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Race as the starting place: equity directors addressing gender and sexual diversity in K-12 schools

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role that Equity Directors play in K-12 schools to understand how these roles are structured in districts, the supports and challenges directors experience, and whether and how they integrate gender and sexual diversity topics into district diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. We conducted semi-structured interviews with ten participants from nine school districts across the USA that had non-discrimination laws addressing gender identity and sexual orientation in schools. Main themes identified from the data concern participant positionality; district climate and priorities; professional development; challenges; and gender and sexual diversity. Most participants had leadership supportive of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts and reported that professional development was a central expectation of much of their work, but time, priorities and content varied. We recommend taking a multi-pronged approach to DEI work that addresses structures to support DEI initiatives, hiring priorities and resources. Intersectional approaches to DEI education should be prioritised.

Introduction

From the start of public schooling in the USA, questions of access and equality in education have been important (Bell 2004; Neem 2017). The *Brown v. Board of Education* (Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka)[1] decision underlined their significance – with particular attention to racism and unequal access to education. When Title IX was passed in 1972, prohibiting discrimination 'on the basis of sex', education institutions' attempts to comply led to increased attention to issues of sex discrimination (Stromquist 1993). Since the 1990s, issues of access and discrimination in schools towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students have also been prominent (Meyer 2015).

As schools have worked to address inequities, some have created roles designed to promote awareness, decrease stigma and discrimination (Mattheis 2017). These positions have different titles including Equity Directors, Equity Officers, Directors of Equity, and Cultural Liaisons (Samuels 2019). The people appointed to these roles often prioritise issues related to racial discrimination and inequity in schools, but their work has expanded to include other topics including religion, immigration and culture as well as

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gender and sexual diversity (GSD). This study emerged out of related projects examining efforts focused on improving school climates related to GSD (Meyer 2008; Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airton 2016).

In this paper we explore the roles of equity directors in K-12 school districts, as well as factors that impact their projects and priorities, with particular attention to GSD. Equity directors are school district personnel primarily responsible for leading initiatives on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)-related topics. As concepts of 'diversity,' 'equity' and 'inclusion' are broad and have been interpreted in various ways by educational institutions and their employees (Ahmed 2012) part of this enquiry concerned how participants and their districts understood these terms.

We recruited individuals from US states that have enumerated legal protections prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender expression. We focused on these states to learn if and how equity directors engaged with education about GSD, including but not limited to addressing policies and initiatives aimed at reducing bias towards LGBTQ people and communities, as part of their work.

Literature review and theoretical framework

There has been minimal research on district-level DEI personnel. We identified only one study of the experiences of district-level diversity personnel (Mattheis 2017). It examined the challenges faced by district DEI leaders in Minnesota regarding a school integration programme between 2009 and 2013. A larger literature however on DEI professional development provided valuable background to this study. We identified three dominant themes: (1) the importance of educational leadership training, (2) the value of school-level DEI learning and principals' roles in justice-focused professional development, and (3) the need for Professional Development (PD) focused on GSD.

Several studies have focused on educational leadership programmes in universities and how they prepare students to engage with DEI (Furman 2012; Douglass Horsford 2014; Santamaria 2013; Shields 2010). Brackett et al. (2014) reported that few educational leadership programmes adequately prepare administrators to centre social justice, and few receive ongoing PD on these topics. Perhaps because of this weakness, Capper and Young (2014) identified a series of 'ironies and limitations' (p. 158) in educational leadership for social justice including: (a) murky definitions of inclusive practices, (b) lack of understanding about the intersections of identity and differences, (c) the limits of focusing on student achievement through test scores, (d) lack of policy coherence, and (e) the need to focus on critical collaborative leadership rather than searching for individual superheroes among educational leadership.

The second group of studies has examined DEI PD at the school-level. These most often focused on principals' efforts to implement PD to positively shape school climate and teacher practices (DeMatthews 2015; Gleason 2010; Kose 2009). Much of this literature focuses on characteristics of principals who facilitate and support successful social justice-focused PD in their schools. (Gleason 2010; Kose 2009; Kose and Lim 2010; Shields 2010). Kose (2009) identified that for social justice-focused PD to be successful, principals must be transformative leaders in vision, learning, structural support, cultural development, and political leadership.

