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Fostering Equity-Centred School Leadership: The Journey Upstream

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Abstract

Persistent inequities affecting students from non-dominant groups are pervasive in education. To ensure outcomes and opportunities are equitable, educational leadership that centres equity is critical. This Dissertation-in-Practice (DiP) lies at the intersection of superintendent-led principal learning and equity-centred school leadership. The problem of practice explores how superintendents can foster equity-centred school leadership to address educational disparities. It focuses on supporting superintendents in the Great Northern District School Board (GNDSB) yet acknowledges broader potential due to the widespread nature of educational inequities. Situated within a critical orientation amidst a structural-functional and interpretivist organizational context, the DiP delineates historical, political, economic, social, and legal factors shaping the current state, contrasting it with an envisioned future state that emphasizes three key equitable leadership priorities: fostering a culture of belonging and inclusivity, maintaining high academic expectations, and implementing restoration-focused practices. Transformative and authentic leadership approaches pervade the DiP. They are applied to a three-stage change theory, which serves as a guiding framework for employing the selected strategies of critical dialogue and professional development to address the problem of practice. With a bias toward action, the change implementation plan articulates how superintendents will foster the growth of principals along a continuum of equitable leadership practice, employing key communication and evaluation tools and leveraging professional learning networks for knowledge mobilization. The DiP concludes by emphasizing ongoing learning and collaborative efforts among GNDSB leaders to address leader learning needs and amplify student voice, urging sustained momentum and intensified efforts for underserved students to ensure lasting impact.

Keywords: equitable outcomes, equity-centred school leadership, superintendent-led principal learning, critical dialogue, transformative leadership, authentic leadership

Executive Summary

Educational leadership prioritizing equity is crucial for ensuring equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students, although, despite efforts in Ontario, inequities persist, particularly for students from non-dominant groups (Campbell, 2020; Fullan & Gallagher, 2017; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2014a, 2017; Shields, 2020). This Dissertation-in-Practice (DiP) explores the intersection of superintendent-led principal learning, equity-centered school leadership practices, and the gap in research supporting principal leadership development despite evidence linking principals to improved student outcomes (Ford et al., 2020; Grissom et al., 2021; Rogers, 2022). The problem of practice explores the role of superintendents in fostering equity-centred school leadership to address inequitable educational outcomes and opportunities.

Although intended to support superintendents in the Great Northern District School Board (GNDSB; a pseudonym), this DiP holds the potential for broader impact, given the pervasive nature of educational inequities. The first chapter extensively explores the GNDSB's organizational context, including its structural-functional and interpretivist epistemologies, leadership approaches, and commitment to equity, while also considering the influence of positionality in the research process. Considered from a critical orientation, the problem of practice is thoroughly analyzed, including a detailed exploration of historical, political, economic, social, and legal factors shaping the present state. Drawing from Ishimaru and Galloway's (2014) conceptual framework of an equitable school culture, the envisioned future state is outlined, highlighting three key equitable leadership priorities: fostering a culture of belonging and inclusivity, maintaining high academic expectations, and implementing restoration-focused practices.

The second chapter delineates the plan for change. It describes how transformative leadership, a critical approach explicitly rooted in equity and prioritizing the goal of rectifying the structures that perpetuate inequities (Shields, 2020, 2022), and authentic leadership that leverages and cultivates

positive psychological capacities and ethical climates (Avolio et al., 2005), will be integrated to address the problem of practice. Schein's (2017) three-stage change theory serves as a guiding framework, with Wang et al.'s (2020) conceptual framework of system readiness informing readiness for change. Considering the pivotal role of ethics in leadership and change, where leaders influence individuals and organizations significantly, the intertwined relationship between the ethical conduct of leaders and the ethical nature of the leadership process (Ciulla, 2005) is explored.

To develop the plan, three strategies that could be employed by superintendents to foster equity-centred school leadership are contemplated: professional development, critical dialogue, and collaborative mentorship. After comparing key dimensions, critical dialogue that centres the principle of confrontation (Gorski, 2018) and a warm demander approach (Safir, 2017), and professional development related to the content of the three priorities, emerge as a comprehensive strategy for addressing the problem of practice, as integration will enhance the depth and scope of both strategies.

The final chapter links espoused theory and theory in use (Senge, 2020) by detailing the implementation process. Emphasizing action over changing beliefs, the plan is anchored to Ishimaru and Galloway's (2014) continuum of equitable leadership practice, outlining how superintendents will promote leadership growth through the strategies of professional development and critical dialogue. Communication and evaluation tools, stressed by Deszca et al. (2020) as crucial for translating theory into action, are articulated. The communication plan focuses on conveying the need for change, participatory approaches, and leveraging professional learning networks for knowledge mobilization, while monitoring and evaluation draw from an integration of Deming's plan-do-study-act model (PDSA; Christoff, 2018) and the equity transformation cycle (Safir & Dugan, 2021), facilitating assessment and refinement of change initiatives using three levels of data.

The DiP concludes by acknowledging the ongoing nature of learning and change, leveraging the systems approach to knowledge mobilization through professional learning networks (PLNs) as leaders

in the GNDSB collaborate to co-create new knowledge. Learning needs will persistently emerge through data, disaggregation, and deep listening, prioritizing the next step of intentionally amplifying unheard student voices. It closes by encouraging continuous momentum and heightened efforts for underserved students through allyship, advocacy, and activism.

Land Acknowledgement

I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to live, learn, and unlearn as a guest on the sacred traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, Cree, and Métis peoples. I extend gratitude to my neighbouring communities of the Batchewana First Nations and Garden River First Nations for their steadfast stewardship and generosity in sharing this ancestral land. Recognizing the profound significance of this land within the Robinson-Huron treaty territory, I offer this acknowledgment as a genuine gesture of respect and recognition for the enduring impact of broken treaty relationships.

As an educator, I commit to moving beyond rhetoric and actively striving to build an equitable and inclusive future for all children. I acknowledge the responsibility to confront the complex legacies of colonialism and residential schools, and I commit to weaving the threads of understanding and action into a shared future where the richness of every child's background and identity is honoured and celebrated.

Personal Acknowledgements

I have learned that completing a doctorate is a journey no one takes alone. I am immensely grateful for the wonderful professors at the University of Western Ontario, whose guidance, time, and compassion have been invaluable in shaping my development as a scholar-practitioner. A heartfelt thank you to Dr. Maxwell for her clear guidance, insightful feedback, and relentless encouragement, motivating me to strive for continuous improvement.

I am grateful to my Western University cohort for their camaraderie and collective wisdom. The readily accessible support and humour on What's App were a comforting anchor. I am humbled by their dedication and honoured to have shared this transformative experience with them.

To my family, thank you for your enthusiasm, support, and loving mockery. Your patience in listening to me endlessly jabber during family dinners means the world to me. I am deeply thankful to my mother for her unwavering belief in me, to my sister for her encouragement, and to my children, who inspire me to strive towards a better world for them and generations to come.

Throughout this journey, my husband has been a steady support every step of the way. Thank you for your constant encouragement and support, for fueling me with coffee and snacks, for meticulously proofreading and editing my writing, and for reminding me that challenges are supposed to be hard. While completing this degree may have been my dream, I know we have both sacrificed to make it a reality.

Lastly, I wish to express gratitude for this precious gift of learning. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to embark on this educational journey, recognizing that not everyone shares this privilege. One of my deepest hopes is to play a part in building a world where such disparities in access to education are nonexistent.

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Acronyms

EIE	Equity and Inclusive Education
EQAO	Education Quality and Accountability Office
GNDSB	Great Northern District School Board
OHRC	Ontario Human Rights Commission
OLF	Ontario Leadership Framework
OME	Ontario Ministry of Education
OPC	Ontario Principals' Council
PDSA	Plan-Do-Study-Act
PESTEL	Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal Factors
PLN	Professional Learning Network
PPM	Policy/Program Memorandum

Definitions

Critical dialogue: A strategy for addressing the problem of practice in which superintendents and principals engage in a thoughtful examination and discussion of ideas, perspectives, or issues from a critical standpoint, questioning assumptions and exploring underlying power dynamics and social justice issues to deepen understanding, foster critical thinking, and promote changes to practice.

Equity-centred leadership: An approach that identifies and rectifies disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes and underlying oppressions that predict success or failure correlating with identity, background, or perceived limitations in service of equally high outcomes for all students, regardless of circumstances (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023; Lopez, 2016; Safir & Dugan, 2021).

PESTEL Factors: The political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal factors that describe the environment or context in which the organization functions (Deszca et al., 2020, p. 31).

Praxis: The process of merging critical reflection and tangible action (Freire, 1970/2018).

Professional development: A strategy for addressing the problem of practice that entails a structured approach to facilitate informational learning through content dissemination, focusing on equity and making deliberate connections to practical applications, enhancing principals' capacity to implement equity-centred practices.

Warm demander: A leader who combines encouragement and high expectations in their approach, which is deeply rooted in building relational capital and trust and emphasizes strategic listening, reflective questioning, and experimental action (Safir, 2017).

