TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF EQUITY-ORIENTED PRACTICES
IN K-5 LITERACY INSTRUCTION

By

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ABSTRACT

The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) included requirements and supports to advance equity and excellence for all students, including those historically underserved in education. However, data available from the Maine Department of Education (2021) signaled an evident achievement gap. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) required equity strategies and evidence-based interventions to improve and encourage schools, educators, and leaders to determine which data-driven approaches best meet school and student needs. Effective equity-oriented practices in the literacy classroom included group work, centering student voice, student-centered instruction, and implementing grade-level materials (Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017). Still, little information was available exploring the experiences of teachers as they used these practices in their literacy instruction. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used in literacy instruction in-service by public K-5 elementary teachers in a large metropolitan school district in Maine. Interviews with six public in-service Grades K-5 elementary school teachers revealed how to better support teachers as they worked with students to close the opportunity gap and the subsequent achievement gap. The experiences of participants led to themes that included (a) district initiatives, (b) necessary enhancements, and (c) the needs of educators. The research revealed two types of teachers. The first type of teacher described being confident implementing equity-oriented practices and therefore hopeful that their students would achieve at grade-level. The second type of teacher described uncertainty in their use of equity-oriented practices and their distrust toward the new curriculum.

DEDICATION

To all of my students: you have all taught me so much about education and the need for equity. To my husband, Patrick, thank you for supporting me and being by my side throughout every milestone. To my parents, thank you for the sacrifice you made to get me here. To my family, thank you for always being there for me. To my advisors and professors at the University of New England, thank you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Injustices in the classroom are not solved through awareness of injustices and inequities, but through action (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023b). Equity-oriented practices include naming equitable and inequitable conditions, reflecting on how inequity is handled and how it could be handled, advocating for students, and offering students the opportunities they need to learn (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a; Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017). Just after the COVID-19 pandemic, 65% of teachers reported feeling more concerned about closing opportunity gaps (Namkung et al., 2022). Opportunity gaps reflect differences in education that affect students' individual performance and achievement (Cruz, 2021; Pendakur, 2016). Still, opportunity gaps have existed among students of different races, socioeconomic levels, languages, and disabilities long before the pandemic (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979; The New Teacher Project, 2018). The federal and state governments, through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015), aimed to provide school districts and schools with the opportunity and support to design equitable education, where learning opportunities exist for all students (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act was passed in 2015, replacing No Child Left Behind, which was passed in 2001. The ESSA included requirements and supports to advance equity and excellence for all students, including those historically underserved in education (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). These requirements included expectations that students be able to establish higher-order thinking, use multiple assessment measures, have equity-focused resources and strategies, and have the chance to participate in evidence-based interventions (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) called for school districts and schools to identify challenges and make solutions to support students. This act was intended to close existing opportunity gaps that lead to achievement gaps. Resource equity was also a requirement of ESSA, which called for states to focus on equity when they applied for educational funding (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). This included districts identifying per-pupil spending and establishing incentives and funding based on student need (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). The ESSA also required equity strategies and evidence-based interventions to improve and encourage schools, educators, and leaders to determine which data-driven approaches best met school and student needs (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). The ESSA also provided funding for early childhood education and community schools, termed "evidence-based, equity-enhancing approaches to reducing the opportunity gap" (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016, p. 2). Since its implementation, the ESSA has sought to support low-performing schools as they identify the causes of inequitable opportunities in learning (Carter et al., 2013; Cruz, 2021; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015).

This researcher, who was a former middle school educator and current elementary educator, had long wondered if educators had been far too focused on student achievement as a problem, rather than looking at the causes of the problem. Ferrer et al. (2015) identified that achievement gaps continue to persist, and in reading, they are present as early as first grade. It appears educators in the United States have been far too focused on the symptoms behind achievement and have subsequently allowed such focus to dictate the learning opportunities offered to students or the practices used to support students (Carter et al., 2013). Carter et al. (2013) wrote, "thinking in terms of 'achievement gaps' emphasizes the symptoms; thinking about unequal opportunity highlights the causes" (p. 1). Cruz (2021) identified that The Every

Student Succeeds Act (2015) aimed to support the nation as it tackled existing inequities within its schools. The ESSA requires that teachers play a significant role in tackling inequities and ensuring that the focus is not solely on achievement, but rather on providing rich and meaningful learning opportunities (Cruz, 2021; Gorski, 2016; The New Teacher Project, 2018).

Shifting from thinking solely about gaps in achievement to gaps in opportunity allows educators to recognize the root cause of achievement gaps and instead focus more on the institutional responsibility to support student achievement (Carter et al., 2013; Pendakur, 2016). Understanding the institutional responsibility of schools and districts requires a deeper understanding of how to target injustice through equity literacy and transformative learning (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020; Holdo, 2023). Furthermore, understanding the institutional responsibility of schools and districts also requires a more profound understanding of educational equity, the role of educators in addressing inequity, and literacy instruction in kindergarten through fifth-grade (K-5) education (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017). The next section will describe commonly referenced terms throughout this study.

Definition of Key Terms

Achievement. The Maine Department of Education (2018) defined achievement as the number of students scoring at a performance level of 3 or 4, meaning meeting or exceeding state expectations, on the Maine Education Assessments. Hartl and Riley (2021) identify that student achievement is demonstrated by mastery of knowledge and skills, character, and high-student work.

Achievement gap. The achievement gap consists of the differences in standardized testing, graduation rates, college drop-out rates, and employment between students historically underserved in education and their affluent peers (Cruz, 2021; Pendakur, 2016).

Balanced literacy. The balanced literacy approach to instruction relies on the teacher's content selection and instructional methods (Clements, 2020). Teachers select both based on students' needs (Clements, 2020). This approach uses a blend of teacher and student choice of reading material incorporating whole-language instruction and "diverse strategies, including read-aloud sessions, word walls, guided reading, and reading circles and just enough phonics instruction to meet the requirements of state standards" (Ravitch, 2007, p. 27)

Collective efficacy. A group's shared belief in their ability to organize and execute "the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (Bandura, 1997, p. 477).

Equity. Equity is ensuring and providing every learner with the access and support they need to succeed by removing any existing barriers to that success (Hannah, 2022). Equity in education requires systems to ensure every learner is offered the opportunity to achieve in school (Cruz, 2021; Lumadi, 2020). Equity "honors the myriad of differences among individuals and provides various levels of support, including resources, instruction, and learning opportunities to ensure that fairer, more equitable outcomes are achieved" (Kapp & Kunz, 2021, p. 12).

Equity audit. Equity audits identify that variance in opportunities can be seen in achievement gaps (The University of Southern Maine, n.d.). The University of Southern Maine defined an equity audit as "[a] model [that] focuses on the funding, access, and discipline variances that lead to achievement gaps" (p. 2).

Equity consciousness. Equity consciousness describes a person's "awareness regarding the degree to which others receive equitable treatment, how well they understand the concept of inequity, and how willing they are to be authentically engaged in redressing inequity" (Skrla et al., 2009, p. 3). Equity consciousness includes a continuum of levels that can be used to understand teachers and their ability to recognize, respond to, and redress inequity and cultivate and sustain equity (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020; Skrla et al., 2009).

Equity literacy. A framework for teachers that identifies the abilities of an equity-minded teacher (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a). Equity literacy embraces multicultural curriculum development and calls for more significant efforts to address inequity and injustice in education and create equitable classrooms and schools (Gorski, 2016; Lazar, 2022). The framework gives educators several equity-based abilities, including recognizing, responding to, and redressing inequities and cultivating and sustaining equity, all of which ultimately advance equity in education (Bukko & Liu, 2021).

Equity-oriented practices. Equity-oriented practices target meeting students' needs and addressing existing inequities in curricula and instruction (Lazar, 2022). Equity-oriented practices support inclusivity, promote social justice, and consider and provide for the needs of all individuals (Lazar, 2022; Lumadi, 2020).

Guiding coalition. The definition of a guiding coalition is "putting together a group with enough power to lead the change and getting the group to work together like a team" (Kotter, 2012, p. 23).

In-service teachers. In-service teachers are defined as those working and professionally certified by the state (Lazar, 2022; Maine Department of Education, 2022).

In-service teacher education. In-service education includes "the relevant courses and activities in which a serving teacher may participate to upgrade his professional knowledge, skills, and competence in the teaching profession" (Osamwoni, 2016, p. 1).

Literacy proficiency. Literacy proficiency in the context of this study involves "ensuring that all Maine children enter adulthood equipped to be successful in post-secondary study, careers, and civic life is the ultimate mission of Maine's educational system and requires proficiency with a variety of literacy-oriented abilities" (Maine Department of Education, 2021).

Opportunity myth. The opportunity myth identifies that all students can succeed with the work presented when allowed to access such work (The New Teacher Project, 2018). The opportunity myth identifies that for all students, regardless of their background, school does not appropriately set them up for success, whatever that success may look like (The New Teacher Project, 2018).

Opportunity gap. The opportunity gap identifies the difference in access to effective educators, curricula, appropriate or grade-level materials, and social supports that distinguish an inequity in access (Cruz, 2021; Pendakur, 2016).

Pre-service Teachers. Pre-service teachers are teacher candidates who are practicing in the classroom under a mentor and teacher education program (Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017). These teachers are learning and developing the teaching skills necessary to become professionally certified teachers (Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017).

Professionally certified teachers. According to the Maine Department of Education's (2022) Chapter 115 definition, "the professional teacher certificate is the standard certificate for a teacher in Maine and shall be issued with one or more endorsements that specify the subject area and the grade level for which the teacher is deemed qualified" (p. 8).

Science of reading. The science of reading has been defined as explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension based on scientific evidence and data-informed practice to build readers (Bose, 2023).

Social justice. Social justice in education is "the distribution of resources fairly and treating all students equitably so that they feel safe and secure—physically and psychologically" (Álvarez, 2019).

Transformative learning theory. Transformative learning theory identifies that learning occurs through critical thinking and self-reflection on past experiences, acknowledging that those past experiences influence how individuals determine or view new experiences (Mezirow, 1990; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Transformative learning identifies that people change their worldviews through critical thinking and calls for individuals to interpret their ideas to learn (Mezirow, 1990; Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is a leadership approach that "frames leaders as flag bearers who inspire, encourage, and accomplish what others cannot" (Bass, 2008, p. 158). Transformational leaders challenge their followers to take ownership of their work, identify their followers' areas for growth and strengths, and align their followers with the tasks they need to be successful (Langston EDU: Creative Commons Attribution, n.d.)

Statement of the Problem

Many school districts have made significant efforts to reach and sustain equity literacy in education since the implementation of the ESSA (Lazar, 2022; Wheldall et al., 2019). This includes addressing existing social justice issues and inequities contributing to opportunity and achievement gaps (Cruz, 2021). A pattern of research has supported the fact that early literacy

instruction supports only some students and may contribute to a form of inequity in achievement (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a; Okonkwo & Obeka, 2020; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015; Williamson, 2017). Different approaches to early literacy instruction, including the balanced literacy approach (Gabriel, 2020; Hanford & Peak, 2021) and the science of reading (Gabriel, 2020), showed existing methods and practices for teaching literacy in early education were inequitable and did not support all students (Gabriel, 2020; MacPhee et al., 2021; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015).

The Maine Department of Education (2021) illuminated an inequitable gap in academic achievement among fourth-grade students. This plan revealed that "in 2019, roughly 57% of fourth-grade students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch scored below proficiency reading level, while [only] 33% of students who are not eligible for free or reduced lunch scored below proficiency reading level" (p. 3). Existing literacy instruction had identified that a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching early literacy was insufficient and inequitable (Hartl & Riley, 2021; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Data further signaled an evident achievement gap that may have resulted from the inequity in existing instructional routines and practices (Cruz, 2021; Gorski, 2016).

Existing literacy instruction, including the one-size-fits-all approach, did not account for culturally and linguistically diverse students or students with disabilities and thus was inequitable (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a; Lazar, 2022; Patzelt, 1995; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Consequently, some students were shown to score persistently lower on most literacy standardized tests and not meeting academic expectations (Lumadi, 2020; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Equity-oriented teaching practices are defined as practices that address inequity, support

inclusivity, promote social justice, and consider and provide for the needs of all students in the classroom (Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017). These practices may better support literacy instruction (Lazar, 2022; Lumadi, 2020). Lazar's (2022) research identified the importance of equity-oriented practices in pre-service teacher learning and teaching placements in early literacy classrooms. Lazar (2022) also identified that practicum placements had to be "spaces around apprenticing for equity literacy teaching" (p. 177). Lazar (2022) stated that this meant having "teacher candidates grapple with equity issues as they work with advocacy-oriented mentors" (p. 177). Lazar (2022) noted that teacher candidates' need for advocacy-oriented mentors signaled a need to further understand how in-service teachers implement equity-oriented practices to target inequity and injustice and how their professional learning and growth support creating an environment where teachers acknowledge inequity and advocate for equity.

Studies have identified effective equity-oriented practices in the classroom, including group work, centering student voice, student-centered instruction, and implementing grade-level materials (Lazar, 2022; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015; Williamson, 2017). These equity-oriented practices put the whole student at the center of teaching and learning, and prioritizes equitable education (Lazar, 2022; Okonkwo & Obeka, 2020; Williamson, 2017). Lazar (2022) identified that while pre-service teachers can recognize equity-oriented practices and have used such practices in literacy instruction, further research was necessary to fully understand in-service teachers' experience using equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction. Specifically, such research should focus on how teachers perceive equity-oriented practices to support their literacy instruction and students' literacy achievement (Lazar, 2022). Previous research has also

suggested that instructional strategies are crucial variables that affect equitable student achievement (Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017).

This study sought to better understand teachers' experiences as they used equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction, which was identified as instruction in phonemic and phonological awareness, reading strategies, and writing strategies through standards-aligned lesson plans (Gibbs & Reed, 2021; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). This information helps better understand how teachers can support all students in early literacy instruction, especially those traditionally underserved and those historically categorized below proficiency in literacy (Maine Department of Education, 2021). This study also sought to identify ways school and district leaders may support teachers in education. This study explored teachers' experiences through interviews with six educators.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used in literacy instruction in-service by public K-5 elementary teachers in a large metropolitan school district in Maine. Equity-oriented teaching practices were defined as practices that address inequity in education, support inclusivity, promote social justice, and consider and provide for the needs of all students (Lazar, 2022; Lumadi, 2020). Literacy instruction is defined as phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, reading, and writing strategies (Gibbs & Reed, 2021; Lazar, 2022; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). This study explored two main research questions through their interviews with teachers.

Research Questions and Design

This study gathered qualitative data on the experience and perception of teachers using equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction. The purpose was to gain a better understanding of teachers' use of equity-oriented instructional practices in their classrooms and how teachers described the outcomes of equity-oriented instructional practices in their teaching (Cruz, 2021). This study addressed the following research questions:

> **Research Question 1:** How do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine describe their experiences when implementing equity-oriented practices during literacy instruction?
>
> **Research Question 2:** How do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine perceive the outcomes of literacy instruction when using equity-oriented practices?

These questions were explored through interviews with six in-service teachers in a large metropolitan district in Maine. These interviews were then coded using ATLAS.ti, which analyzes qualitative research using artificial intelligence software (Master your research projects with the power of AI, 2024). Interview transcripts were coded using an in vivo style of coding, which used participants' exact words to develop themes across interview transcripts (Volpe-White, 2019). This style of coding was also applied to its thematic analysis and provided detailed findings concerning teacher experiences and perceptions of equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework consists of personal interest, topical research, and the theoretical framework (Weaver-Hightower, 2014). This researcher's personal interest in this study's topic stemmed from this researcher's experience with equity and desire to understand equity literacy better. The conceptual and theoretical framework highlight the importance of the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). The equity literacy framework will help identify teachers' equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction. It is also paired with this study's theoretical framework, transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990), which helps better understand the perceptions of teachers using equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction. The combination of the equity literacy framework and transformative learning theory will clarify the role of teachers when using equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction (Bukko & Liu, 2021).

This researcher was a former English language learner, and it was their experience with inequity that led them to become a teacher and researcher who sought a better understanding of equity in education. Opportunity gaps persist in education, and ultimately, so do gaps in achievement (Maine Department of Education, 2021). Thus, with equity literacy advocates and school and district leaders seeking to find a solution to opportunity and achievement gaps, new literacy curricula and practices for literacy instruction have been introduced (Hartl & Riley, 2021). This researcher has experienced having a student reading at a first-grade level in their fifth-grade classroom. This experience led this researcher to seek to investigate how public, in-service, and professionally certified K-5 teachers in Maine describe and perceive equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction.

Researchers have begun to focus on opportunity and its relationship to achievement (Carter et al., 2013; Cruz, 2021). The opportunity gap identifies the differences in access to effective educators, curricula, appropriate or grade-level materials, and social support that distinguish an inequity in access (Cruz, 2021; Pendakur, 2016). This study sought to understand in-service teachers' perceptions of equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction in kindergarten through fifth-grade. The purpose of this was to help equity researchers, teachers, and school and district leaders understand what teachers need to practice the characteristics of the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) and help close opportunity and achievement gaps.

In the equity literacy framework, Gorski and Swalwell (2015) identified five equity-based abilities. These five abilities are to recognize, respond to, and redress inequities, as well as cultivate and sustain equity (Gorski, 2020). The framework identified that teachers must learn and gain these equity-based abilities to move their instruction, classroom, and school toward equity (Gorski, 2016). The equity literacy framework identified the necessary abilities of educators to not only actively address inequities but instruct with an equity mindset and fulfill requirements set forth by the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). The equity literacy framework promotes that teachers are the necessary change agents in education for addressing existing inequities that result in opportunity and achievement gaps (Gorski, 2020; Kotter, 2012; Lazar, 2022).

The equity literacy framework helps teachers and leaders understand the abilities necessary to make education more equitable for all students (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020). The framework highlights the essential skills of equity-minded educators who prioritize addressing inequities in education and cultivating and sustaining equity (Bukko & Liu, 2021;

Gorski, 2020). This framework helps school and district leaders better understand teachers' experiences and what supports teachers felt necessary to cultivate and sustain equity in early literacy instruction (Gorski, 2020). The equity literacy framework recognizes educators' vital role in creating academic environments where educational equity can exist and where teachers and leaders take a shared role in learning, reflecting, and transforming education toward equity (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020).

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990) was the theoretical framework for this study. Transformative learning theory is vital for becoming an equity-minded educator. This type of educator will examine, question, and revise existing perceptions that often guide school and district leaders' decision-making (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Mezirow, 1990; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Transformative learning theory describes the necessary level of learning for educators to think critically about their instructional practices and how their teaching may be influenced by prior professional and personal experiences (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020). Bukko and Liu (2021) proposed that teachers must examine, question, and revise their perceptions and undergo this level of learning to become equity-minded educators.

