

**Creating Conditions: An Analysis of An Elementary School Principal's Approach to  
Advancing Educational Equity**

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## **Introduction**

The term “equity” has been popularized in discussions about school leadership, particularly over the last few decades. While we know that it is important to foreground issues of equity in educational settings, less is known about how school leaders make sense of and address issues of equity. Further understanding extant, implicit operating internal equity frameworks in practicing school leaders may help us understand both how to train aspiring equity-minded educators and coach current practitioners to confront biases and push their thinking deeper. That is, by surfacing and naming these implicit processes, we create the possibility of critically examining and reflecting on them in new ways.

The goal of this investigation is to pilot methods for conducting a larger research study in which I seek to better understand school leaders’ equity orientations by developing a non-hierarchical typology of leaders’ educational equity definitions and actions. Specifically, I seek to understand four central questions:

1. How do practicing school leaders define educational equity?
2. What leverage points (or theories of action) do leaders engage to advance equity at their school sites?
3. What framework for decision-making do leaders employ to respond to specific equity issues that emerge in their contexts?
4. How do leaders’ conceptualization of equity manifest itself in their everyday leadership practice?

In this paper, I explore these questions in the context of John Huber<sup>1</sup>, a veteran principal at a small elementary school in Southern California. Given the nature of this research as a pilot, I will both present initial findings and reflectively evaluate the utility of the methods I employed, concluding with directions for future research.

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<sup>1</sup> To protect confidentiality, all participant names and locations in this paper will be referred to by pseudonyms

I present this paper as a confessional tale, as explained by Miles, et al. (2014) (see pp. 330-331), in that this paper is as much about the study as a process as it is about the findings. As such, throughout the paper, I will pay particular attention to “lessons learned,” as well as spaces where my initial assumptions were challenged.

## **Methods**

### **Positionality**

All research is shaped by the positionality of the researcher and the participants. Attention to the ways in which these social locations impact not just the findings, but also the conceptual frameworks upon which they rest, is particularly important in qualitative research. This is because of the dialogical and personal relationships formed in advance of, during, and after the data collection process. Rather than seeking to offload my identity at the start of this paper, I hope to “take seriously the idea that we can always, only, ever understand the world through the instruments of our being” (Orellana, 2019, p.145) by continually engaging with the ways my identity has shaped this research.

As such, a few key elements of my personal background are important to acknowledge before moving forward, so that you, the reader, can evaluate and make sense of the validity of my claims, as defined by the credibility of my findings *in spite of* the various positionalities shaping this research (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 242). Specifically, I identify as a cis-gender, heterosexual, White male with a professional background as a school principal in urban communities. It is important to acknowledge that my experiences of power and privilege most certainly shaped both my access to school leadership roles as well as my own leadership philosophy. This both provides insight into the research, given the predominance of white, male

leadership in education (and the identity of the research participant in this study), as well as opportunities for blind spots to emerge.

I operate under the assumption that all educational leaders have either an explicit or implicit equity orientation, which may be foregrounded or backgrounded in their practice depending on the degree to which they identify with it. That is, school leaders are regularly confronted with equity issues, whether they recognize them as such or not, to which they respond based on some underlying framework of beliefs. Approaching this from a stance of feminist critical race theory - acknowledging the fundamental construction of American society and education on the foundation of white supremacist ideology, and that racism and sexism are fundamental axes on which oppression is based - means that, in theory, all actions and decisions we make have implications for advancing (or inhibiting) the development of a more equitable, just society (see Milner, 2007). Consequently, this means that equity issues in this study will consistently arise in three ways: first, those that my participants recognize that I do not; second, those that I recognize that my participants do not; and third, those which emerge that neither my participant nor I recognize. Conceptually speaking, the greatest implications of these three scenarios are on the latter two research questions dealing with equity in practice (how can we examine that which we do not recognize?). Nevertheless, it is my belief that in surfacing and engaging explicitly with our concepts of equity in both theory and practice, we advance opportunities to better understand leadership in educational communities.

### **Research Site**

John Huber is the principal of a K-6 elementary school, Apple Elementary, in Southern California. He is a cisgender, White male quinquagenarian. He and his teachers serve approximately 450 students, a little over 80 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price

lunch and 54% of whom speak a language other than English at home. The school is located in a relatively small elementary school district typical of the region in which I, the author, also worked as a principal. Principal Huber and I began working in the district at the same time and developed both a strong collegial relationships and friendship. Entree to the research site was thus grounded on a preexisting relationship between myself and Principal Huber. Given the size of the district, many of the teachers present in the observations I conducted were familiar with me as a former colleague and current PhD student.

Principal Huber was provided with an original draft of the research proposal and given the opportunity to provide feedback and input on the proposed goals of the study. He expressed willingness and consent to participate and did not share concerns regarding the research objectives. During meeting observations, meeting participants were notified of my presence and asked for consent after hearing a brief explanation of the purpose of my study as a class assignment.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through a recorded, hour-long semi-structured interview (see Appendix A for the interview protocol) and field notes from four Zoom meeting observations ranging from 30 minutes to an hour in length. A fifth hour-long observation was scheduled, but had to be cancelled, due to complications at the research site. This meant that the original intention to collect four hours of observations was not completed. Table 1 provides an overview of the data collected.