Chapter One – The River

The essence of equity in education lies in ensuring that opportunities and outcomes are never predicted or determined by a student's identity, background, or perceived limitations. The crucial need for equity-focused educational leadership is underscored by the persistent presence of educational disparities, particularly affecting students from marginalized communities (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017; Shields, 2020). In Ontario, an emphasis on equity has improved success and reduced achievement gaps for some, though disparities persist for others (Campbell, 2020; Fullan & Gallagher, 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2014a, 2017). Although inequities are widely acknowledged, students from non-dominant groups continue to experience gaps in opportunities and outcomes (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017).

This Dissertation-in-Practice (DiP) seeks a path to address the underlying causes of inequity, rather than merely treating its symptoms (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Safir & Dugan, 2021). A well-known quote, often credited to Desmond Tutu, wisely suggests that we need to stop pulling people out of the river and instead journey upstream to understand why they are falling in. This quote is related to a metaphorical tale (see Appendix A) where villagers tirelessly rescue people falling into a river until someone suggests investigating upstream. There, they discover broken bridges that are responsible for the incidents. The villagers prevent further accidents by repairing it, eliminating the need for continual rescues downstream. This parable poignantly underscores the necessity of proactively addressing underlying issues beyond immediate aid. If we only stand at the mouth of the river, and that is all we see, we will overlook all that happens upstream. This dissertation represents my journey to go upstream.

The problem of practice explores the role of superintendents in fostering equity-centred school leadership to address inequitable educational outcomes and opportunities. It sits at the intersection of research examining the role of superintendents in leading principal learning and school leadership

practices centred on equity. Although there is strong evidence to positively link school principals to improved student outcomes, less is known about how to support the leadership development of principals (Ford et al., 2020; Grissom et al., 2021; Rogers, 2022). Although this DiP is intended to foster change in the Great Northern District School Board (GNDSB; a pseudonym), it may have benefits on a broader scope, given the pervasiveness of educational inequities.

The inaugural chapter delves into the organizational context of the GNDSB, including its structures, leadership approaches, and commitment to equity. Other major elements of this chapter probe the complex problem through a discussion of the historical and external factors that influence the problem of practice, culminating with a depiction of the future envisioned state and three key priorities. The chapter commences by exploring researcher positionality and critical worldview, setting the stage for the subsequent discussions.

Positionality and Lens

Who I am and how I see the world are intimately connected to my approach to this DiP. Positionality affects the entirety of the research process including how problems and questions are constructed, inquiry approach and interpretation, and knowledge creation (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Day, 2012; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). In the context of the river parable, I am a villager. Consequently, it is sagacious to transparently examine researcher positionality and lens thoughtfully and explicitly. Because positionality includes personal characteristics and worldviews (Berger, 2015; Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014), both will be considered. This section begins by detailing facets of my identity and context, acknowledging the influence of my unique perspectives and biases. It is followed by a discussion of how I understand and interpret the world.

Positionality – Who I Am

Positionality is shaped by social identities and life experiences rooted in race, ethnicity, gender, religion, citizenship status, age, and socioeconomic status (Piedra, 2023). Identifying these

characteristics, traits, and identity markers is relatively straightforward. I identify as a White, middle-class, heterosexual, cis-gendered woman with positional authority as a senior leader in the GNDSB. However, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) refine positionality as the explicit recognition of how one stands in relation to others, shaping how the world is seen and understood. To this end, my journey to think critically about how inherent and acquired facets of my identity influence understandings and experiences is complex and evolving.

I am increasingly aware of the barriers and privileges stemming from my identity and how they influence how I listen, how I am perceived, and how I perceive others. Like Irving (2014), who compared herself to a fish unaware of the water it swims in, I have come to recognize the pervasive culture of White superiority that surrounds me. Embracing Battiste's (2010) call to examine privilege, I understand that simply acknowledging positionality is not enough to address it. Continuous self-reflection, embracing failure, and accepting uncertainty are crucial for identifying and dismantling biases (Gachago, 2018). By striving to interrupt my tendencies toward White fragility and complacency, I embody what Freire (1970/2018) describes as an unfinished, self-aware learner. Ongoing reflexivity will strengthen efforts to avoid pitfalls associated with my privilege, such as false generosity and saviour behaviours, which may manifest as presuming to know what is best for marginalized communities (Freire, 1970/2018; Safir & Dugan, 2021). In pursuing this goal, I am grateful to learn from thought leaders, scholars, students, and families at the margins.

Given that the problem of practice is related to inequities in educational outcomes, it is also prudent to reflect on my own positive, successful school experiences. I recognize that the possibility to flourish as both a student and as an educator can be attributed to opportunities and structures that favour my identity. Holding this self-knowledge and perspective in mind, I acknowledge that not everyone experiences school similarly, and I refrain from speaking "for that which [I] have not felt"

(hooks, 2015, p. 59). Recognizing the limitations of my expertise regarding others' experiences, my role as a change leader is informed by and collaborative with those who experience inequity.

Dei and Adhami (2021) assert that educational leadership is about leveraging positionality to drive change. As a superintendent, I have the agency to foster equity-centered school leadership as I directly supervise, support, and guide principals. However, I continue to reflect on the influence of educational leadership and strive to embody the principles inherent in my role. As an employee, I am bound by both moral and contractual obligations to the GNDSB. I recognize that I have benefitted, and continue to benefit from, the hegemonic structures of the public school system. However, I remain steadfast in the belief that meaningful transformation can emanate from this very standpoint. Drawing inspiration from Pewewardy et al. (2018), who advocate for innovative approaches within the existing colonial framework, I am driven to explore new avenues for change from within this leadership position.

Lens – How I See the World

In developing this DiP, I am grateful for the opportunity to engage in introspection, enabling me to explore my identity and perspective on the world. I am particularly drawn to critical theory principles that focus on power, inequities, oppression, marginalization; centre leadership, change, and decision-making (Capper, 2018), and call for action (Apple, 2016). Critical theory grapples with issues of power and justice by exploring and questioning how race, class, gender, and sexuality coalesce to construct social consciousnesses (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010).

This critical worldview obliges examining and rectifying the systems responsible for generating, replicating, and sustaining inequities (Capper, 2018; Green, 2016; Shields, 2020). In particular, attention to structures and processes that are less visible, more pervasive, and not always conspicuous is prudent (Castagno, 2009; Ryan & Rottman, 2007) to expose injustices linked to race, class, and gender (Green, 2016). Critical theory does not offer prescribed responses, but emphasizes questioning and exploration (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010).

Moreover, a fundamental tenet of critical theory involves critiquing knowledge and practices. Positivism in research and practice must be disrupted by embracing a diversity of perspectives (Rexhepi & Torres, 2011), such as counter-hegemonic knowledge (Dei & Adhami, 2021). Knowledge is seen as provisory and characterized by the Hegelian concept of Aufhebung, that ideas are both negated and partially preserved through interaction with the knowledge of others (Apple, 2016; Rexhepi & Torres, 2011). Resolution of the problem of practice will emerge through engaging with diverse ideas that bring new perspectives to disrupt positivism.

The tenets of critical theory, which involve questioning assumptions and challenging dominant ideologies, hold significant importance in the field of education (Theoharis, 2007; Wang et al., 2019). Specifically, I am grappling with the challenge of translating theory into practical applications of equity-centred leadership. According to Freire (1970/2018), a prominent figure in critical pedagogy, reflecting on the interplay between theory and practice is essential for enriching both aspects.

Reflexivity and Allyship

Reflexivity, rooted in critical theory, encourages questioning dominant narratives and understanding positionality in systems of privilege and oppression. Engaging in reflexivity regarding social identities enhances awareness of power relationships, offering an opportunity to transcend biased perspectives and address these complex dynamics (Day, 2012; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Piedra, 2023). Furthermore, accepting feelings of shame and guilt and shifting from a defensive stance to embracing positionality can transform these emotions from hindrances into productive tools for generating insights and promoting growth (Gachago, 2018; Stuart, 2017).

Reflexivity and allyship share a symbiotic relationship, particularly in the context of White allyship. A crucial aspect of White allyship involves embracing humility and acknowledging the limitations of one's knowledge, experience, and skills, while recognizing and valuing the insights and experiences of colleagues, students, and families (Gachago, 2018). Mindful of my privilege, I strive to

approach this DiP as an ally, advocating for equitable educational opportunities and outcomes (Patton & Bondi, 2015). Growing as an ally entails embarking on a journey that unfolds through open conversations, self-examination, questioning, confronting biases, and pushing beyond comfort zones (Alexander, 2016), all of which are integral elements reflected in this DiP.

The following section shifts to an examination of the context of the GNDSB, exploring its organizational structures, leadership frameworks, broader contexts, and district demographics, all of which profoundly shape the development of the DiP. Prudently, the organization's commitment to equity will also be carefully elucidated.

