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RECOGNITION, AND ACTION**

**PROFESSORES ENFRENTANDO IN/EQUIDADES: COMPREENSÃO,
RECONHECIMENTO E AÇÃO**

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Abstract

Teachers' equity work is often discussed in research literature, however, little empirical evidence exists about the nature of this work. This article explores teachers' understandings, recognitions of, and actions regarding in/equities in their schools. Data was derived from interviews with fifteen urban elementary school teachers who engage in equity work. While researchers acknowledge that understanding equity and diversity plays a key role in preparing teachers to tackle inequities in their schools, relatively little is known about this process. Findings illustrate that although all participants share a common commitment to teaching for equity, they held differing ideas about the meaning of equity, what equity looked like, and what their role should be for redressing inequity. Participants' understanding of in/equity were found to exist on a spectrum from less to more developed, as were their actions. Findings also illustrated inconsistencies with regards to where participants existed on the continuum of understanding in relation to their actions. The nature of participants' level of understanding, how they described their recognitions of in/equity, and the actions they took to address inequities are described thematically to illustrate their general nature as there is little information available in particular regarding teachers' understandings and recognitions of inequity.

Keywords: teachers, equity strategies, understanding equity, recognizing equity, equity actions

PROFESSORES ENFRENTANDO IN/EQUIDADES: COMPREENSÃO, RECONHECIMENTO E AÇÃO

Resumo

O trabalho de equidade dos professores é frequentemente discutido na literatura de pesquisa, no entanto, há pouca evidência empírica sobre a natureza deste trabalho. Este artigo explora os entendimentos, reconhecimentos e ações dos professores em relação às in/equidades em suas escolas. Os dados foram obtidos a partir de entrevistas com quinze professores de escolas urbanas que se dedicam ao trabalho de equidade. Embora os pesquisadores reconheçam que a compreensão da equidade e da diversidade desempenha um papel fundamental na preparação dos professores para lidar com as iniquidades em suas escolas, pouco se sabe sobre esse processo. Os resultados mostram que, embora todos os participantes compartilhem um compromisso comum com o ensino pela equidade, eles mantinham ideias diferentes sobre o significado da equidade, o que era a equidade e qual deveria ser seu papel para corrigir a iniquidade. A compreensão dos participantes sobre in/equidade revela existir em um espectro de menos para mais desenvolvido, como foram suas ações. Os resultados também ilustram inconsistências no que diz respeito ao lugar onde os participantes existiam na continuidade do entendimento em relação às suas ações. A natureza do nível de compreensão dos participantes, o modo como descreveram os seus reconhecimentos de equidade e as ações que empreenderam para abordar as iniquidades, são descritos tematicamente para ilustrar a sua natureza geral, dado que há pouca informação disponível sobre a compreensão e reconhecimento dos professores sobre iniquidade.

Palavras-chave: professores, estratégias de equidade, compreensão da equidade, reconhecimento da equidade, ações de equidade

Introdução

The article begins with a description of the problem addressed in this study: how teachers understand, recognize, and respond to in/equities. This is followed by a review of the literature addressing in/equity – what it means to understand, recognize, and act on in/equities. Next is a

description of the methods used. This is followed by thematic data that demonstrates the general way in which participants understand recognize and act on inequities and. Findings from all participants were used to create a composite participant and associated vignette which illustrates the kinds of equity actions undertaken by the participants, their experiences, and the decisions they made along the way. Finally, the implications of these findings for professional development and practice are explored.

The Impetus for Teachers who ‘Teach for Equity’: Diversity and Inequities

Schools in North America are becoming increasingly diverse. In diverse contexts not everyone is treated equitably (Mclaren, 2007). The evidence is “clear and alarming that various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Scheurich & Laible, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999)” (in Brown, 2004, p. 79). Students of low socioeconomic status, who have recently immigrated to, or do not speak English as their first language, and many other marginalized students do not experience the same kind of academic success as their fellow students (Brown, 2004; Nieto, 2000; Tremblay, Ross, & Berthelot, 2001). Students whose life experiences and learning abilities are not acknowledged and accommodated by schools disengage and experience lower levels of educational success (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2003; Kumashiro, 2002; Ryan, 2006). This means that some schools and schooling practices are inequitable and exclusive (Harper, 1997; Ryan, 2012). This situation calls for teachers who are able to understand and respond to diversity in an equitable and inclusive manner (Gerin-Lajoie, 2008).