***Table 1. Data***

<b>Date</b>	<b>Data Type</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Notes</b>
February 3	Observation - Staff Meeting	30 minutes	Partial observation - beginning of the meeting

February 9	Observation - “Long Path” (Leadership) Team Meeting	30 minutes	Partial observation - beginning of the meeting
February 26	Interview	60 minutes	15 minutes were “off the record”
March 1	Observation - Technology Integration Meeting	60 minutes	Full Meeting
March 8	Observation - “Long Path” (Leadership) Team Meeting	60 minutes	Partial Observation - first hour of meeting

My initial belief was that the first three research questions could be answered through the interview, while the latter three would be addressed through observation. That is, question one (the leader’s equity definition) would be answered in the interview exclusively, while data for questions two and three (leverage points and decision-making framework) could be harvested from both the interview and observations, with question four (manifestation in leadership practice) would be answered through observation alone. What I found was that I was not able to reap the full richness I had hoped for from the observations.

The limitations of the observations occurred for a few reasons. First, I had believed that partial observations would yield meaningful data. Indeed, this is the approach school leaders often take in observing teachers - multiple short observations as opposed to fewer, long observations. My thought was that micro-instances of equity issues would be observed, recognized, and analyzed. What I found is that, given the many lenses through which to observe equity, it was difficult to note data (e.g. how often different people participate) that would end up proving meaningful in the analysis. This limitation could potentially be partially mitigated in the future by recording Zoom observations, so that they could be examined and watched multiple times for more comprehensive data collection. However, different meeting structures means that

only certain data can be collected during fractional observations depending on part of the meeting that is seen (e.g. presentation, discussion, activity). In the future, seeing the full arc of a meeting from start to finish can ensure that all ways of engagement in the meetings are captured.

A second limitation was that, as an outsider to the school community, many of the rich, micro-level dynamics were lost on me. Despite knowing Principal Huber well, insight into why or how he responded to particular individuals was shaped by unobserved context was largely lost on me. Take this excerpt from my field notes from my first observation, for example:

Audrey - “I want to piggyback on what Ursula said, my brain is fried and seeing the link so many times is great.” I think to myself that John may have provided the link so many times and in so many ways for people like her, who are a bit disorganized. I know this because I supervised her when she was shared between my site and John’s. How does this insider knowledge shape my observation?

Here, I was aware of not just Principal Huber’s general approach, but also of the specific professional practice of the speaker, which allowed me to interpret and find meaning in what would otherwise be a benign shoutout. Because I am not as intimately familiar with other teachers at the site, I was not able to capture the same degree of subtext in other interactions. In future research, where I have even less of a relationship with the research participants, this level of depth would be nearly impossible for me to tune into. One way to mitigate this would be to conduct a series of mini-interview debriefs with the site leader after each meeting observation to better understand how they interpreted the comments and dynamics of the meeting. This would not only support a better understanding of the leaders’ decision-making processes, but also provide opportunities to check potential researcher analytical bias.

## **Analysis**

The transcribed interview and my field notes were imported into MAXQDA for coding and analysis. I began with an initial round of descriptive coding. I then drew on the analytical

process of factoring discussed by Miles, et al. (2014) to start making my claims. After developing my initial descriptive codes, I reviewed the larger codes looking for themes or trends by which I could break them down into tighter categories. In my spreadsheet, where I displayed each coded segment along with its code, I started generating a more refined secondary and, sometimes, a tertiary code. I then looked back through these secondary codes to see what was salient/relevant to my initial research questions. I used this to journal out my larger understandings of the data, which were the first iterations of my claims. Based on this, I then went back to the data and recoded it with my new set of codes and definitions, looking specifically for evidence to enhance, support, or undermine the claims I hoped to make. Finally, I revisited my initial draft of claims and examined them in light of the revised codes. The final codebook with example codes and frequencies is presented in Appendix B.

As discussed at above, opportunities for researcher bias abound. Of particular note is my pre-existing relationship with Principal Huber. This shapes not only how I see the data, but potentially how I report it. To address this, a draft of this paper was presented to the participant, Principal Huber, for his feedback and review as a form of member check.

## **Findings**

### **Defining Educational Equity**

Principal Huber identified his underlying professional motivation as an opportunity to advance “social justice through education.” Specifically, he felt that “education is the equalizer for opportunities that society might not readily provide to all members.” Though he was quickly able to explain this “*why*” behind his work, he struggled to articulate his equity definition; when giving the opportunity to revise his definition at the end of the interview he commented, “I think



it is too complex a concept to put just put words to. I think it's, there's, educational equity is...that's... that's kind of everything that we do.”