Organizational Context

Effective leaders demonstrate adeptness in understanding context, which is necessary to navigate the complexities of dynamically changing milieus (Fullan, 2020). Given that school districts significantly shape the learning and growth of school principals (Ford et al., 2020), analyzing the organizational context holds relevance in this DiP. In the context of the river parable, the GNDSB is the village. A comprehensive portrayal of the GNDSB is presented, including its commitment to equity. This section begins by exploring the school district's organizational structures and leadership strategies.

Organizational Structures

The organizational context of the GNDSB closely aligns with the structures and epistemologies of the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME). The governance structure between the ministry, the school board, and the schools is hierarchal in nature. Efforts to achieve established goals prioritize efficiency and are often facilitated through bureaucratic elements, including governance structure, policies, documents, and procedures (Bolman & Deal, 2017). This orientation reflects a structural-functional epistemology where stability and order are emphasized.

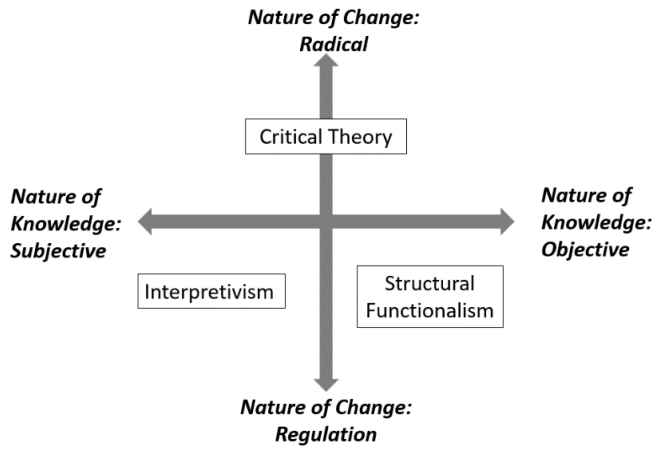
Furthermore, the organizational context of the GNDSB also reflects elements of an interpretivist epistemology. This is evident through the value placed on collaboration, professional learning

communities, and constructivist learning approaches (Capper, 2018). These aspects prioritize a more participatory approach to education, emphasizing the importance of shared knowledge construction and collaborative problem-solving.

When located on Burrell and Morgan's sociology theory framework (see Figure 1), structural functionalism and interpretivism are oriented toward the regulation end of the nature of change axis (Capper, 2018). Change is slow and incremental, prioritizing efficiency and effectiveness over rapid transformation. Understanding this epistemological context is essential, especially given the critical orientation of this DiP, which is more radical in terms of the nature of change. Navigating this tension in perspectives will be essential for developing strategies that effectively address the challenges within the organizational context of the GNDSB.

Figure 1

Sociology Theory Framework



Note. This figure shows the location of critical theory, interpretivism, and structural functionalism in Burrell and Morgan's sociology theory framework. Adapted from "*Organizational Theory for Equity and Diversity*," by. C. Capper, 2018, Routledge. https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.4324/9781315818610

At the local level, school districts are governed by an elected board of trustees. In the GNDSB the composition includes ten elected trustees, one appointed First Nations trustee, two student trustees, and one Indigenous student trustee. They have no individual authority but are collectively accountable as a board to set direction by developing and monitoring the multi-year strategic plan and for hiring and conducting performance appraisals of the director of education (Ontario Public School Boards' Association, n.d.). The board oversees policy and fiduciary direction while entrusting the day-to-day operations to staff (Campbell & Fullan, 2019).

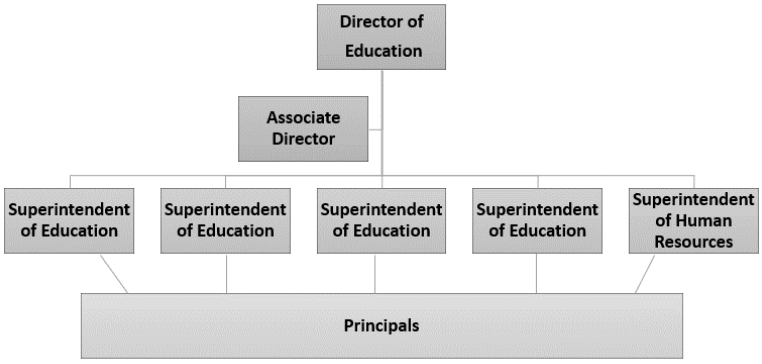
The senior team of the GNDSB, consisting of the director, associate director, and five superintendents, collaborates closely with the board of trustees, as Campbell and Fullan (2019) recommend. While the board sets policy, the senior team develops and implements related procedures, programs, and supports. The structural configuration of the senior team resembles Bolman and Deal's (2017) star configuration, characterized by multiple connections, free-flowing information, well-developed communication, a tolerance for ambiguity, manageable conflict, and positive morale. The result is a collegial and professional culture. Leveraging the strength of team dynamics will be crucial in addressing the problem of practice and navigating various epistemologies and leadership approaches efficiently.

The role that superintendents play as liaisons between individual schools and the broader school district is also critical (Goldring et al., 2018). One of the pivotal responsibilities of superintendents, and one that is particularly central to the focus of this DiP, is supervising and supporting the approximately 50 principals in the GNDSB (see Figure 2). This role is transitioning from regulatory and administrative functions to actively supporting the continuous professional growth of principals (Goldring et al., 2018; Rigby et al., 2019; Thessin & Louis, 2019). As superintendents evolve in their role from mere administrators to proactive supporters of principal professional development, their

significance as conduits between individual schools and the broader district becomes increasingly pronounced.

Figure 2

Governance Map



Note. This figure illustrates the governance structure of the GNDSB (Servant, 2024).

Leadership Approaches and Practices

Leadership that prioritizes personal awareness, purpose, relationships, and the leader's role as a facilitator and collaborator, reflecting the principles of an interpretivist epistemology (Capper, 2018), permeates both the GNDSB and OME. These principles are evident in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF), through which the OME provides direction regarding leadership. The OME developed the OLF to articulate a shared vision of leadership by identifying effective school and district-level leadership domains, competencies, and personal leadership resources (Ontario Institute for Education Leadership, 2013). While the OLF does not explicitly align with any particular leadership model or theory, it is most closely associated with instructional and transformational leadership (Leithwood et al., 2019; Shields, 2022).

School District

The GNDSB is located on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg and the homeland of the Metis. It is a part of the Robinson Huron Treaty of 1850, Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850, and Treaty 9

of 1905. The GNDSB serves over 10,000 students in 44 schools in both rural and urban communities, spread across more than 70,000 square kilometres in northern Ontario.

While the school district primarily consists of White, English-speaking students and staff, newcomers to the community contribute to a growing population of students and families with diverse racial, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Although this demographic shift is not yet fully reflected in official data, a 2019 census reveals significant differences between students and staff. For example, 70.5 percent of students identify as White compared to 83.7 percent of staff, 21.8 percent of students self-identify as Indigenous in contrast to only 7.2 percent of staff, and 11.7 percent of students identify their sexual orientation as LGBTQ2S+ juxtaposed with 2.1 percent of staff (GNDSB, 2020). These demographic differences underscore the importance of intentionally addressing inequities.

Commitment to Equity

A commitment to equity permeates organizational policy and vision, spanning both macro and meso levels. In 2017, the OME launched Ontario's Equity Action Plan to build on the 2009 Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy by identifying and eliminating discrimination, barriers, and bias so that all students reach their potential and succeed personally and academically (OME, 2017). Alongside every school board in the province, the GNDSB has developed and implemented equity policies and procedures as mandated by the OME. However, while these equity policies signify a commitment to equity, Rezai-Rashti et al. (2021) characterize them as non-performative, citing a lack of resources, action, and accountability. Ahmed (2007) describes this dilemma as a gap between words and deeds. Moreover, since the change in the provincial government in 2018, there has been a slowdown and suspension of equity-related initiatives (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2021).

In 2014, the OME introduced *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*. This document articulates a commitment to the success of every student, affirming that regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race,

religion, sex, sexual orientation, socio-economic status or other factors, all students deserve the opportunity for success (OME, 2014a). The renewed vision prioritizes Indigenous students, children and youth in care, students with special education needs, newcomers, and children from families experiencing poverty (OME, 2014a). Similarly, the GNDSB outlines its vision as fostering a learning community for all to flourish, identifies equity and inclusion as a core value, and establishes equity as one of three strategic priorities. The GNDSB commits to creating learning environments that afford students equal opportunities to reach their full potential, addressing systemic discrimination, eliminating educational disparities, and deepening collaboration with Indigenous partners to support understanding and implementation of the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

The vision of the DiP, which centers on equity-focused school leadership aimed at ensuring equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for all students, fully aligns with the articulated visions of both the OME and the GNDSB. Equity is prominently identified in the mission, vision, values, and strategic priorities of both the ministry and the school district. This alignment is key because profound and equitable change requires that the organization has a shared vision throughout (Shields, 2020).