Issues of Diversity and Inequity Addressed in the Literature

Coinciding with the growing diversity of the student population in most parts of the world is an increasing interest in what it means to teach to this diversity, to teach for equity. Advocates of teaching for equity believe that inequitable conditions exist both inside and outside of schools and that they be addressed through their actions. There are many beliefs regarding what it means to teach for equity and the attributes one must have to do so. Brown (2004) believes “they are committed to an agenda in which past practices anchored in open and residual racism, gender exclusivity, homophobia, class discrimination, and religious intolerance are confronted and changed over time” (p. 333). Along with this commitment to redressing inequities, teachers doing equity work also need to have a thorough understanding of in/equities and how they are created and perpetuated, and they need to be able to recognize inequities when they see them (Athanases & De Oliveira, 2008; Di Angelo & Sensoy, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 2004; Peters & Reid, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Finally, many also believe that true or robust equity work involves not just understanding and

recognizing inequities but also acting to eliminate them (Di Angelo & Sensoy, 2010; Peters & Reid, 2009; Solomon, Singer, Campbell, Allen, & Portelli, 2011; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Multiple bodies of research and literature exist which outline different aspects and issues surrounding teaching for equity, including but not limited to those that address the aims of teaching for equity (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007), the kinds of actions educators undertake in their attempts to teach for equity (Solomon et al., 2011), educators' feelings and beliefs about their students and teaching for equity (Brown, 2004; Love & Kruger, 2005; Pohan, 1996; Sleeter, 2004). There has been considerable recent focus on what it means to prepare educators for teaching in diverse settings and how this should be done (Florian, Young, & Rouse, 2010; Sleeter, 2008; Solomon et al., 2011; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007), including evaluations of the effect of preservice programs on educators' beliefs about things like equity and diversity (Brown, 2004). It is also commonly stated that understanding and beliefs regarding equity and diversity are related to action; some even say these beliefs are reliable predictors of action (see for example Brown, 2004). However, relatively few scholars explore and consider beliefs and actions at once and in relation to one another. Exceptions to this include people such as Whipp (2013) and Cochran-Smith et al. (2009). Both studies explored the effect of pre service education programs with a specific focus on social justice on students and recent graduates. While studies such as these are able to demonstrate a relationship between thought and action with regards to the way thoughts changed as a result of people's experiences in the programs, there is still much to be learned about the relationship between educators' understanding, their ability to recognize in/equity, and actions they take on the basis of these perceptions.

What is Equity/Inequity?

Equity is popularly discussed in reference to education, yet it is a complicated term with multiple meanings. Depending on the situation, and the goals of those using the term, it can mean very different things. For some, equity means that everyone should receive the same things (Jenks, 1988, p. 519). For others, equity means more should be given to those in need (Jencks, 1988). For others still, equity includes calculations of merit based on fair or meritocratic competition (Jenks, 1988). In reference to the complicated nature of terms such as equity (inequity, equality, and inequality), Stone (2012) defines equity as a term which "denote(s) distributions regarded as fair, even though they contain both equalities and inequalities (p. 41). Stone goes on to say that when considering distribution of an asset, and in this case the asset is education, three things are key to the consideration – who is getting the asset, what is being distributed, and how it will be distributed (p. 42). Determining who should get what and how is not an easy task and it is highly dependent on context and the distribution of political power (Stone, 2012). Those with more voice and political power will have a greater influence over the distribution of all other assets. Broadly speaking, equity

in education involves trying to achieve fair and equal opportunities for people but “does not necessarily entail equal treatment” (Solomon et al., 2011, p. 15).

What these definitions acknowledge is that some groups of students have been disadvantaged by society and societal institutions because of their membership in identity groups which are marginalized and discriminated against. They have less voice and power, and therefore experience less opportunity and success educationally and otherwise; as a result, work needs to be done to right those wrongs, decrease those disadvantages and help students experience greater equity in schools in multiple ways (Banks & Banks, 1995; Ryan 2012). Equity minded educators engage in equity work to address this unfair disadvantage. For the purpose of this study, equity is about ensuring all students are provided with the education, support and opportunity they need to succeed academically (though not narrowly focused) and otherwise, and is particularly concerned with work that contributes to the provision of equity of opportunities and outcomes for students who experience marginalization and oppression. Although equity is a complicated term which means different things depending on the situation, there are some elements that remain relatively constant, regardless of the source of the definition and the goals of those involved. For instance, equity and inequity are often discussed in reference to group membership or identity, power, the individual and systemic nature of in/equity, and the consequences of experiencing inequity. Sometimes some of those elements are given more or less focus than others. The definition of equity which informs this study includes those four main components; they are conceptualized as the terrain which relates to identity, the mechanism which is power, the nature of inequity which is systemic and taken for granted, and the consequences of in/equity which are grave and have long-term effects.