Nevertheless, there was a clear connection to the social justice orientation he shared and his attempt to define educational equity. He stated that, “Equity for me would be providing what is what is needed based on societal discrepancies that are in place.” He further explained that “the key is that the educational system should be addressing those gaps, and providing opportunities that one would otherwise not have.” He emphasized that addressing gaps and discrepancy was not about making things equal, but equitable, “with the intent to balance things out.” At the same time, he acknowledged that “the playing field would never be even” but he sought to “get to as close to even as possible.” Here, we see that Principal Huber’s stated definition is largely focused on righting larger societal wrongs by investing educational resources in children based on their needs, with an acknowledgment that some issues children faced were a function of larger social factors.

Though he felt the definition of educational equity was difficult to capture in words, when it came to practices, he expressed having clear understandings of how to act upon issues of equity. This became more clear as he described his role in advancing equity at his site.

### **Leverage Points**

During the interview, Principal Huber expressed that believed himself responsible for shaping school culture, specifically by “creating conditions” for individual teacher success and efficacy. In fact, he identified his work with adults as his first step in addressing equity issues when he came to Apple Elementary:

Well, I think coming in the first piece that was glaring was that the adults who are employed by the school did not believe in the kids and the community. And so, so if you have belief systems that perpetuate the gap - the engagement gap - then I think that's like,

the most glaring issue that's out there is, is the adults. So for me, one of the biggest pieces before working on the students in the student issues it was addressing the the adults.

While he acknowledged the importance of instructional practice and resources for students during his interview, developing and shaping adult culture at the school was the key mechanism by which he articulated change occurring. Indeed, the majority of the work he spoke suggested that this work was a necessary precondition for increasing student academic engagement “and their desire to be a part of the school.”

In fact, he shared that, “that's the most important work that [principals] do is, is creating the conditions for individuals to be successful, which then collectively create the conditions for the organization to be successful.” This, he argued, was accomplished through three main leverage points:

1. Professional development, curriculum, and other “activities”
2. Challenging beliefs and calling out situations of misalignment; developing alternative belief systems
3. Strategic staffing decisions to limit or eliminate the impact of individuals he deemed toxic or “bad for kids”

### ***Professional Development***

The professional development leverage point was the most clearly observed leverage point in action during the observations, though it should be noted that this was not necessarily directly tied to issues of equity, but rather back to Principal Huber’s efforts to shape a school culture in which teachers believed in their own abilities to effect change. I noted that he had several committees and learning opportunities, some optional, some encouraged, and some mandatory for teachers. In addition to his general professional development series, for which he is working with a consultant focused on leveraging technology to advance student learning, he

also had a Technology Integration Committee, a Long Path Team, a School Culture Committee, and a book club focused on Ibram Kendi's How To Be an Antiracist.

Committee meetings largely focused on collective decision-making, communication, and modeling expected instructional practices. I will discuss the first two points at greater length later in this paper, and focus here instead on how committee meetings functioned as a form of professional development that empowered teacher success in a few ways. First, in a number of meetings, Principal Huber either modeled, or had teachers model, the use of the AnswerGarden tool that was presented by the consultant in the professional development and assigned as “homework” for teachers to implement in their classrooms. Consider the following vignette from the Technology Integration Committee meeting, for example:

*Eric asks a question about the training with the consultant. John begins to respond, “I think something that stresses people out...”*

*Cristina interrupts, “All I heard was homework.”*

*John responds, “I think that was it; as soon as he said ‘homework,’ everyone’s eyes went WHAT?!?” He widens his eyes as if he is terrified.*

*Some off-topic conversations about the professional development calendar, COVID tests, and the reopening plan ensues, until John brings the group back on task.*

*“Was anyone able to do the Answer Garden activity?” he asks*

*Cristina shares that she logged in but didn't get further than that.*

*John replies, “I am kind of eager to see how it goes.”*

*Sally posts in the chat that she had done it. Eric asks aloud, “How did it go for you, Sally?”*

*Sally has had her camera off the whole time but replies aloud, “It was easy. I put the link in the chat ...” (she then described how easy it was for her students to respond).*

*John says, “Let’s look at it together.” Cristina starts talking about it as John shares his screen, but then he stops and says, “Maybe you should share” to Cristina. She then shares her screen.*

Collectively, the Technology Integration Team then workshopped their way through the process of creating the AnswerGarden, with Cristina as a model, learning together how to do the task they were asking the staff to do (or rather, that the staff has been asked to do by the trainer). Here, Principal Huber gently reinforced expectations while also supporting a teacher through the process of something she struggled with. In doing so, he created an opportunity for her to be successful while also ensuring that the other individuals in the meeting had the skills to support their colleagues through the expected task.

Though this interaction had little to do directly with advancing equity, and perhaps had limited instructional value (Principal Huber later noted the AnswerGarden activity as a “translational” form of technology use that could just as easily be completed with student whiteboards), the attitudes and mindsets it exemplified were important features that connected to his belief in creating the conditions for teacher success and self-efficacy. Having the teacher who was stymied in her initial attempts to employ the tool accomplish the task with the support of her colleagues reflected the importance Principal Huber placed on ensuring that adults believed in their own abilities. This type of interaction in committee meetings was not atypical in my observations; in fact, a version of this same vignette occurred in a subsequent observation of the Long Path Team meeting.