While the commitment to equity is widely acknowledged, equitable practices do not naturally emerge from policy alone, so it is crucial to determine how leaders will translate these aspirations into action (Clayton & Nganga, 2022; Rigby et al., 2019). Lopez (2016) asserts that one of the conundrums in educational leadership lies in transforming well-intended policies like the Ontario Equity and Inclusive Strategy (OME, 2014b) into tangible actions within the everyday realities of schools. Senge (2020) suggests that the primary obstacle to change in organizational learning is not the disparity between knowledge and ignorance, but rather the divide between what is known and what is put into practice,

commonly referred to as the gap between espoused theory and theory-in-use. The premise of the DiP is to bridge the disconnect between the espoused theory and the theory in use.

Beyond the organizational context, the leadership problem is embedded within a broader landscape. The following section articulates the specific leadership challenge and delves into its contextual underpinnings to set the stage for further discussions.

Framing the Problem of Practice

The problem of practice is framed within contextual opportunities and challenges. This section provides both a historical overview and an analysis of the political, economic, social, and legal factors influencing the problem's context. Chunoo et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of identifying and naming troublesome issues to advance equity and social justice efforts. Understanding these contextual elements is akin to navigating turbulent waters in the river parable. This section begins by articulating the leadership problem of practice and delineating the gap between the present state and a more desirable, yet feasible, organizational state. It concludes by posing guiding questions that emerge from potential factors influencing the main problem.

Leadership Problem of Practice

The recognition of a problem, that something is not going as expected, is the dawn of all planned change (Schein, 2017). A leadership challenge in the GNDSB is the support of students struggling to flourish, almost all of whom are historically and currently marginalized and underserved. This meso context mirrors the broader educational landscape, echoing that of the OME, in which disparate outcomes for sub-groups such as students from lower-income communities, racialized students, and Indigenous students are evidence of persistent inequities (Campbell, 2020; Fullan & Gallagher, 2017; OME, 2014a, 2017).

Disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes are well documented in educational research and literature (Shah, 2018; Shields, 2020). Moreover, the pandemic exacerbated inequities for

students already marginalized, underscoring the urgency of confronting oppressive norms (Lopez, 2022). The repercussions of such disparities are profound, with students from non-dominant cultures disproportionately facing higher dropout rates and diminished prospects for higher education, resulting in lasting economic vulnerability and health disparities (Shields, 2020). This illustrates the profound personal and societal consequences of falling into the river.

Shields (2020) asserts that disparities in opportunities and outcomes will persist until leaders adopt an equity mindset. However, much of the existing research is theoretical and lacks clear guidance on how leaders can effectively address persistent opportunity gaps resulting in unequal outcomes (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Shah et al., 2022b; Shields, 2020). The OLF has been criticized for not prioritizing equity as a core leadership principle and for not providing explicit directives on confronting inequities (Doan & Jaber, 2021; Shields, 2022). While Leithwood (2021) suggests that many leadership practices and resources outlined in the OLF could potentially foster equitable outcomes for students, Khalifa et al. (2016) argue that simply enhancing current leadership strategies without addressing systemic inequities will be insufficient to meet the needs of minoritized students.

Through personal observation, I believe that principals in the GNDSB are passionate, committed leaders who tirelessly support and pull students from the river. They do not intend to marginalize students or perpetuate inequities and disparities. Acknowledging the critical role principals play in addressing inequities within schools (Grissom et al., 2021), it is imperative to provide them with support to move beyond rhetoric and effectively translate ideas into action (Dei & Adhami, 2021; Lopez, 2021). While it is widely recognized that superintendents play a crucial role in developing the capacity of principals, particularly in serving historically underserved students, how this is effectuated exists in a vacuum of research (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Rigby et al., 2019). This problem of practice explores the role of superintendents in fostering equity-centred school leadership in the GNDSB.

Historical Overview

School boards in Ontario continue to grapple with historical manifestations of colonialism and racism (Shah et al., 2022a). The practices and structures of educational institutions effectively achieve their historical purposes, which include preparing individuals for specific societal roles and maintaining particular social norms and hierarchies (Robinson & Robinson, 2022; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Shalaby, 2017). As a result, the academic journey for students from non-dominant groups differs markedly from that of their White, middle-class counterparts, as evidenced by their disproportionate challenges, including inequitable treatment in terms of suspension, expulsion, and exclusion from educational opportunities (OME, 2017; Shields, 2020).

A multitude of approaches and strategies have been employed to address persistent inequities in education. These include targeted intervention strategies, enhancing professional capacity and leadership, fostering parent and community engagement, establishing student support teachers and teams, and implementing policies for specific student populations (Campbell, 2020). While these efforts are undeniably crucial, they often resemble attempts to pull students from the river without addressing the underlying causes of the problem. In alignment with provincial initiatives, these same strategies and practices have been implemented in the GNDSB, but unfortunately, they have had a similar dearth of impact as exhibited provincially.

The lack of discernible impact in addressing educational inequities may stem from a flawed conceptualization of the problem, leading to fragmented solutions that fail to tackle the root causes of inequity (Fullan, 2021). The focus on narrowing achievement gaps is insufficient, particularly when measured in the narrow terms of standardized achievement (Campbell, 2020; Hargreaves et al., 2018). Indeed, Ladson-Billing (2006) suggests that focusing on a perceived achievement gap oversimplifies the problem and frames it as a deficit. Fullan (2021) describes this as an obsession with academics involving

both the learning system and the related assessment of learning outcomes, which favours the elite and undercuts equity.

PESTEL Analysis

Moving beyond historical underpinnings, a deeper understanding of the problem of practice emerges through an exploration of political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal (PESTEL) factors. A PESTEL analysis examines external influences that affect an organization but are outside its control and not inherent or related to the organization (Mitchell & Britt, 2019). However, these external forces shape the broader context within which educational organizations operate and influence strategies for addressing the identified problem of practice (Deszca et al., 2020). In the following brief PESTEL analysis, technological and environmental factors are not considered as they are not germane to the problem of practice.

Political and Economic Factors

Education in Ontario functions in a highly centralized, neoliberal context characterized by sameness, meritocracy, race-neutrality, standardization, and deficit thinking (Shah, 2020; Shah et al., 2022b). The ongoing emphasis on bolstering Ontario's economy and global competitiveness perpetuates the misunderstanding and neglect of equity (Cepin & Naimi, 2015; Patti et al., 2015). Moreover, an accountability paradigm epitomizes the neoliberal reform agenda in Ontario (Cepin & Naimi, 2015; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017). Although large-scale accountability policies may draw attention to systemic inequities, focusing on performance and accountability for closing achievement gaps through high-stakes testing detracts from understanding and addressing unequal educational conditions (Datnow & Park, 2018; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2017). However, Shah et al. (2022b) suggest that trends are shifting from the race evasion and illusory equity of neoliberalism to anti-racist resistance, which calls for collective consciousness and the reconceptualization of structures, policies, and practices. This emerging trend provides a more favourable political context for developing this DiP.

Social Factors

In the organizational context, equity and social justice present both challenges and opportunities. Schools continue to be places of oppression for some students, with leadership practices still tethered to inherited colonial systems of power that reinforce the status quo (Dei & Adhami, 2021) and leadership frameworks that overlook alternate epistemologies (Khalifa et al., 2019; Lopez, 2021). Capper (2018) argues that inequities are perpetuated by the structural-functional and interpretive responses to diversity that stem from a deficit ideology. Although interpretivist epistemologies focus more on participation and understanding than structural functionalism, both ignore privilege, power, identity, oppression, equity, and social justice (Capper, 2018).

Furthermore, increasing diversity resulting from immigration is reshaping schools, reflected in the evolving demographics of students and families. In the GNDSB (2023), 29.7 percent of students identify their racial background as other than White, and 6.6 percent indicate that their first language is not English. As schools become more culturally and linguistically diverse, coupled with a rise in the number of students from low-income families, some view this as more of a problem than an opportunity (Lopez, 2016). This complex social context is causing uneasiness, leading to the emergence of populism and far-right ideologies, deficit thinking, and a rise in bigotry, antisemitism, racism, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination (Lopez, 2017; Osler & Starkey, 2018). At the same time, social unrest is also evident in movements such as Black Lives Matter and Indigenous protests as oppressed groups demand to be heard, set against a backdrop complicated by the proliferation of fake news, alternative facts, and so-called identity politics (Lopez, 2017).

In the wake of the pandemic, calls for change are reframing this historic period as a critical opportunity for change. Osmond et al. (2020) argue that revelations of inequities exposed by the pandemic compel educational leaders to address them. Shah (2020) suggests that the crisis has created the opportunity to challenge traditional educational discourses. Ladson-Billings (2021) echoes this

sentiment, positioning the pandemic as a chance to reimagine education and reset with a culturally-centred pedagogy. Fullan (2021) advocates for moving beyond a mindset focused solely on learning loss, emphasizing the pandemic's potential to serve as a catalyst for change away from outdated learning approaches. The current post-pandemic social context aligns well with the vision of the DiP. Nevertheless, this window of opportunity may be narrowing, prompting a sense of urgency.