Understanding, Recognizing and Acting

Findings from this study reveal that equity work involves an evolving and cyclical process of understanding, recognizing, and acting. This process does not necessarily begin nor end at any one particular part of this process, nor do all people begin with the same level of understanding and recognition or robustness of action. The cycle could begin with a very basic or complex understanding that could spur any form of action, with action that provides insight and understanding, or it begins with a sudden recognition of inequity that spurs further understanding or action. Regardless, once this cyclical relationship is set into motion, the three processes can support one another in moving the person involved along a continuum of understanding, recognizing, and acting in relation to equity from a less in depth and robust to more in depth and truly robust and equitable practice. As people make their journey along this continuum they would hopefully become more effective in all three things – understanding, recognizing, and acting in response to or in the name of equity. Therefore, further uncovering this process is in the best interest of those concerned with the pursuit of equity and

inclusion. The purpose of this study is to uncover more information about how teachers who self-identify as being concerned with issues of equity/inequity in schools understand, recognize and act on equity/inequities in their schools.

Understanding In/equity

This idea of a continuum or different levels of understanding is not new. Much of the research in the area of understandings of in/equity is informed by Freires' work on critical consciousness (1973, 1992). Freire suggested that critical consciousness, which he said was required for a critical relationship with the world where one was aware and acting upon reality to empower and liberate, developed along vertical and horizontal planes (Heaney, 1995). The horizontal plane represented the positionality of the individual and how that influenced the way they observed and engaged with the world around them. The vertical plane was made up of three basic stages of development beginning with semi intransitive consciousness and ending with critical transitivity. Banks also has a continuum of multicultural education, with four main stages (Banks & Banks, 1995; Banks, 1999). People begin using superficial approaches to address diversity in their schools by having celebrations for things such as black history month. The second stage involves incorporating different perspectives and approaches into the existing curriculum without making any substantive changes or using critical thinking. In the third stage, changes are made to the curriculum that encourage students to understand and critically question diverse perspectives. The social action approach is the final stage on the continuum at which point educators teach in a transformative way using activities and materials that encourage students to be social actors (Banks, 1999). Although researchers such as Freire and Banks have outlined their perspectives regarding the existence of different levels of understanding with regards to things such as critical consciousness and multiculturalism, and researchers explored things such as teachers conceptions of teaching for diversity (Brown, 2004; Sleeter, 2004), in depth explorations of teachers understandings of in/equity remain to be uncovered, particularly in relation to their recognitions and actions regarding in/equity.

Recognizing In/equity

Existing research into recognition of inequities in school settings provides cause for concern. In Ryan's (2003) study regarding administrator perceptions of racism in their schools he found that administrators were reluctant to admit that racism existed within their schools. Even participants who did recognize that racism existed in their schools and could pin point specific racist incidents preferred to think of those incidents as not truly racist but expressions of general frustration and anger (p.150). Ryan (2003) also highlighted a few possible causes for this reluctance or inability of principals to recognize and acknowledge racism in their schools, such as a lack of understanding of systemic

causes of racism or the desire to paint their schools in a more positive light. Aveling (2007) conducted a similar study in Australia and found many of the same things. Aveling like many others, (e.g. Nieto, 2004; Ryan, 2003) contends that lack of understanding, recognition and acknowledgement of forms of inequity such as racism are highly problematic and pose multiple challenges for people attempting to do equity work in their schools. For example, a lack of understanding of the often systemic and institutional nature of forms of inequity such as racism can lead to the use of strategies to address racism in schools that are relatively ineffective such as celebratory multicultural events, as they are not designed to target what is truly playing out in schools.