### ***Challenging Beliefs***

Though it was not observed in practice, a key leverage point in creating the conditions for success among adults that was emphasized in my interview with Mr. Huber was challenging

adult belief systems. According to him, this was slow and steady work - he said, "I don't think there's any homeruns in changing belief systems" - that he accomplished in a couple of ways.

The first way he sought to challenge belief systems was to "spotlight" examples that directly contradicted prevailing attitudes among adults. For example:

So like, for example, at Apple, and just as at my previous schools, parent involvement or lack of parent involvement was considered as one of the biggest issues or the biggest needs or the biggest factors that were getting the - that were contributing to the lack of school success. So, providing opportunities like, for example, a parent education workshops, which you know, are typical things that you do, but ensuring - putting all the effort into it to ensure that participation is high, and that the program is a success. And my first year, we held a night series on parenting strategies to promote school success. And of course, these are in the evening so even if it was well attended (or poorly attended), teachers and staff might not know that. And so we put a lot of effort in ensuring that it was successful, one for the immediate outcome of parenting, or parents learning new strategies to support their kids. Two, for parents to be, to feel, or to have a sense of partnership and involvement at the school at a deeper level than just you know, something volunteering. But then the other aspect is to ensure that the adults on the school site are aware that this many parents came to the event, this many parents graduated from the event. And so you just do - what I just did was after every evening, send out a message afterwards that said, "Wow! We had this many parents who are here," take photos of the parents. And so completely debunked the belief that existed that parents don't care.

Principal Huber saw his role in challenging beliefs not just as sharing success stories of parent involvement to contradict negative narratives and stereotypes about parents in the community, but also to work to actively ensure that success stories existed. In other words, he felt it was his charge to invest energy in the success of programs *because* they provided an opportunity for him to present a positive counternarrative. He explained how he employed a similar strategy with parent conferences, in which he sought out parents who had not attended and reached out to them himself, resulting in 95% of families showing up to the meetings. In publicizing this, as well, it was an opportunity to draw "attention to specific data that debunks a faulty belief."

In addition to his strategic use of situated examples to challenge faculty assumptions about students and the community, Principal Huber also noted the importance of “calling out when people's individual actions demonstrate that they don't have high teacher efficacy or individual efficacy or when someone's actions are directly impacting the outcomes.” For example, he described working with a teacher, Gertrude, who was an especially outspoken and powerful individual on the staff (he described her as “the matriarch”) that had a particularly negative impact on the culture of the school. He described embracing opportunities to address her “interacting with a parent in a certain way, or her interacting with a student in a certain way, or her actions at a staff meeting.” So, after she was on her phone during a training on mindfulness, he reported that he approached her in the following way:

“I was pretty shocked to see that, that while we're engaging in this training that we have all identified as a staff is important to give our students to give our students skills and strategies so that they can, so that they can be more focused and better students, and you're in the back of the room, on your phone.” And that's it. And then just let the silence and like, like her response.

Principal Huber was direct in confronting what he saw as an issue with this teacher's behavior, and employed a general outline he had for calling out, which he described as, “This is what I observed. And this is how I feel that your actions are in disagreement with the direction that we're going in.”

I was surprised, then, that despite some significant “callouts” and a grade level change I will discuss shortly, this teacher engaged not spitefully, but enthusiastically, in the staff meeting. Not only was Gertrude participating in Principal Huber's book club, she also was the first person to share a “shoutout” at the staff meeting during the dedicated time to recognize colleagues for support. Interestingly, her shoutout was directly aimed at Principal Huber, stating, “I would like to give a shoutout - whenever I need a link, I can't find it and you had it in so many places.” That

she independently chose to appreciate him for making the meeting link accessible indicated that she either genuinely appreciated him and his efforts to grow her, or that she wanted him to believe that she genuinely appreciated him and his efforts to grow her. In either case, her participation in the staff meeting promoted a dramatically different organizational energy from how she had previously engaged.

### ***Strategic Staffing***

My surprise at Gertrude's expression of appreciation during the staff meeting came from the fact that not only had Principal Huber described calling her out, but also moving her grade level as part of a strategic move to reduce her influence on staff culture. To him, staffing decisions were a key leverage to limit or eliminate the impact of individuals he saw as toxic or "bad for kids."

Principal Huber explained that "the roots of school culture are often developed during non-instructional time." Gertrude had been embracing the lunch block she shared with all fourth, fifth, and sixth grade teachers to share "45 minutes every day of potential, really negative, really anti-student conversation, very toxic conversation, and then any initiative or any movement forward, that's an opportunity for resistance to take hold, or resistance to be voiced." By moving Gertrude's grade level, he not only strategically positioned her during a lunch block that was shared by fewer teachers, but also put her on a team "around people who did not have the same mindset, or people who would not just be followers." This would then make her "less comfortable in voicing her resistance or keeping the status quo."