Legal Factors

The Ontario Education Act (1990) and the Ontario Human Rights Code (1990; Code) serve as statutory frameworks for educational equity. Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 119 of the Education Act is the policy that provides specific direction to guide the review, development, implementation, and monitoring of Equity and Inclusive Education (EIE) policies in each school board (Cepin & Naimi, 2015). EIE policies are required to conform to the requirements of PPM 119, the Ontario Human Rights Code, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Municipal Freedom of Information and Personal Privacy Act, the Ontarians with Disabilities Act, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, the Youth Criminal Justice Act, and other relevant legislation (Council of Directors of Education, 2014).

The Code was legislated in Ontario in 1962. All people are rights-holders under the Code, including members of protected groups who may face discrimination based on age, ancestry, citizenship, colour, creed, disability, ethnic origin, family status, gender identity, gender expression, marital status, place of origin, race, receipt of public assistance, record of offences, sex and sexual orientation as well as other marginalized groups not protected by the Code (Ontario Human Rights Commission [OHRC], 2023). Moreover, all people are duty-holders under the Code and are obligated to respect, protect, promote, and fulfill the human rights of rights-holders (OHRC, 2023). In 2023, the OHRC released a new strategic plan that centres around five priorities, including education, and declared a commitment to improve opportunities and outcomes by improving accountability and addressing discrimination for students disproportionately affected (OHRC, 2023).

Educational organizations in Ontario are duty-holders under the Code and must comply by ensuring they provide an inclusive and equitable education for all students. Discrimination and exclusion in education can result from poverty, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, and other identities (Virella, 2023). Under human rights legislation in Canada, standards of inclusion oblige that barriers to full participation be addressed (Brown et al., 2020). Claims based on human rights, especially those related to the standards of inclusion, can have a significant and legal impact (Brown et al., 2020). The OHRC is mandated to protect human rights and promote compliance with the Code through public inquiries and strategic litigation but does not have the same authority as the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario to issue legally binding findings of discrimination or enforce resolution (OHRC, 2023).

Examined through a human rights lens, systemic discrimination becomes apparent, particularly impacting racialized students and those with disabilities. Research indicates that both suspensions and placement in self-contained classes disproportionately impact these groups (Brown et al., 2020). Suspensions have been shown to negatively affect engagement, achievement, and graduation rates, with certain racial groups experiencing a more significant impact (Brown et al., 2020; Zheng & De Jesus, 2018). Moreover, racialized students and those from lower income households are often overrepresented in self-contained special education classes, a trend associated with biases related to students' racial, class, and gender identities (Parekh & Brown, 2019). Given the limitations of self-contained settings in terms of curricular opportunities and instructional time, these disparities are alarming (Mitchell, 2010). Policy and practice reforms are essential to address these systemic inequities (Brown et al., 2020). Osler and Starkey (2018) proffer the importance of centring human rights at the heart of education.

Relevant Internal and External Data

The MOE makes relevant external data available to quantify students' educational outcomes using key indicators. Results indicate that in 2022-23, 78 percent of grade six students in the GNDSB met

or exceeded the provincial standard on the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) grade six reading assessment**;** 72 percent of grade ten students who took the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test for the first time passed; 69 percent of students at the end of grade ten were on track to graduate with their peers; and 76 percent of students graduated within five years of starting grade nine (OME, n.d.). The data from the 2023-24 GNDSB Student Achievement Plan reveals that 7.3 percent of students in grades four to twelve have faced at least one suspension, which is notably higher than the provincial rate of 3.32 percent, and only 26.2 percent of students in grades one to eight attend school regularly, with more than 90 percent attendance, a figure significantly lower than the provincial average of 52.6 percent (GNDSB, 2024). Although it is imperative to move beyond this technical view of educational outcomes as achievement scores (Shah, 2018), it does offer valuable insight. In a way, large-scale data clearly illustrates how many students are metaphorically falling into the river.

However, this DiP also endeavours to honour the appeal for a broader, more inclusive way to define and measure educational success (Battiste, 2013; Campbell et al., 2018; Toulouse, 2016). Although data may be essential for achieving equity, the methods and contexts for its use are poorly understood (Datnow & Park, 2018). Standardized achievement scores, graduation rates, suspension data, attendance data, and other data linked to accountability mechanisms cannot fully capture the complexity of the problem of practice. Critics argue that large-scale standardized testing and accountability measures, which impose uniform standards on all students, disproportionately benefit White, middle-class students by prioritizing knowledge that aligns with their experiences and backgrounds (Garner et al., 2017). As a result, certain data is problematic and can further marginalize low-performing students (Datnow & Park, 2018). The educational experience of students who are not White, not middle-class, non-disabled, or not heterosexual is different because they are more likely to face discrimination, harassment, and exclusion (Shah, 2018). Adopting a corporate-style approach that

prioritizes quantitative data can lead to remedial strategies that exacerbate marginalization (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021).

Instead, the valuable data gleaned from listening to the experiences of the families and students (Safir & Dugan, 2021) will also inform this DiP. Throughout my previous roles as an educator and principal, I regularly encountered students who conveyed their unmet needs through words or forms of resistance, such as disruption and withdrawal from learning. Families, too, voiced their concerns, both formally and informally. As a superintendent, I receive feedback from principals that students continue to express themselves through disruptive behaviour or learning avoidance. I also continue to hear from families advocating for the needs of their children, reaching out directly or voicing their concerns through various forms of media. Each story shared is an experience textured with emotion and one that can be mined for valuable data for understanding how students and families perceive their school experience.

Guiding Questions

The central question stemming from the problem of practice is how superintendents can foster equity-centred school leadership. From this overarching query, other questions emerge and have significant implications for superintendents in addressing the problem of practice. Factors such as increasingly polarized ideologies, the capacity of superintendents as experts, and the role of critical consciousness all contribute to and shape the central inquiry. Each contributes to shaping the central question and presents unique challenges and opportunities for superintendents.

The ethical and legal imperative to embrace equity-centred leadership is increasingly juxtaposed with polarized ideologies. These opposing viewpoints often cast equity advocates as too radical or political. The polarization within the sociopolitical landscape is further intensified by the demographic of educational leaders, who are predominantly White and may lack direct experience with systemic inequities (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2021). The challenge lies in prioritizing equity work while

acknowledging that others may harbour uncertainty, reluctance, or even resistance. Moreover, tension may arise from the transformative leadership approach rooted in a critical worldview within the structural-functional orientation of education, where change can be slow. Given that change will not come through comfortability, how can entrenched thinking and structures be challenged while also centring compassion, relationships, and learning?

A second question emerges concerning the role and capacity of superintendents in fostering the leadership development of school principals, particularly in the realm of equity-centered leadership. While the role of superintendents is evolving towards enhancing and strengthening principals' instructional leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2020), cultivating equity-centred leadership presents a distinct challenge. Leadership traditionally implies a wealth of experience, knowledge, and understanding, yet not all superintendents, myself included, possess extensive expertise, experience, and skills in equity. In navigating the journey upstream, superintendents will need to traverse alongside principals, sometimes leading and at other times following. Hence, the question is, how can superintendents decentre themselves as experts and position themselves as learners alongside principals?

Given the critical lens of this DiP, the third guiding question explores the role of critical consciousness in addressing the problem of practice. Originating from the seminal work of Freire (1970/2018), critical consciousness encompasses reflection, which is the *awareness* of oppression and inequity, *motivation* characterized by moral commitment, and *action* aimed at challenging or changing the inequity (Diemer et al., 2021). While reflection holds value, it often overshadows action (Diemer et al., 2021). However, confronting inequities requires critical action, where action and reflection occur reciprocally and simultaneously (Diemer et al., 2021; Freire, 1970/2018). Freire (1970/2018) emphasizes the significance of merging critical reflection and tangible action, which he terms praxis. The third guiding question asks how will the approach to addressing the problem of practice integrate critical consciousness and praxis?

The following section outlines the vision for change. It delineates the present state and then transitions the focus to the more desirable yet attainable organizational state.

Leadership-Focused Vision for Change

Dei and Adhami (2021) propose that although it may not be feasible to rehabilitate the current system, dreaming of new ways of schooling fosters hope and serves as a catalyst for change. Hope and critical theory intertwine as optimism drives understanding, critique, and efforts to challenge the status quo. Virella (2023) describes hope as the bedrock that grounds the vision of a better future for all students, especially those who have been historically marginalized. Fullan (2021, p.39) characterizes hope as a "nested purpose," suggesting that hope becomes a strategic tool when linked to a compelling vision. This section outlines a hopeful vision by juxtaposing the present with an envisioned future and delineating priorities for change.