The learning theory caters to understanding the level of emotional intelligence teachers require to undergo critical reflection and learning to become equity-minded educators (Gorski, 2020; Gupta, 2022; Lazar, 2022; Mezirow, 1990; Woerkom, 2008). The theory identifies phases of learning in adults, including (a) a disorienting dilemma, (b) a self-examination, (c) a critical assessment, (d) recognition, (e) exploration, (f) planning of a course of action, (g) acquisition of knowledge, (h) provisional trying of roles, (i) building of competence and self-confidence, and (j) a reintegration (Kabakci & Şahin İzmirli, 2015). The theory provides a unique perspective on

how teachers explain and interpret their experiences and perceptions of the outcomes of equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction. The next section will discuss critical assumptions, limitations, and the scope of the study.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

The study's overall scope included a small sample of teachers from a large metropolitan school district in Maine. This study consisted of six teachers teaching Grades K-5 within the district. This study sought to understand the experiences of teachers implementing equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990) and the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) were used to better understand participants' perspectives and the impact equity-oriented practices may have on instruction. This study's main assumptions revolved around professional training, support, or lack thereof by equity leaders or equity teams. This study's limitations revolved around its limited number of participants.

A critical assumption in this study was that all participating teachers had received equity training, such as those provided by professional learning communities, where they had analyzed student work and established a plan for student interventions (Bishop & Noguera, 2019). Additionally, there was an assumption that participants were receiving continuous training related to developing their equity literacy and equity-oriented practices. Equity training for educators should include clarity for teachers on how to develop high-quality instruction for students (Bishop & Noguera, 2019). The skills of teachers have been described as not meeting the needs of students, which in turn means equity training must be tailored to the needs of individual teachers without pressure for changes to be made (Bishop & Noguera, 2019).

Teachers may have been given the opportunity to undergo such training. Nonetheless, the researcher's most critical assumption was that such activity was required, transformative, and effective in supporting educators as they worked as or became equity-minded teachers.

A major voice of change is the voice of the guiding coalition (Kotter, 2012). The guiding coalition consists of change-makers who support leaders and followers as they grapple with transformation (Kotter, 2012). This researcher has determined that a guiding coalition in education comprises school leaders, teachers, educational technicians, and the school equity committee. Equity in education requires a guiding team or group of equity-oriented individuals to support and lead change with its leaders and staff (Gorski, 2020; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). A significant limitation of this study was the pressure of the guiding coalition or lack of leadership within the guiding coalition that limited teachers' voices. Another limitation of this study was the small sample size of participants. The small sample size limited findings related to equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction; yet, Skrla et al. (2009) and Bukko and Liu (2021), identify that teachers' reflections can still potentially benefit leaders in developing educators' equity consciousness or equity-mindedness.

Rationale and Significance

This study explored the role of equity-oriented practices in early literacy instruction, including how these practices addressed curricular injustices and helped close the opportunity gap (Cruz, 2021; Gorski, 2020; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015; Williamson, 2017). The rationale for this study was based on the knowledge of pre-service educators and the lack of knowledge of in-service educators using equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction (Lazar, 2022). Additionally, there was a need to better understand how to close opportunity gaps and support

achievement in Maine (Cruz, 2021; Pendakur, 2016). This researcher believed that understanding how teachers perceive equity-oriented practices support their literacy instruction and student achievement highlight the significance of equity in literacy instruction. This information may also allow school and district leaders and equity researchers to understand how they can help teachers using equity-oriented practices and the further development of equitable education in highly diverse districts and classrooms. Lastly, understanding teachers' perception of equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction identified to school and district leaders how they could better understand the supports necessary for developing teachers' literacy practice and teaching with an equity mind (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Mezirow, 1990).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used in literacy instruction by in-service public K-5 elementary teachers in a large metropolitan school district in Maine. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) required educators to make necessary changes to address inequities and close existing opportunity gaps (Cruz, 2021). Researchers have identified that institutional changes, such as changes in policy and curricula, have been made across schools in the United States to address opportunity gaps (Pendakur, 2016). There is a clear need for pedagogy to change, considering the curricular and policy changes in education (Cruz, 2021). Williamson (2017) noted that equity-oriented practices taught to pre-service teachers positively support equity in the literacy classroom; however, there was a further need to understand how in-service teachers create an equitable environment through such practices in their literacy instruction. Given that major gaps in achievement continue to exist, it is important to understand what leaders can do to support

building teachers' equity literacy (Cruz, 2021; Lazar, 2022). This study sought to answer two research questions. The first research question asked, how do public in-service working and certified kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers working in a large metropolitan school district in Maine describe their experiences using equity-oriented practices during literacy instruction? The second research question asked, how do public in-service working and certified kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers' working in a large metropolitan school district in Maine perceive the outcomes of implementing equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction? Chapter 2 contextualizes these research questions and provides a foundation for this study with a review of the literature on this topic.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The ESSA (2015) aimed to protect and support disadvantaged schools, high-need students, and those students achieving below grade-level. The ESSA (2015) requires schools to ensure all students have access to and the opportunity to engage in coursework centered around grade-level standards. The ESSA (2015) also supports advancing equity in learning. Equity has become a popular topic in educational research because it has the potential to offer students more significant outcomes (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2016). Equity honors a student's individuality and aims to provide fair opportunities, resources, practices, and instruction by removing any existing barriers that limit their access (Cruz, 2021; Gorski, 2016; Kapp & Kunz, 2021).

Unfortunately, equity in education has been challenging to achieve. This is especially true in early literacy education, where existing practices for teaching literacy are often identified as inequitable and unsupportive of all students (Hannah, 2022; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). The research by Bukko and Liu (2021) on equity in education and equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction has resulted in the acknowledgment that equity requires a more in-depth understanding of bias, culture versus equity, and inequity. Research on equity in education has also revealed the need for a level of learning that leads to the transformation of learning (Bukko & Liu, 2021). This level of transformation is necessary for inequity to be recognized, responded to, and redressed, and for equity to be cultivated and sustained in education (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). All of these are vital equity-based abilities identified by the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015).

Williamson (2017) and Lazar (2022) identified that there is a need for equity-oriented practices in education as well as in the classroom and for pre-service teachers to enter the

classroom with equity in mind. This researcher similarly believed further research was needed to understand how in-service teachers supported their instruction and students through equity-oriented practices. Such equity-oriented practices included consistent whole-school training on equity issues, restorative practices at the school level, small group instruction, highlighting student's voices, and the use of grade-level materials at the classroom level (Gabriel, 2020; Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017). Understanding how in-service teachers addressed inequities in literacy instruction through equity-oriented practices could help district leaders, administrators, and school and district literacy coaches, all of whom are meant to lead efforts toward reaching the goal of the ESSA (2015), achieving equity to better understand what is necessary to support equity in education. Understanding how in-service teachers address inequities in literacy instruction through equity-oriented practices may also help such educational leaders identify how to support literacy instruction, teacher learning and transformation, and student achievement according to what teachers themselves reflect through their experiences (Lazar, 2022). School leaders may learn what is necessary for creating and supporting equity literacy in the classroom, school, and society through equity-minded teachers (Gorski, 2016; Lazar, 2022).

This researcher will address this study's conceptual and theoretical framework in this chapter. The following key themes found in the literature relevant to understanding and answering the problem and the identified research questions will also be discussed in this chapter. These themes included (a) the opportunity gap, (b) equity-oriented practices, (c) culturally relevant practices, (d) highlighting students' voices, (e) use of data and small group instruction, (f) implementing grade-level materials, (g) educational equity, (h) the role of educators in advancing equity, (i) equity consciousness, and (j) literacy instruction in

kindergarten through fifth grade. This researcher believed understanding these variables could help schools better understand how equity in literacy is achieved through equity-minded teachers and equity-oriented practices.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of a research study is comprised of a researcher's personal interest in the topic being studied, topical research, and a study's theoretical framework (Weaver-Hightower, 2014). The conceptual framework for this study consists of the researchers' experience as students and educators in a large metropolitan school district. The conceptual framework for this study also consists of research on the equity literacy framework developed by Gorski and Swalwell (2015). Finally, this study's conceptual framework also includes transformative learning theory, which has been previously linked to equity literacy (Bukko & Liu, 2021).

Personal Interest

As an educator, this researcher has seen and experienced the opportunity gap and how opportunities vary and are often not offered to students with disabilities and multilingual learners. The implementation of ESSA (2015), made equity an important and relevant topic of discussion in public education because the legislation aims to identify existing inequities and tackle them by offering the appropriate support for equity in education, such as providing additional funding for specific schools in need (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). Much of ESSA (2015) seeks to address is the opportunity gap, which reflects significant inequities and injustices in schools across the United States, resulting in what is widely known as the achievement gap (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; Cruz, 2021). Year after year, Maine schools reported low reading

scores on assessments taken by low-socioeconomic, culturally, and linguistically diverse students or students identified as requiring special education (Maine Department of Education, 2021). Equity literacy is no longer about equal access to material, but is rather a mission to recognize, respond, and redress inequities, including those evident in policies, instructional practices, and curricula, and taking the necessary steps to cultivate and sustain equity (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a).

This researcher's experience as an early literacy teacher in a district with such strong equity visions led to their interest in this topic and wanting a better understanding of teachers' experiences using equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction. Understanding teachers' experiences prioritizes their importance in educational equity and, specifically, studies how teachers can be supported in cultivating and sustaining equity in literacy instruction (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2016; Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017). Gorski and Swalwell (2023a) stated that transforming equity included recognizing, responding to, and redressing inequities and cultivating and sustaining equity. Therefore, teachers must learn, reflect, grow, and evolve into someone who has these equity-minded abilities (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a; Mezirow, 1990). Becoming such a teacher can be accomplished through transformative learning, the method of learning researchers have connected to the equity literacy framework on their path to becoming equity-minded (Bukko & Liu, 2021).

Topical Research

The equity literacy framework was first introduced and termed by Gorski and Swalwell (2015). The framework identifies that including culture in curricula and practice is not the answer to educational inequities (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). The equity literacy framework uses

culturally responsive pedagogy and critical race theories to support equity efforts (Davis, 2021). Davis (2021) also noted that the framework distinguishes itself through its principles of "confrontation; poverty of culture; equity ideology; prioritization; redistribution; fix injustice, not kids; evidence-informed equity; and one-size-fits-few" (p. 7). Equity literacy identifies two examples where culture leads teachers and individuals away from equity: centralizing and emphasizing culture to deemphasize justice and inequity (Gorski, 2016). The equity literacy framework was developed with the intent to address the common practice of educators seeking to remedy injustice through culture-based strategies in education, such as cultural competence, cultural proficiency, culturally relevant teaching, and multicultural education (Gorski, 2016). When teachers are in the process of creating culture-based strategies, they are often basing culture on their own societal norms (Gorski, 2016). Equity literacy instead supports the abilities of equity-minded educators who target inequities and injustices (Gorski, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017).

The equity literacy framework's emphasis on justice over culture sets a precedent for pursuing the equity-based abilities identified through the framework (Gorski, 2016; Lazar, 2022). The emphasis on culture creates the illusion of progress toward justice when, in fact, there is little to no progress at all (Gorski, 2016). Gorski (2016) called this the opposite of equity. The framework's commitment to justice through equity-based abilities is a significant strength; still, the framework's focus on educators playing a pivotal role in addressing inequities and building and sustaining equity opens the door to discouragement or even equity traps in education (Gorski, 2016; Lazar, 2022). Equity traps may include patterns of thinking and behaviors that trap progress toward equity (Gorski, 2016; Gorski, 2020; Skrla et al., 2009).

There may be some confusion when discussing equity and equality. Gorski (2016) made a major distinction between equity and equality while discussing the role of culture in literacy instruction. Equality means equal representation, distribution, and access, but equity requires that tools, policies, and practices be implemented for all students to have fair access to the material (Center for Public Education, 2016; Long, 2022). Gorski (2020) identifies that equity ensures policies, environmental cultures, ideologies, and practices are critically analyzed and equitable for traditionally disadvantaged students and families. Shufflebarger (2022) identified that an equity literacy lens provides a framework for the goals of Gorski's equity literacy framework, for "how teachers can create and sustain more equitable materials, interactions, and institutional cultures" (p. 13).

Research on the equity literacy framework has shown how the framework identifies the importance of developing teachers who can be equity-minded, equity-driven, or even equity-literate individuals (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020; Williamson, 2017). The framework targets fixing issues of inequity and ultimately injustice by equipping educators with five equity-based abilities to support an equity path forward (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a). Those include the following equity-based abilities educators should have when responding to inequities: (a) the ability to recognize inequity, (b) the ability to respond in the immediate term to inequity, (c) the ability to redress inequity in the long term, (d) the ability to cultivate equitable ideologies and institutional cultures, and (e) the ability to sustain equity efforts (Gorski, 2016, 2020; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). These equity-based abilities support teachers in becoming equity-minded instructors (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015; Lazar, 2022).

The Ability to Recognize Inequity

Gorski and Swalwell (2015) identified recognizing inequities as one of the five equity-based abilities. This ability consists of educators recognizing "even the subtlest forms of inequity," whether through learning materials, classroom interactions, policies, or disparities in opportunities and outcomes (Gorski, 2016, p. 225). Recognizing inequity involves noticing and identifying the racial and social justice issues in education (Shufflebarger, 2022). Identifying inequities in an educator's instructional practice depends heavily on their awareness, understanding, and commitment to equity (Williamson, 2017). The teacher in the study by Williamson (2017) demonstrated a commitment to equity, which pushed her to distribute and redistribute access and opportunity to grade-level content. This equity-oriented practice requires that teachers recognize the educational disparities created by existing discrepancies, such as the traditional pull-out instruction for multilingual learners (Williamson, 2017). Teachers must pair identified inequities with appropriate responses to achieve equity (Gorski, 2020).

The Ability to Respond in the Immediate Term to Inequity

Responding to inequities is the second equity-based ability identified by Gorski and Swalwell (2015). This equity-based ability includes developing the skills and knowledge needed to intervene when biases or inequities are identified (Gorski, 2016). Responding to inequities may look like challenging colleagues' use of language, practice in the classroom, or perception of students, and it is an essential step in becoming an equity-minded educator (Williamson, 2017). Gorski (2016) identified that responding to inequities is a significant step in the equity literacy process. Gorski (2020) further noted that this response signifies a teacher's understanding of existing inequities in materials, interactions, policies, curriculum, and practices and their ability

to foster meaningful conversations about equity concerns. According to Gorski (2016), the response to inequity must be made promptly and may even call for a shift in school culture.

The Ability to Redress Inequity in the Long Term

Redressing inequities or injustices is the third identified equity-based ability (Gorski, 2016). This ability asks teachers to take a deep look into the educational institution's history and cultural norms, which are then considered to attend to the dynamics that cause educators to believe existing inequities are acceptable (Gorski, 2016). Teachers who redress inequities advocate against inequitable practices, policies, and biases by recognizing the root causes of inequity and how these biases connect to societal or school norms and conditions (Gorski, 2020). Rectifying inequities calls for teachers to be willing to address inconsistencies in curricula, material, policy, or more (Gorski, 2016). A better knowledge of the organization's history may help this researcher understand what is needed to build a community of trust. Understanding the organization can also facilitate the cultivation of an equity lens culture and ensure the long-term sustainability of equity.

The Ability to Cultivate Equitable Ideologies and Institutional Cultures.

Cultivating equitable ideologies calls for teachers and leaders to apply an equity lens to all forms of education, whether policy, curriculum, teaching practice, hiring, or teaching strategies (Gorski, 2020). Fostering equitable ideologies prioritizes students and families who traditionally may not have been prioritized and cultivates an in-depth understanding that equity is a commitment, not simply a strategy or program (Gorski, 2020; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a). Cultivating equity identifies the immediate need for a commitment to equity made by educators by calling equity to be a method of thinking rather than an afterthought (Gorski, 2016, 2020).

Organizations where equity is cultivated call for all decisions to be made with an equity lens (Gorski, 2020; Williamson, 2017). Making decisions with an equity lens results in a culture of collaboration and support to aid educators in their equitable endeavors and instruction (Gorski, 2020; Lazar et al., 2012; Williamson, 2017).

The Ability to Sustain Equity Efforts

Sustaining is the last of the five equity-based abilities and begins with cultivating equitable cultures, environments, and schools. Bukko and Liu (2021) believed cultures, environments, and schools should be bias-free. Sustaining bias-free environments that promote equity may be challenging, especially in the face of resistance and misinformation (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020). Sustaining equity calls for teachers to truly understand equity, communicate confidently about their commitment to equity, and remain cautious over what often seems to pose as equity but is not equity at all (Gorski, 2016). There must exist a culture of commitment to equity for transformation to truly occur and equity to be sustained (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; Williamson, 2017). Ultimately, such a commitment to sustaining equity may result in equity-minded educators, equity in the classroom, and equity beyond the classroom, school, and community (Center for Public Education, 2016; Gorski, 2016, 2020; Lumadi, 2020; Rust & Wessel-Powell, 2022).

The equity literacy framework demonstrates the importance of developing teachers who can be equity-minded or equity-driven individuals (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Williamson, 2017). Equity literacy identifies the five equity-based abilities supporting equity in literacy practices (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Davis, 2021; Gorski, 2020; Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017). The framework was influenced by multicultural education; however, the equity literacy framework

differentiates between culture and race to focus on equity (Gorski, 2016). The framework

identifies that culture is often used as a synonym for race but that injustice and inequity are not

cultural problems and cannot be solved through cultural solutions alone (Gorski, 2016; Gorski &

Swalwell, 2015). The five equity-based abilities of equity-minded educators are robust and

supportive of equity in the classroom; it is clear that becoming an equity-minded educator

requires a level of transformative learning made by educators for equity to be cultivated and

sustained in education (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020). Transformative learning's 10 phases

lend themselves to reflective learning and transformation in educators (Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

These phases are just a surface level of understanding transformative learning theory and its

humanist, critical social theory, and constructivist assertions (Mezirow, 1990).

Theoretical Framework

The two major theories commonly linked to Gorski and Swalwell's (2015) equity literacy

framework are Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and Bandura's self-efficacy theory

(1997). Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978) has also been linked to the framework

(Bukko & Liu, 2021). Transformative learning theory identifies a type of learning that

contributes to and is necessary for transformative change (Mezirow, 1978). Bukko and Liu

(2021) state that transformative learning is the level of learning necessary for teachers to develop

an equity mindset. Transformative learning theory requires examining, questioning, and revising

previous perceptions, including prejudices and biases that influence expectations and guide

decision-making (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Transformative learning theory is deeply rooted in

humanist, critical social theory assumptions, and constructivist ideas, identifying that humans are

often unaware of their assumptions and biases (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). These assumptions and

biases can often cause teachers to neglect aspects of their experiences (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). According to Gorski (2020) and Bukko and Liu (2021), many educators adopt an equity lens in their instruction.