Sometimes, these decisions were more serious than a grade level change, and instead focused on individuals "whose belief systems were so solidified" that his work was more "about helping them make a career choice." Principal Huber described his most significant dilemma at

the site as deciding to give a probationary teacher a non-reelect early in the year, effectively notifying her that she would not return to the school or obtain tenure the following year. He shared that the primary issue was that “This teacher was not good for kids, especially for kids of color. Her approach, her interactions, were pretty concerning.” He had tuned into “subtle interactions that she had with kids” and knew that if he did not act soon, this teacher would obtain tenure. Interestingly, the key factor that he struggled with regarding this decision was not that she was well-liked by staff, but instead was the lack of documentation he had - and had from the previous principal at the site - to justify the termination. He was concerned that he had not done enough to coach, mentor, and change her underlying belief structures. Nevertheless, he held his conviction tightly, noting the implications of this staffing decisions for equity not just in the short term, but in the long term, as well, stating, “I knew that it was the right thing to do for kids well beyond my time at Apple, so if I’m only there for five years, this is a person who probably would spend the next 20 years influencing kids and influencing the culture at Apple.” He saw his responsibility not as just ensuring the short term conditions for success, but long term ones as well.

Though it was less focused on equity, staffing was also a prominent feature in my final observation of the Long Path Team meeting, where he discussed the school reopening plan. In multiple moments, he echoed the idea he shared in his interview that the students were the easy part, while figuring out the adults would be more difficult.

Ultimately, Principal Huber’s focus on supporting individuals to achieve success through the leverage points of professional learning, challenging beliefs, and strategically arranging staffing configurations, appeared to reflect a belief in the prominent role each staff member had on collective outcomes at the school. He saw each staff member as having the potential to shape



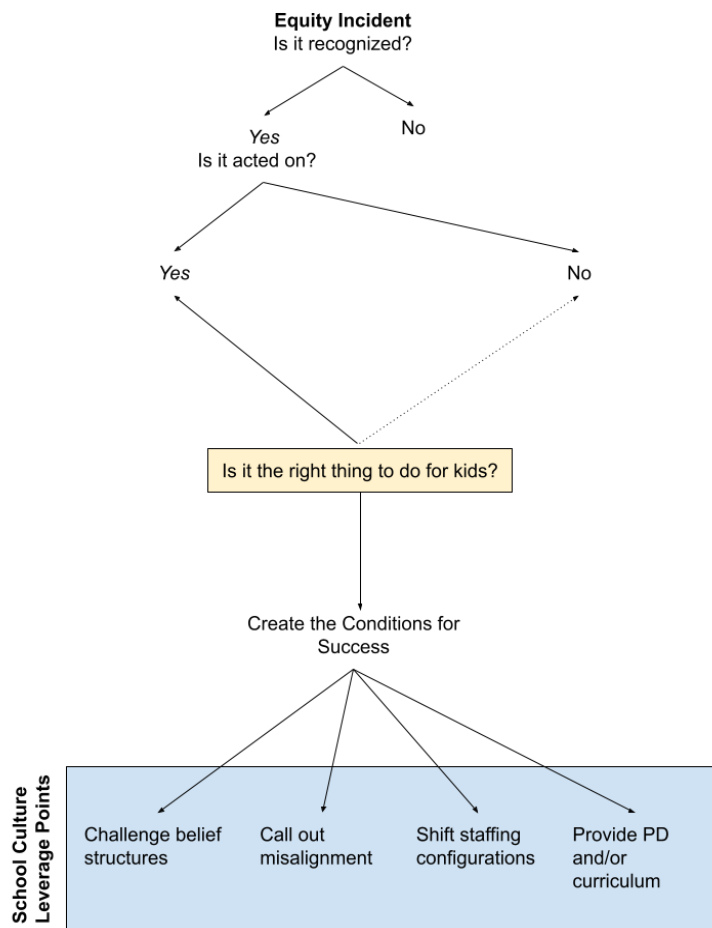
school culture, stating that, “An individual can influence a culture, can have a great, greater impact on the status quo of a culture - could be either positive or negative; if it's someone who's has a positive influence, then and then the ripple effect could could be amazing.” A corollary to this, of course, was that those whose effects were negative, or not good for kids, had to be neutralized “without apology.” In this sense, though he defined educational equity around addressing “societal discrepancies,” his functional approach at the school site, or theory of action, centered around human capital and ensuring that the right people were positioned and supported to do the work.

### **Equity Framework**

Principal Huber held a strong conviction about what was good for kids, a sort of moral grounding, that undergirded and enabled his unapologetic decision-making. Prior to the interview, I had developed some *a priori* assumptions about the nature of decision-making around equity based on my own experiences as a leader, but Principal Huber’s model was surprisingly simple. He did not describe any complex calculus for acting as I had anticipated, instead describing his decision to act on the issue of the non-reelect because “it was the right thing to do for kids, and I cannot see any other way around it...Knowing that that was the right thing to do, and that the repercussions of that were the right thing to do, or the right thing to accept, that it was just going to be that way.” In other words, his firm belief that he was acting in the best interest of students simplified his decision-making process, allowing him to act decisively regardless of the potential consequences.

In Figure 1, below, I provide a visual display representing Principal Huber’s framework for approaching equity issues at his site based on the data I collected.

