion with individual school principals, holding individuals accountable for results, and issuing mandates. One member recognized the possibility of counter-resistance to the

council's efforts but said, "I'm thinking that in spite of the push back, we need to push forward." The nature of the discourse showed the continuous struggle and negotiation in which the council engages.

News articles about the council over the years described conflicts between the council and school board, with one article stating that the council and board "frequently spar" over the council's mission ("Equity Council," 1998). Although participants in this study understood the role of the council, the group still pushes against the boundaries that limit it. One of the most overt acts of resistance I observed during the study was the decision to invite principals to council meetings to present information about their schools. Participants stated that the purpose of inviting principals to meetings was to learn more about the schools, to build relationships with the principals and hold them accountable for results, but extending the invitations was also a political move made possible by the council's power. When council members learned that their work had not yielded substantial changes in closing gaps, they pressed to expand the accepted boundaries of the council's role to hear directly from principals. The board agreed to their recommendation. Principals, in order to appear open and transparent, represent their schools well, and show their belief in and support for equity, were obligated to accept the invitation. The move to bring principals to meetings provides an example of the council pushing the boundaries of the group's role beyond advising.

Two participants, Mr. Moore and Mr. Blakeman, commented on the previous inadequacy of the communication chain between council members and principals. Before, the established channels required messages to be relayed to directors, then to

principals. Messages and questions from principals also had to go through the directors to council members. Council members decided to change this process; now they send a member directly to principals' meetings, where communication occurs face-to-face, thus reducing or eliminating misunderstandings. The action to address an unworkable communication system also shows the willingness of the council to resist some of the limitations placed on it.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there are many contexts and reasons for oppositional behavior (Giroux, 2001; Hoy, 2004). Some acts of resistance are solely reactions against domination; this type of resistance "knows only how to say 'no,' not how to say 'yes' to a different view of society that would change the status quo" (Hoy, 2004, p. 6). The council engages in acts of resistance, but members also follow a purpose that drives their work: they are guided by the mission to eliminate gaps and advocate for the academic achievement of all students. Besides acting to oppose, the group also proposes actions for moving forward to eliminate the disparities in the school district through the ten recommendations. Also, the council decided there was a need to hold principals accountable for results, so it brought them in to explain their data. The possibility of holding principals accountable for results as a component of future action will be discussed further in the next section.

Implications

Critical theory. The Equity Council has spent many years challenging the school district but has done so from the epistemological standpoint of the district. The positivist perspective may align with the district's emphasis on technical change and individual academic achievement for students. However, if the council hopes to

fundamentally change or transform the schools, critical theory might better serve as the underlying theory for their action.

Critical theorists point to the importance of curriculum and the act of teaching as not only serving to reproduce existing structures in society (Bowles & Gintis, 1977), but also the possibilities they provide to confront injustice (Giroux, 2012; Kincheloe, 2008). So far, the Equity Council has promoted culturally-responsive teaching, but has not delved into curriculum. Some teachers may be using culturally-responsive teaching methods, or even critical pedagogy, but stories from educators and students who have participated in such learning experiences have not been shared at council meetings thus far.

The public sphere. Several participants talked about the importance of the community. Their comments expressed continuity and flow, as opposed to divisions; they not only wanted to give back to the school district, but also wanted to invite the community in, to have community members attend and participate in council meetings. Ms. Williams expressed the idea of unity when she said "and so, you know, that conscience of the people who disagree with that kind of separation in the community—we want to be that conscience."

As described in Chapter 4, before the Equity Council formed in 1994, the school board assigned a task force to study the inequities in the Wilson County School District. Several public forums brought together individuals, community groups and faith-based organizations and more, to focus on education. The public discussions could have been an example of a developing public sphere. After the task force made its recommendations, one of which was to form the Equity Council, it

appears that the public discussions stopped, and much of the responsibility for oversight of equity in the district was transferred to the council. While the creation of the Equity Council signified the district's commitment to equity, it also may have relieved some of the individuals and schools in the district of making equity a daily priority; a similar situation was described in Chapter 2 in a study by Smith and Roberts (2007).

Giroux (2001) calls attention to the potential of the reconstruction of the public sphere in creating an active citizenry. According to Habermas (1974), a part of the public sphere is formed whenever people meet to discuss topics of public interest. The public sphere must be free from domination; people must be at liberty to express their opinions. All participants in the conversation are equal and must have equal access and opportunity to participate. In some ways, the Equity Council is like the public sphere. When Ms. Williams objected to the idea of having private meetings, she described one of the original purposes of discourse in the public sphere, which was to react against "decisionistic secret politics" (Hohendahl, 1979, p. 93) and increase transparency of the decision-making processes of the state (Hohendahl, 1974). Ms. Williams indicated an obligation to the public in keeping the council's work accessible to everyone:

> The issues that come to us come from the public. And so they need to—*anyone* ought to be able to sit in on any of our meetings….You cannot have an Equity Council that's having secret negotiations or meetings, because then you become like the people you're trying to change.