Acting for Equity

There are many different words used to describe equity work in schools. Teaching for equity is part of a family of theories and research topics that include multicultural education (McGee Banks & Banks, 1995), culturally responsive pedagogy and teaching (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995), anti oppressive education (Kumashiro, Baber, Richardson, Ricker-Wilson, & Wong, 2004; Villegas, 2007), teaching for social justice (Sleeter, 2008; Villegas, 2007), multicultural education (Sleeter, 1992), anti homophobic teaching (Kissen, 2002; Shanahan, 2006), anti racist education (Gillborn, 1992; Troyna, 1987), and inclusive schooling (Florian et al., 2010), amongst others. Numerous actions are undertaken by educators to address inequities in their schools and school districts, many of which have been found to be effective at tackling equity issues (Gandara, 2002; Reynolds, Walberg, & Weissberg, 1999). The conception of what constitutes equity work that is used for this study is informed by the work of all of these fields and is quite broad, much like Sleters' (1992) conception of multicultural education being "broadly defined as any set of processes by which schools work with rather than against oppressed groups" (p. 141). The definition of equity work which informs this study is any actions that are undertaken in an attempt to decrease inequity in schools. These actions are conceived of as existing on a spectrum from more or less robust in terms of their ability to address all four aspects of the definition of in/equity which informs this study. Actions undertaken by equity minded educators range from those that are targeted to address very basic equity needs such as charity work to help people attain basic life necessities, to those actions that address systemic injustices.

Methods

This study was conducted using qualitative research methods (Merriam, 1998), as the goal of the study was "discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied" (p. 1). This study is descriptive and exploratory in nature (Merriam, 1998) as little is known of the topics explored. Fifteen urban elementary public school teachers who self-identify as actively

engaging in equity work in their schools participated in one-on-one interviews ranging in length from one to three hours. Seven of the participants were male, eight were female. Many self-identified as members of marginalized groups; one was gay, one was a lesbian, another was transgendered, two were immigrants, two were black, and two were second generation Canadian and mentioned having witnessed their parents experiencing marginalization and oppression for not being authentic citizens.

Participants engaged in semi structured interviews that lasted between 35 and 150 minutes. Interviews consisted of open ended questions that inquired into participants' understanding of equity and inequity. Participants were interviewed using a variety of methods. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person. Five of the interviews were conducted on the phone, and one interview was conducted via Skype using video and audio. The audio from all of the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Interviews were conducted until saturation or repetition in the data was achieved. Patterns became obvious after three interviews, and saturation seemed apparent after 6. However, 15 interviews were conducted to ensure saturation had been achieved and to explore additional lines of inquiry that arose in the first few interviews as preliminary data analysis was conducted following each interview. Fifteen interviews were also conducted to attempt to capture a variety of perceptions on study topics.

Preliminary analysis and interview notes were recorded in a computer journal. The journal served as a tool for analysis to document new questions as they arose, to do preliminary analysis, and to make connections between the different topics of the study. Each interview was printed and read multiple times with the purpose of identifying new themes and those selected during the literature review. The list of themes that was developed from these readings was entered into Nvivo and the interview transcripts were coded accordingly, using grounded theory (Creswell, 2015). The most commonly described sub themes under the parent themes of understanding of equity and inequity, and experiences of equity were chosen as the focus of analysis and discussion for this article.

Understanding, Recognizing, and Acting for Equity in their Schools

When considered together, the findings illustrate that although all of the participants share a common commitment to equity and teaching for equity, they held differing ideas about the meaning of equity (understanding), what equity looked like (recognition), and what their role should be for redressing inequity (action). Participants' understanding of in/equity were found to exist on a relative spectrum from less developed to more developed, as were their actions. However, the nature of the research questions did not allow it to be appropriately determined whether or not participant recognitions exist on this same spectrum. It is also possible that some of the participants may have more comprehensive understanding, ability to recognize, and actions for in/equity than they were able to convey in the interview. Therefore, while it is believed that teachers' ability to recognize in/equities

in their schools likely exist on a spectrum to more or less developed, that is a question that remains for future research. The findings did, however, illustrate some inconsistencies with regards to where participants existed on the continuum with regards to their understandings of and actions taken with regards to in/equities. Two kinds of inconsistencies existed. The first inconsistency related to participants' descriptions of their understandings and actions regarding in/equities in relation to their descriptions of how they recognized in/equities as playing out in schools. Three of the participants appeared to have less of a comprehensive ability to recognize inequities in action in relation to their understandings of and reactions to inequities. The second inconsistency related to participants' actions. In this case, three of the participant's descriptions of the actions they took in relation to inequities in their schools were less robust than the descriptions they gave of their understandings of in/equities. The nature of participants' level of understanding, how they described their recognitions of in/equity, and the actions they took to address inequities are described thematically to illustrate their general nature as there is little information available in particular regarding teachers' understandings and recognitions of inequity. Following this thematic data, a vignette is used to highlight the connection between participants' understandings recognitions and actions and some of the consistencies that existed.