### **Figure 1. Principal Huber’s Framework for Addressing Equity Incidents**



Though I had envisioned several anchored considerations in the yellow box influencing the decision on if, how, and when to act, Principal Huber grounded himself in his sense of duty to the children of the community was to ensure that “the adults, regardless of their role, are the best qualified, the most competent, the most suitable for creating change or equitable experiences for the students at the school.”

In retrospect, however, I realized that I failed to engage Principal Huber in more deeply examining and explaining his conceptualization of what is “good for kids” or the “right thing to do,” and how this connected back to, or not, his social justice orientation. In future research,

following up on and probing these strong convictions, when they emerge, may help add additional depth and nuance to leaders' framework.

### **Manifestation in Everyday Practice**

I had initially expected that this framework would come into play frequently in observations, that I would be able to see consistently how equity issues emerged and were addressed, either consciously or unconsciously. As previously discussed, however, a few factors limited my capacity to do this: the limited scope of the observations, my lack of insider knowledge at the site, and my own blindness to privilege and oppression. Regardless, though Principal Huber defined educational equity as challenging larger “social discrepancies,” the reference to his social justice orientation was not made explicit in any observed interactions. One possible exception to this occurred during the first Long Path Team meeting I observed, where he proposed an idea that had been generated on the School Culture Committee:

John then jumps into the next item on the agenda, “Something that came from the school culture committee was doing the student success recognition assembly. It will be optional by grades to participate. But the thought is that it is important to have opportunities to continue to engage children. Women's History Month and Cesar Chavez day is coming up. The thought is to connect that to this recognition assembly like we did the last one with MLK, Jr. What are your thoughts on that?”

Here, we see at least an implicit acknowledgement of the importance of elevating and recognizing historically marginalized groups, directly connecting the achievements and qualities of women and individuals of color to success in the students. A secondary example may be found in his book club, which is reading How To Be an Antiracist, though I did not have the opportunity to observe his discourse in that context. That his social justice orientation was a subtext to his leadership, rather than explicitly framed, aligns with his earlier claim that educational equity “is everything we do.”

What emerged in his everyday practice, instead, were more subtle elements of the positive school culture he strove to develop. A prominent feature, for example, was connecting through affirmations and humor, which were the two largest code families that emerged and present in all four observations. In total, I coded 14 different instances of jokes or humor during my observations. There were 19 instances of combined staff-staff, administrator-staff, and staff-administrator affirmations, with the majority (nine) directed by Principal Huber towards a staff member. These ranged from acknowledging ideas (“That’s a good question”) to affirming conversations (“I appreciate the focus on instructional time”).

Another prominent code family during observations was “seeking input,” which I coded 13 instances of across the three committee meetings I observed. As mentioned previously, Principal Huber placed great emphasis on collective decision-making and communication in his committee meetings. He frequently brought ideas to these teams and sought feedback, asking for team thoughts, questions, and reactions. Take, for example, the following vignette illustrating an instance of planning with the Long Path Team. He had drafted a series of AnswerGarden questions to use in the upcoming staff meeting that he then piloted with the team:

*John asks, “So what do you guys think? I think I need to reframe these questions to get a little deeper. I think the first question is, what do students need when they return to in person learning? I think that taps into ideas and in general, but I don't see much difference in the responses to the second question. What can we do to support students, that is just the flip side of the same question. The 3rd question may be where we go deeper.”*

*Bridget adds that it is important to have the staff discuss first so they can be guided to some ideas and answers before typing.*

*John says he will look at the questions and that he will have the staff do some time discussing in breakout rooms before submitting individual responses. He then thinks aloud about an idea about another question regarding their initiatives.*

This vignette, where he would ask for ideas or questions, hear an idea, and then revise his thinking was not uncommon in other meetings.

While this opened the door for his various teacher leaders to understand his thinking and gave some the opportunity to provide feedback or pushback, I noticed that it was a core group of teachers participating in the dialogue. In this Long Path meeting, for example, one attendee did not speak at all during the entire hour, and another only spoke once. The non-speaker at one point appeared to raise her hand, but a more dominant voice jumped in and started speaking, effectively silencing the input of this individual. While on the one hand it makes sense to have a core leadership team to engage with, it also raises questions about *who* gets to participate and *why*? In what ways might the dynamics of meetings *inhibit* diverse voices from participating or divergent views from being expressed?

These are questions that require longer, ethnographic study to better answer, but it is worth noting that the potential exists for voices to be excluded based on access to the central decision-making processes at the school. How these lines of exclusion are drawn may reinforce the marginalization of certain groups. Conversely, they may not; what is salient is that this is a line for further inquiry and investigation.

## **Discussion**

Principal Huber's equity theory of action revolved around his underlying goal to advance social justice by ensuring that students were taught by teachers who believed in both the community and themselves as agents of change. He unapologetically addressed any individual whose action or beliefs contradicted what he believed to be right for kids, believing that his role was to create the conditions for teacher success. In doing so, he believed he would set students up for academically engaging and enriching learning experiences. Strategically manipulating

adult culture through professional development, creating counternarratives to dysfunctional belief systems, and arranging staffing configurations were the key leverage points he exercised to advance change at his site. While some of these elements were observable in everyday practice, his social justice equity orientation appeared to be an underlying, tacit belief system rather than an explicitly voiced and maintained vision.