However, as previously noted, in meetings, the council spends less time on discussion than on listening to reports and presentations. Mr. Fields referred to the lack of discourse in council meetings when he said that the council reacts "as individuals," a statement which was substantiated through meeting observations. The council's meetings are similar to school board meetings, in which members mostly present and listen to reports and talks, rather than engage in discussion and critique. As stated in Chapter 4, all the members do not appear to know each other very well, and there are few opportunities to become acquainted. With no private meeting time to discuss beliefs about equity and the purpose of education, it would be difficult to establish some shared views on these ideas. When new situations occur, under the bylaws the group cannot meet alone to discuss the situation to determine an appropriate response.

Mr. Harris identified the stake that the entire community has in the Wilson County education system when he said, "Everybody wants to start pointing fingers instead of really rolling up their sleeves and saying, 'No, this is a community problem. And we've got to look at how *we* are going to solve it." Mr. Hampton and Mr. Blakeman mentioned that there are other groups in Buchanan in addition to the Equity Council that are working to eliminate disparities in the Wilson County educational system. Several organizations in Buchanan also advocate for environmental and social justice causes. Creating opportunities for public discussion among all the groups working for progressive causes could create opportunities for people to learn from each other. These meetings would allow connections to be made between education and other institutions and reduce the tendency to treat schools as separate and isolated from the community and other organizations. Such

conversations could begin to re-create a public sphere, like the one that may have been developing when the task force held the public forums in the early 1990s. The public sphere should provide a space free from the limitations of the council's bylaws and school district oversight. It also should seek to increase the diversity of those involved in the conversation, especially working-class people who do not appear to be well-represented on the council at this time.

The school district's accountability to the state and federal governments is clear. The measures the district employs, the goals it pursues, and the language it uses come from systems, market logic and positivism. The council has aligned its work with the district's model. Council members have learned the language of systems and appear to accept the district's goals and strategies as legitimate. The council may learn about the district's work, but its main influence in how that work is accomplished occurs through its relationship with the board. The district's responsibility to the public, including the Equity Council, is less evident than its accountability to the government and business. Creating space and conditions in the public sphere for discussion could make the district's accountability to the people of Buchanan more visible.

The council's recent efforts to hold the principals accountable for their schools' performance could be a starting point for further work in developing a public sphere. The schools are accountable to the state and federal governments (and others) on measures such as student performance on achievement tests. However, the schools' accountability to the public could include co-created and agreed-upon measures as well. Ranson (1986) describes how accountability involves evaluation of

performance, but it can also center on a discussion about the purpose of education. From the diverse perspectives of teachers, elected officials, community members, parents and students, a shared vision about the purpose and goals of education could be developed. Once an agreement has been reached about the purposes the schools will work toward, schools can then be held to account. In this way, discourse on the purpose of education can "thereby help to foster not only effective schooling but also the conditions for a more vital accountability for citizenship" (Ranson, 1986, p. 96). In Wilson County, such an agreement could be created between the schools and the public, thus allowing the public some voice in the work of the schools and also helping to create an active citizenry.

As discussed in Chapter 2, radical teachers should play an important role in creating the public sphere (Giroux, 2001). In order to do this, they must be engaged as active citizens outside their schools, including working with outside groups that work for progressive causes, such as labor unions, social justice groups, and environmental concerns. If council members could locate radical teachers in the district, build relationships with them through the activities described above, and help them to connect with other radical teachers, all groups might benefit.

The relationship between theory and practice must be defined in order to reconstruct the public sphere (Giroux, 2001). Many times, theory is seen as the domain of intellectuals, when in fact, people from all levels of education and socioeconomic positions formulate theories about what they perceive in society. According to Giroux,

> The interface between theory and practice is not at the point where "radicals" provide prescriptions and parents, workers, and the oppressed receive and utilize them; instead, it is at the point where these various groups come together and raise the fundamental question of how they may enlighten each other, and how through such an exchange (of theoretical positions) a mode of practice might emerge in which all groups may benefit (2001, p. 240).

In the public sphere, through critique and analysis, the validity of various theories is discussed and debated. The mediation between theory and practice in the public sphere occurs with the goal of creating a democratic society.

In practice, creating a public sphere is not an easy endeavor. The requirement for equal access and opportunity for all participants to contribute to the discussion is difficult to achieve (Giroux, 2001). The condition that the space must be free from domination and conflict also may be difficult to ensure; for example, in practice, some people might be afraid to speak out for fear of retaliation. Furthermore, the influence of mass culture has engaged people in consumer pastimes rather than in public discourse (Agger, 2013); Giroux comments that "the dominant ideologies of individualism, consumerism, and scientific rationality" (1988, p. 41) have contributed to a decline in public life. Finally, business logic promotes the idea that problems can be solved through individual choices in a market, thus reducing the need for collective problem-solving (Apple, 2005). However, despite these barriers, it would still be worthwhile to try to create a new public sphere in Wilson County.

There are many historical examples of communities and activists that worked together to create education that served the needs of their students and community

(Apple, 2005). There are also current examples from which people can learn, and which should be shared. Rebuilding the public sphere in Wilson County, with the participation of Equity Council members, radical teachers, working class people, students, women and people of color could provide a way for people to become active citizens through critical discussion of the issues that are important to them.