Understanding In/equity

Understanding of in/equity were found to range from basic to more complex. Some participants were able to articulate an understanding of all of the four key aspects of in/equity highlighted in the literature (terrain, mechanism, nature, and consequences) whereas some participants were only able to recognize one or a few of these aspects. Of the fifteen participants, all of them were able identify at least one aspects of in/equity, seven of them identified two key aspects of in/equity, four of them identified three key aspects, and three of them articulated an understanding of all four key aspects of in/equity.

Half of the participants understood in/equity as involving two key aspects of the definition of in/equity derived from the literature. These participants primarily talked about the systemic nature of race, class, gender etc. They described how people from a variety of backgrounds experienced challenges or barriers, such as individual discrimination or systemic oppression that denied them access to appropriate education. Kent described this when he said “inequity is when people do not perceive each other as being equals and when there are barriers put forth in front of people and it hinders them from progressing”. Evident in this description is an understanding that certain people are discriminated more than others and that there are particular challenges that are associated with this discrimination.

Four participants were able to articulate an understanding of three of the aspects of in/equity referred to the terrain, mechanism, and nature of in/equity. None of those four participants mentioned the consequences of experiencing inequities. Joana described equity as recognizing people as individuals and treating them as such when she described what she perceived equity to be:

I have an older brother, and my mom didn't parent us the same when we were very young. She did for us each what we needed, and that is how I see it – being able to recognize what people need, and addressing their needs, supporting them in that area of need, understanding that we all have different needs and are different in some ways.

Although participants in this group described equity and inequity from multiple perspectives and in a relatively in depth manner, they did not seem to perceive inequity as resulting in many of the consequences highlighted in the literature such as lack of academic and social success and problems later in life. The main difference between this group of participants and those who articulated an understanding of all four categories of in/equity was that this group did not articulate a clear connection between all of the categories. For example, some of them alluded to the possible consequences by using language such as “providing students with chances for success”, but they did not elaborate on what that might mean. It was unclear whether participants in this group (who identified 3 categories of in/equity) perceived students who experienced discrimination and oppression as being entirely in charge of their fates or largely at the mercy of individuals and a system which are predisposed to prefer certain students and denigrate others.

Participants in the final group, who articulated an understanding of all four categories of in/equity articulated a clear relationship between all four of these categories. The most striking thing about this group was their clear descriptions of a cause and effect relationship between the different categories of the definition. They articulated how they or their students who did not conform to dominant ways of knowing and being had less power and opportunities than those who did; they experienced greater individual and systemic discrimination; and that these experiences led many of them to have very different outcomes than their dominant peers. Sidney described this when he explained that equity and inequity were inextricably linked; he could not think of one, without the other, and therefore could not think of equity without thinking of the consequences of inequity. Sidney stated:

Equity has two dimensions to it; the first is fairness. Fairness implies that we ensure that personal and social circumstances like socioeconomic status, gender, ethnic origin, ability, disability, can't be an obstacle to achieving educational potential. Secondly,

equity is inclusion, the implication there being that there is a basic minimum standard of education for all; legally there is. So, everyone needs to be able to read and write and do simple arithmetic. So these two definitions are really closely connected because tackling school failure helps to overcome the effects of social deprivation that causes school failure; so they are totally connected.

Here Sidney used the term social deprivation not to refer to those who diverge from dominant ways of knowing and being as lesser than or at a deficit in comparison to their peers who do conform, but to illustrate that their living is deprived in nature. Sidney and the others in this final group recognized that the greater hardship experienced by marginalized students affects their current and future lives in detrimental ways.

Recognizing In/equities

Data for this research question was generated from the answers participants gave to the interview question that asked what kinds of inequities existed in their schools. Unlike participants' descriptions of their understandings of in/equity, it was less clear with participant descriptions of their recognitions of in/equity whether they recognized in/equity happening in their schools in simple or more complex ways. When describing the inequities that they have witnessed in their schools, participants most commonly referred to situations where people were discriminated at an individual level or systemic level, based on a personal characteristic such as ethnicity, culture, or religion. Participants therefore most commonly referred to the terrain and nature of equity and inequity in descriptions of how they recognized inequities playing out in their schools. The three most commonly described kinds of incidents were: 1) children discriminating against one another, 2) parents not having cultural capital to advocate for their children and schools, 3) teachers having deficit views of children in historically marginalized groups.