Constructivism is one of the central ideas of transformative learning theory (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). It identifies that humans construct reality based on previous experiences (Owen, 2021). According to Mezirow (1990), when new experiences are contrary to previous experiences, individuals can enter a process that could lead to transformation. This type of learning lends itself to a better understanding of how teachers may grow and develop their equity-minded abilities (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017).

Humanism is another one of the foundations of transformative learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Humanism is founded on the notions of freedom and autonomy and that individuals can make personal choices despite existing constraints they express (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). The theory does not consider that humans still have specific needs that must be met (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Critics have argued that without western-rooted humanist assumptions, transformative learning theory could not be defined as it has been (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Critics have also argued that applying transformative learning to non-western perspectives can be challenging because of its western-rooted humanist assumptions (Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Another significant central idea of transformative learning is the critical social theory. This theory aims to critique and change society instead of explaining or describing it (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). A community's dominant ideologies include a community's beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives that individuals may use to justify their experiences (Taylor &

Cranton, 2012). These ideologies make sense of what is commonly considered the normal way to think and act, or the institutional culture and norms, and are at the center of Transformative learning theory (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Individuals can enter transformative learning when they recognize their shared beliefs as domineering and inequitable (Mezirow, 1990; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Transformative learning theory is not highly focused on social change, yet it is focused on the individual's engagement in learning and can help support a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions and experiences as they learn and experience educational equity and use equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction (Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Mezirow (1990) identified that meaning is constructed through the perceptions of individuals' experiences and how learning occurs only when one person calls on another person's perspective into question. Transformative learning relies on individuals defining themselves, engaging in alternative views, and challenging common ideologies (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Many theorists and researchers have critiqued transformative learning theory because it uses the word transformation (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). According to Brookfield (2000), authentic transformative learning necessitates fundamental changes, and only then should the word transformation be used to describe learning. Therefore, while transformative learning theory has been widely used, using the word transformation to explain all and every form of learning can lead to a loss of validity (Brookfield, 2000). Taylor and Cranton (2012) noted that transformative learning theory's critiques eventually led to the further expansion of the theory to address power and other assumptions. Shortly after addressing power and other assumptions, teachers' critical reflection over their assumptions about power, race, gender, and ideology became essential to transformative learning theory (Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is a significant aspect of transformative learning (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). This type of reflection encourages teachers to reflect on their practice, bias, and knowledge to increase their awareness, recognition, and comprehension of the factors and assumptions that impact and guide teaching (Gibbons et al., 2022). Critical reflection better explains the people, environment, and perspective needed for transformative learning (Taylor, 2017). Brookfield (2000) identified four traditions of critical reflection, including (a) ideology critique, (b) reassessment of traumas and inhibitions, (c) analytic philosophy, and (d) pragmatism. Together, these four traditions help researchers understand how people learn and reflect on feelings and relationships and understand the logic, opinion, judgment, and role critical thinking plays in questioning oneself and well-known ideologies (Brookfield, 2000; Taylor, 2017). Critical reflection is one of the pillars of transformative learning that leads to critical consciousness-raising and discourse (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Both critical conscious-raising and discourse encourage educators to question their assumptions and perspectives, engage in meaningful dialogue, revise habits, and plan for action based on their transformative experiences, such as those actions called by the equity literacy framework (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Communicative and Instrumental Learning

Transformative learning theory identifies two ways of learning: communicative and instrumental (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Communicative learning involves critical reflection and assessment of assumptions that support norms, such as those that may contribute to existing inequities (MacPhee et al., 2021; Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Communicative learning acknowledges that communicating with others involves values and morality and is one method by which transformative learning can be achieved (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Instrumental learning involves controlling and manipulating others and the environment, making problem-solving logical and often task-oriented (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Transformative learning is achieved through such logical and task-oriented experiences (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Transformative learning offers an opportunity for learner empowerment and conscious raising to allow learners to be able to recognize, respond, and redress inequities and cultivate and sustain equity-oriented practices in literacy education (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2016).

Transformative Learning and Equity Literacy

According to Bukko and Liu (2021), the principles of equity literacy are grounded in transformative practice and critical consciousness, which together highlight how existing approaches do not appropriately tackle inequity. Mezirow (1997) noted, "Critical reflection and discourse together target awareness of ideas, beliefs, judgments, and feelings that shape their past or present experiences" (p. 223). Additionally, transformative learning identifies that past experiences influence how individuals determine or view new experiences (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). The theory aims to foster critical reflection and conversation among educators by "reassessing the way we [educators] have posed problems and reassessing our orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 13). The theory identifies that transformative learning can expand an individual's consciousness over their own biases, assumptions, and perspectives through critical reflection and conversation, a necessary component of the equity literacy framework (Gorski, 2016; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a).

Transformative learning theory may help this researcher and school and district leaders better understand teachers' perceptions and experiences with equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction and help identify a gap in teachers' understanding of existing inequities in instructional practices and routines (Gorski, 2020; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a; Mezirow, 1990; Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Transformative learning theory asserts that transformative experiences lead to opportunities for empowerment and, quite possibly, the identification of inequities (Bukko & Liu, 2021). Identifying those barriers is a practice that supports equity when the identification leads to implementing procedures that support the inclusion of equity in day-to-day instruction (Lazar, 2022; Smith, 2023; Williamson, 2017). Using the equity literacy framework may better illustrate teachers' perceptions as they use equity-oriented practices (Gorski, 2016; Lazar, 2022). The transformational learning theory may highlight the experiences that contribute to their practice (Bukko & Liu, 2021). Together, these practices also provide a better understanding of the critical themes found in literature, including the (a) opportunity gap, (b) equity-oriented practices, (c) educational equity, (d) the role teachers play in addressing persisting inequities, (e) equity consciousness, (f) collaboration with teachers and school leaders, and (g) current literacy instruction in kindergarten through fifth-grade education (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a; Lazar et al., 2012; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016).

The Opportunity Gap

The opportunity gap essentially identifies gaps among students identified as low-socioeconomic, students of color, or special education students in comparison to their white, affluent peers (Cruz, 2021; The New Teacher Project, 2018). Opportunity gaps exist because of

inequities in policy, curricula, practice, and instruction (Cruz, 2021; Gorski, 2020; The New Teacher Project, 2018); therefore, opportunity gaps rely on institutional agents enabling inequities in education (Pendakur, 2016; The New Teacher Project, 2018). Pendakur (2016) stated that for institutions to close opportunity gaps, they must invest in strategies and programs that support more equitable student success or academic achievement. Institutions such as those in this study continue to work on incorporating new programs and equity-oriented practices (research site school administrator, personal communication, May 5, 2023). There remains a need for learning and reflecting on curricula and instructional practices to validate their effectiveness in targeting inequity in education (Cruz, 2021; Gabriel, 2020; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a). Teachers play a major role in addressing the opportunity gap using equity-oriented practices, and teachers are more likely to use equity-oriented practices when such practices are held in high regard in their schools (Lazar, 2022).

Equity-Oriented Practices

Existing research on equity-oriented practices is limited, though there is some knowledge of what can be considered an equity-oriented practice in literacy education (Kapp & Kunz, 2021; Lazar, 2022). Equity-oriented practices in literacy education include (a) culturally relevant pedagogy, (b) highlighting student voice and work, (c) the use of data and small group instruction, (d) culturally responsive/diverse literature, (e) better alignment with school goals, (f) a focus on social-emotional learning, (g) offering access to challenging literature, (h) understanding and incorporating home language, culture, and knowledge, (i) increasing accessibility through differentiated instruction, (j) the use of empowering language, (k) collaboration with teachers and school leaders, and (l) student work being put on display (Kapp

& Kunz, 2021; Lazar, 2022; Lumadi, 2020; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015; Williamson, 2017).

Instruction becomes equitable and can help create more inclusive classrooms through these

equity-oriented practices (Bukko & Liu, 2021). However, teachers must start by identifying and

examining inequities in literacy instruction to eventually offer "learners access to pedagogically

sound instruction in the classroom and support their pursuits outside the classroom"

(Shufflebarger, 2022, p. 6). Identifying existing inequities and injustices allows educators to

work through and make literacy instruction more equitable (The New Teacher Project, 2018;

Williamson, 2017). Gorski (2016) identified that while culturally relevant pedagogy is an

equitable practice, it alone does not reach equity. Culturally relevant pedagogy instead often

leads toward the idea of progress when in fact, there is minimal, if any at all, progress toward

equity (Gorski, 2016).

Culturally Relevant Practices

Culturally relevant pedagogy has become famous for creating inclusive literacy

classrooms (Gorski, 2016). Ladson-Billings (1994) identified culturally relevant pedagogy as

teaching that uses culture to empower students and impact their skills, attitudes, and learning.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is closely linked with culturally responsive teaching, multicultural

education, and cultural proficiency, all theories rooted in equity and justice (Gorski, 2016). This

teaching emphasizes race, social justice, and educational equality, aiming to address existing

inequalities in teaching, curricula, and practice (Hernandez, 2022). It must be noted that equality

is not the same as equity. Equality ensures all students receive the same instruction, but equity

ensures students can access that instruction by implementing the necessary measures that cater to

equity, such as equity-oriented practices, curricula, and literature (Gorski, 2016).

Researchers have heavily investigated and highlighted cultural pedagogy comprising culture in literature, curricula, and materials to make learning more accessible to students (Gorski, 2016; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016; Williamson, 2017). Culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on supporting students' awareness of culture and building culture in the classroom environment. Hernandez (2022) identified that culturally responsive teaching "strategies are transformational and incorporate teaching mechanisms that promote minority students' success while supporting their heritage, language, and cultural identity" (p. 3). Culturally relevant pedagogy is an equity-based practice, but it alone does not address issues of inequity evident in the literacy classroom (Gorski, 2016; Lazar, 2022). Shufflebarger (2022) identified that materials should be culturally sensitive and inclusive and highlighted the need for more significant analysis of materials and curricula that are considered culturally responsive and equitable.

Studies have identified that racial diversity in curricula and materials may contribute to greater student engagement and even higher achievement (Capper, 2022; Hernandez, 2022; Kapp & Kunz, 2021; Lee & Buxton, 2008). Using culturally relevant materials draws students into instruction, learning, and grade-level content (Williamson, 2017). However, materials identified as culturally relevant must be further analyzed to be deemed equitable (Gorski, 2016). Equitable literacy materials, for example, eliminate depictions of stereotypes and misrepresentations of cultures, which can occur even within culturally responsive materials (Hannah, 2022; Kapp & Kunz, 2021; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). Kapp and Kunz (2021) and Thomas and McIntyre-McCullough (2016) discussed that literacy materials should include diversity within

cultures, eliminate misrepresentation of culture and groups of people, celebrate diversity, and eliminate marginalization.

The use of culture in teaching has supported student engagement in literature and learning (Gorski, 2016; Hannah, 2022; Hernandez, 2022; Shufflebarger, 2022; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015; Williamson, 2017). When culturally relevant curricula and materials include diverse representations in literature and materials, students can connect more significantly with them (Capper, 2022). According to Shufflebarger (2022), a method of confronting inequity is an educator's critical awareness of the biases and inequity in materials and further modifying their use because of such materials. Ultimately, culturally relevant pedagogy should not be penalized (Gorski, 2016). Culturally relevant pedagogy is insufficient for achieving equity by itself (Gorski, 2016). Culturally relevant pedagogy encompasses vital aspects of race, diversity, and inclusion which create opportunities for aspects of equity in the literacy classroom and enable teachers to reflect on existing curricula, materials, and instructional practices (Gorski, 2016). Culturally relevant pedagogy can be an equity-oriented practice; however, it is not the only equity-oriented practice in literacy instruction (Gorski, 2016). Williamson (2017) discovered that highlighting students' voices and work was both culturally relevant and equity-oriented and encouraged students in their learning.

Highlighting Student Voice and Work

Highlighting students' voices is a culturally responsive and equity-oriented practice (Shufflebarger, 2022; Williamson, 2017). This equity-oriented practice connects students to their learning by placing students at the center of learning (Williamson, 2017). Highlighting students' voices centers students' prior knowledge and understanding and uses that prior knowledge and

understanding to establish a greater connection to the classroom environment (Williamson, 2017). According to Shufflebarger (2022), highlighting student voices and work are characteristics of equity-minded educators and strategies for structuring classroom environments that commit to equity literacy.

When equity-minded educators center student voice and work in their literacy instruction, they consider student culture and experiences, analyze text, and unravel materials to enhance students' voices and provide an opportunity for higher-order thinking and learning (Shufflebarger, 2022; Williamson, 2017). This occurs even if curricula or materials are not supportive of such opportunities (Lazar, 2022; Okonkwo & Obeka, 2020; Shufflebarger, 2022; Williamson, 2017). Practices such as highlighting student voice and student work provide teachers with an opportunity to connect students' cultures, understandings, and thoughts to classroom experiences to sustain a more equitable experience for students (Williamson, 2017). This practice can be more challenging in the early elementary literacy classroom when standard curricula often overpower student voices (Lazar, 2022; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015; Williamson, 2017). Small-group instruction and relevant data collection is another equitable practice that may better support early elementary literacy (Wheldall et al., 2019).

Use of Data and Small Group Instruction

All students need high-quality literacy instruction (Wheldall et al., 2019). Student data from teacher observation and assessment can inform teacher instruction and signal a greater understanding of students' knowledge and needs (Majedah, 2017). Wheldall et al. (2019) noted that foundation and literacy skills in beginning readers may foretell a student's success in

reading. This data demonstrates the need for early interventions with individualized and small-group reading instruction (Majedah, 2017).

Small-group instruction differs from traditional guided reading. Traditional guided reading may include a skill taught and practiced through whole-group instruction, such as letter formation or identification (Majedah, 2017). Small group instruction allows teachers to observe and note how students understand and progress in meeting the identified learning target or goals (Majedah, 2017). Majedah (2017) noted that small group instruction can be worked into a classroom's daily schedule by allowing students to work on designated areas for growth every day. Small group instruction should be no more than 10 minutes per day and in a structured setting, and it should aim to reinforce learning that previously occurred in whole-group learning (Majedah, 2017). Previous research has suggested that performance in literacy improves over time through small group instruction and structured differentiated lessons (Wheldall et al., 2019). The implementation of small groups is an opportunity for teachers to continue to teach students grade-level content and practice with grade-level material (Majedah, 2017; Wheldall et al., 2019). Small group instruction is an equity-oriented practice (Lazar, 2022; Majedah, 2017). When identifying students' needs, a teacher can set students up for success by promoting mastery through the repetition of literacy targets and lessons (Majedah, 2017; Miller, 2020). The implementation and use of grade-level materials is another equity-oriented practice and part of the definition of the opportunity gap that leads to gaps in achievement (Cruz, 2021; The New Teacher Project, 2018).

Implementing Grade-level Materials

Implementing grade-level material allows students to learn according to grade-level standards (Cruz, 2021; The New Teacher Project, 2018). Grade-level materials implemented in the classroom are an equity-oriented practice because teachers are addressing the existing opportunity gaps (Cruz, 2021). According to research on opportunity gaps, which highlights the inequities in classrooms where they exist, implementing grade-level material and instruction is critical for supporting all students (The New Teacher Project, 2018). The New Teacher Project (2018) identified that:

> When we make different choices about how resources are allocated—when all kids get access to grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and high expectations, but mainly when students who start the year behind receive these resources—achievement gaps shrink (p. 55).

Teaching curricula to students at different levels of language knowledge or learning is an equity-oriented practice that supports teachers resisting the traditional expectations where multilingual learners and special education students imitate the instruction of their general education or atypical affluent peers (Williamson, 2017). Grade-level materials allow students their right to high-quality and engaging learning opportunities that may ultimately lead to tremendous success in reading later in their academic careers (Lumadi, 2020; Majedah, 2017; Wheldall et al., 2019; Williamson, 2017).

Teachers show an understanding of equity, commitment to students, and awareness of existing social justice issues when they implement grade-level material (Lumadi, 2020; Williamson, 2017). Inequities in the classroom in curricula, materials, and standard instructional

practices could be better supported by teachers using equity-oriented practices, especially when teachers are targeting student academic achievement (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Lumadi, 2020; Williamson, 2017). The implementation of grade-level materials ensures teachers are actively addressing the opportunity gap in achievement (Lazar, 2022; Muhammad, 2019; Okonkwo & Obeka, 2020; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; The New Teacher Project, 2018). Teachers must undergo formal professional learning to effectively use grade-level materials and gain a deeper understanding of how these materials may contribute to achievement gaps (Lazar, 2022; Muhammad, 2019; Okonkwo & Obeka, 2020; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; The New Teacher Project, 2018). Educational equity includes providing all students with access to grade-level learning and remains at the center of implementing grade-level materials (Cruz, 2021; Gorski, 2020; The New Teacher Project, 2018).

Educational Equity

Understanding educational equity is essential for addressing inequities in literacy (Hannah, 2022; Kapp & Kunz, 2021). Equity in education provides teachers and students with the resources and tools to develop to their full potential in and outside the literacy classroom (Kapp & Kunz, 2021). Educational equity encompasses practices that operationalize equitable learning experiences. These may include equity-oriented teacher professional development and learning, culturally diverse classroom materials, and access to challenging and rigorous materials and resources (Kapp & Kunz, 2021). Understanding equity in education is necessary for achieving equity in the literacy classroom (Hannah, 2022; Lumadi, 2020).

Equity in any classroom provides students with the necessary tools to learn, succeed, and achieve, however, Gorski (2020) and the Center for Public Education (2016) identify that equity

is more than giving equal access and opportunity to students. It involves removing barriers in existing systems that contribute to educational injustices (Center for Public Education, 2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) made equity in education law. The ESSA replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and identified that all students must have the necessary tools to learn, succeed, and achieve. The ESSA supports equity efforts by providing the essential components for such efforts, including accountability, support, and funding to reach equity through curricula, literature, and other materials offered in the classroom (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Hannah, 2022; Kapp & Kunz, 2021).