A few studies have explored PD efforts related to GSD, but none have examined the roles of district leaders as part of these efforts (Payne and Smith 2011; Greytak and Kosciw 2010). These studies sharie how administrators respond to and implement district-wide initiatives that focus on affirming LGBTQ youth. For example, Smith and Payne's study describes how school administrators in one state 'refused' PD related to LGBTQ youth. Multiple factors contributed to the resistance, including perceived lack of relevance, the risk of backlash, possible school board disapproval, and school personnel lack of interest in learning about LGBTQ students (2011, p. 183). Two other studies reported on the challenges administrators face when trying to support transgender students (Leonardi and Staley 2018; Mangin 2020).

There is a gap in the literature on equity directors and the work these leaders engage in regarding GSD PD. The GLSEN National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al. 2020) illustrates the prevalence of homophobia and transphobia in secondary schools, thus more information is needed about efforts at district-level to make schools more inclusive and affirming of GSD. Prior research indicates the presence of an equity director can improve educators' experiences in supporting transgender youth (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airton 2016). In US schools, Title IX coordinators are officially tasked with developing educational efforts to reduce sex discrimination in schools, however recent research shows this is a low priority for many who hold this position (Meyer and Quantz 2019). This project aims to fill this gap by interviewing equity directors about their roles and priorities related to DEI work in their districts, and if and how they included GSD-inclusive education in their activities.

Our study is grounded in social justice (North 2008) and anti-oppressive theories of education (Kumashiro 2002) which argue that educational institutions should seek to address social inequalities and challenge oppression. Equity directors lead work to correct systemic inequities in educational opportunities including educating personnel on racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, and working at systems level to address the impacts of these oppressions on students. We apply the lenses offered by Black feminist theory (Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1984; Nash 2008) to ensure our analysis centres the knowledge and experiences of participants who experience oppression in multiple ways with particular attention to race, gender and sexuality.

These theoretical perspectives call attention to the importance of positionality (Hartsock 1993/1997; Milner 2007) and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Nash 2008). An intersectional lens theorises how oppression occurs at the nexus of different identities. Nash champions the importance of an intersectional lens as a 'primary theoretical tool designed to combat feminist hierarchy, hegemony, and exclusivity' (Nash 2008, 2). Intersectional analyses draw from multiple subject positions and centre the contributions of participants whose identities and experiences provide them with epistemic privilege (Jaggar 1989) to see and understand how power and oppression operate.

While two of the three authors of this paper identify as White, we draw from the work of scholars of colour to centre issues of race and racism alongside gender and sexuality and the linked oppressions of sexism, transphobia, and homophobia. Two of the authors are cisgender women and one identifies as both non-binary and transgender. Two of the authors identify as members of the queer community and one identifies as a straight ally actively involved in addressing homophobia and transphobia in schools. All three authors have worked in and with K-12 school districts on DEI-related initiatives and draw on these positionalities and experiences. We state this to make explicit the ontological understandings we bring to the project (Milner 2007; Zamudio et al. 2009).

Methods & data sources

Recruitment focused on the 17 US states and the District of Columbia that prohibited bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity through enumerated laws (GLSEN 2019) at the time of data collection (January – July 2019) (see Table 1). We hypothesised that with mandated protections it was more likely that districts would have plans in place to address GSD as part of DEI initiatives.

We identified the two largest urban and suburban school districts in each state using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) database and found the staff person who was likely responsible for DEI work from visiting district websites and calling district offices. We emailed 72 potential participants with study information inviting them to participate. Participants completed 30–60 minute semi-structured interviews using video conference software which were recorded, transcribed and anonymised. Interviews included questions about the amount of time individuals had been in an equity director position, the strengths and challenges of districts' DEI efforts, and the types of PD they offered. We also asked about the climate of the district with respect to DEI work, the district's priorities regarding DEI, and any policy or PD efforts specifically related to GSD. Important findings emerged in the following areas: positionality, district climate, professional development, GSD, and challenges.