Of course, all of these findings are preliminary and require additional inquiry. Some key limitations emerged in the study regarding data collection, particularly with regard to the depth of understanding that could be captured by an outside observer. Future research on the micro-level equity interactions should either be grounded in richer, ethnographic study or through reflective processing with leaders following observations. This form of “engaged reflection and representation” (Milner, 2007, p. 396) creates greater opportunities for validity because it surfaces where the researcher and participants may disagree in their interpretations of events based on their individual positionalities. Such a practice not only deprivileges the epistemic authority of the researcher, but also offers us richer, more nuanced understandings of the social interactions that characterize qualitative research and interpretation.

In reflecting on the implications of this study as a pilot for future research, some components need to be re-evaluated. Because large-scale, multi-site ethnographic research is not feasible, focusing on the first three research questions (addressing leaders’ equity definition, theory of action, and decision framework) is more realistic, as these points can all be examined through interviews alone. As a first step, developing a typology of these definitions, leverage points, and frameworks can help us make sense of how principals understand their work. Once this has been more fully fleshed out, it may be easier to then examine how this manifests itself in everyday practice via observation and follow-up interviews.

Of course, a key limitation of relying too heavily on interview data is that the way people talk about their practice is often not in alignment with the way they implement their practice. One way to triangulate data in the absence of observations may be to interview key stakeholders within the leaders' sites in order to capture more data on how their vision is implemented into practice in the eyes of those they, in theory, lead. This approach not only adds context to our understandings of educational leadership, but also helps control the validity of findings by limiting the potential bias of researchers who would otherwise accept principal interview data at face value.

### **Conclusion**

This pilot study was a valuable exercise for me in understanding my researcher strengths and areas for improvement. I learned the limitations of observational data, or at least, of observational data in the ways I collected it, if it is not clearly connected to research questions. My expectations that understandings would simply emerge from the data were overly naive (or, perhaps, ambitious? self-indulgent?). I look forward to considering how the mistakes and reflections from this study take shape in my research career in the future.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

- Tell me a bit about your professional background in education; how did you get where you are today?
- In my experience, many educators have a “Why?” behind the work that they do. Can you tell me a bit about your personal “Why?”
  - Possible probes: What drives you to do the work you do? What motivates you to come in on difficult days? What keeps you going when things get tough?
- (Depending on what they say, something like: I’m going to shift gears towards a focus on issues of educational equity.) What does educational equity mean to you?
  - Follow up: In your opinion what does it mean to do “equity work?”
    - What is your perspective on the administrator’s role in addressing educational equity?
      - Probe for specifics based on responses (e.g. “what do you mean by \_\_\_\_?” or “what does that look like in your day-to-day practice?”)
    - You shared some key strategies you have used, such as \_\_\_\_\_. Are there other strategies you use to advance equity?
- What would you describe as the most pressing issues of equity currently at your site?
- So when I think of dilemmas, I think about a situation where the action you should take is unclear or is difficult, right? There's sort of a moral struggle, or there's some challenge around what to do. I'm wondering if you can think of any dilemmas or the most significant dilemmas you've faced with regard to equity?
  - Probe for significance (“Can you say more about what made this dilemma significant for you?”)
  - Probe using expressed emotions (“Were there other times you felt \_\_\_\_?”)
  - What factors did you consider in your decision to respond or not respond?
    - Would you say that you usually consider \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_ when you decide whether to act on an issue of equity? What other factors do you think about?
  - What factors did you consider in your decision in *how* to respond?
    - Would you say that you usually consider \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_ when you decide how to act on an issue of equity? What other factors do you think about?
- Talk me through a time you felt deeply troubled by a decision you had to make.
- Now that we’ve talked through equity from a few different angles, I wanted to give you a chance to think back on your original definition (paraphrase). Are there any revisions you would like to make?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about equity?

## Appendix B: Codebook, Example Codes, and Frequencies

Code	Definition	Excerpt	Frequency
Troubleshooting	When teachers bring an issue to the principal and he troubleshoots or advises on it	<p>Eric - "Mr. Huber, I have a conflict - can you help me with it? (he walks through a scheduling conflict for tomorrow with two meetings that overlap by 15 minutes).</p> <p>John advises him to stay in the first one with Sarah (the coach?). Teacher 1M asked if it would be inappropriate to join the other 15 minutes late. John clarifies that that one is a webinar so he doesn't need to worry about showing up late. I am struck again by the deference here-calling him Mr. Huber, looking for his input/advice, and then his concern about whether it would be appropriate to show up late. Is this Eric's process or is it the culture?"</p>	2
Modeling Practices	Examples where the principal either models professional practice or has someone else demonstrate while the group troubleshoots/problem solves	John asks if anyone has anything to add to the agenda. Fred says he doesn't have anything to add, but he needs help with the answer garden. John said he would try today so he can do it tomorrow. He says, "We'll troubleshoot it right now, Fred"	4
Management Meetings	References to district leadership and management meetings	<p>Eric - "Off topic from cyber a bit - do you know what populations are going back in phase one? And when?"</p> <p>John - "that is going to be a big conversation in management tomorrow. April 5th."</p>	2
Professional expectations	When principal sets or implies expectations of	"There are questions about the collaboration. There have been	4