Equity requires a shift in thinking. Thomas and McIntyre-McCullough (2016) identified that conversations based on equity may feel uncomfortable. Equity aims to actively target existing inequities and injustices evident in education and the classroom (Gorski, 2016). Teachers have found it can be challenging to recognize and respond to existing inequities in education and within the classroom (Gorski, 2016; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). Identifying inequities requires school and district leaders and educators to understand the fundamental difference between equity and equality (Gorski, 2016). Understanding the difference between equity and equality may help teachers and leaders understand the reason behind equity-oriented practices and their purpose in the classroom for helping all students achieve academically (Center for Public Education, 2016; Gorski, 2016; Hannah, 2022; Okonkwo & Obeka, 2020). Equality calls for all individuals to have access to the same resources. Equity, on the other hand, calls for what is fair and right for everyone. Understanding the difference between the two requires a transformative learning experience. Educators can

create this experience by raising consciousness that supports equity-oriented instruction in the classroom (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Center for Public Education (2016) has linked equity closely to student academic achievement. Center for Public Education (2016) identified that addressing inequities in funding, access to high-level curricula, and being taught by well-educated teachers helps close the achievement gap in early elementary schools. Even though his may be true, there is a need for equity-minded educators—those who understand what resources, policies, and practices support equity in education and fair access to instruction and achievement (Center for Public Education, 2016; Gorski, 2020; Lazar et al., 2012). Transformative learning must take place for educators to become equity-minded (Bukko & Liu, 2021). Such transformative learning will aid teachers' ability to recognize, respond to, and redress existing inequities and cultivate and sustain equitable literacy instruction (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020).

Educators play a key role in supporting educational equity (Gorski, 2016). Administrators and teachers must prioritize equitable literacy instruction to support and fulfill the goal of achieving educational equity (Gorski, 2016; Lazar, 2022). Understanding the necessary components of equitable literacy instruction depends on students' individual learning needs and addressing the existing inequities and injustices in curricula, practices, and materials to make literacy instruction accessible to all students and to cultivate and sustain equity over the long-term (Gorski, 2020; Lazar, 2022). Equitable literacy instruction addresses existing inequities and injustices in curricula and materials through equity-oriented practices that aim to make learning available and accessible for all students (Gorski, 2016; Muhammad, 2019; Williamson, 2017). Inequitable practices may persist in education however, equity-oriented practices are readily

available for literacy instruction to redress inequities and cultivate and sustain equity (Gorski, 2016; Kapp & Kunz, 2021; Lazar, 2022). The role of educators in addressing inequities is therefore not only relevant but significant, as educators recognize, respond to, and redress inequities, use equity-oriented practices in their instruction, and work toward achieving equity in education (Gorski, 2016).

<center>**The Role Teachers Play in Addressing Persisting Inequities**</center>

Educational equity relies on teachers' ability to recognize, respond to, and redress existing inequities, cultivate equity-driven environments, and sustain equity in education long-term (Gorski, 2020). Equity-oriented practices in the literacy classroom rely heavily on educators for their implementation (Lazar, 2022; Muhammad, 2019; Williamson, 2017). However, for educators to address inequity in literacy education, educators must be introduced to and understand the equity literacy framework and be conscious of their bias, previous experiences, and presence of self that may be reflected in their practice and affect or influence their experience (Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). Transformative learning plays an essential role in understanding the role of educators as they address inequities in instruction (Bukko & Liu, 2021).

Whether or not teachers come into the classroom prepared to create an equitable learning environment or to teach with an equity lens, as discussed by Williamson (2017), depends on how they have been trained or prepared in their pre-service learning. Educator qualifications are a significant variable in achieving educational equity (Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). Pre-service learning of equity and equity literacy is necessary for future teachers to grow and become equity-minded in their pedagogy (Lazar, 2022). Educators will need to be fully prepared

to enter the classroom and will need some awareness of the aspects of equity to be able to close the existing opportunity gaps, address inequities in curricula, instruction, materials, and policies, and challenge those inequities regardless of resistance (Gorski, 2020; Lazar, 2022; The New Teacher Project, 2018). Pre-service transformative learning of equity can support educators as they transition into diverse classrooms and are met with existing inequities, and may even limit students' opportunities to succeed academically (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Lazar et al., 2012).

Pre-service teachers receiving instruction in equity before entering the classroom need to understand what is necessary to serve a diverse student population (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2016). Transformative learning that supports the development of equity-minded teachers may help move a classroom, school, and society toward addressing existing inequities (Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017). Pre-service learning can prepare teachers to enter education with equity training that may support cultivating equitable environments committed to equity and where equity is a part of all decisions and instructional practices (Gorski, 2020). However, pre-service learning does not solve the problem of existing educators having little to no understanding of equity or its significance in education, the literacy classroom, and society (Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017).

According to Kapp and Kunz (2021), in-service teacher learning and professional development is an equity-oriented practice in literacy education. Geletu and Mihiretie (2023) identified that teachers learn informally and in structured learning environments, both of which are methods that promote teacher development of professional competencies necessary for curriculum implementation and may support the use of differentiated teaching practices that improve classroom instruction and engagement (Geletu & Mihiretie, 2023). Professional learning

communities, one method of professional learning in education, consist of collaborative work and conversation over teaching and learning, much like those described by the equity-minded educator in Williamson's (2017) study. Collaboration in teaching and learning through professional learning communities, such as grade-level or equity teams, helps teachers gather new information, clarify and discuss beliefs, examine existing methods of thinking and teaching, and foster critical reflection amongst educators (Geletu & Mihiretie, 2023).

The practice of in-service professional learning can help educators tasked with teaching in culturally, linguistically, and overall diverse classrooms or changing demographics better understand their changing role (Williamson, 2017). This learning may also help teachers learn to identify existing injustices and recognize, respond to, and redress inequities in instruction, including in their literacy instruction (Geletu & Mihiretie, 2023; Kapp & Kunz, 2021; Osamwoni, 2016; Williamson, 2017). Bukko and Liu (2021) studied pre-service teachers and identified that there is potential for a positive impact on teachers working on equity by coaches, administrators, and instructional leaders. Bukko and Liu (2021) also identified that research to further understand the impact of such professional learning is valuable and significant.

Collaboration with Teachers and School Leaders

Collaboration between school leaders, instructional coaches, and teachers is necessary for sustaining equity-oriented practices (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Williamson, 2017). District and school-level leaders may support teachers by providing space for learning about equity and equity-oriented practices (Bukko & Liu, 2021). This could be through professional development and in-class hands-on support by those leaders (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Kapp & Kunz, 2021; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). Addressing any change in an organization is difficult,

but addressing a change that requires teachers to have a change in thought to overcome a problem that may not affect them is complex (Skrla et al., 2009; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). The complexity of such change lies in transforming teachers to be equity-minded and understanding and recognizing that current systems, such as curricula, materials, and practices, may be inequitable (Kotter, 2012; Lazar, 2022; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016).

Kotter (2012) identified that any change requires action and support from stakeholders to overcome the many obstacles of change. Embracing equity literacy and equity-oriented practices, even if teachers identify and target inequities, may leave teachers feeling disempowered by obstacles and may lead teachers into an equity trap where equity is thought to be achieved but is not actually a central focus at all (Gorski, 2016; Kotter, 2012; Skrla et al., 2009). School leaders may create a team to support equity and support systems, or communities of learners, that make it possible for teachers to implement equity-oriented practices and make them sustainable (Geletu & Mihiretie, 2023; Williamson, 2017). These support systems depend heavily on the needs of school teachers, students, and leaders (Geletu & Mihiretie, 2023; Skrla et al., 2009; Williamson, 2017).

Identifying each school's demographic and per-pupil needs is necessary to recognize, respond to, and redress inequities and cultivate and sustain equity-oriented practices in the literacy classroom and educational equity overall (ESSA, 2015; Gorski, 2016; Pendakur, 2016; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). The critical support systems for cultivating and sustaining equity also vary because schools differ in student demographics, district or school policies, curricula, and access to materials (Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). Depending

on each school's student demographic, some teachers may need more language support from language educators in their literacy classroom, while others in less diverse schools may not require such support (Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). Teachers with little or no experience may benefit from a more hands-on approach to coaching and learning as they become more equity-minded educators and use equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction (Bukko & Liu, 2021). Even in other circumstances, according to equity consciousness, some teachers are not ready to take such drastic steps in addressing equity, yet that does not mean they cannot take any steps at all (Skrla et al., 2009).

Equity Consciousness

Educators' awareness of bias is significant in relation to their ability to learn, implement practices, and interpret their experiences (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Understanding and identifying one's biases relies on a teachers' awareness and the influence and affect their biases may have on their instruction and practice (Cavallaro & Sembiante, 2021; Gorski, 2016; Lumadi, 2020; Mezirow, 1990; Okonkwo & Obeka, 2020; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). When educators identify their own biases, they may be able to identify inequities (Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). Skrla et al. (2009) identified equity consciousness as a person's ability to identify and acknowledge inequity towards others and actively redress that inequity. When inequities in materials, curricula, and instruction are identified, teachers may implement and use equity-oriented practices (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Lazar, 2022). Developing a teacher's equity consciousness may be required for changes to occur in terms of equity and education (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Skrla et al., 2009; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016).

Equity-conscious teachers commit to social justice and believe all students can achieve academic success regardless of their identity or perceived ability (Skrla et al., 2009). According to Skrla et al. (2009), equity-conscious teachers have four central beliefs:

> The first is that all children (except only a very small percentage, e.g., those with profound disabilities) are capable of high levels of academic success. The second is that all children mean all, regardless of a child's race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, learning differences, culture, language, religion, and so on. The third is that school adults are primarily responsible for student learning. Finally, the fourth is that traditional school practices may work for some students but not all. Therefore, if we are going to eliminate the achievement gap, it requires a change in our practices. (pp. 82-83)

These four beliefs highlight educators' role in addressing equity and the significance of self in implementing curricula and practices (Geletu & Mihiretie, 2023; Skrla et al., 2009; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Equity consciousness is a foundational element in teacher preparation and professional learning to help develop educators who practice reflection on their experiences and work (Gorski, 2020; Skrla et al., 2009).

Pazey and Cole (2013) wrote that "real change requires a fully informed consciousness, a true equity consciousness" (p. 259). Therefore, for in-service educators to work toward equity in their instruction and to teach with equity in mind, a transformational level of learning is required (Bukko & Liu, 2021). The equity consciousness theory discusses the need for teachers to go through specific levels of training to develop into equity-conscious teachers (Pazey & Cole, 2013). The equity consciousness theory identifies the following five levels of consciousness,

including no knowledge of equity or bias, limited or some understanding of equity, inauthentic, vacillating, and authentic (Skrla et al., 2009).

Teachers at the first level have no knowledge of equity or bias and may need to be made aware of the practices they contribute to the field that create inequities (Skrla et al., 2009). According to Skrla et al. (2009), teachers at this level may attribute blame to students and families and hold prejudicial views toward the students they teach. This may include the belief in the inferiority of some student groups based on race or identity (Skrla et al., 2009). Teachers in the second level have limited or some understanding of equity and may have little account of equity issues (Skrla et al., 2009). They may understand the problem based on inequity for one group but are not able to identify the disparities among all groups (Skrla et al., 2009; Williamson, 2017). A second level teacher may acknowledge and understand issues of injustice evident for students who may receive special education services, but they need to recognize or understand issues of inequity for students of color (Gorski, 2020; Skrla et al., 2009).

Teachers at the third level are inauthentic and may identify equity, but they do not act according to that belief (Skrla et al., 2009). These teachers appear to have a developed equity consciousness though their behavior does not reflect that belief, and instead these teachers may identify themselves as being saviors for students instead of being teachers who serve students according to their needs (Skrla et al., 2009). Teachers in the fourth level are vacillating between addressing inequities or remaining quiet (Skrla et al., 2009). These teachers may have a deep understanding of equity but are limited when under pressure. Skrla et al. (2009) noted that these teachers tend to slip into one of the previously identified levels of equity consciousness, especially when under stress and pressure. Teachers who vacillate often experience this in

response to the silencing efforts of others who are unwilling to let go of their deficit ideals (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Skrla et al., 2009). Teachers in the fifth level are authentic and have a deep desire to practice equity (Pazey & Cole, 2013). These teachers practice equity daily, and they recognize biases based on previous experiences, identify the connection between equity beliefs and religion, faith, and spirituality, and learn from others or earlier experiences with equity-conscious educators who have challenged their previously held views about others (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Skrla et al., 2009).

The equity consciousness continuum offers a deeper understanding of the role of teachers in advancing equity efforts, including in the use of practices in the literacy classroom (Bukko & Liu, 2021). The equity consciousness theory provides a continuum that allows leaders to better understand how educators can be supported in responding successfully to inequities (Bukko & Liu, 2021). The continuum identifies that teachers are also at all different levels of learning with equity and invites school coaches and leaders to "provide differentiated professional development for individual teachers or small groups of teachers with similar equity consciousness need," like the practices that contribute to equity in the classroom (Skrla et al., 2009, p. 85). Understanding teachers' equity consciousness may help district and school leaders create the necessary transformative learning opportunities for teachers to raise their consciousness levels and cause them to reflect on their past and present experiences and build upon their commitment to educational equity (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016). Understanding their level of equity consciousness may also demonstrate how teachers' current practices are or are not influenced by transformative learning opportunities in trainings (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Skrla et al., 2009) Ultimately, understanding teachers' level of

equity consciousness may also contribute to better understanding their current literacy instruction in K-5 education, which is commonly identified as inequitable because of the lack of diverse curricula and practices (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Skrla et al., 2009).

Current Literacy Instruction in K-5 Education

Literacy instruction in early education often relies on some pre-written curricula focused on a single method of teaching students how to read (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). According to Tunmer and Chapman (2015), most scripted curricula focus on the science of reading, which positions listening comprehension to fully account for reading comprehension. Therefore, such instruction and curricula may not always be equitable and may not account for culturally and linguistically diverse students or students with disabilities (Lumadi, 2020; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). This is because of existing curricula and whether such curricula are of high quality and sensitive to educator bias, both of which are barriers to achievement for students of color (Hartl & Riley, 2021).

The whole language approach is another popular approach to teaching reading and writing in the early literacy classroom (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). The whole language approach to literacy instruction is an attitude toward teaching commonly reflected through popular scripted curricula (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). The whole language approach calls for students to bring meaning to language and learning through real-life experiences and thus needs to account for students who have limited experiences (Lazar, 2022; Patzelt, 1995; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Tunmer and Chapman (2015) identified that teachers are required to focus on the existing methods of teaching literacy. However, those methods of literacy instruction are often one-size-fits-all approaches that neglect explicit skill instruction and instead result in many

students with a deficit in literacy skills that contribute to the gap in student achievement (Cruz, 2021; Davis, 2021; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a; Patzelt, 1995; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). When teachers fail to meet the needs of students through existing pedagogy and practice, children will continue to struggle to read and achieve according to grade-level expectations (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). The inequity in literacy instruction, however, needs to be better understood to be tackled (Gorski, 2016).

Inequity in Literacy Instruction in K-5 Education

The science of reading is popular amongst many leaders, teachers, and parents alike because of its blend of developmental, psychological, and cognitive scientific knowledge in teaching students how to read (MacPhee et al., 2021). According to Gabriel (2020), the science of reading is "as much a political statement as it is a label advertising a certain set of values" (p. 36). However, the science of reading has grown in popularity, focusing on building readers through comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, phonics, and phonemic awareness as its foundation (Knott, 2020; MacPhee et al., 2021). Its framework signals a solution for low-reading scores among low-socioeconomic students and multilingual learners (Gabriel, 2020; MacPhee et al., 2021).

Other researchers have highlighted that the science of reading does not extend to a scientific approach to writing, spelling, and morphology (Gabriel, 2020). Morphology is the study of the structure of words, including the basic building blocks of words that aid in word decoding and sound-letter associations (Wolter & Gibson, 2015). Furthermore, the science of reading relies heavily on students' prior experiences and knowledge of the language as it asks them to know, identify, and sound-out words, including words students may not even know due

to a language or cultural barrier (Gabriel, 2020). Therefore, multilingual students and students with limited experience may only access instruction with proper support, which is often not available in low-socioeconomic schools or for multilingual learners (The New Teacher Project, 2018).

The phonics-first instructional approach has also become popular in early literacy teaching (Lazar, 2022; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). The phonics-first instruction calls for explicit phonics instruction for all students before anything else and focuses to a limited extent on students' previous experience with comprehension (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). The focus of phonics first aims to teach letter sounds and phonemic awareness before focusing on words or their meanings (MacPhee et al., 2021). The phonics first approach may seem to be equity-oriented, yet it almost disregards the fact that students come to school with an abundance of word knowledge, whether in English or another language, that can be used for understanding text and teaching words (Fletcher et al., 2021; Hendrix-Soto, 2021; Williamson, 2017). The phonics-first instruction does not rely on students' knowledge of the English language expressly, yet eventually learning opportunities may be denied to students who lack the phonological and phonemic awareness to develop language and comprehension (Gorski, 2020; Hendrix-Soto, 2021; The New Teacher Project, 2018).

Knott (2020) discussed that cognitive scientists have identified that phonics, one of the pillars of the science of reading and a highlight of the phonics-first approach to teaching reading, is the best way to learn how to read. Knott (2020) also identified that phonics can help address educational inequities in reading instruction. However, young readers developing concepts of print and phonological and phonemic awareness should also be developing oral language

comprehension in written language (Duke et al., 2021). Supporting multilingual students who are developing oral language comprehension, identifying unknown words, and phonetically blending unfamiliar words may take educators time and effort (Duke et al., 2021). Students will struggle with reading given their limited vocabulary, especially without the proper instructional practices (MacPhee et al., 2021).

Teachers must reflect and analyze their current strategies of teaching reading because, while there are benefits to each of the several different methods, not all are equitable (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Teaching students how to read includes using practices that support individual student needs (Gabriel, 2020). Gabriel (2020) stated, "Ironically, the question that drives the scientific endeavor is often not 'what works,' but 'what works when, for whom, and under what circumstances" (p. 36). The science of reading and all other methods of teaching reading should drive teachers to ask questions and critically analyze their instructional materials, curricula, and practices in their teaching (Gabriel, 2020; Gorski, 2020).

Early Literacy Practices in K-5 Education

Early literacy practices in education include some that can be considered equity-oriented. These practices included guided reading, shared reading, and reading to children (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Guided reading is the most common approach for teaching reading skills such as decoding strategies, vocabulary, and comprehension (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Guided reading is explicit instruction in small groups and is attentive to individual student needs (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015; Young, 2023). However, guided reading is a type of instruction based on perceived student reading level, which can often enable teacher bias and contribute to existing opportunity gaps (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015; Young, 2023). Historically, guided

reading has assembled students reading below grade level into low-level groups with low-level peers, limiting their access to grade-level reading and highlighting a potential for inequity in instruction (Young, 2023).

Shared reading, another practice used in early reading, involves reading to students and students alongside a teacher with a grade-level or a higher-level text (Gibbs & Reed, 2021; Thomas & McIntyre-McCullough, 2016; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Shared reading allows students to read grade-level texts regardless of whether they can read such texts independently (Gibbs & Reed, 2021). According to Gibbs and Reed (2021), shared reading includes interactive experiences demonstrating proficient reading skills and thinking. Initially, teachers may do most of the reading in shared reading and become independent readers as they become more familiar with the text (Gibbs & Reed, 2021). They may even develop oral language and vocabulary through reading (Gibbs & Reed, 2021).