Participants and positionality

Ten equity directors participated in the study representing nine different districts from nine states. Two directors shared a position in the same district. The sample had diversity across race, gender, and sexual orientation. Table 2 summarises the demographics of participants and Table 3 summarises the districts in the study. For most participants, their identities played a significant role in their approach to equity work. This aligns with prior research that connects educators' identities and their understandings of, and commitments, to various forms of diversity and equity work (Johnson 2007; Meyer 2008).

Table 1. State Laws Protecting and Affirming LGBTQ Students.

State	Enumerated[6] Anti-Bullying Law	Enumerated Non-Discrimination Law	LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum Laws
Arkansas	x	x	
California	x	x	x
Colorado	x	x	x
Connecticut	x	x	
DC	x	x	
Iowa	x	x	
Maine	x	x	
Maryland	x		
Massachusetts	x	x	x
Minnesota	x	x	
Nevada	x		
New Jersey	x	x	x
New York	x	x	x
North Carolina	x	x	
Oregon	x	x	x
Rhode Island	x	x	
Vermont	x	x	
Washington	x	x	x

Table 2. Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Job Title	Years in Role	Age	Race or Ethnicity	Gender Identity*	Sexual Orientation
Matt	Associate Superintendent and Chief Academic Officer	< 1	39	White	Male	Straight
Maria	Director of Equity Affairs	< 1	34	Latina	She/her	Heterosexual
Harry	Middle School Principal and Co-Chair Cultural Proficiency & Equity	5	48	African American	Male	Heterosexual
Trina	Executive Director, Equity & Instructional Services	9	47	Mixed-Race Asian & White	She/her	Heterosexual
Sam	Director of Equity Initiatives	9	52	African American	Male	Straight
Sandy	Achievement and Integration Coordinator	1	53	African American	She/her	Heterosexual
Chad	Intervention Specialist	1	30	Black & Asian-American	Male	Heterosexual
Vanessa	Intervention Specialist	3	33	White	Female	Queer
Doug	Equity Specialist	1.5	38	Caucasian	Trans-Male	Queer
Kacey	Equity & Diversity Specialist	2.5	40	White	Female	Straight

Note: Race and ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation identifiers report the exact words participants used to answer the demographic questions.
*Verbatim responses concerning how the respondent answered the question: 'What is your gender identity?'

Table 3. District Information.

District	Type	US Region	Student Enrollment
1	Suburban	Midwest	7,380
2	Suburban	Southeast	11,262
3	Suburban	Northeast	155,280
4	Suburban	Northwest	17, 302
5	Suburban	Northeast	156,380
6	Suburban	West	84,646
7	Urban	Northeast	54,312
8	Urban	Northeast	6,973
9	Suburban	Midwest	18, 187

Note: One interview included two equity directors, so there are only nine school districts represented here but ten equity directors

For example, one participant, Chad[2] remarked that an impetus for him to become engaged in equity work in schools was his desire to, 'give back to the urban community he grew up in.' Vanessa told us that she is open about her identity as a queer woman in conversations with students about sexuality, and that as a White woman, she advocated for an intersectional lens in her district while recognising that in conversations about race, there were points where she will not be able to entirely connect. Maria, a Latina woman from the Southeast remarked on how she always knew that 'education was about more than reading and writing' and that her mother's commitment to multicultural education had inspired her own.

Racial identity and background also played a part in the work of Sam, an African American man. His father was a principal in a segregated school, and he grew up in a neighbourhood with all African American teachers. Sam told us, 'I heard the stories of my neighbours, of my parent's friends, about the struggle, about the obstacles they had to go through, and so I was just always immersed in that.' Kacey, a White equity director from a suburban district in the west, stated how racial justice has always been important to her as she reflected on her upbringing on the south side of Chicago and being raised as

a 'multicultural kid.' She told us, 'I was able to develop a racial identity that was really in a larger context of communities of colour as a kid and that really has impacted my ability to do this work.' Doug, who identified as both queer and trans, said that he could speak to issues around gender identity based on who he was. However, he also remarked that training cannot only be done by people who embody the marginalised identities at the basis of the training; for example, anti-racist education should not only be led by people of colour and LGBTQ-focused education can not only be presented by people who identify as such. The importance of personal background and identity was underlined by each participant. Their ontological knowledge and life experience was an important source of motivation and learning that guided their priorities and expertise in their role as an Equity Director.