Present State

Ontario is internationally renowned for its commitment to and success in achieving excellence (Campbell, 2020). Shewchuk and Cooper (2018) describe Ontario as one of the best school systems in the world and suggest that it is possible to address opportunity gaps through continued vigilance and capacity-building efforts. Although students in the GNDSB may be perceived as successful given their relatively close alignment with provincial averages in measures like EQAO scores and graduation rates (OME, n.d.), the hopeful vision for this DiP is the pursuit of the elusive goal of equity in both opportunity and outcomes for *all* students.

In the present state, the educational outcomes of some students are hindered by persistent inequities, systemic barriers, and oppression grounded in aspects of their background, identity, or perceived ability. Not all students are thriving, and too many are falling into the river. In my previous roles as principal and educator, I particularly noticed students who were disruptive or struggling. Shalaby (2017) reframes troublesome students as canaries in the coal mine, highlighting invisible harms

that others might quietly or silently endure. Drawing from Shalaby's insights, I recognize that other students also have unmet needs, albeit less visibly.

Current educational reform approaches stem from a structural functional epistemology as students are typically viewed through a deficit ideology, emphasizing what they lack or cannot do compared to norms based on White, middle-class culture (Capper, 2018; Valencia, 2010). Deficit thinking shifts the blame away from the school and locates it on the student's experience, focusing on fixing or adjusting marginalized students and families instead of addressing the underlying marginalizing conditions (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Shields, 2020; Valencia, 2010). Shields (2020) asserts that deficit thinking is a by-product of implicit bias associated with White privilege and supremacy, as negative beliefs conveniently place blame on people for their circumstances.

Moreover, the present state is steeped in performative equity. Lopez (2016) describes the prevailing ethos of equity and social justice in schools as mere window dressing and rhetoric marked by a plethora of diversity activities, glossy policy statements, buzzwords, and feel-good approaches that fail to significantly impact the experience of diverse students. Analogously, Tuck and Yang (2012) suggest that the language of decolonization in education is also shallow and symbolic. These surface-level gestures do little to substantially improve the experiences of diverse students.

In my experience, it appears that many principals and educators in the GNDSB have adopted what Pewewardy et al. (2018) refer to as a contributions approach to equity, characterized by a well-intentioned *heroes and holidays* method. Indeed, while multicultural education and cultural competency represent essential steps forward, they are insufficient and inherently flawed as they fail to address the root causes underlying systemic oppression (Au, 2017; Pon, 2009). Because cultural differences can be held in high esteem while still enacting harmful policies, good intentions must be challenged and replaced by an understanding of the difference between celebrating diversity and eliminating inequity (Dei & Adhami, 2021; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023).

The historical context and complex political, economic, social, and legal factors have shaped the present state. As Blankstein and Noguera (2015) underscore, neglecting to confront the entrenched educational inequities risks jeopardizing the very foundation of society. Nevertheless, even amidst revolutionary times and unprecedented challenges, effecting change is possible by reimagining the approach to education and prioritizing the well-being of children (Robinson & Robinson, 2022). In essence, this DiP not only endeavours to address the pressing challenges of the current educational milieu, but also strives to cultivate new possibilities for a future state.

Future Envisioned State

This future envisioned state is grounded in hope and optimism. Education has the potential to serve as a vehicle for social change (Battiste, 2013; Lopez, 2016). Shields (2020) asserts that children lack agency over the circumstances of their birth, including their families or the adversities they may encounter, and families do not willingly opt to experience hardship, poverty, marginalization, or unemployment. However, every child enters the world with boundless potential, with education as the conduit through which they can fully realize and flourish in their capabilities (Robinson & Robinson, 2022).

This vision for the future state is neither novel nor innovative. It finds alignment with the visions of the GNDSB and OME, while also drawing inspiration from the wisdom of revered thought leaders upon whose shoulders I gratefully stand. Andreotti (2021) grounds the future of education in the well-being of the next seven generations, asserting that education prepares children to be healthy and wise elders. Fullan (2021) envisions education as a pathway for all students to become good at life. Similarly, Robinson and Robinson (2022) describe the promise of education as empowering students to understand the world and nurturing their natural capacities so they can navigate their way as fulfilled, active, compassionate citizens.

The envisioned future is centred around school leadership that places equity at the forefront, firmly anchored in the core values of excellence, inclusivity, and social justice. It entails a collaborative effort between superintendents and principals to navigate upstream, collectively addressing and restructuring systems, processes, and practices to prevent any student from ever metaphorically falling into the river in the first place. By prioritizing equity in school leadership, the envisioned future aims to ensure equity of opportunity and outcome for every student, irrespective of identity, background, or perceived limitations.

Equity-centred School Leadership

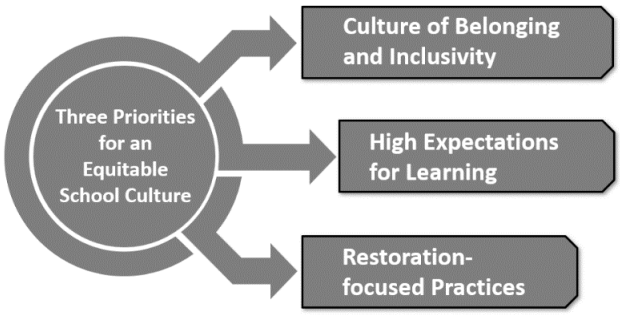
Galloway et al. (2019) underscore the importance of language in shaping change initiatives. In this DiP, the term *equity-centered* is intentionally chosen to emphasize the prioritization of the interests, aspirations, and needs of underserved students, aiming for equitable outcomes for all (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023; Lopez, 2016; Safir & Dugan, 2021). The term *leadership* encompasses the exertion of influence, the embodiment of values and vision, and the exercise of power, all of which translate into decisions and actions that profoundly impact the educational experiences of students (Lopez, 2016). Therefore, *equity-centered school leadership* is an approach to address and remedy disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes, challenging underlying oppressions that contribute to success or failure based on identity, background, or perceived limitations, ultimately striving for equitable outcomes for all students, regardless of their circumstances (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023; Lopez, 2016; Safir & Dugan, 2021).

To operationalize equity-centred school leadership, this DiP is grounded in the conceptual framework developed by Ishimaru and Galloway (2014). Drawing from the outcomes of an expert panel and a comprehensive literature review, the authors identify a set of high-impact equitable leadership practices. Among the ten practices outlined in the framework, cultivating an equitable school culture is most closely aligned with the envisioned future state and underscores the pivotal role of school

leadership. This practice is characterized by the three priorities of fostering a culture of belonging and inclusivity, maintaining high expectations for learning, and implementing restoration-focused practices (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Through these priorities (see Figure 3), school leaders will not only address immediate issues of inequity, but will also foster long-term systemic change.

Figure 3

Priorities for Fostering an Equitable School Culture



Note. This figure illustrates the three priorities of the future envisioned state. Adapted from "Beyond Individual Effectiveness: Conceptualizing Organizational Leadership for Equity, " by A. M. Ishimaru and M. K. Galloway, 2014, Leadership *and Policy in Schools, 13*(1), 93–146. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2014.890733

Culture of Belonging and Inclusivity

As a priority of the future envisioned state, a culture of belonging and inclusivity is characterized by a warm, welcoming, and affirming environment where every student feels valued, respected, and embraced for their unique identity and contributions (Khalifa et al., 2016). This culture emerges from deep, caring, and authentic connections and relationships that extend throughout the entire school community (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Such connections are founded on empathy, understanding, and a commitment to ensuring that everyone feels valued and included.

Equity-centred principals collaborate with staff, students, families, and community members to cultivate and prioritize trusting relationships (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Recognizing the dynamics of

power and oppression within these relationships, as well as their interactions with institutional structures, is paramount in fostering a sense of belonging and inclusivity (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023). This necessitates acknowledging and understanding how systemic racism and subtle biases operate and perpetuate inequities (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Rather than engaging in performative acts of equity, such as displaying posters or hosting multicultural festivals, fostering a genuine culture of belonging and inclusivity requires actively addressing issues like racism, classism, and homophobia (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Gorski & Swalwell, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021).

When inclusion and belonging are fostered for marginalized students, engagement, voice, and meaningful participation are valued (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Safir and Dugan (2021, p.99) emphasize the need to shift from a pedagogy of compliance to a pedagogy of voice that honours that students are capable, complex, and competent and says, “I see you. I believe in you. You are safe to grow and thrive here. I want to hear your voice.” Within the school environment, meaningful connections are pivotal because relationships and learning are deeply interconnected (Clinton, 2020). Deep learning flourishes in environments where students experience a genuine sense of belonging (Safir & Dugan, 2021), a concept that will be further explored in the subsequent subsection.

High Expectations for Learning

In the future envisioned state, the second priority is establishing high expectations for learning, which entails fostering a culture of rigorous standards for achievement and instilling the belief that every student can attain ambitious goals. Equity-centered principals play a crucial role in shaping such an environment by cultivating a culture where high expectations prevail, challenging the misconception that student potential is limited by their identity or background (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). Disparities in opportunities and supports, like inadequate instructional time and tolerance for mediocre performance, pose significant barriers that hinder access to excellence in education for some students.