Reading to students is another practice or method of teaching early literacy and involves simply reading to students through teacher-led instruction. This practice may be less student-centered than guided reading and shared reading, but it does allow students to practice and hear a fluent reader (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction can help support and bring equity into education (Kapp & Kunz, 2021; Lazar, 2022). Nevertheless, when considering these practices, teachers must reflect on the standard curricula in early literacy, which often do not consider non-mainstream and multilingual students, and what practices may support their instruction and student achievement (Geletu & Mihiretie, 2023; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015).

Summary

This chapter included this study's literature review. The conceptual framework for this study included personal interest, equity literacy (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015), and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990). The literature review revealed significant themes such as (a) the opportunity gap, (b) equity-oriented practices, (c) culturally relevant practices, (d) highlighting students' voices, (e) use of data and small group instruction, (f) implementing grade-level materials, (g) educational equity, (h) the role of educators in advancing equity, (i) equity consciousness, and (j) literacy instruction in kindergarten through fifth grade. Existing equity research highlighted that in-service educators and their perceptions of equity-oriented practices may help school and district leaders, principals, and literacy coaches better understand how to support teachers as they strive for educational equity, close opportunity and achievement gaps, and aim to equitably build young readers (Lazar, 2022; Skrla et al., 2009). Chapter 3 will detail this study's methodology.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

ESSA (2015) sought to address institutional inequities in education by providing funding and support to schools. However, data since its implementation continued to signal persistent inequities in education (Cruz, 2021; Gorski, 2016). Existing literacy instruction, including the one-size-fits-all approach, did not account for culturally and linguistically diverse students or students with disabilities, and thus was inequitable (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a; Lazar, 2022; Patzelt, 1995; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). This study sought to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used in literacy instruction by in-service public kindergarten through fifth-grade (K-5) elementary teachers in a large metropolitan school district in Maine.

ESSA (2015) was introduced to replace the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). The implementation of ESSA required school districts to make significant efforts to reach and sustain equity in education (Lazar, 2022; Wheldall et al., 2019). Notably, previous research identified that some of the most significant inequities in education were in curricula and instructional practices within the classroom (Gorski, 2016; Kapp & Kunz, 2021; Lazar, 2022; Shufflebarger, 2022; Williamson, 2017). The use of equity-oriented practices therefore had become an equitable practice aimed at addressing inequities in literacy instruction (Lazar, 2022).

Existing literacy instruction identified that the one-size-fits-all approach to literacy instruction did not support all students (Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). However, little was known about teachers' experiences with and perceptions of equity-oriented practices and whether such practices supported student achievement. The following research questions were explored in this study:

Research Question 1: How do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine describe their experiences when implementing equity-oriented practices during literacy instruction?

Research Question 2: How do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine perceive the outcomes of literacy instruction when using equity-oriented practices?

Understanding teachers' experiences revealed to equity researchers and school and district leaders how they could better support teachers implementing equity-oriented practices long-term, especially through transformative learning opportunities (Mezirow, 1990). The transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990) was the theoretical framework of this study.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used by in-service public elementary teachers in a large metropolitan elementary school district in Maine. This study's proposed methodology, phenomenology, permitted this study to provide a lens for school and district leaders and other equity researchers to better understand the experiences of in-service Grades K-5 elementary educators as they used equity-oriented practices in the traditional general education classroom. Classrooms in this district were undergoing many curricular and instructional changes while this study was underway. Teachers were learning how to implement and use equity-oriented practices daily in their literacy instruction (Hartl & Riley, 2021). Consequently, by understanding teachers' experiences, school and district leaders and other equity researchers could gain a better understanding of the supports or additional professional learning needed by teachers for equity to be cultivated and sustained long-term, especially in K-5 literacy instruction.

Qualitative research seeks to explore and understand a central phenomenon and engage in emerging research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Qualitative research is flexible, relevant variables are often predetermined, and findings are often discussed in the analysis process (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Creswell and Guetterman (2019) noted that qualitative research includes research questions as opposed to hypotheses and is more inductive than deductive. Qualitative researchers seek a more robust understanding of the view of one group or a single individual, and therefore a qualitative researcher's questions and interview protocols carry significant weight (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Agee (2009) identified that qualitative inquiries focus on the why and how of human interactions. Phenomenological studies analyze the lived experiences of participants and seek to better understand their experiences and perceptions (Neubauer et al., 2019). This study's research questions were written to seek a better understanding of the experiences of this study's participants and the influence of social context on those experiences.

Qualitative researchers generate questions about events or the influence of such events (Maxwell, 2008). According to Castillo-Montoya (2016), qualitative researchers use the interview protocol refinement framework to strengthen their interview protocols. The interview protocol refinement framework includes four phases: (a) ensuring interview questions align with research questions, (b) constructing an inquiry-based conversation, (c) receiving feedback on interview protocols, and (d) piloting the interview protocol (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). This researcher chose to use this protocol to refine the semi-structured interviews conducted in this study.

The phenomenological research approach was the best fit to explore and better understand teachers' experiences as they recognized, responded, and redressed inequities and sought to cultivate and sustain equity through their practice. The phenomenological approach was best suited for this study because it "focuses on the study of an individual's lived experiences within the world" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 90). This study's approach allowed this researcher to develop an understanding of the experiences of some K-5 literacy teachers in education. Additionally, all interview questions focused on teachers' experiences and perceptions of equity-oriented practices in the classroom.

Site Information and Demographics

This study was conducted at Denver Public Schools, a pseudonym used for a diverse metropolitan district in Maine. Denver Public Schools students range from pre-K to fifth-grade. The school was in one of a few diverse districts in Maine according to the district's (2024). The district had also made significant efforts in its literacy instruction to engage in equity-oriented instruction and practices and to create a district-wide vision toward reaching equity and closing the opportunity and achievement gaps (according to the district's website, 2024). The district had many curricular and professional learning changes that targeted building equity in education (according to the district's website, 2024). Many of these changes resulted from new district policies that sought to address the inequities in education as required by the ESSA (2015). The participants in this study included six in-service K-5 teachers within Denver Public Schools.

Denver Public Schools included 10 elementary schools and enrolled just over 6,500 students across grades pre-K-12 (according to the district's website, 2024). This large metropolitan district included just over 50% of students who identified as white and just under

50% who identified as Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, or Pacific Islander or as being of two or more races (according to the district's website, 2024). The schools at which this researcher had chosen to conduct all interviews and observations reflected similar district demographics. Participants taught at three different schools in the district. The first school enrolled over 300 students who spoke more than 10 languages, the second school enrolled just under 400 students who spoke more than 17 languages, and the third school enrolled just over 400 students with about 19 languages spoken across the student body (according to the district's website, 2024). The ESSA (2021-2022) dashboard identified that just under 50% of this district's enrollment consisted of students of color. District English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) teachers (personal communication, May 5, 2023), identified that this number had changed drastically since the state welcomed refugee families from Angola and other parts of Africa. Most refugee families arrived in Maine in April 2023 and were relocated across the state (Haskell, 2023).

According to Denver Public Schools ESOL teachers (personal communication, May 5, 2023), many of the district's new students had interrupted learning. Denver Public Schools already had a diverse population, even so public schools in Maine districts have had difficulty staffing schools with sufficient ESOL teachers, causing a greater challenge when it came to supporting all students (Meyer, 2023). Participants in this study were recruited via their work email. This researcher sought approval to conduct this study from the district's superintendent (see Appendix A). The district's website (2024) listed participants' email addresses. This researcher then sent participant information sheets to all classroom teachers K-5 (see Appendix D).

Participants and Sampling Method

Purposeful criterion sampling was the sampling method used in this study. Criterion sampling identifies and selects all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance (Palinkas et al., 2015). According to Palinkas et al. (2015), criterion sampling requires participants to volunteer to be part of a study still to be selected based on criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants volunteered to be part of this study by responding to a recruitment email sent to all teachers at the school. They self-identified as meeting this study's criteria for participation. Criteria for eligibility to participate identified that participants must have been (a) age 18 or older, (b) currently teaching in grade level K-5, (c) have a minimum of three years of experience teaching, (d) have a minimum of two years teaching in district, and (e) a definition/ideal for equity (see Appendix D). Therefore, participants' experience in education and their perception of equity were considered to ensure a wide range of participants. The goal of these criteria was to diversify the pool of participants by including teachers who self-identified their grade level, their number of years teaching, and their definition of equity. This researcher used this sampling method to best reflect the needs of teachers at various levels of equity consciousness and equity literacy (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023b; Skrla et al., 2009). This study included six K-5 elementary teachers chosen through criterion sampling, which selected participants that met some predetermined criteria of importance (Palinkas et al., 2015). This small sample size of six K-5 teachers from the district was a limitation but offered the opportunity to deeply dive into the experience of these educators (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Instrumentation and Data Collection

This qualitative phenomenological study was based on the idea that this methodology lent itself to this researcher's ability to develop a better understanding of the experiences of educators as they underwent significant curricular and educational changes and used equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction (Lazar, 2022). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants each engaged in one interview with this researcher over Zoom. Permission to audio record the interview was requested by this researcher.

This researcher aligned this study's interview protocol with this study's purpose and this study's research questions. This study's interview questions and potential follow-up questions sought to better understand educators and their experiences with equity-oriented practices (Appendix E). Interviews were conducted in private rooms away from public view. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using Zoom's automated transcription feature. This researcher, upon completion of the interview, checked the transcripts for accuracy. Following this, this researcher engaged in the member checking process, which in this case consisted of returning transcripts to participants to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts per participant (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). These transcripts were sent to participants via this researcher's University of New England email address to their personal email, as identified by participant. Participants had 7 calendar days to approve the transcripts. If a participant did not respond to this researcher's request for confirmation of the accuracy of the interview transcript, then the transcript was considered accurate. Once member checks had been completed, all data underwent further thematic triangulation, which corroborated data from different individuals (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The transcript was then coded and reviewed several times for

identifiable themes, sub-themes, or categories using the in vivo coding style, which used participants' exact words to develop themes (Volpe-White, 2019).

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were coded using an in vivo style of coding on ATLAS.ti (Master your research projects with the power of AI, 2024). The in vivo coding style involves using participants' exact words as codes to capture their experience and perceptions (Volpe-White, 2019). The software ATLAS.ti is a research tool that supports analyzing qualitative research using artificial intelligence software (Master your research projects with the power of AI, 2024). It had been previously used by this researcher to code interview transcripts and was used in this study as well. This same style of coding was also used for thematic triangulation. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) identified that thematic "triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals" (p. 261). Interview transcripts were therefore analyzed together. This method encouraged the researcher to develop a report that was both accurate and credible (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This researcher used in vivo coding to ensure all themes and data reflected participants' exact words (Volpe-White, 2019). This style of coding was descriptive and used to support the trustworthiness of interview findings (Volpe-White, 2019). Themes were developed based on how participants described their perceptions and experiences, which demonstrated how participants had responded to the phenomenon (Volpe-White, 2019). The process of revising themes was conducted several times to ensure accuracy.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Ethical Issues

This study's limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues surrounding research will be discussed in the following section. These limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues highlighted

areas of this research that could contribute to bias in the data collection process. The limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues were considered by this researcher when reviewing the data in concluding remarks. This study's limitations, delimitations, ethical issues are described as follows.

Limitations

Limitations are found in all studies (Valdosta State University, n.d.). Limitations are found in studies' validity, generalizability, and applicability (Valdosta State University, n.d.). Researchers have no control over limitations, but they are required to forewarn readers of limitations (Valdosta State University, n.d.). The study's limitations included participants' access to continued professional learning, pressure from school and district leaders, access to collaborative team planning time, and the small sample size. There was no certainty that participants had access to continuous professional learning, such as collaborative planning time and learning of instructional routines, practices, and curricula (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023a; Lazar, 2022; Williamson, 2017). This lack of access to continuous professional learning limited the scope of participants' understanding and perception of equity-oriented practice. Pressure from the guiding coalition, in this case, school and district leaders, may have influenced participants to answer questions in certain ways. This researcher's role as a school equity leader in this large metropolitan district may have also contributed to participant bias in their responses throughout the interview. Likewise, the small sample size could have been a limitation. The district website (2024) highlighted the unique diversity of the district and schools in this study within Maine, which poses a challenge for their transferability and replication in other schools or districts.

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries that make studies manageable (Valdosta State University, n.d.). A delimitation of this study was its participant criteria, which identified that all participants must have a minimum of three years of teaching experience. Another delimitation of the study was its focus on K-5 literacy instruction, a specific content area that may have lent itself to better understanding how the opportunity and achievement gap were related (Carter et al., 2013). The study's final delimitation was its focus on the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015), which would better define what was considered equity-oriented and provide a framework for understanding equity.

Ethical Issues

A major concern for research, according to the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) as written in *The Belmont Report*, is the protection of the privacy and confidentiality of participants. This researcher protected participants' privacy and confidentiality by taking measures to protect the confidentiality of this study's data. The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) determined respect for persons as essential during the research process. According to the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979), "respect for persons incorporates two ethical convictions, individuals should be treated as autonomous agents and second that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection" (p. 4). Following the guidance from the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979), this researcher ensured that the confidentiality of all

participants was protected during interviews. This researcher assigned pseudonyms to each participant and kept each pseudonym in a master list as required by the University of New England's Office of Research Integrity. The master list was kept in a file cabinet away from all other data. All other paper files were also locked away in a file cabinet. All electronic files were kept in separate password-protected files, only to be accessed by this researcher.

The Belmont Report identified beneficence as being that "persons are treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being" (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, p. 8). This researcher ensured beneficence by making sure that participants underwent a consent process and that the consent process took place in a private setting away from others. All school, subject, and district names were not disclosed and instead replaced with pseudonyms. All data was kept locked away and confidential. All participants were informed of their right to stop and no longer participate in the interviews or study should they feel uncomfortable. According to the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979), no burden was unduly imposed on participants. This researcher ensured that participants complied with this requirement by making them aware that they had the right to skip or not answer any questions for any reason. Some questions may have been sensitive and personal in nature; therefore, it was the participants choice whether they chose to answer. Participants privacy, confidentiality, and justice, which called researchers to ensure all participants were treated equally, ensured that any answers would not have any effect on their relationship with their employability or performance

review in the school and district (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

All data was kept confidential and with the participant's knowledge and consent. All paper records were secured using locked file cabinets accessible only to this researcher. All other files were stored using virtual password-protected files accessed only by this researcher and the University of New England's Office of Research Integrity staff as needed. Data was also stored on the researcher's secure UNE OneDrive account. A master list was kept with participants' pseudonym, email address, and school. The master list was stored securely and separately from the study data and was destroyed in compliance with terms set by the University of New England's Office of Research Integrity. This researcher was the only one who had access to the master list.

The researcher ensured to adhere to the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) principle of justice, particularly considering their role as an employee and equity leader at a local school within the study district. There was a potential for bias with subjects in the study, especially those who were vocally against equity efforts such as equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction, but this researcher avoided bias when sampling by avoiding teachers from their home school through participation criteria and ensured participants did not feel disadvantaged in any way. This researcher ensured that this did not affect participants' employability or performance review in their practice by maintaining confidentiality.

Trustworthiness

This study's trustworthiness depended on its credibility, transferability, dependability or validity, and confirmability (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Member checking was conducted to ensure this study's credibility. The demographic makeup of participants and the diverse student demographics with which they work, best demonstrated the transferability of qualitative data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). According to the district demographics, as one of the most diverse districts, this district's enrollment may not have reflected many other districts in Maine. Therefore, this study may be easily transferable to other districts whose student populations have similar demographic characteristics. Dependability and validity were best seen through the equity audit template, used as guidance when creating interview questions, which identified key criteria regarding equity that demonstrated evidence of inequity in education (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Finally, confirmability was evident through the several coding rounds following member checks and data triangulation that ensured data dependability (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Credibility

This researcher used the in vivo (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) style of coding, which highlighted participants' words, when conducting thematic coding to ensure the credibility of this study. In vivo coding uses participants' exact words to develop themes from interview transcripts (Volpe-White, 2019). Additionally, member checks were conducted with participants to ensure the accuracy of the findings in transcriptions. According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), "Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals" (p. 261). Triangulation allowed this researcher to be both accurate and credible.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to apply the results of one study to another setting (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The transferability of the study is best seen through its findings, which revealed that this study may be applied to settings with similar demographics as those evident at this large metropolitan school. This study's focus on equity (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015), particularly in literacy instruction (Gabriel, 2020; Lazar et al., 2012) made this study more easily applicable to other contexts, settings, and populations. This study focused on maintaining a consistent methodological process to strengthen its transferability to other settings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Davis, 2021).

Dependability

Ravitch and Carl (2021) noted that a researcher must realize the significance of maintaining the dependability of the data that was both collected and analyzed. The completed interviews in this study demonstrated dependability, with the interview questions centered around the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). Member checking within the context of this study involved the participants being given the opportunity to validate the accuracy of the transcript, which further supported the dependability of the results. This researcher also maintained a commitment to reflexivity. Jamieson et al. (2023) defined reflexivity as "the process of engaging in self-reflection about who we are as researchers, how our subjectivities and biases guide and inform the research process, and how our worldview is shaped by the research we do and vice versa" (Jamieson et al., 2023, p. 2). This was an effort to ensure this researcher's personal bias had a limited effect on the research findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability was addressed by admitting biases and limitations in the study's methodology (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Interview transcripts underwent several rounds of in vivo coding. Additionally, member checking was conducted to ensure participants' perceptions and experiences were presented accurately (Efron & Ravid, 2019). Lastly, interview transcripts were used in thematic triangulation to strengthen their confirmability.

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Summary

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The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used in literacy instruction by public in-service K-5 elementary teachers in a large, diverse metropolitan school district in Maine. This study involved data gathered during one semi-structured interview with each of the six K-5 elementary teacher participants. This researcher developed interview questions using the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015), conducted member checks (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), and used the in vivo (Volpe-White, 2019) style of coding. Following coding, this researcher conducted thematic triangulation (Volpe-White, 2019) to ensure dependability and validity in the study. This chapter addressed this study's limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues. These included the belief that participants had continuous access to professional learning, access to collaborative team planning time, participant criteria, and protecting participant privacy, confidentiality, and justice. Finally, this chapter addressed issues related to the study's trustworthiness, which included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Chapter 4 will discuss the analysis of the data and present the results and findings.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used in literacy instruction in-service by public K-5 elementary teachers in a large metropolitan school district in Maine. This study explored two research questions:

> **Research Question 1:** How do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine describe their experiences when implementing equity-oriented practices during literacy instruction?
>
> **Research Question 2:** How do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine perceive the outcomes of literacy instruction when using equity-oriented practices?