Results

Just as participants represented diverse identities, there was variation in district priorities and structures related to DEI education efforts even though many were operating within similar policy contexts. For example, some participants worked full-time as part of a team in the district, while others led district-level DEI work as an add-on to their full-time role as a school principal. Some had been in the role for many years and were funded with a permanent budget, while others had recently created the position and were funded by temporary grants. Some participants held high-level roles such as Associate Superintendent and Chief Academic Officer, while others were hired as Specialists or Coordinators. This context indicates the varied levels of funding, political commitment, and influence that Equity Directors had.

District climate and priorities

Many equity directors spoke about the importance that strong district leadership played in their ability to be effective and credited the superintendent and/or strong relationships with the school board. Participants spoke in mostly positive tones about the support they received from upper-level administrators and their school board. Trina explained, 'a key thing in this work is our superintendent. If he was not very publicly outspoken and transparent about our equity work, we couldn't do this.' Doug stated, 'Our current superintendent leads with equity and has that as a central focus of his work.' Other participants described the importance of having an elected school board that was supportive of DEI work. Sandy worked in such a district, saying, 'I have a good relationship with the school board, they're supportive. I've been very pleased with the support they provided.'

Equity Directors also talked about the challenges they faced due to the history and politics of their region. One spoke about the challenges of doing anti-racist work in the Southeastern region of the USA which has a long history of White supremacy due to its reliance of enslaved peoples to do work on plantations prior to the abolition of slavery in 1865. Another named the challenges of doing this work in a state that was initially founded as a 'White State'.[3] Maria talked about the challenging context of her large district by explaining, 'We have areas that are super rural and rooted in Republican values and then we have communities that are in central [city] that are extremely diverse and very liberal ... How do you attack something that disparate that needs such different

things?' Trina described a similar challenge as follows, 'So it's a big divide. We have one high school that is uber-conservative or that's like, Tea Party capital. Oh my goodness … and then one end of the community that's a little bit more mixed.' Although many equity directors received support from the administration and school board, the broader school community was more divided in its views about DEI work.

We also asked participants to discuss recent high-profile events that impacting their work. Participants mentioned protests related to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, transgender students transitioning at school, teddy bears on nooses[4] hung at school, the 'n-word' shouted at sports tournaments, and racially motivated hate crimes against students. Most of these events had racist motivations at their roots and tended to spur renewed attention or increased support for education efforts related to the incident. A majority of equity directors said that the primary focus of their job was related to race (6 districts) and cultural proficiency (7 districts).

Professional development

We asked about district structures and support for DEI PD as well as the challenges equity directors faced. Participants described the audiences they worked with along with major priorities that year for DEI initiatives. Most participants were directly responsible for professional development of staff and the percentage of their time spent on PD ranged from 1–75%. Some also provided the names of outside resources they used in their PD. The three participants who spent over 50% of their time on DEI PD all worked in districts that named 'cultural proficiency' as a top priority. A summary of audiences, percentage of time focused on PD, district DEI priorities, and outside resources is provided in Table 4.

In all but one case, districts did not provide mandatory, ongoing DEI-related PD. Six equity directors explained that DEI PD activities were among several options from which educators could choose to fulfill professional advancement requirements in the district. Moreover, equity directors did not have systematic ways of following up or

Table 4. Equity Directors' PD Audiences, District Priorities and Programmes.