Future Research

As the study progressed, questions arose which were outside the scope of the study, or which could only be addressed in a cursory manner but which might serve as the focus of future research. First, I only briefly examined principal and district narratives. Future research might explore these messages at a deeper level. The relationship between the public and the private suggested some other questions. For example, two participants disagreed about the need for private meeting time. Future action research could explore the reasons for these positions and how meeting time affects communication within the group. Research questions also could be developed around the meeting broadcasts to learn who is watching the meetings, why they choose to watch instead of attend meetings in person, and their impressions of the council meetings. These findings could be used to explore ways in which the council could use media and what messages it might want to communicate. The council continues to monitor student suspensions, and an exploration of student discipline—including students' perspectives--could also provide avenues of study. Finally, if the Equity Council does initiate community discussions through a public sphere, these meetings could be analyzed in subsequent studies.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the Wilson County Equity Council in the context of its historical beginnings, its role as an advisory body to the school board and a force for activism. For over twenty years, the Equity Council has had a working relationship with the Wilson County School Board and district. The affiliation endured changes in leadership and board members. Sometimes the bonds were collaborative, and other times, adversarial.

The council accepts many of the limitations of its role as an advisory group to the school board, but it occasionally presses those boundaries. The council and school district can each benefit from the perspective of the other. The council can learn from the district's expertise and experience in pedagogy and administration, while the district could benefit from the council's perspective as a group serving the community. The school system is obligated to meet the demands of accountability; under this burden the schools become more technical and institutional and less capable of or willing to critique their own practices. With the many constraints placed on teachers, radical change seems impossible from within the system. In the quest to project the right image, the schools highlight their success stories and remain silent about many problems that have persisted for many years, despite the strategies put in place to correct them. The school board and district employees need the critique of the council and community.

The school system could demonstrate its accountability to the public by working with the community to decide some of the measures by which success will be judged, instead of allowing these decisions to be made by business and the

government. A vision of education that demonstrates accountability to the community might begin to take shape through a new public sphere in which people, especially marginalized groups, become politically involved in the issues that matter to them. Ignoring, suppressing and discrediting the voices that oppose the ideology of the school district means succumbing to the false consciousness of many people that already believe, as Mr. Fields said, that "it's always been that way, and there's nothing you can do about it." There is no guarantee that preparing students to become active citizens will lead to increased test scores. However, education can raise the critical consciousness of students about their own lives, show them how to confront injustice in society and give them hope that they can make a difference.

Scholars caution those who wish to radically transform education and society. Schools and education alone will not be able to correct all of society's problems, although they are important sites for change to occur (Giroux, 2001; Kellner, Lewis, Pierce, & Cho, 2009; Stanley, 2007). People who wish to become agents for change should understand the potential risks to their jobs and relationships (Giroux, 2001). Agger (2013) also suggests that people who work for change should beware of expecting transformation to occur quickly, because they will likely be disappointed. Instead, they should maintain reasonable expectations, so they can avoid becoming discouraged when progress occurs slowly.

The Equity Council began because of the recommendations proposed at a gathering of community members who opposed the disparities they saw in the school system. Though the names and faces in the meeting room have changed over the years, the group has shown itself to be resourceful, able to negotiate a place for itself,

and keep that place at the table. The council keeps moving forward, resisting the limits others place on it. Its work serves as a reminder that the issues that are important to the Wilson County community do not have to be decided by experts or dictated by top-down mandates, nor do people have to learn to live with unfairness. Many in the Buchanan community, likely including members of other groups working for other progressive causes, support the mission of the Equity Council. Maybe council members cannot transform the entire school district without radical change in other areas like the economy—but maybe, working together with others who care, they will find that progress is indeed possible.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. What were some of the reasons why you decided to serve on the Equity Council?

2. a. What do you feel is going well with the council?
   b. What are some of the successes that have come about as a result of the council's work? c. What made this success possible?

3. In what ways has serving on the council been of benefit to you?

4. What are your responsibilities as a council member? When you were a new council member, how did you learn about what was expected of you?

5. a. What could be improved upon with the council?
   b. What barriers has the council faced that made it more difficult to achieve its mission?

6. What are the goals of the council?

7. a. Describe the work processes of the council. b. What parts do the council, school district and school board play in these processes?

8. What are the relationships like between people on the council?

9. What is the relationship like between the council and the school board?

10. What is the relationship like between the council and the school district?

11. a. Describe an example of conflict the council has experienced. b. How did the council deal with the conflict?

12. a. What are the sources of power or authority? b. Who is the council accountable to?

13. How much power or influence does the council have to improve educational outcomes for all students in the district?

14. What resources does the council have to achieve its mission?

15. What are some traditions the council keeps?

16. Part of the council's mission statement says that the council represents "the equity conscience of the community." What does that mean to you?

APPENDIX B

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Observation Protocol

Location: Date: Start time: End time:	
Descriptive Notes:	Reflective Notes:

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW CODING TEMPLATE

Interview Coding Template

Interview	Theme										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Stevens											
Blakeman											
Hampton											
Maxwell											
Davis											
Montgomery											
Moore											
Williams											
Fields											
Harris											