The most common inequity that participants described was children discriminating against one another. Alana described these actions as students perpetuating stereotypes against one another about the values that society places on different identities. Derek witnessed this kind of experience on a daily basis, "between individuals, especially between the kids where you have a child that brings attitudes from home to school and tests the water by applying it to other kids". Participants expressed their desire to step in and stop these kinds of interactions. They did not put sole responsibility for these actions on students; however, most participants expressed the belief that students had learned these behaviours from someone else and were merely emulating them.

Participants commonly described their belief that many parents, particularly those who were recent immigrants, of lower SES, and/or who did not speak English lacked the knowledge and power

required to advocate and act for their children in ways that would positively influence their school experience. These participants saw a clear relationship between the background of the students and their parents, power, the nature of education as a system and its actors, and educational and social consequences. They believed that lacking knowledge and power functioned as an umbrella, affecting multiple aspects of schooling including the resources students would be provided with, the interactions they had with other students, teachers, and administrators, and the resources, equipment, and support they may receive. In relation to language barriers, Meloney stated:

Parents who don't speak the language; they are completely left out of the culture of the school in some cases, and those families are being undermined in some cases because people don't understand the culture. Or people who have lived here their whole lives don't understand the challenges of moving to a new place when you don't know how the system works or how to navigate it.

Melony was frustrated that parents and children who were recent immigrants, and even those who had lived in the community their whole lives, experienced inequities as a result of language barriers. She expressed the belief that those experiences were "unfair". Other participants described how this lack of knowledge and power could result in a fundamental misunderstanding or miscommunication of how the system of education, and larger governmental programming worked. They felt this negatively influenced the parents' abilities to navigate and negotiate the education of their children. Other participants, such as Sidney, described how this misunderstanding could go both ways: parents misunderstanding the system, and the system misunderstanding the parents and the students, which resulted in a cyclical occurrence of inequitable situations and inequitable solutions.

Acting on Inequities

All of the participants in this study self-identified as teaching for equity. Therefore, they were all able to describe ways in which they taught or acted for equity in their schools. As a group, participants' actions varied greatly in terms of how many of the categories of equity and inequity they dealt with. Some of them addressed more of the aspects while others addressed less. For the most part, participants' actions regarding equity and inequity seemed to be related to their level of understanding of equity and inequity in terms of how many of the categories they addressed. However, this was not always the case.

When asked to describe their equity work many of the participants began by saying they attempted to create a safe and inclusive classroom; they believed a safe and inclusive classroom was a prerequisite for doing equity work. For example, the first thing Alana said when asked to describe

her equity work was “I tried to create a very inclusive classroom where everyone feels safe”. As they went on to describe their equity work in more detail, most of the participants described the terrain, nature, and mechanism of equity in terms of what they addressed in their classes. The main way participants described addressing these aspects of equity and inequity was through incorporating a diverse range of lived experiences and viewpoints in the classroom resources and making a concerted effort to teach students about diversity. Sarah said:

That is mostly what we do (creating lesson plans that address equity issues), we have also planned a few assemblies. Last year we got sick of assemblies so we did almost a gallery walk. . . All the primaries worked on a similar lesson or unit and then displayed either artistically or graphically something in the hallways, so we were able to walk around and see what all the other classes have displayed. . . I try to be very careful about the literature I pick for the read aloud and that kind of thing.

Sarah went on to describe how, although this may not appear on the surface to be really important equity work, it was a foundational step for the students. By teaching them about multiple perspectives and encouraging them to be critical thinkers, they would hopefully become engaged critical citizens as adults, which eventually would lead to a more equitable society. Sarah said – “I really try to get them to question everything. . . Because I think as they grow up, that ability to question society and government and what they are doing is going to lead us to a more equitable society.” Teaching students to be critical thinkers and active participants in a democratic space was something multiple participants described as being foundational to their equity work. Inta described this when she said “so, if I want my children to grow up and become active democratic citizens then I need to model a democratic society in that classroom as much as I can. . . And I don’t just mean that in a superficial sense”.

Many of the participants articulated the ways in which their work addressed the nature of inequity, in terms of addressing individual and systemic discrimination and oppression, yet very few of them spoke about their attempts to address the consequences of inequity. Those participants who did address all aspects of in/equity in their equity work were often conscious that there were different kinds of equity work. For example, Inta was very explicit that her work was comprehensive, she made an attempt to really dig down into the issues in a concrete fashion, she said “I don’t do the additive approach at all, like its black history month, so let’s watch a movie on Rosa Parks, but it is just another lesson that we did around the “isms”. The language she used when she described her work indicated that although it was not easy, she was able to meet the expectations of the curriculum and the standardized tests her students would have to take, through her equity teaching.