Equity Director	Time spent on PD (%)*	Audience	District DEI Priorities	Outside PD Resources
Matt	2%	Administrators, instructional coaches	LGBTQ+; SES	Marzano[7]
Maria	75%	Administrators	race; cultural proficiency	*Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain*[8]; *Courageous Conversations*[9]
Harry	1%	District-wide	cultural proficiency	Marzano; 'Student Voice'
Trina	10%	District-wide	race; cultural proficiency; LGBTQ+	Taking it Up[10]
Sam	n/a	n/a	race; cultural proficiency	*Courageous Conversations*
Sandy	50%	Equity coaches	cultural proficiency	*Courageous Conversations*
Chad & Vanessa	n/a	n/a	race; cultural proficiency; LGBTQ+	n/a
Doug	50%	District-wide	race; cultural proficiency	Center for Educational Equity[11]
Kacey	3%	District-wide	Race; LGBTQ+	A Queer Endeavour[12]

Note: 'n/a' means the participants' job did not involve professional development (PD) with school or district personnel, or they did not refer to any outside PD resources.
*Refers specifically to the portion of the Equity Directors' job spent on DEI- related PD activities.

holding educators accountable for applying the learning they gained in DEI PD sessions. Participants expressed good intentions and clear commitments when they described their job responsibilities and goals as equity directors, but the PD structure of their districts made consistent anti-oppressive focused PD that could make lasting changes in knowledge and behaviour difficult. Equity directors often had to shoulder the entire responsibility of DEI initiatives since they reported that DEI priorities were not well integrated or embedded across multiple structures and roles in the district.

Only one equity director, Trina, described a purposeful district structure for ensuring all staff and faculty participated in regular and ongoing DEI PD. Trina explained how they had co-developed a 'matrix of professional development' (see Figure 1) that they used to keep track of differentiated PD activities and the requirements for district staff. She described the mandatory PD as 'racial identity and awareness training' which consisted of multiple training events throughout the school year, each one building on the previous training. She explained,

> Our norms are all based in equity lenses. That's how we drive our work. If something's coming up and it's around the school calendar, we overlay the equity lens. We have that discussion using those lenses to drive us to a more equitable outcome in our decision making ... That's part of our culture. That's the way we function.

Because Trina's district leadership committed to this DEI-focused culture, there were resources and structures available that made her job much more manageable. The work was not without its challenges, but the other equity directors pointed to systemic challenges that were prohibitive in creating a similar culture in their own districts.

Job Type	Coaching for Educational Equity (CFEE)	TIU1 Getting each school/department to a % tipping point - tighten up the action plan - related to the SIP equity goal - emphasis on schools who need to get to tipping point	Coaching from the Inside Out	TIU2 The next training	Culturally responsive teaching and the brain
Administrator	Required - within first 15 months	Helpful, but not required	Within first 3 years	Helpful, not required? Flesh this idea out for each job group	x
Dean	Required - within first 15 months	Required in first year (if not attending CFEE in first year)	Helpful, not required		x
Instructional Coach/ TOSA Central	Required - within first 15 months	Required in first year (if not attending CFEE in first year)	Within first 3 years		Train teachers/TOSA leaders - train the trainer model
Instructional Coach T1	Required - within first 15 months	Required in first year (if not attending CFEE in first year)	Helpful, not required		x
Instructional Coach Building	Required - within first 15 months	Required in first year (if not attending CFEE in first year)	Helpful, not required		x
Counsellors	Required - within first 15 months	Required in first year (if not attending CFEE in first year)	Helpful, not required		x
School Psychologists		required within first year			x
Cultural/ Community Liaisons		Required within first 3 years			x
All staff	not required	Required within first 3 years	Not required		X -Need to develop a plan to systematically train all teaching staff

Figure 1. Professional Development Matrix from school district #9.

Challenges

Participants described the challenges they faced in implementing DEI initiatives. Specifically, participants discussed challenges of 1) funding and capacity, and 2) resistant teacher/educator attitudes. Lack of funding and resources for good quality, sustained DEI PD was a common challenge voiced by participants. Kacey said her district limited the funds to her department, and that 'almost everything is grant-funded' which gave the impression there was a lack of long-term support within the district. Doug explained how funding issues prohibited him from providing DEI PD district-wide. He illustrated this point by discussing training on a new policy for transgender students:

> When I did the trans policy training, it took me half a year to get to every school and that was just on one topic. We want everyone to be able to receive meaningful information and in a timely way to do a training of trainers is the only way to do it, and it's the only way we could afford to. We don't have a budget for this other than me.