Upholding high expectations for learning, grounded in asset-based perspectives and recognizing the inherent potential of every student, serves as a potent tool in dismantling deficit approaches and advancing greater equity (Leithwood, 2021; Okilwa & Barnett, 2017). Conversely, setting low expectations based on superficial attributes or behaviours not only diminishes the perspectives of marginalized students but also perpetuates their marginalization (Khalifa et al., 2016). Achieving equity through excellence demands collective responsibility and a shared commitment to ensuring each student's mastery of learning. It goes beyond mere proficiency in essential subjects, prioritizing an inclusive learning environment that caters to the unique needs of every learner (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015).

At its core, equity work is fundamentally pedagogical (Safir & Dugan, 2021). Fullan (2021) and Hargreaves et al. (2018) conceptualize equity and excellence as increasing the performance of all students through deep learning. Fullan and Gallagher (2018) assert that deep learning will address inequity and is especially key for students most disconnected from school. Some students who have encountered homelessness, neglect, trauma, or intergenerational poverty may not demonstrate readiness to learn, often leading to remediation, program modifications, or withdrawal, which can exacerbate feelings of alienation and disengagement (Fullan et al., 2018). Deep learning holds well-being and learning as essential and inseparable in developing, understanding, and using the six global competencies: character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking (Fullan, 2021). Achievement can be improved for all students when schools keep equity at the core (Shewchuk & Cooper, 2018).

Restoration-Focused Practices

The third priority of the envisioned future state, a culture of restoration-focused practices, underscores the importance of repairing harm, nurturing healing, rebuilding relationships, and embracing restorative justice principles as alternatives to punitive measures. Equity-centered school

principals play a pivotal role in cultivating such a culture by reconceptualizing disciplinary approaches (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015) and actively addressing disproportionate and exclusionary disciplinary practices that impede learning opportunities for specific student demographics (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Often, challenging behaviours exhibited by marginalized students stem from unmet needs, which can lead to an increased likelihood of disciplinary actions (Greene, 2016; Shalaby, 2017). However, exclusionary disciplinary practices are rooted in colonial power dynamics that focus on assigning blame rather than fostering understanding, thereby perpetuating the marginalization of vulnerable student groups (Eyllon et al., 2022).

While principals may justify resorting to exclusionary disciplinary measures such as suspension with good intentions, the repercussions are often far-reaching and deleterious. Such practices frequently exacerbate misbehaviour, contribute to higher dropout rates, diminish graduation rates, and increase the likelihood of engagement with the criminal justice system known as the school-to-prison pipeline, ultimately fostering a negative school climate (Annamma et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2023; Dutil, 2020; Mergler et al., 2014). The probability of dropping out of high school increases with each suspension, and the likelihood of graduating drops from 75 to 50 percent after just the first suspension (Balfanz et al., 2014).

Equity-centered leaders embrace restorative and inclusive practices to reshape school discipline dynamics (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). By adopting restorative approaches, principals transform the relationship between staff and students and achieve equity in school discipline by reducing suspension and simultaneously the number of marginalized students in the discipline system (Gregory et al., 2016). Restorative practices foster belonging by shifting from a culture of exclusion to a relational culture and addressing the root cause of misbehaviour, thus ameliorating racial disparities while improving school climates, academic engagement, and academic performance (Darling-Hammond, 2023). Clinton (2020) encourages connection before correction and direction, as connection fosters stress management,

emotional regulation, motivation and perseverance, healthy relationship skills, identity, critical and creative thinking, and executive functioning needed for students to do well in school.

The future envisioned state reflects a belief in the inherent worth and potential of every student, aiming to create a school environment where every child can thrive. It upholds the principle of "no throw-away lives," a concept articulated by advocates like Shalaby (2017, p. 169), emphasizing the imperative of investing in the growth and development of all children, irrespective of their identities or backgrounds, and rejecting the notion of deeming any child as disposable or expendable. By embracing the priorities outlined in the future-envisioned state, equity-centred school leaders will ensure that every child is valued, supported, and provided with the resources and opportunities they need to succeed.

Conclusion

This first chapter poses the problem by illustrating the view from the proverbial mouth of the river. It is the landscape as seen through the lens of my own worldview, positionality, and position as a villager. The village, symbolizing the organizational context, was depicted alongside a historical overview and examination of pertinent factors contributing to the issue. Despite the efforts of villagers to rescue students in the present state, the root cause remains unaddressed, leading to worsening conditions and an increasing number of individuals falling into the river. Envisioned was a hopeful future state along with its key priorities.

The following chapter will explore a path to journey upstream toward this envisioned future. It will explore the significance of transformative and authentic leadership in driving change, utilizing Schein's (2017) change theory as a guiding framework. Additionally, an analysis of system readiness, drawing from Wang et al.'s (2020) conceptual framework, will be conducted, followed by contemplation of three potential strategies for addressing the problem of practice.

Chapter Two – Finding the Path

Chapter one framed the problem of practice through a critical lens, researcher positionality, and organizational context. It provided a historical overview and analyzed the political, economic, social, and legal (PESTEL) factors shaping the current state, while also outlining the priorities for the envisioned future state. This second chapter, however, contemplates the plan to address the problem of practice. Fullan (2020) advises cultivating a deep appreciation for and understanding of the change process. This chapter identifies the leadership approach and framework for leading the change process, considers organizational change readiness and change ethics, and concludes by deliberating potential strategies to address the problem of practice. Metaphorically, this chapter seeks to find a path to navigate the journey upstream. The first section discusses how leadership is understood in the context of this Dissertation-in-Practice (DiP).

Leadership Approach to Change

Stemming from a deep contemplation of critical theory, the leadership approach delineated in this section reflects an epistemological shift from interpretivism to a more critical orientation. While the principles of instructional and transformational leadership outlined in the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) have historically resonated, from a critical worldview they are experienced as deficient in ethics and social justice (Doan & Jaber, 2021; Shields, 2022). Moreover, these leadership approaches have been ineffectual in charting an equitable and ethical change path for the journey upstream.

Khalifa et al. (2016) argue that intensifying current leadership models will fail to address persistent inequities. Instead, leaders must maintain a broad awareness of possibilities and ethical responsibilities (Ciulla, 2005), consider alternate epistemologies (Khalifa et al., 2019; Lopez, 2021), and embrace pluralism by holding multiple perspectives in tension (Andreotti et al., 2011). Heeding this, two leadership approaches, transformative and authentic, will be integrated to address the problem of

practice, aligning with a critically informed worldview. Subsequently, a discussion of these leadership approaches and their integration follows.

Transformative Leadership

Transformative leadership is a critical framework that operates as a normative theory by embedding explicit values of equity and justice to guide actions (Shields, 2022). Weiner (2003) defines transformative leadership as the exertion of influence guided by the principles of justice and democracy and the intricate balance between individual accountability and societal obligation. The concept of influence holds significance in shaping the relationship dynamics between superintendents and principals, which will be vital in addressing the problem of practice.

Transformative leadership prioritizes addressing systemic inequities by centring the lived experiences of historically marginalized individuals and rectifying underlying structures (Shields, 2020, 2022). This approach aims to recognize and tackle the root causes upstream that lead to students being metaphorically swept into the river. Moreover, transformative leaders operate with a sense of urgency, recognizing the need for immediate action rather than waiting for systemic change (Galloway et al., 2019; Roache & Marshall, 2022; Shields, 2020). This sense of urgency aligns with critical theory's orientation towards the more radical end of the nature of change axis within Burrell and Morgan's sociology theory framework (Capper, 2018).

Additionally, according to Battiste (2013), schools have the potential to act as catalysts for change, particularly for students whose potential cannot be constrained by predetermined circumstances like their social class, gender, or race. Transformative leadership theory contends that since those factors are not chosen, it is essential to recognize and address implicit bias while rejecting deficit thinking (Shields, 2020). This underscores the critical role of educational leaders in fostering environments that nurture the potential of all students, irrespective of identity, background, or perceived limitations.

Because transformational leadership is ubiquitous in the Great Northern District School Board (GNDSB), presumably because it is promoted by the OLF, it is important to differentiate between transformative and transformational leadership. The latter emphasizes setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). However, transformational leadership does not address the inequitable distribution of power, critique, or the need for moral courage (Shields, 2022). In contrast, transformative leadership is grounded in the principles of excellence, equity, inclusion, and social justice (Shields, 2022). Appendix B provides a detailed comparison of these two leadership approaches.

Transformative leadership is a fitting approach for addressing the problem of practice as it aligns with the critical orientation of this DiP. It couples culturally responsive approaches with tools that address oppression and systemic inequity, underlining the need for those with privilege to understand hegemony and dismantle privilege by becoming allies and agents of change (Galloway et al., 2019; Shields, 2020). Shields (2020) contends that embracing transformative leadership will lead to the creation of safe and caring school environments where students experience a sense of belonging, inclusion, and engagement in learning. Indeed, the goal is to cultivate an approach to leadership in service of the type of schools in the future envisioned state, thus making transformative leadership an appropriate leadership approach for the DiP.