For those participants like Inta who were aware of the different kinds of equity work that could be done, and who attempted to address all aspects of in/equity, the main consequences they described were disengagement, disproportionate rates of punishment and exclusion from the classroom for certain groups of students. For example, Melony described a program she started in one of her schools for a group of boys that were commonly getting referred to the office. She and her colleague initiated a leadership program for the students where they invited the students to provide their feedback on teaching practices. At the end of the year Melony, her partner, and the students presented the results of the project to the whole staff. While the exercise was valuable for the students, it was not without its conflicts. She described how many of her colleagues felt that Melony and her colleague had overstepped the boundaries of professionalism; a few of them felt their practice was being attacked. However, even those who were upset about what they heard were still hearing that there were better practices that could be used when dealing with students that were more equitable than others, and even the students could name them.

Melony went on to explain how the majority of the students in this group that had been identified by her colleagues as problematic were Black. During the first half of the year, before they started the leadership program, there were 16 office referrals for the group of students involved. During the second half of the year, when they ran the leadership program, there were two office referrals. Melony said “And, whatever the dynamic was between them and the teacher (previously), somehow it began to calm down”. Melony hypothesized that this decrease was partially because her colleagues were now aware they were tracking office referrals and partially because the students were feeling more engaged in school because of the leadership program. Participants who had a comprehensive understanding of equity issues such as this described their belief that if teachers did not try to understand and address the different backgrounds, interests, and learning needs of their students that they might be more likely to perceive their behaviour as more problematic than their peers, the students might not remain engaged and excited to learn, and their parents also might not see value in engaging with the school.

Discussion

For the participants in this study, context seemed to play a relatively large role in influencing the kinds of inequities participants witnessed as well as the actions they took to address inequities in their schools. Each teacher had different experiences depending on the nature of their teaching environment, what their colleagues were like, the kinds of students they taught, and the nature of the community surrounding the school. The inequities they reported on seemed to be largely conceived of by participants as being individual in nature; students bullying and discriminating against one another, and teachers holding deficit views of their students. Most of the participants in this study

spoke therefore spoke about one on one interactions with students and peers, and though they did sometimes make connections between those interactions and their systemic causes, this was not always the case. They did not talk in depth about things such as systematic under performance of certain groups of students on standardized tests. However, some participants spoke about systematic discrimination against students of certain minoritized groups, such as Black males, for their behaviours not conforming to dominant norms around good behaviour and conformity in Western institutions. Most of the actions the participants undertook to address inequities therefore revolved around information and resources, incorporating a variety of views into classroom lessons and materials and encouraging critical thinking with their students and colleagues. Few of the participants mentioned attempts to make school or system wide changes through their actions, and all of those that did highlighted how challenging it was to engage in that kind of work because of the resistance of colleagues, leadership, and parents. Findings were likely influenced by the fact that all of the participants of this study were elementary school teachers. Elementary teachers spend more time with their students, in one classroom, than high school or middle school teachers which might encourage them to focus most of their equity efforts within that room, and systematic issues around academic performance and behaviour might be more prominently evident in high school settings.

The findings that educators differ in terms of their level of understanding, and actions, regarding equity are not altogether new. Of greatest importance in this study is the consideration of all three phenomena at once, as understanding, recognition, and actions are primarily researched and considered separately. Further, differences between the ways in which individual educators understand, recognize, and act for equity are not always given much more than a mention. The findings with regards to the relationship between the level of understanding, recognition, and action regarding in/equities when considered separately replicate much of what has already been reported regarding the experiences of students in schools. It is commonly reported that students bully and discriminate against one another (Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2008), that cultural capital plays an important role in the educational experiences and achievement of students (Brown, 2006; Sullivan, 2001), and that teachers hold deficit views of their students (García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 2002). Importantly, this study highlights inconsistencies between participants' understanding, recognition, and action. Few of the participants articulated how their actions would address systemic discrimination and oppression, beyond the concept of creating students who could eventually become agents of change, even if they were able to articulate a comprehensive understanding of in/equity. This is obviously of value but will be a very lengthy and time consuming process and many students will continue to be discriminated against and oppressed while these new leaders are developing if more concrete actions are not taken in the mean time to address the discrimination and oppression currently being experienced by students. Overall, the findings raise questions about the relationship

between understanding, recognition, and action and suggest that an even more in depth analysis may be required regarding the relationship between the three, particularly regarding what kinds of education, training, and experiences might help foster this connection.