Even when funding and resources were not directly named as a challenge, these constraints were evident in other challenges mentioned in the interviews. All the interviewees stated that they did not have the capacity to implement DEI PD to the extent to which they felt it was needed.

Most of the equity directors worked in teams that were disproportionately small considering the size of the district, and much of their time was taken up by administrative or other organisational tasks such as scheduling, attending meetings, and responding to emails. Some equity directors did not even have PD as part of their job duties, and others reported spending only 1–3% of their time on PD-related activities. Only three participants dedicated 50% or more of their time to offering PD. This made implementing sustained DEI PD challenging, if not impossible. Kacey worked in a large district in the West, and she explained the challenges she faced as follows:

> Our capacity is—we're only two people. We do a lot of administrating. We are often coordinating meetings and bringing folks together and creating agendas. I would say professional learning and curriculum development would be the pieces that are my personal favorites, and it's what I find we're doing less and less of as we're doing more systemic work.

Participants also said they did not have the capacity to properly respond to inequitable practices or reform curriculum materials to include more representation of diversity to the extent they wished to, or to provide workshops from an intersectional perspective. Most of their work focused on racial inequity because, as Maria explained, 'of our location and where we are and what we're dealing with on a day-to-day basis.'

A second common challenge directors discussed was navigating resistant attitudes of teachers. Some educators showed resistance through defensiveness and refusing to engage. Others expressed contempt for DEI work during PD:

> There's always a group of people at every meeting I go to and in every group [of educators] I present to that are rolling their eyes the whole time I'm talking and don't see the benefit of what we're doing . . . it's pockets of people, it's principals I can never get to write me back, it's teachers who roll their eyes when I'm talking.

Four participants discussed White educators who were resistant to discussing racial inequity. Sandy said the difficulty with such PD was in 'being able to communicate that in a manner that's not off-putting or offensive to White staff and faculty.' Sam described a similar challenge in more detail:

> It's just tricky because you talk about Whiteness with White people. For those people who are faint of heart or afraid of this work, it shuts them down. So how do you talk about this thing that surrounds us all that we kind of live in or are immersed in, but get people to a state of mind where they can see it and not be offended and not make assumptions about what it is?

The resistance of some educators made DEI efforts difficult. Lack of funding and other resources compounded this problem because equity directors were not able to provide the ongoing PD that could shift attitudes and beliefs.

For many participants, community resistance to GSD topics made PD challenging. Maria said, 'LGBTQ for sure is a major issue that will always raise a lot of feathers. Why aren't we just teaching reading, writing and math? That's kind of always the argument.' Trina explained that GSD-related issues received a greater amount of resistance than issues of race, ethnicity, class and religion:

> There are some members of our community that take exception with the idea that there are people who should have recognition within our system who are homosexual or who identify as a non-binary gender. Some pushback might be around literature in the classroom or trainings that say we honour all families, and we honour the make-up of every family, and we will not take a stance to judge the type of family, the composite or make-up of the family being better than the other. There's some people really interested in that [judging families], and we're not.

Four of nine participants described how they had prioritised GSD-inclusive topics in their PD along with issues of race, and they all described resistance.

Gender and sexual diversity

Although resistance to GSD was pervasive, three of the nine school districts named GSD-related topics as part of their district's priorities for the current school year. However, two of the nine participants did not mention GSD until prompted directly. Four prominent sub-themes were evident: intersectionality, student voice, parent interest, and transgender students.

Intersectionality, a concept first introduced by Black feminists, was a term used by participants to describe the way they thought about DEI initiatives. In several districts, we saw intersectional lenses applied by offering training on GSD that was folded into conversation about racial bias. Sam described how work around racial inequity created a bridge for discussion about LGBTQ students.

> I belong to this group and the focus has been on race, equity and culture, but we started talking about LGBTQ issues and it was just funny, these people who are so into the racial dynamics and inequities did make that same connection to the LGBTQ community and it just speaks to the idea that we all have continuous work to do, and continuous growth, because how can you not see the connections?