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with six participating in-service teachers from a large metropolitan school district in Maine. According to the district's Every Student Succeeds Act (2021-2022) dashboard, the district's enrollment comprised just under 50% students of color. The enrollment of the schools at which participants taught consisted of over 300 students and students who spoke more than 10 languages (according to the district's website, 2024). Interviews with teachers were conducted via Zoom behind closed doors to maintain confidentiality. Interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes. This researcher used Zoom's automated transcription feature to ensure interview data was recorded accurately. Data from the interview transcripts was then coded using an in vivo style of coding, which used participants' exact words to develop themes (Volpe-White, 2019) on ATLAS.ti (Master your research projects with the power of AI, 2024). These transcripts were then followed by a series of two more coding

sessions to eliminate redundancies and identify themes. Member checks (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) were then conducted with each participant to ensure the accuracy of the interview transcription. Finally, thematic triangulation (Volpe-White, 2019) was conducted to ensure dependability and validity in the study. The next section will discuss this study's data analysis method.

Analysis Method

Data from semi-structured interviews was organized by participant on a master list which was only to be used during recruitment and destroyed. The master list was used to keep track of participants and their corresponding interview transcripts. This researcher assigned participants pseudonyms. Once all transcripts were entered into the platform, the interview transcripts were coded using an in vivo style of coding on ATLAS.ti. The in vivo style of coding used participants' exact words to develop themes across interview transcripts (Volpe-White, 2019). This style of coding and thematic analysis allowed for descriptive findings (Volpe-White, 2019). The ATLAS.ti software identified several codes. The codes developed were then used by this researcher to identify patterns. The first analysis resulted in 258 codes. The second coding analysis was centered around distinguishing the similarities and eliminating further similar categories. This resulted in 48 codes. The third coding analysis consisted of revising and further eliminating the redundancies in the 48 codes generated on ATLAS.ti while moving them to Microsoft Sheets. This process was conducted to categorize codes into the three main themes identified in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Themes

Theme	Number of times referenced in data
District Initiatives	14
Necessary Enhancements	20
Needs of Educators	14

Presentation of Results and Findings

The common words used by participants to describe their perceptions were used to derive the identified themes. Participants' responses consistently included descriptions that had to do with students' backgrounds and curriculum, including its management, opportunity, adoptability, and quality. Additionally, participants also shared their experiences with professional development, highlighting aspects such as relatability, feeling siloed, stress, and quality. These descriptions resulted in the commonly used words by participants meeting students where they are, collaboration and coaching, and scaffolds and supports. The following sections will discuss in detail each participant's background and provide a summary of their experiences.

Becky

Becky was a teacher with 20 years of experience who taught several different grade levels. Becky identified that she used several equity-oriented practices, including collaborating with colleagues, using multicultural materials and text, implementing rigorous and grade-level learning, and working with students to meet their needs. Although Becky expressed a lack of

confidence in her use of new curriculum, she expressed hope for student achievement, primarily due to the implementation of these equity-oriented practices in her literacy instruction. Becky also described using several outside and in-district resources to support her use of these equity-oriented practices.

Using the district as a resource and collaborating with district leadership was important to Becky. Becky expressed gratitude and a deep interest in learning and collaborating with district specialists to better understand cognitive science and the background knowledge of her students. Becky identified that this level of collaboration and growth mindset allowed her to be able to address student needs in her classroom, especially given the colossal shift in curriculum.

> In terms of the shift from teacher's college centered curriculum and now this, we're shifting to [a new curriculum], and that's been a pretty crazy shift. And I think it remains to be seen whether or not that will lead us to greater equity in terms of access for all students.

Becky emphasized the importance of working to have students' foundational needs met by providing equal access, complex text or rigorous reading materials, and developing student comprehension of complex text.

The use of equity in Becky's literacy instruction was significant. Becky identified that "it's [equity in literacy instruction] influenced my teaching and is really at the center of everything that we do." She further described working with families, increasing her ability to understand culture, adapting to curriculum, discussing equity, reflecting on practice, and identifying and responding to bias. Although Becky identified with these practices, she

acknowledged challenges remained. One of the biggest challenges discussed by Becky was adapting to new curricula while still adapting to the needs of students.

Becky discussed the positive impact of having a standardized curriculum across districts as an equity practice. Becky, on the other hand, described equity as requiring individualization and responsiveness in instruction. Becky identified that for teachers who want to be equity-focused implementing a new standardized curriculum can be stressful. Becky described feeling caught between implementing standardized curriculum to ensure equal access and using the correct practices to provide individualization so that students could truly access the new curriculum. Becky also identified that while feeling the stress and pressure to implement, individualize, and maintain an equity-focus, opportunities like professional development, access to guidance counselors and literacy coaches, district courses for teachers, community partners, a district focus on equity, and being able to discuss equity openly provided a sense of hope for both teachers and students in the district. According to Becky, while there was limited time for practices such as looking at student work, collaborating, and planning, teachers advocated for more time "to analyze student work and to adapt to the students in front of us. And then, I do think, achievement—higher achievement—is possible through [the curriculum]. I hope. I think so." Becky identified that the district provided its teachers with support, resources, and plenty of learning opportunities, even with the challenges present. However, Becky emphasized that time was essential for helping teachers place equity at the center of instruction, reach equity literacy, and support students.

Jackie

Jackie had nearly 20 years of teaching experience and a background in multilingual education. Jackie identified "intense differentiation and grouping," such as small groups, as being key to fostering complex and critical thinking in her literacy classroom. Jackie placed an emphasis on policy and how policies translate into the classroom. Given the district's new policies on equity and literacy, Jackie highlighted that most policymakers did not understand how policies translate into the classroom, especially given the diversity within the classroom. Jackie noted new policies in the district came new curricula. According to Jackie, new curricula put into question how teachers can maintain culturally relevant instruction and engage students in complex and critical thinking. However, Jackie also highlighted how access to professional development, collaboration, and support from school and district leaders have always been available and equity-focused.

When discussing the district's equity-focus, Jackie identified that equity and cultural lenses should be taken into everything done in education. Jackie said:

> When we talk about equity-oriented practice, the primary thing that needs to happen is I need to understand my cultural lens, because that touches everything that I do; and I have to become as aware as I possibly can of my students' cultural lenses. So, you know, for me that's really important.

Jackie highlighted that for her, understanding herself, recognizing her own bias, and understanding her students remained at the center of teaching with an equity and culturally relevant lens. There were such great changes in district curricula, Jackie found ways to prioritize concrete and critical thinking in her classroom. Using small group instruction, some balanced

literacy approaches, and some approaches from the science of reading in her classroom per

district curricula, Jackie found ways to support her students learning. Jackie, like Becky,

identified time as a key factor in curriculum implementation. Jackie noted:

> I don't think the curriculum was ever intended to be that way. Nobody wanted it that way.
>
> Nobody wanted it implemented that way. You can see the pot and the process, and the
>
> windows and the mirrors that they've put into all of that, that curriculum, it's beautiful. If
>
> it could be completed, it just is impossible to complete.

Jackie said teaching literacy using equity-oriented practices was more than "superficial box

checking," but instead was work "that we need to engage in." According to Jackie, for that

engagement to happen, time was needed to dive deeply into the curriculum.

Tracy

Tracy had 4 years of teaching experience at the same grade-level. Tracy identified taking

an equity lens into her literacy instruction by scaffolding instruction and activities for students,

which involved teachers designing activities or supporting materials that place students in

Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. Tracy's use of scaffolding instruction aimed

to support students reading and learning at grade-level. Tracy identified knowing where her

students needed to be by the end of the year but was unfamiliar with the district's (2020) literacy

vision. However, Tracy did know that the district was moving toward a science of reading

framework for their literacy instruction. The science of reading framework prioritizes teaching

phonics or letter sounds to remediate inequities (MacPhee et al., 2021). Tracy further identified

that she had been adopting a science of reading framework in her own literacy instruction over

the years. Tracy said, "I've kind of been supplementing and the way where they're going kind of

aligns to what I've been doing, in terms of phonics." Although she had been moving toward the science of reading in her literacy instruction, Tracy expressed concern over district curriculum shifts and whether the curriculum would include the necessary resources to scaffold and support students in literacy.

Tracy further described the different scaffolds and supports she provided for students when necessary, including visual aids, routines, sentence frames, written and verbal directions, hands-on materials for students, and different methods of demonstrating learning. Tracy identified using these different scaffolds and supported both whole-class instruction and small-group instruction depending on students' needs. Tracy also identified using technology to her advantage by assigning differentiated assignments based on skills students were working on or needed to practice. According to Tracy, this teaching strategy allowed students to practice necessary skills at the same time, but in an individualized manner. One of the practices Tracy also identified was using pre-assessments to identify which skills students already had and help her "form the mini writing groups that [they] do."

Tracy identified how she used her knowledge from previous classes to support students using an equity lens. Tracy also identified collaboration with staff from the response to intervention (RTI) program at her school which integrates educational and behavioral needs by identifying students through assessment to support core instruction (Rutgers Center for Effective School Practices, 2021). The RTI's 6-week system aimed to maximize student achievement and identify students need for special education services (Rutgers Center for Effective School Practices, 2021). Collaborating with RTI and other support staff allowed Tracy to identify student needs and prepare for small group instruction. One of the benefits Tracy identified was

using these interventionists to support students in small groups before collecting the ~~six~~6-week

data necessary for intervention. Collaborating with interventionists for Tracy was an effort to

support students in grade-level learning and close gaps in opportunity and achievement among

students by the end of the school-year.

According to Tracy, teachers at her school participated in 6-week rotating coaching

cycles where they could bring their curricular-related worries and concerns to work through with

both literacy and math coaches. However, Tracy identified time as a concern when it came to

new curriculum implementation. Tracy stated that because of all the preparation to do during the

first week back to school in the fall, "getting my hands on the curriculum earlier, that lets me

either take time to kind of see what the curriculum is about or even work with our literacy

coach...before we actually have to start." According to Tracy, opportunities for collaboration

were important, equity-focused, and supportive of student learning at her school. Tracy identified

that more professional development before the new school year on teaching reading, especially

with the curriculum shift and the science of reading, would be helpful. Tracy identified her

commitment to building stronger readers and decoders who were ready for the next grade, and

recognized that her own learning played a major role in that process.

Felicia

Felicia had 11 years of experience teaching and approximately 20 years of experience

working in general education. Felicia identified taking the equity lens into everything that she

did, including when planning for instruction, working with families, and choosing her

instructional techniques and practices. Felicia identified that she was not familiar with the

district's literacy vision (2020) and that perhaps this uncertainty was part of the problem of not

knowing the expectations for the grade level, especially with the shift in curriculum. Even so, Felicia identified that the district's focus on equity had influenced her practice quite a bit. Felicia said:

> I mean everything we do now, we're thinking equity-based and it's like, you know, right down to like our earns you know, like well, does everyone have access to things at home that they could bring in? Even writing stories, it's like, well, let's create the experience so everyone like has something to pull from, you know, it's not just those that have travel and have these experiences and so I think we're constantly and will always have that equity lens just so everyone can access things.

Felicia described how she provided her students with what they needed so that they could access grade-level learning that was both meaningful and accessible using her equity lens, scaffolds, and supports.

One of the challenges Felicia described had to do with the district's shift in curriculum. According to Felicia's experience with the district's new curriculum, it was not appropriate for the lower grade levels as the new curriculum consisted of a lot of "sitting and talking." However, Felicia described her continuous effort to scaffold and support lessons for students, including word work, providing alphabet charts, highlighting sentence starters, writing students ideas for them, using protocols such as turn and talk, and being strategic. However, Felicia described how behaviors continued to affect her classroom, but she remained optimistic that with consistency and the use of equity-oriented practices, she could help meet student needs.

Felicia identified minimal support from school coaches and administrators. According to her experience, the professional development that was available at the district was more teacher-

driven and not a true opportunity to dig deeper into the curriculum and tailor it to student needs. Felicia identified that most teachers would prefer a deeper dive into curriculum and student needs. Felicia further highlighted how opportunities to work with instructional coaches in the curriculum or grade level in the coaching model would be helpful. Felicia described how this level of collaboration with experts could help teachers plan appropriately in a way that still honored the program but also engaged students. Felicia identified that, in addition to working with coaches, learning how other schools had worked through curriculum changes could have been helpful for teachers. Finally, Felicia also highlighted the importance of working with curriculum experts without feeling shame for deviating from the curriculum, even a little or individualizing instruction.

Felicia expressed using individualized instruction to help close achievement gaps and support closing gaps in opportunity for grade-level learning. Felicia felt these practices seemed almost automatic because of her experience teaching. Felicia described feeling shame for implementing such practices in her literacy instruction. Even with her consistent efforts and her use of equity-oriented practices, Felicia described a major academic change in her students. Felicia said, "There's a huge academic change and it's that these kids this year are not doing half of what my kids could do last year. And that's really hard." Felicia believed that not knowing the students' expectations and going through the motions of the curriculum felt like leaving students without basic reading strategies, practice, and the opportunity to apply their skills to reading. However, Felicia remained hopeful that as she became more comfortable with the curriculum and materials and understood the district's expectations, her students would succeed.

Jenni

Jenni had 5 years of experience in education and 4 years of experience teaching. Jenni, like Felicia and Tracy, identified being unfamiliar with the district's literacy vision (2020) but being familiar with equity-oriented practices. Jenni identified her use of cultural awareness and diverse representation, such as learning and incorporating student cultures, holidays, and languages into the classroom read aloud, as a predominant equity-oriented practice in her literacy instruction. Jenni's intention through diverse literature, such as books that taught about holidays or incorporated different languages, was to ensure her students were represented in stories and through reading aloud. Jenni identified the importance of family engagement and working with families who spoke other languages as an equity-oriented practice. Jenni also identified the importance of supporting students who spoke other languages through visual aids, hand motions, and gestures. Jenni described that the purpose of these equity-oriented practices was to ensure students were comfortable in the classroom and understood instruction.

Much like students, teachers also need to understand the instructions they are tasked with implementing. Jenni expressed an insufficient amount of equity-related professional development at her school and said that she was mostly relying on previous professional development around equity. Jenni also identified the difficulty in finding any teacher willing to step into the equity cohort. An individual willing to step into the equity cohort would work with the district's central office and provide professional development at their school. However, Jenni did identify having support at the central office level and an individual that they could reach out to if they, their colleagues, or their principals had questions related to equity, whether regarding more equity-oriented resources or challenging conversations about issues related to equity.

However, Jenni did identify a need for an equity coach at her school-level. Jenni described an equity coach as being someone accessible within the building when necessary to support students and teachers around issues related to equity. According to Jenni, having coaches and RTI staff provided an additional advocate for students, as well as more instructional support for teachers.

Jenni described the importance of becoming comfortable with the new curriculum as a teacher, weighing the pros and cons of the curriculum, and identifying what could and could not work. Jenni described a significant difference in her students' learning, "the students' reaction, the students' engagement to this curriculum, it's very, very different from the past years. We had COVID students who didn't really get the same opportunity as the students did this year." Not only did Jenni identify how her students were more engaged, she also identified how her students were more interested in reading and writing, though she could not identify if that was because of the new district curricula. Jenni said:

> I do realize that also we're waiting to see if this program works. I feel like it's like the OK, we're going to figure it out. We're going to try this new program, which makes you nervous because the program before has been working. And you, as a teacher, are comfortable and can use certain materials that you've used before. But now it's like, 'ohh, you're going to use new materials with a new group of kids,' and so you're very hesitant about seeing progress like you did before.

Jenni further identified having access to the curriculum well before the new school-year started to prepare and get to know the curriculum as being both helpful and necessary. She identified the need for more than a 2-week preparation before the start of the new school year to prepare for curriculum changes. Jenni identified time as being essential for getting to know her students by

saying "you have to balance this new curriculum and hope that it works while you're trying to understand your students." Jenni was hopeful and optimistic, indicating that she would continue to incorporate the equity lens into the curriculum, literature, collaboration, and family engagement.

Chelsea

Chelsea had 20 years of experience teaching and identified holding students accountable to high expectations as key to helping them achieve high expectations. Chelsea believed equity-oriented practices included the use of equity sticks, differentiated protocols, and implementing an equity-centered curriculum. Chelsea's knowledge and understanding of the science of reading (MacPhee et al., 2021) were fundamental for supporting students. Chelsea identified a deep gratitude for the training she had received from other districts that helped her develop her sense of understanding toward the science of reading. Chelsea's practice had shifted since learning more about the science of reading, which consisted of explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Bose, 2023). Chelsea described her former practice as involving more of a balanced literacy approach that used a blend of teacher and student choice of reading material, incorporating whole-language instruction, read aloud, and guided reading circles with minimal phonics instruction (Ravitch, 2007). Chelsea said:

> It was more of differentiated groups, focused on meeting kids where they were, kind of
> like a guided reading practice and the Fountas and Pinnell approach where I had multiple
> groups and kind of teaching kids the next thing they needed to know, and I would have

them rotate through centers and do different computer programs or just read themselves

when they weren't with the teacher.

Chelsea, when she discussed the Fountas and Pinnell (2009) approach, highlighted the balanced-

literacy approach to literacy instruction. Chelsea stated that her equity-oriented practices now

focused on whole-group instruction, complex text, and teaching students to do close reading and

to observe the language of text. Chelsea described that this approach held students accountable

for the high-level of achievement she believed her students were capable of meeting.

Chelsea believed these new methods of teaching involved protocols to keep students

engaged and talking with others to develop ideas and answers to complex questions, even for

students whose first language was not English. Chelsea's protocols, as were previously

identified, included the use of equity sticks and conversation cues that she identified as

supporting students engaging in grade-level conversations. Chelsea said:

I use the equity sticks, where we do like thought prompt and pair share type of thing

where kids think for like 10 or 15 to 30 seconds and then they partner talk. I have

differentiated partners, you know, diverse partnerships through the day, sometimes

they're carpet partner, sometimes they're just a partner. Sometimes we do like a mix and

mingle where I play music until the music stops or stand up, pair up that kind of

thing. So, I think that builds equity because in the old way, where you were just like

asking a question and people would raise their hands. You know, obviously the kids who

knew it were raising their hand and the other kids weren't necessarily even thinking about

it.

Chelsea felt this instructional change resulted in more students reaching proficiency. Chelsea

expressed that her expertise in equity-centered curriculum and equity-oriented practices for

English language learners allowed her to support students reaching proficiency.

     According to Chelsea, there were more professional development opportunities in her

former district for English language learners. There were also more opportunities to see her

colleagues teach, highlighting her own discrepancies leading to achievement gaps and helping

her learn how to shift her literacy instruction and collaborate with colleagues. Chelsea described

these types of trainings as not being abundant in this district. Chelsea acknowledged a shortage

of subs and recognized literacy coaches as great resources, but described not experiencing the

coaching cycles and connections to other teachers she had in other districts. Chelsea described

that this district "felt more like a silo…I don't get to see how many of my coworkers teach."