The differences and relationships between understanding, recognition, and action are also not often considered in existing research in light of their value for informing professional development and training. For example, when examining White educators' perceptions of their White privilege and their relationship to practice, Mitchell (2009) found that participant understanding was relatively similar, with the exception of the one novice educator (p. 90). Mitchell (2009) even went on to highlight how other researchers (e.g. Helms, 1997) have suggested a continuum of understanding regarding things like race and ethnicity, but after making a passing reference to this occurrence Mitchell (2009) goes back to considering the value of the findings in a summative fashion. Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) considered the findings of their study investigating the understanding and actions around equity of masters' level teacher candidates in relation to common critiques of social justice work such as that it lacks coherence and ignores learning for the sake of focusing on feelings. In the study described in this article, participant understanding, recognition, and actions were not always related in terms of where participants existed in each continuum. This means that where people exist on one continuum may not be related to where people exist on another. The existence of different levels of understanding, recognition, and different kinds of actions is a key piece of the puzzle for designing and executing professional development and training for educators. It is commonly espoused that learning about equity and diversity is the cornerstone of action (Brown, 2004), as though the key to becoming equitable in ones' actions is being able to understand and recognize in/equity. However, in this study, even those who had comprehensive understanding of in/equity did not necessarily act on the inequities they witnessed in their schools in a comprehensive way. This suggests that a more nuanced approach should be taken with regards to preparing educators for teaching for equity.

Rather than assuming that learning about in/equity will lead to equitable actions, and relying almost completely on theoretical learning experiences that might not give educators a comprehensive understanding and ability to recognize inequities in their classrooms and schools, programs should also address the discontinuity that can exist between understanding and action by critically reflecting on the relationship between these three phenomenon by exploring this process through experiential learning and critical reflection. Whipp (2013) investigated how the perceptions of graduates of a social justice oriented program changed over time based on their experiences. Whipp found that things like cross cultural experiences and support from mentors positively influenced understanding and that understanding positively influenced practice. Yet little is known about why this relationship occurs as their study was also exploratory in nature. Merryfield (2000) investigated the lived

experiences of professors who teach in teacher preparation programs that have an equity focus and found that professors who had personally experienced discrimination and oppression were more likely to have more profound impact on the development of a critical consciousness. Merryfield also found that people who had not personally experienced inequities could learn about them through university or experiential learning. Yet, Merryfield cautions that learning about inequity is challenging work and it might be easier to enrol people in teacher education programs that identify as having experienced diversity prior to their enrolment in the program. Whipp and Merryfield's studies illustrate the value in continuing to examine the relationship between thought and action, particularly in relation to teacher education and professional development and critically questioning the equity actions of educator and educational leaders. They both called for further research on the topic, stating that their studies and others only begin to uncover this complicated topic.

Opportunity is lost by treating each educator as though they all hold the same level of understanding or making assumptions about people's level of understanding based on identity characteristics, and failing to acknowledge that even professors of education programs will hold varying and competing notions of equity. Researchers such as Whipp (2013) and Milner (2010) have highlighted a lack of program direction and coherence as possible source of lost opportunity for supporting educators in the development of their understanding and action for social justice. One contributing factor to this loss of opportunity is that educators could be taught in such a way that addresses and acknowledges the different levels of understanding and incorporates it into the lessons. But this would require a coherent teacher education program which clearly outlined the varied levels of understanding, recognition, and actions. Few initial teacher programs offer such coherence and guidance for their professors and their students (Brown, 2004).

Conclusion

In summary, the elementary teachers in this study expressed a desire to understand, recognize, and act on inequities in their schools. They believe school could be inequitable and feel a sense of responsibility to redress inequities and remove obstacles and barriers impeding the development and success of their students. Regardless of this commitment the findings represent a range of different levels of understanding, recognition, and actions, which were not necessarily related. Findings from this study raise questions about historic assumptions that increased levels of understanding and recognition will lead to equity actions that address inequities in a comprehensive manner, laying the foundation for subsequent studies that investigate the ways in which teachers' beliefs relate to their equity practices or lack thereof and raising questions for informing teacher education for equity.

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