In Sam's district, race served as a starting place for staff members to see the connections between marginalisation based on race and marginalisation based on gender and sexuality. Trina also shared, 'By talking about race first, then we can start talking about other

forms of equity with a little more fluidity. We had that racial identity awareness, equity foundation. Now let's layer in gender and sexuality on top of that and the intersectionality of both of those pieces.' Teachers and staff in her district worked actively to disrupt a 'historical dominant culture type model' and a 'cultural shift' was the subsequent goal. Trina described how their equity model as proactive and 'forward facing' and how teachers and staff received two years of training in which discussion of LGBTQ identity and diverse family structures builds on initial conversations about race.

Vanessa described how she leveraged intersectionality to disrupt students' tendencies to fall into the 'oppression Olympics,' whereby individuals use difference divisively rather than as a means for deeper understanding of systems of oppression. Kacey explained how intersectionality informed her understanding of equity and offered comfort when taking the lead in her district on GSD topics. Kacey had a master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies and noted, 'It was actually through [an] intersectional lens that I came to think about gender. I went the opposite of probably a lot of White women in this work, where they found race through gender. I found gender through race.' Harry described how LGBTQ topics and White privilege were the most challenging for him when it came to equity training. He wanted to be more intersectional in his work, but an obstacle for him was when teachers and administrators maintain an impersonal response. He noted, 'Race seems to be more available for people to talk to, however, not on a personal level, only social. I get a lot of teachers and principals that tell me that they're colour blind.'

From this data, it was evident that Equity Directors often leveraged prior work related to racial oppression to bridge understanding on GSD topics. Although some discussed experiencing resistance to addressing racial equity efforts, they drew from the longer history of research, policy and curriculum to support what many referred to as 'cultural proficiency' on the part of educators.

Equity directors spoke about how students were often important leaders. Harry described how much of the pushback with respect to GSD-inclusion came from staff members and, 'the kids themselves have no problems with it.' For three other participants, student input directly informed directors' understanding of pertinent issues and information surrounding GSD. Doug spoke about regular visits to various LGBTQ groups in schools and what he had gained from these visits, 'It was way more fun to learn about [GSD and trans-related topics] through them and what it meant to them.' For Trina, before policy guidelines had been released in her district, students were given a platform to express their experiences. She says, 'Our students have been telling us, hey, these are our issues right now.' Lastly, Chad and Vanessa told us how they too learned from their students. Vanessa gave the example of writing 'LGBTQ' on the board and the students had told her that she 'missed pansexual.' While some equity directors did not specifically speak about their work with students, it is an area that we feel is rich for future attention.

The impact of active and organised parent and community groups can be significant – particularly regarding DEI. Kacey explained that PD topics are often prioritised according to parent values, particularly those in privileged social positions:

> We struggle in our office between are we all of a sudden foregrounding LGBTQ issues because the parents advocating for them are also White and upper class and getting the ear of the superintendent? We don't want to compete, but what about race and all of our Native [American] students?

Harry also described how certain GSD topics received more attention because 'parents and guardians were requesting more training.' Equity directors seemed concerned that demand from parents could take them away from ongoing efforts to support students of colour.

Concerns about policy and resistance to inclusion were prominent in discussions about transgender students. In Harry's district, where a policy on transgender issues had been in place for three years, there was a disconnect between this district value and staff members behaviours. He stated, 'We will do everything outside of our student management system[5] to help them identify and self-identify.' Yet he reported that staff, rather than parents, resist supporting transgender youth. He shared how he had invited a social worker to deliver training around LGBTQ topics and the meeting was 'dead silent', the implication being that this silence showed disengagement and/or passive resistance to learning about the topic.

In some cases, equity directors used the lack of policy to enact creative, student-centred responses to supporting trans youth. For example, Maria leveraged the absence of official guidelines to ensure that a transgender student could participate on the boys' volleyball team in accordance with his gender identity. Overall, equity directors expressed a commitment to transgender students, whether by implementing robust, district-based policy or responding to immediate needs of transgender students such as name changes and participation in sports. As the body of research describing transgender topics in K-12 schools increases, so will accounts of success in navigating this terrain.