	staff	<p>questions about whether it is mandatory. My hope is that everyone attends but it is not mandatory.” John comments on first grade from the week before and references the teacher who participated. “I’d like to continue with the expectation that we continue to participate in it.”</p>	
Seeking input	Situations where principal seeks input or thinks aloud with staff about an issue	<p>John then asks for it to continue to be attended, but that he is open to discussing extenuating circumstances. He asks the teachers to communicate that expectation with their colleagues, “Is that okay?” Several teachers nod yes. He then asks, “Any questions?” No one speaks up.</p>	13
Participation	Observational notes on who is or is not participating	<p>I notice one person has their camera off. The team appears to all be women. The person with her camera off hasn’t participated yet to my knowledge.</p>	2
Developing Teachers	Moments of developing individual teachers/efficacy through PD, curriculum, and activities	<p>I ask John before it starts about the committee. It sounds like it emerged organically last year and became more formal this year. It is a group that comes together with tips and tips for tech, piloting and presenting ideas to the staff. I appreciate that John has created this as a leadership opportunity for teachers who may not necessarily be involved in other ways, though it sounds like some of the folks on the team are already involved in leadership at the site. I am also struck that at least one teacher - Claudia - doesn’t seem particularly adept at the technology.</p>	3
Knowledge of Students	Conversations where principal demonstrates intimate knowledge of	<p>John adds, “Just so you know, Sonia, I think you have the youngest one. (John lists the names) I think there was a</p>	4

	individual students and families	reason they were at the park and it wasn't by choice."	
Creating Conditions	References to creating conditions for teacher success and efficacy	"I think as as a principal, the role is in every single aspect of it from from creating, creating conditions where where teachers can become more successful and have more confidence and more belief in their abilities."	4
Challenging Belief Systems	References to challenging belief systems and "calling out" as a way to shape school culture	"So like, so try to think of that and at and then and then kind of have a mental plan of how am I going to address this situation, and not in a way that's just isolated, but but ongoing. So kind of a, a immediate, short term plan to address the situation, but if I feel that it's something that is more of an individual's character, a belief system, then what's going to be the long term plan, so the short term plan might be very direct, and, and explicit, whereas the long term plan would be more subtle, and and then consistent, and, and where the person might not actually be able to identify like, Oh, this is the this is what's going on?"	6
Instructional Practice	References to instructional practice	"And then also, on the strategies and practices side of it is ensuring that there are programs and practices in place that would would address the gaps that that that are present, whether it's academic opportunities, sometimes we just think about interventions, but but I think it goes beyond that. I think it's also opportunities for for higher level learning for deeper delves into, into content, instructional practices that are that accelerate learning. I think it's also providing the resources, whether it's technology or apps or or any other	4

		resources that that might might be necessary to advance students to that level.”	
Intentional Staffing	References to using staffing as an intentional strategy to shape school culture	“But then also, the long term plan is, okay, so I cannot, if we're going to change the culture of the school, then I need to move her out of upper grade. So, so then moving a teacher out of out of primary, to an upper grade slot, so that I can move her all the way down to second grade, even though that there's a fourth grade opening. And so doing that without apology, and without what, without hesitation. So, so there's a long term. And that, that might seem like, Well, hopefully does not seem as as harassment or targeting her.”	9
Equity Definition	Principal definitions of equity	“Educational Equity? Well, I mean, there's, I think first I would break it down to the two to two parts, education and equity. Equity for me would be providing what is what is needed based on societal discrepancies that are in place. So So equity would be just providing, you know, providing what what's needed not not in a format that's equal but a format that is is equitable, and and with the intent to to balance things out. And then educational equity would be around.”	4
Humor	Instances of joking or humor	<p>"There is a brief side conversation about COVID vaccines. It is about 1:42 pm.</p> <p>Cristina - “That pain was better than labor pain!” in reference to the vaccine shot. Eric talks about how he had to register at least 3 teachers for it.”</p>	14
Affirmation admin	affirmations given by	“I think we are ahead of the other	9

-> staff	administrator to staff	schools because you helped develop this spreadsheet of our students.”	
		John then outlines the student groups for phase 1 and briefly shows the spreadsheet of the students the team had selected.	
Affirmations staff -> staff	Staff affirming one another	Fred - he is the one who posted about shoutouts in the chat, so I imagine he had been thinking about this in advance - “I would like to give a shoutout to Greg for the student recognition assemblies. He has helped me out all year.” Fred also talks about how meaningful these have been for students. About 5 people put reactions (hand clap, thumbs up).	6
Affirmation staff -> admin	Affirmations of the principal by staff	People just unmute their cameras to talk. Lavinia - “I would like to shoutout to Karen, and also to you, John, but Karen has been the ELPAC person and she is a great lead on this ELPAC thinking (~7 people applaud physically on campus).”	4