Chelsea identified that her school does not reflect the protocols and routines from the curriculum,

which would be beneficial for the full fidelity of the new curriculum. The following section will

discuss the themes and subthemes further developed from the interviews. Themes and

Subthemes

     The themes in this study were developed the following coding cycles. Coding identified

several themes. Subthemes were developed by this researcher. Table 2 shows the data's themes

and subthemes.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
District Initiatives	District Policy
	District Curriculum
Necessary Enhancements	Enhancements for Access
	Enhancements for Grade-level Learning
	Enhancements for Collective Efficacy
The Needs of Educators	Professional Learning of New Curriculum
	More Time

Note: These themes demonstrate the significant role teachers play in helping reach educational equity and providing students with grade-level learning opportunities. The developed themes also identify what district leaders, principals, and more can do to support teachers.

Theme 1: District Initiatives

According to the equity literacy framework by Gorski and Swalwell (2015), the five equity literacy practices are to recognize, respond to, and redress inequity, as well as cultivate and sustain equity. These five abilities are considered transformative and are required to move beyond awareness and into action (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). The district's focus on equity

literacy therefore had pushed the district from awareness and into action as they examined "curricula, policies, traditions, and hiring practices" and implemented change (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023b, p. 7). Unfortunately, several participants said those policies were unknown or challenging to uphold. Several participants also described the curriculum challenging to implement, regardless of whether it had undergone equity audits (Porosoff, 2022), or assessments to determine if it was equitable based on what it does.

Subtheme 1: District Policy

According to three participants, the district's equity and literacy policies and visions were unclear. Felicia was asked how familiar she was with the district's literacy vision. Felicia responded:

> Not familiar. I think that's part of the struggle that our [grade level] has is now with the shift in curriculum. It's like we kind of knew what the expectation was and where [our grade level] was supposed to end in the year, and now we're kind of now it's like 'ohh, they don't have to read books and they don't have writing' like, we don't really know what the district's vision or expectation is of [our grade level].

Participants identified that the district was transitioning toward adopting the science of reading framework, which consisted of explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Bose, 2023). This framework was identified by participants as an effort to enhance equity (MacPhee et al., 2021). According to participants, the district's shift to the science of reading had come with new curricula, the need for coaching and learning, and the need for additional time for both planning and collaborating.

Subtheme 2: District Curriculum

Curriculum was a common term mentioned in interviews. According to Becky, one of the major changes the district had made to enhance equity included the implementation of a district-wide standardized curriculum. Participants described their district's enrollment as being more transient, with students often moving from one school zone to another, and consequently described the need for a standardized curriculum. Most participants were unaware of the district's literacy vision (2020) and felt a need for coaching and time to read and learn the new curriculum. Several participants also expressed a sense of hope for the future of their literacy instruction and curriculum.

Participants described incorporating diverse literature and curricula, including mirrors and windows (Tschida et al., 2014), mirrors being where participants see themselves in instruction, and windows allowing students to view experiences different from their own. According to Porosoff (2022):

Diversity and inclusion audits ask what the curriculum *has*, while equity and justice audits ask what the curriculum *does*. *Equity* means building systems to ensure that members of a community can meaningfully engage and fully access benefits without undue burdens. An equity audit involves discovering what it means to engage with the curriculum—and what its benefits are—then asking, who can engage fully? Who can engage only partially—or must hide, diminish, or change some part of themselves to engage? Who can't engage at all? Who can easily access the curriculum's benefits and who must take on additional burdens to do so? (para. 12)

All participants discussed their challenges with the implementation of new curricula and described "going back to basics." Most participants described how going back to basics meant centering the whole student in their instruction through equity-oriented practices so all students could engage in the curriculum. Many teachers described scenarios however where their students could not easily access the benefits of the curriculum or engage fully in the curriculum.

Felicia described seeing minimal achievement compared to other years. Felicia also described:

I think the more I understand the expectations and the district's vision of the expectations and curriculum, the more comfortable I am with the curriculum and materials, and I think using the equity lens when planning and moving forward. I think that they're [the students] going to be OK. I think that these practices will be OK. I just have to, again, do what I feel is appropriate.

According to Felicia and other participants like her, doing what she felt was appropriate for students to access the curriculum was an essential practice.

Jenni described seeing more engagement from her students but not seeing progress as quickly. Jenni said, "I feel like it took a long time to see the progress, whereas years before I saw the progress right away." Participants found district policy and curriculum around equity-oriented practices to be unclear. However, participants expressed hope that they would continue to enhance their instruction with equity-oriented practices that they had learned, had used in the past, and continued to learn. Ultimately, participants believed their equity-oriented practices of centering the student, providing scaffolds and supports, and providing small group instruction

helped them remain hopeful for their students and ultimately understand the district's literacy policy and the district's new standardized curriculum.

Theme 2: Necessary Enhancements

Equity-oriented practices are practices that target meeting students' needs and address existing inequities in curricula and instruction (Lazar, 2022). There were several equity-oriented practices that participants described during their interviews. Participants described how these practices enhanced equity because they helped participants support inclusivity, promote social justice, and consider and provide for the needs of all individuals (Lazar, 2022; Lazar et al., 2012; Lumadi, 2020). Participants identified many practices that supported their instruction. The most common practices included evaluating curriculum, working with families, prioritizing social-emotional learning, scaffolding instruction, providing differentiation and skill-based grouping, and providing students equal access to grade-level learning.

Subtheme 1: Enhancements for Access

Several participants described these practices as helping students access to grade-level learning and curriculum. Becky described evaluating the curriculum using these equity-oriented practices. Becky said, "we're constantly thinking about each individual child and what the individual needs might be, in terms of learning style, but also in terms of cultural learning styles as well." Other participants expressed similar sentiments and believed that ensuring diversity and inclusion was necessary. All participants agreed that none of this could be effective without first knowing the whole child.

Participants described working with families to better understand students, their learning styles, and their social and emotional needs. Participants described how connecting with families

allowed them to understand their students' prior knowledge and background. Participants were also able to make a connection between students' home lives and days at school. Once participants felt they knew their students, they described being able to better incorporate their knowledge into their literacy instruction. A few teachers described the significance of meeting students' social and emotional needs to ensure their students were regulated and able to access the curriculum. One teacher identified that "[it] made a huge difference in what we're able to do with kids in terms of connecting with families and meeting their social emotional needs, whether it's enough or not. It doesn't ever feel like enough." Although several participants described doing their best to make connections and work alongside families, all described that it always seemed like more could be done.

Subtheme 2: Enhancements for Grade-level Learning

All participants described a desire to enhance student access to diverse and inclusive materials and grade-level learning. Participants were able to differentiate for students, create small group instruction based on necessary skills, and provided students with equal access to grade-level learning by providing scaffolds and supports. According to participants, this was a major step in the direction toward enhancing equity for students and demonstrated that participating teachers were at inauthentic, vacillating, and authentic levels of equity consciousness. Skrla et al. (2009) noted that equity consciousness is the belief that all students, regardless of their race, religion, class, culture, or gender, are capable of high levels of success. According to Skrla et al. (2009), teachers in the inauthentic phase may recognize inequity but do not act. Teachers in the vacillating phase have deep understanding but do not always follow through when pressured (Skrla et al., 2009). Teachers in the authentic phase have a deep

understanding of the need for implementing equity (Skrla et al., 2009). The equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) supported teachers disrupting patterns that limited the degree to which their students received this equitable treatment.

According to the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015), part of recognizing inequity included rejecting deficit views such as the culture of poverty. The culture of poverty locates the sources of inequalities as existing within institutions rather than as pressing upon those with the least amount of power (Gorski, 2012). Participants identified continuously advocating for their students and using equity-oriented practices, even when the vision was not clear or the curriculum did not seem accessible. For participants, using the equity lens allowed them to recognize and respond to existing inequities. Even within the new standardized curriculum in the district, deemed to be equitable by EdReports (2024) and district leaders (research site school administrator, personal communication, May 5, 2023) participants found themselves seeking new ways to continue to advocate for greater student access to curriculum and support for grade-level learning from district leaders.

Subtheme 3: Enhancements for Collective Efficacy

Collective efficacy is known as groups' shared belief in their ability to organize and execute "the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (Bandura, 1997, p. 477). Donohoo et al. (2018) identified that when collective efficacy is shared amongst educators, the culture of a school consists of a belief in high expectations for student success or achievement. Collective efficacy, therefore, means believing teachers are accountable for the effect their practice has on student achievement and placing value on solving problems together

(Donohoo et al., 2018). Participants expressed different experiences regarding collective efficacy.

All participants described meeting as grade-level teams and receiving professional development for new curricula. However, they described most of such training as more of a lecture-styled learning experience over short periods of time, with less collaboration. Some participants in this study described collaborating with their literacy coaches through coaching cycles, while others described limited time with material and learning along with the students how to teach curricula and how to cater to their students' needs. These two experiences affected participants by either causing them to feel hopeful that with the use of equity-oriented practices in curriculum implementation their students would achieve high expectations or perceiving that their students were achieving lower than grade-level expectations.

Participants needed more to support and sustain equity-oriented practices in the classroom. Becky, like many other participants, described the feeling of desiring to do more. "Yeah, I mean, I probably have the desire to more than I do in actual practice in that we have so many components and we're navigating this new curriculum." Participants took their equity lens into all that they did daily but, the greatest challenge they faced was support from their guiding coalition. Kotter (2012) defined a guiding coalition as a "group with enough power to lead the change and getting the group to work together like a team" (p. 23). Participants described the desire and need for time to collaborate as a grade-level team, support for working with coaches, accountability for doing so, and the opportunity to learn from seeing one another teach. When it came to collaboration, Chelsea described the following:

It feels more like a silo here, I don't get to see other many of my coworkers teach ever, because there's a shortage of subs and, you know, I think our principal is also, they're wonderful, wonderful people and principals, but they're very busy with management and that kind of stuff.

Several participants expressed similar thoughts about their own principals. Participants understood that their school leaders were preoccupied with other job responsibilities.

Several participants noted how a lack of collaboration resulted in teachers' inability to engage in different practices and protocols that better reflected their new curricula. Participants described a continuous lack of support for new curricula to support their students learning. Collective efficacy, therefore, was described by participants as an enhancement to school culture that could support teachers growing as they supported students achieve at grade-level. Participants, though, described several additional needs that would help them cultivate and sustain equity in their literacy instruction.

Theme 3: The Needs of Educators

According to Gorski and Swalwell (2023b) sustaining equity comprises of individuals who recognize taking a stance toward equity as essential. Gorski and Swalwell (2023b) noted:

When we find ourselves struggling to wriggle out of our heads and funnel our awareness into real change, let's remember that equity and justice are not merely ideals. They are purposeful, transformative actions. And students, families, and staff who bear the brunt of injustice should not also have to bear the implications of our hesitancies to act. (para. 40)

Based on the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015), for equity to be cultivated and sustained, there needed to be a fundamental shift at the district level, such as the curricular

changes that participants identified had occurred within the district. Participants described fundamental shifts as the district acted, recognized, responded, and redressed existing inequities. However, participants also concurred that for equity to be cultivated and sustained, district priorities, policies, and curricula needed to be clarified to their teachers by the school and district leaders.

Subtheme 1: Professional Learning of New Curriculum

Participants said they needed more support from school and district leaders, including literacy coaches, to dive deeply into curricula and better understand the equity-oriented practices they could use in their literacy instruction. This researcher determined that participants who better understood district policy, even if they could not name it, and clear school coaching cycles were the same participants who felt supported by their literacy instructional coaches, RTI staff, and district leaders. These participants also described their relationship with colleagues as more collaborative. Jackie described feeling grateful for her relationship and collaboration with colleagues, and attributed their support as being helpful when using equity-oriented practices. Jackie said, "I'm so fortunate to have special educators and ESL teachers that can support me in that work. There's a lot of communication and collaboration there."

Participants who did not describe a similar experience did describe needing and wanting one just like it. Felicia described wanting more support from experts by saying:

It would be nice to have someone that actually really knows the curriculum or really understands the grade level, to help plan appropriately what will be engaging, because I find behaviors are up because there's so many programs that are like, 'sit, talk, sit, talk' and they're not doing enough. And it's like, how can we bring in more?

It was clear that all participants wanted their students to succeed. Beyond windows and mirrors, ensuring students could see themselves in literacy instruction, or providing them with an opportunity to have new experiences, participants wanted their students to achieve at grade-level.

All participants described having their students' achievement and success at the forefront of their concerns. Some participants described not seeing achievement compared to their previous year of teaching. Those same teachers also described needing more time to collaborate and dig deeply into curriculum beyond teacher-driven training offered by their district the week before school started. Participants described being offered professional development time to plan and unpack; however, they described this time as isolated and inefficient. What most participants described as needed was the same structure of learning and use of protocols that they were asked to provide their students when they taught a new curriculum. Teachers described their needs as coaching cycles, active collaboration, and trainings beyond the lecture model.

Subtheme 2: More Time

There was one challenge that persisted across all participants, including those who expressed having positive collaboration to work through the curriculum and those who expressed wanting this experience. Participants identified time management as a major challenge. Time management became one of the biggest influences for participants who wanted to foster high expectations for their students. Without sufficient time to collaborate, rather than simply plan, participants feared failing their students and resorting to practices they had used in the past, which may or may not have been aligned with the new curriculum. Chelsea described such practices as meeting students where they were, as opposed to raising them to the level they needed to meet. Participants emphasized the importance of fostering the level of collaboration

between coaches and colleagues, and that making the time for doing so was essential. The role of the guiding coalition, including coaches, administrators, and support staff, seemed to have been present at some schools but lacking at others. The lack of a guiding coalition resulted in low confidence among some participants.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used in literacy instruction in-service by public K-5 elementary teachers in a large metropolitan school district in Maine. Studies have identified effective equity-oriented practices in the literacy classroom, including group work, centering student voice, student-centered instruction, and implementing grade-level materials (Lazar, 2022; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015; Williamson, 2017). Previous research by Lazar (2022) and Williamson (2017) on literacy instruction, students' literacy achievement, and equity-oriented practices revolved around pre-service teachers. Minimal research revolved around in-service teachers and their perceptions of using equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction. The information gathered from this research revealed how six participants teaching in a large metropolitan school district in Maine perceived how they supported all students in early literacy instruction using equity-oriented practices and what their students' needs were to ultimately cultivate and sustain equity in education. Chapter 5 will discuss the interpretations and importance of the findings and conclude with implications and recommendations for action and future research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to better understand the perceptions of teachers using equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction in Grades K-5. This study explored two research questions:

Research Question 1: How do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine describe their experiences when implementing equity-oriented practices during literacy instruction?

Research Question 2: How do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine perceive the outcomes of literacy instruction when using equity-oriented practices?

Understanding teachers' experiences revealed to equity researchers and school and district leaders how they could better support teachers in implementing equity-oriented practices long-term. This study revealed that district policy, vision, and curricula were clear to some teachers but unclear to others. This lack of clarity contributed to a significant difference between teachers' experiences using equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction. Findings revealed that all teachers desired to enhance access to curricula, experiences, grade-level learning, and collective efficacy. The findings also revealed the needs of teachers to cultivate and sustain equity in literacy instruction, the two final abilities the equity literacy framework highlights teachers should have (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015).

The equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) consists of the ability to recognize, respond to, and redress inequity and cultivate and sustain equity. In this study, enhancing access to experiences, grade-level learning, and collective efficacy were identified

across participants as necessary for achieving educational equity (Hannah, 2022) in literacy instruction. Regardless of how participants felt about curriculum, equity-oriented practices, and policies, all participants revealed the desire to enhance positive experiences, help students achieve grade-level learning, and enhance collective efficacy as a culture in their school. Participants had several other concerns and needed to continue the use of equity-oriented practices and support students in the classroom. Participants described professional learning, also known as transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990), as essential for providing students with access to grade-level instruction through critical thinking and self-reflection on past experiences. Participants revealed that their use of equity-oriented practices does indeed help students achieve grade-level learning.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

The findings in this study showed how teachers described their experiences when implementing equity-oriented practices during literacy instruction and how they perceived the outcomes of their literacy instruction when using equity-oriented practices. Teachers played an important role in students' ability to have access to high-level thinking, curricula, and achievement (Lazar, 2022; Muhammad, 2019; Williamson, 2017). The two questions explored in this study revealed a relationship between teachers' experience using equity-oriented practices and their perceptions of student outcomes. Several participants described equity-oriented practices as helping students access to grade-level learning and curriculum.

Research Question 1

Research question 1 asked how public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine described their

experiences when implementing equity-oriented practices during literacy instruction. Participants in this study described using a variety of different practices including small group, scaffolding instruction, equity sticks, differentiation, and a desire to support grade-level learning. Several participants identified having a minimal understanding of the district's equity vision (2020) and literacy vision (2020). However, all participants described having their students' achievement and success at the center of their work.

Participants' experiences and themes revealed two types of teachers in this study. The first type of teacher described being confident in their ability to implement equity-oriented practices and therefore hopeful that their students would also achieve at grade-level. The second type of teacher described their uncertainty in their use of equity-oriented practices and distrust toward the new curriculum, and therefore a perception that their students were not achieving well compared to prior years. Figure 1 highlights these two types of teachers. All participants highlighted equity-oriented practices, even so, teachers' various experiences from one school to another identified a need for a shift in the culture of collective efficacy and transformative learning across the district. This knowledge may assist teachers in better understanding the importance of equity policy and equity-oriented curriculum, as well as the relevant equity-oriented practices.