Discussion and implications

We learned important lessons from participants about the challenging work of DEI education in K-12 school districts. Themes included: positionality, district climate and priorities, professional development, challenges, and the provision of GSD-inclusive education. Equity directors spoke about the importance of supportive leadership and the challenges they experienced due to limited capacity, funding, and resistance. This resistance came from colleagues pushing back during workshops and meetings, and from community members who opposed efforts to advance GSD-inclusive education.

The topic of if and how GSD was to be addressed was a key interest in this project. We learned that some districts made this a priority, while a few equity directors only discussed the subject when prompted – although all states in the study had similar non-discrimination laws regarding gender identity and sexual orientation in schools. Several districts were giving close attention to transgender student inclusion and were developing and implementing policies and practices to affirm transgender students.

It is clear from our data that structural barriers limit the ability of equity directors to be effective. With every participant describing challenges of limited staffing, budget, and time, the task of undoing long histories of institutional racism was a significant challenge. To continue to enhance equitable educational opportunities, DEI work needs to be given budgetary and staffing priority. As Theoharis (2010) reported, it is important to adopt a multi-pronged approach to DEI work. He writes,

> ….. leaders advanced social justice by disrupting four kinds of injustice they observed to be present in their schools: (1) school structures that marginalise, segregate, and impede achievement, (2) a deprofessionalised teaching staff, (3) a school climate that needed to be

more welcoming to marginalised families and disrupt the disconnect between the school and the community, low-income families, and families of colour, and (4) disparate and low student achievement (p. 340).

This suggests that districts need to demand that school principals use equity as a central element informing their leadership and decision-making.

It was notable how each participant described how they came to be engaged in DEI work. Most described their own identities and experiences as primary motivators for becoming equity educators. Nearly all discussed the importance of approaching the work from an intersectional lens even though the structure of many of their workshops and curricula tended to foreground either race or gender or sexual orientation. This forced fragmentation of identity separates equity work from the ways in which oppression is experienced, and results in underdeveloped and siloed approaches to diversity education. To improve school climate, we must develop more sophisticated and complex DEI education efforts. The more that Equity Directors can work intersectionally, the greater the potential outcomes in reducing bias and inequity in schools.

Black feminist theory offers much to practitioners engaged in DEI work. Intersectional theory seeks to recognise and improve the experiences of multiply marginalised people by centring their knowledge and experiences to better understand how oppression and power operate. It is essential when addressing racism to recognise gender and sexual diversity within communities of colour. When learning about homophobia and transphobia, we must also name the racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity within the LGBTQ community. If we continue to approach these topics separately, efforts to create more equitable and liberatory learning environments will remain partial and incomplete.

Notes

1. This Supreme Court decision struck down racially segregated schooling by overturning the 'separate but equal' standard.
2. All participant names are pseudonyms. see Table 2 for detailed information about each participant.
3. Some US states were established with Black-exclusionary laws that prevented people who were not White from living there or owning property.
4. The noose is a symbol of lynching. Lynchings were public hangings of Black men that occurred most commonly in the southeastern region of the USA to assert White supremacy in an effort to subdue and control the Black population through violence and fear during and after the abolition of slavery.
5. This is referring to the student data management system which often presents technical barriers to changing students' names and legal sex marker in official documentation produced by the district such as transcripts, class rosters, and diplomas.
6. In the USA, enumerated protections are those that list social groups explicitly protected by non-discrimination laws such as by race, national origin, sex, disability, etc.
7. A teacher development programme designed by Robert Marzano. See https://www.marzanoresources.com/
8. A 2014 book by Zoretta Hammond.
9. *Courageous Conversations* is an anti-racist curriculum based on research by Glen Singleton. See https://courageousconversation.com/
10. An equity workshop focused on racial inequality. See http://www.edequityoregon.net/taking-it-up.html

11. Policy and research centre based at Teachers College in New York. See http://www.centerfor educationalequity.org/
12. A GSD-focused group based at the University of Colorado Boulder. See https://www.colorado. edu/education/queer-endeavour

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