Figure 1

Two Types of Teachers Revealed Through Findings

Teacher 1: Self-confidence in implementing equity-oriented practices and an expectation that students would achieve at grade-level

Teacher 2: Uncertainty in their use of equity-oriented practices, distrust toward new curriculum, and perception of students achieving lower
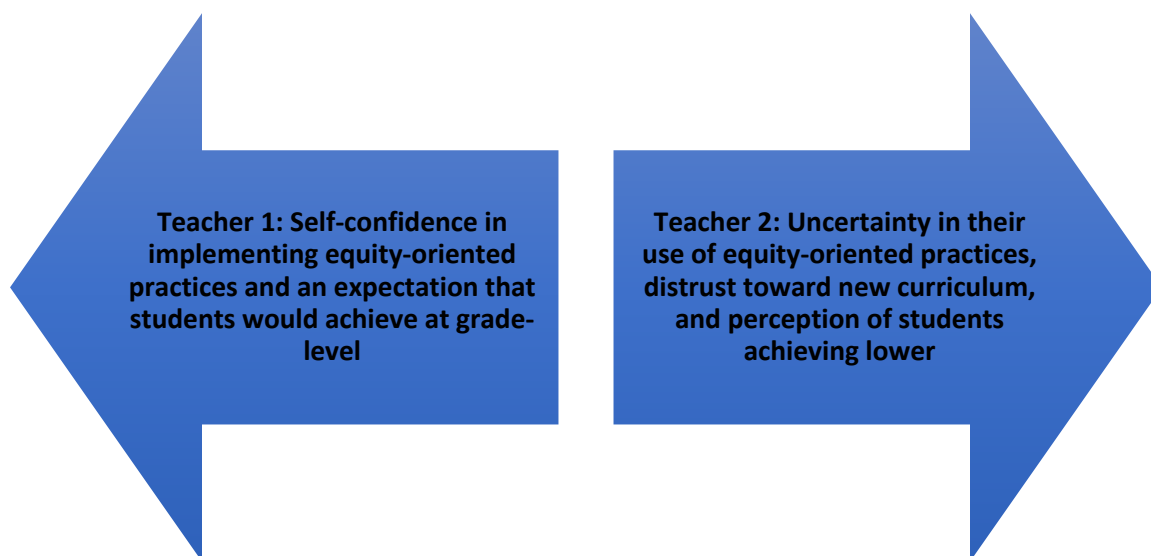
Note: Figure 1 identifies the two different teachers revealed through interviews.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked how do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine perceive the outcomes of literacy instruction when using equity-oriented practices? The two different teachers in this study revealed two different perceptions regarding student achievement. Teacher 1 consisted of Jenni, Chelsea, and Tracy who described greater confidence in their use of equity-oriented practices and perceived greater student achievement. These participants explained how equity-oriented

practices included the use of equity sticks, multicultural texts, small group instruction, discussion protocols, and grade-level materials. They also described in detail their experience and previous experience with professional development that catered to developing teachers' understanding of literacy instruction and equity literacy, a framework that identifies five abilities to recognize, redress, respond to inequities, and cultivate and sustain equity (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). These same participants described actively advocating against inequity and understanding equity as a commitment rather than a simple program. These participants described using their expertise and knowledge to adapt curriculum to students rather than making it less rigorous. These participants described doing so by using practices that enhanced student access to the curriculum.

Teacher 2 consisted of Felicia, Becky, and Jackie who described being uncertain in their use of equity-oriented practices, distrust toward curriculum, and a perception that students were not achieving compared to prior years. These participants expressed hope for the curriculum, their use of appropriate equity-oriented practices, and greater student achievement. They also expressed a hope for better understanding the curriculum and the equity-oriented practices that would enhance access and grade-level learning. Participants recognized that previous curriculum was inequitable and that district policies and curriculum aimed to "recognize and address the root causes of educational outcome[s] and experience disparities rather than addressing only the symptoms of these disparities" (Gorski, 2020, p. 2). Participants described a cautious feeling toward curriculum, recognizing that with the proper support in curriculum for teachers to implement, perhaps it could be done and students could access the curriculum as well. The goal of all participants in this study was that students should have access to high-quality curriculum

and high-quality educators as well. All participants described wanting to do all they could to support their students.

Researchers highlighted that equity-oriented practices target meeting students' needs and addressing existing inequities in curricula and instruction (Lazar, 2022). Equity-oriented practices provided for the needs of all students (Lazar, 2022; Lumadi, 2020). Several participants identified having a minimal understanding of the district's equity vision and literacy vision (according to the district's website, 2020). However, all participants described having their students' achievement and success at the center of their work. Some participants saw greater progress and engagement compared to years prior. Other participants felt their students knew less compared to years prior. The district's priority included changes in policy and curriculum to ensure equity (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023b). However, the district must remember the great role teachers play in cultivating and sustaining educational equity and providing opportunities for transformative learning (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2016; Mezirow, 1990). Bukko and Liu (2021) proposed that to become equity-literate, teachers must experience transformative learning to examine, question, and revise their perceptions.

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990) would be more than the lecture model of learning in teacher professional development. Transformative learning would provide teachers with the necessary experiences to truly understand the purpose behind the district's equity vision (according to the district website, 2020), literacy vision (according to the district website, 2020), and equity-oriented curriculum (Hartl & Riley, 2021) and the need for change. Transformative learning theory describes the necessary level of learning for educators to think critically about their instructional practices and how their teaching may be influenced by prior professional and

personal experiences (Bukko & Liu, 2021; Gorski, 2020). All participants in this study described incorporating an equity lens into their teaching. However, participants also described inconsistencies in their understanding and support across the district. Some participants described being confident in their ability to implement equity-oriented practices and therefore hopeful that their students would also achieve at grade-level. Other participants described their uncertainty in their use of equity-oriented practices and distrust toward the new curriculum and therefore perceived that their students were not achieving to the greatest extent possible. Consequently, teachers played a significant role in equitable education.

Teachers play a major role in students' access to an equitable education (Gorski, 2016). Participants perceived equity-oriented practices as a support for students receiving an equitable education. However, what was clear in this study's data was that there was a level of transformative learning necessary for the participants to be able to truly support their students with the use of equity-oriented practices. All participants described being knowledgeable about equity and educators on the continuum of equity consciousness (Skrla et al., 2009). However, the question remained as to where the learning behind sustaining instruction, commitment, and understanding of inequity and equity stood. Without transformative learning that catered to equity-oriented practices and curriculum, even if they were considered equitable, participants were lost behind time management, behavior management, and commitment to moving their students to where they needed to be. Without proper professional learning, this study's data indicated that participants will continue to fall back on what they know. Participants' previous learning may even include practices from curriculum not necessarily considered equitable, posing a threat to true equity, despite teachers' desire to do more when it comes to equity.

Implications

This study aimed to explore the role of equity-oriented practices in early literacy instruction. The target was to see how equity-oriented practices may address curricular injustices and help close the opportunity gap (Cruz, 2021; Gorski, 2020; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015; Williamson, 2017). The rationale for this study was based on the knowledge of pre-service educators and the lack of knowledge of in-service educators using equity-oriented practices in their literacy instruction (Lazar, 2022). Understanding how teachers believed equity-oriented practices supported their literacy instruction and student achievement highlighted not only the significance of equity in literacy instruction, regardless of curriculum, but the needs of teachers as they aimed to cultivate and sustain equity.

The results of this study demonstrated that participants require a level of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990) to provide equitable education and instruction for their students. Transformative learning theory identifies that learning occurs through critical thinking and self-reflection on past experiences (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Transformative learning also acknowledges that past experiences influence how individuals determine or view new experiences (Mezirow, 1990; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). This level of learning may take teachers away from a place of uncertainty, distrust, and negative perceptions of student grade-level achievement and instead to a place of self-confidence and an expectation that students will achieve according to grade-level. All participants believed equity-oriented practices supported their literacy instruction and student achievement, regardless of whether they agreed with the new curriculum. Data demonstrated that when the curriculum was centered on equity, participants desired to do all they could to enhance access to opportunities, grade-level learning,

and collective efficacy. However, data also showed that there was a level of learning essential for equity to be fully cultivated and sustained in large metropolitan districts such as this study's site.

Opportunity gaps and subsequent achievement gaps in Maine will close as teachers develop their equity lens (Cruz, 2021; Pendakur, 2016). Diverse districts like this one in Maine, which have policies and curricula they desire to implement to enhance equity in education, will need to understand the needs of teachers implementing equity-oriented practices and teaching with an equity lens. Teachers play a major role in moving from inequity to equity in education. Districts focused on understanding and supporting teachers will only improve teachers' instruction, equity literacy, and student achievement (Gorski, 2016). Communities, organizations, and institutions seeking to support in-service teachers using equity-oriented practices in literacy instruction will need to understand the type of transformative learning, time, level of collaboration, and institutional shift toward collective efficacy that teachers need to become literate in equity.

Recommendations for Action

Data demonstrated participants' desire to enhance access and grade-level learning. Data identified participants' misconceptions and misunderstandings of district policies and curriculum and participants' desire for professional and transformative learning, collaboration, and collective efficacy. Collective efficacy (Donohoo et al., 2018) has been described as the shared belief that through unified efforts, teachers can overcome challenges and produce the intended results. This researcher recommends that, based on this study's results, this district, and ones like it, provide the level of transformative learning that better supports teachers developing their equity literacy and equity-oriented practices in Grades K-5. The level of learning necessary for

teachers should reflect the same protocols and practices that teachers are expected to implement in the classroom, because if teachers are equity-oriented, then professional development opportunities will meet teachers at any level of equity-consciousness.

According to Gorski (2020), teachers who sustain equity:

Are cautious of the constant barrage of popular programs and strategies that often pose as "equity" but have little to do with equity and stay committed to embracing a long-term transformative approach based on evidence for what makes an institution like theirs more equitable and justs (p. 2)

All participants in this study had the qualities and abilities of the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). However, findings revealed that there is more research to be done on equity-oriented practices and equity-focused curriculum. Although this study does not represent all teachers in the district, all participants described the qualities and abilities of Gorski and Swalwell's (2015) equity literacy framework. However, the district should consider that within the district there may be teachers who vary on the equity consciousness continuum (Skrla et al., 2009). Equity consciousness includes no knowledge of equity or bias, limited or some understanding of equity, inauthentic, vacillating, and authentic (Skrla et al., 2009). This school district, and districts like it, should place careful thought into their professional and transformative learning opportunities for teachers to ensure that transformative and long-lasting equity.

Recommendations for Further Study

Participants identified different levels of access to continuous professional learning, such as collaborative planning time and learning of instructional routines, practices, and curricula.

Participants had a limited understanding of equity-oriented practices. Therefore, this researcher acknowledges that this limited understanding affected participants' perceptions of equity-oriented practices. This should be studied in greater detail. Finally, the study's small sample size included six participants; with a broader pool, the data may have better reflected the perceptions of teachers in this school district.

This school district described itself as being uniquely diverse within Maine (according to the district's website, 2023). Therefore, the results may not apply to other, less diverse schools or districts in Maine. However, the study's criteria for eligibility to participate ensured that participants had a minimum of three years of teaching experience. This ensured that the research was primarily focused on in-service teachers. The study's focus on Grades K-5 literacy instruction also lent itself to a better understanding of how the opportunity and achievement gap are related (Carter et al., 2013). Finally, this study's focus on the equity literacy framework (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) allowed this researcher to better define what was considered equity-oriented and provided a framework by which equity could be better understood.

Researchers interested in this topic should expand and diversify the pool of participants to include experienced teachers new to the district who may not have received any equity training at all. Researchers should also focus on equity-oriented practices, particularly those catered to the science of reading (Gabriel, 2020; MacPhee et al., 2021; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Researchers' next steps could also focus on how school and district leaders, equity leaders, and curriculum developers could develop transformative learning opportunities to better support teachers transitioning into new equity-oriented curriculum (Hartl & Riley, 2021).

Finally, researchers could further study the relationship between actively sustaining and cultivating equity in the literacy classroom and rejecting new policies and curriculum.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used in literacy instruction in-service by public K-5 elementary teachers in a large metropolitan school district in Maine. This study explored two research questions: (1) How do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine describe their experiences when implementing equity-oriented practices during literacy instruction?, and (2) How do public in-service kindergarten through fifth-grade elementary teachers in a diverse metropolitan school district in Maine perceive the outcomes of literacy instruction when using equity-oriented practices? This study revealed how teachers can be better supported when implementing equity-oriented practices through interviews with six public in-service Grades K-5 elementary teachers. The findings revealed that equity literate (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015) teachers are those who are able to recognize, respond to, and redress inequity and cultivate and sustain equity long-term through the use of equity-oriented practices. Findings also revealed that there were teachers at all levels of equity consciousness (Skrla et al., 2009) in large metropolitan districts like this one in Maine.

Participants in this study described using the equity lens in all that they do and wanting more guidance, collaboration, and time so that they could better understand curriculum and enhance student access to curriculum and grade-level learning with equitable and strong instruction. Participants also described the desire for a shift toward collective efficacy at the institutional level. The next steps for researchers in this field would be to collaborate with

curriculum developers, equity leaders, and district administrators to provide teachers with the

level of transformative learning necessary for equity to be cultivated and sustained long-term and

to study the long-term effects of such efforts.

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APPENDIX A: DISTRICT APPROVAL LETTER

Re: IRB# 0124-16: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF EQUITY-ORIENTED PRACTICES IN K-5 LITERACY INSTRUCTION

To Whom It May Concern -

Please consider this letter of support for the above research by Carla Reyes in partial fulfillment of her doctoral program. We are fortunate to have Ms. Reyes in our district and are happy to support her as she pursues her degree.

APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: January 30, 2024

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Carla Reyes-Crocker
FACULTY ADVISOR: Ian Menchini, EdD

PROJECT NUMBER: 0124-16
RECORD NUMBER: 0124-16-01

PROJECT TITLE: Teacher's Experiences and Perceptions of Equity-Oriented Practices in K-5
                             Literacy Instruction

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
SUBMISSION DATE: 1/21/2024

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: 1/30/2024

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # 2(ii)

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

You are responsible for conducting this project in accordance with the approved study documents, and all applicable UNE policies and procedures.

If any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the research proposal summary, data collection instruments, interview/survey questions, recruitment materials, participant information sheet, and/or other approved study documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment for review to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number as specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director of Research Integrity

APPENDIX C: AMENDED INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER:	March 4, 2024
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	Carla Reyes-Crocker
FACULTY ADVISOR:	Ian Menchini, EdD
PROJECT NUMBER:	0124-16
RECORD NUMBER:	0124-16-02 (Amendment #1)
REVIEW TYPE:	Administrative
PROJECT TITLE:	Teacher's Experiences and Perceptions of Equity-Oriented Practices in K-5 Literacy Instruction
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Amendment
SUBMISSION DATE:	March 2, 2024
DECISION:	Acknowledged
DECISION DATE:	March 4, 2024

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced amendment and has acknowledged this submission. No further action is required at this time.

The changes requested as part of this amendment include the following:

- The eligibility criteria have been updated to remove the requirement of having "no relationship with the researcher." This specific criterion has confused potential participants, leading the Principal Investigator (PI) to suggest its removal from the participant requirements. Initially, this criterion aimed to prevent individuals associated with the PI's institution from participating in the study. However, to address this concern, recruitment emails have deliberately omitted the PI's school from the distribution list.
- The recruitment email, consent, and research proposal summary have all been revised to reflect this change.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director of Research Integrity

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear [Redacted] Public School Teachers,

I am currently a student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled *Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of Equity-Oriented Practices in K-5 Literacy Education* for my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used in literacy instruction in-service by public K-5 elementary teachers in a large metropolitan school district in Maine. I am seeking 10 participants to participate in my doctoral research study.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are:
- Age 18 or older
- Currently teaching in grade level K-5
- Have a minimum of three years of experience teaching
- Have a minimum of two years teaching in district
- A definition/ideal for equity

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one recorded interview of approximately 45 minutes. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of your convenience. If there are more than 10 people who express interest, only the first 10 will be selected to interview. All data will be kept confidential, and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including school names, locations, or staff, will be de-identified.

Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet which outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures.

If you are interested in sharing your experience with me, please contact me via email at creyesperaza@une.edu and we can set up a time for an interview over Zoom.

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please reach out to me at the above listed email.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Carla Reyes-Crocker
Doctoral Student
University of New England

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

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Participant Information Sheet

Version Date:	February 28, 2024
IRB Project #:	0124-16
Title of Project:	TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF EQUITY-ORIENTED PRACTICES IN K-5 LITERACY INSTRUCTION
Principal Investigator (PI):	Carla Reyes
PI Contact Information:	creyesperaza@une.edu; (207) 518-0993

INTRODUCTION

- This project is being conducted for research purposes only. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during, and after the project is complete.
- The use of the word 'we' in the Information Sheet refers to the Principal Investigator and/or other research staff.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

The general purpose of this research project is to explore and understand equity-oriented practices used in literacy instruction in-service by public K-5 elementary teachers in a large metropolitan school district in Maine. Ten participants will be invited to participate in this research as part of the principal investigator's dissertation research. Recruitment emails will not be sent to primary investigators home school.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you are an in-service teacher who is (a) age 18 or older, (b) currently teaching K-5 elementary students, (c) have a minimum of three years of experience teaching, (d) have a minimum of two years teaching in district, and (e) have a definition/ideal for equity.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

- You will be asked to participate in one semi structured interview with the principal investigator that will last approximately 45 minutes over Zoom.
- You can choose a pseudonym to be used in place of your name for the study.
- You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom.
- You will be emailed a copy of your interview transcript to review for accuracy. You will have 7 calendar days to respond or the PI will assume that you have no comments and the transcript will be assumed accurate.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal. The potential risks of participation include an invasion of privacy or loss of confidentiality. This risk will be minimized by using pseudonyms for each of the participant's names and eliminating any personally identifying information from the study. Participants will have the opportunity to review their transcribed interview for accuracy and will be given the choice to have their cameras off during the interview. Participants have the right to skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no likely benefits to participants by being in this research project; however, the information we collect may help school and district leaders better understand equity-oriented practices as perceived by teachers.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

You will not be compensated for being in this research project.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?

We will do our best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. We may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

- Data will only be collected during one on one participant interviews using Zoom, no information will be taken without your consent, and transcribed interviews will be checked by you for accuracy before they are added to the study.

- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.

- All names and e-mails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely assigned pseudonym within a master list.

- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.

- The interview will be conducted in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.

- You will be given the option to turn off your camera during Zoom interview.

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- After you have verified the accuracy of your transcribed interview the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all transcripts have been verified by the participants of this project, the master list of personal information will be destroyed.

- All other study data will be retained on record for 3 years after the completion of the project and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.

- All data collected will be stored on a password protected personal laptop computer accessible only by the principal investigator.

- The results of the project will be de-identified and shared in aggregate with site leadership.

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you will be deleted when the master list is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints, or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Question 1: How long have you been teaching in this district or at this school?

Interview Question 2: How familiar are you with the district's literacy vision? How have the school and districts focus on equity literacy influenced your practice?

Interview Question 3: How familiar are you with equity-oriented practices? What equity-oriented practices do you use in your classroom?

Interview Question 4: Which equity-oriented practices do you find yourself using the most? Why do you think that is?

Interview Question 5: What kind of training/professional development do you receive to help implement equity-oriented practices in your literacy instruction?

Interview Question 6: What supports do you receive from your administrators and coaches to help you in your use of equity-oriented practices?

Interview Question 7: Are there supports you would like to have to help you with your use of equity-oriented practices?

Interview Question 8: How familiar are you with the opportunity gap? How do you feel the use of equity-oriented practices supports or does not support closing the opportunity gap?

Interview Question 9: What academic changes have you observed in your students this year from years prior? How have equity-oriented practices influenced this observation?

Interview Question 10: How do you feel your students' achievement will change as you develop your equity literacy and continue your use of equity-oriented practices?