Authentic Leadership

Although there is no universally accepted definition of authentic leadership, this DiP draws from the work of Walumbwa et al. (2008). They characterize authentic leaders as those who leverage and cultivate positive psychological capacities and ethical climates, reflecting the underlying dimensions of balanced processing, internalized moral perspective, relational transparency, and self-awareness. Moreover, Northouse (2019) identifies four positive psychological attributes as key to authentic leadership: confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience.

Authentic leaders link their deep personal values and convictions with practices that are ethically and morally uplifting (Avolio et al., 2005; Duignan, 2014). They drive change by creating energized fields of influence grounded in values, ethics, collective vision, and moral purpose, fostering a collective ethic of responsibility among followers (Duignan, 2014). Authentic leaders encourage diverse viewpoints and build collaborative relationships, enhancing credibility and nurturing the respect and trust of followers (Avolio et al., 2005). These principles are fundamental in shaping the relationship dynamics between superintendents and principals. This receptiveness to diverse perspectives resonates with critical theory, particularly in its challenge of positivism. Furthermore, authentic leadership generates positive energy, fueling motivation and drive (Duignan, 2014). This positive energy is not only conducive to fostering growth but also serves as a crucial catalyst in propelling the transformative process forward.

In his research, Duignan (2014) challenges the perception that authentic leadership is a soft approach by presenting compelling evidence that authentic leaders actually outperform more aggressive counterparts. This refutation highlights the credibility of authentic leadership, which emphasizes both ethical conduct and a genuine concern for others (Banwo et al., 2021). This alignment between soft power and the concept of authentic, caring leadership reinforces its legitimacy and effectiveness. With its focus on ethical behaviour and its capacity to inspire engagement and dedication, authentic leadership emerges as particularly well-suited for driving educational change and improvement (Duignan, 2014) and, in extension, for addressing this problem of practice.

In adopting authentic leadership, various arguments that debate, defend, and contest this approach have been considered. While skeptics like Alvesson and Einola (2019) criticize it as overly simplistic and lacking empirical support, proponents such as Gardner and McCauley (2022) refute these claims, advocating for trust in both research and lived experiences. Despite the need for further empirical investigation, a growing body of evidence demonstrates a positive correlation between

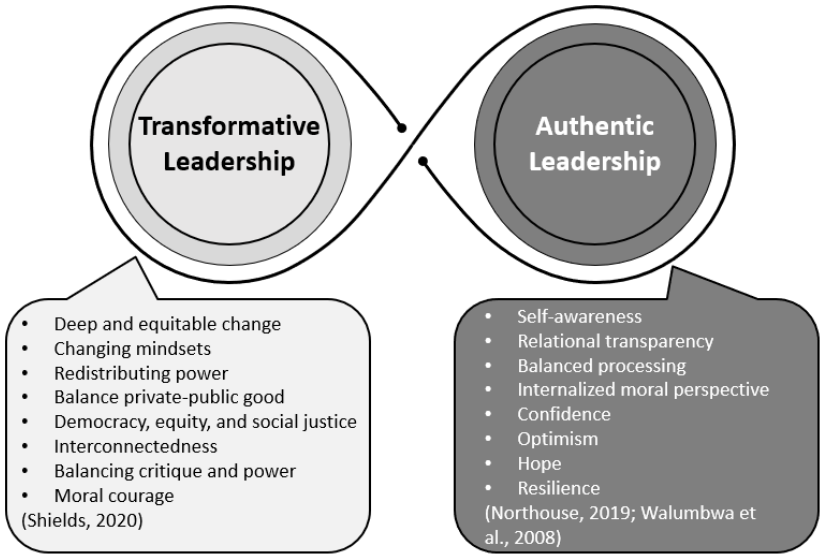
authentic leadership and valued outcomes such as trust in leaders, psychological safety, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and both individual and team performance (Abbas et al., 2020; Agote et al., 2016; Ahmed, 2023; Kulophas & Hallinger, 2021; Saleem et al., 2022; Sarwar et al., 2023). In weighing the various arguments surrounding authentic leadership, it is evident that while skepticism exists, there is an increasing amount of research supporting its positive impact on organizational outcomes.

Integration

Transformative and authentic theories present distinct yet complementary leadership approaches for addressing the problem of practice. Shields (2020) suggests that transformative leadership can be adopted without dismissing other leadership approaches. Integrative thinking advocates for resolving the tension between different models rather than choosing between them, ultimately creating a new model that incorporates aspects from each (Leavy, 2017). The integration of these two approaches will enhance the overall leadership approach (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Integration of Transformative and Authentic Leadership



Note. This figure illustrates the integration of transformative and authentic leadership.

The synergy between these two approaches enhances the other's efficacy. Authentic leadership complements the promise and hope of transformative leadership emphasized by Shields (2020), playing a vital role in fostering moral courage and balancing critique. Additionally, the soft power of authentic leadership (Duignan, 2014) embodies Shields's (2020) recommendation to be full of peace and goodwill and act with patience, firmness, tenderness, and calm deliberation. Merely having good intentions is insufficient (Shields, 2020), and the value of authenticity compels actions to align with rhetoric (Duignan, 2014). Action is a key consideration in addressing the third guiding question.

This integrated approach to leadership will employ the framework for leading the change process described in the next section to foster equity-centred school leadership in the GNDSB. The subsequent section moves on from describing the approach to leadership to delineating the change process. It will elucidate how Schein's (2017) change theory will serve as a framework for guiding change.

Framework for Leading the Change Process

Leading organizational change is a complex process. Neglecting to align a planned change with a suitable change theory can lead to missed opportunities for improvement (Evans et al., 2012). This section introduces Schein's (2017) change theory as the apposite framework for addressing the problem of practice, while also recognizing its inherent limitations. This marks the planning phase for embarking on the journey upstream. It concludes by discussing how the change theory aligns with learning.

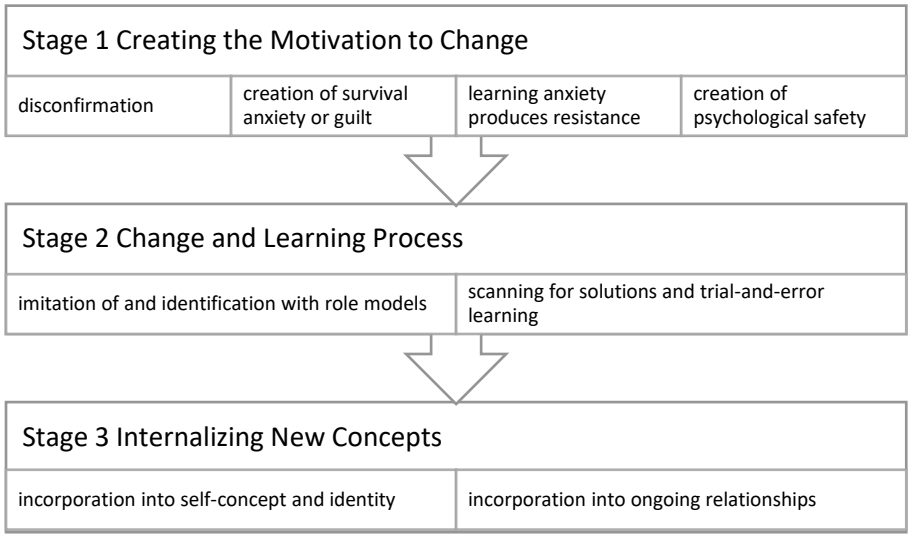
Schein's Change Theory

Schein's (2017) change theory is the framework that will be adopted to address the problem of practice (see Figure 5). Schein's process expands upon Kurt Lewin's foundational stage theory of change by incorporating the psychological and social processes that transpire when people and organizations change (Coghlan, 2021). Within Schein's model of learning and change, Lewin's traditional three stages

of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing evolve into three new stages: creating the motivation to change, the actual change and learning process, and internalizing the change (Coghlan, 2021; Schein, 2017).

Figure 5

Schein's (2017) Change Theory



Note. Adapted from "*Organizational Culture and Leadership* (5th ed.)," by E. H. Schein, 2017, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

The impetus for change is fueled by the need to reconcile the disparity between the future envisioned state and the present state (Stroh, 2015). In Schein's (2017) initial stage, dissatisfaction or disequilibrium fosters the motivation to change. Lewin (1947, p. 35) describes unfreezing as "bring[ing] about deliberately an emotional stir-up" in order to "break open the shell of complacency and self-righteousness." Schein uses Lewin's terminology of unfreezing in this stage (Coghlan, 2021) and asserts that it involves four distinct processes: disconfirmation, survival anxiety or learning anxiety, resistance to change, and creating psychological safety (Schein, 1996, 2017).

Disconfirmation develops when economic, political, social, or personal information reveals that goals are not being met (Schein, 2017). Survival anxiety, or guilt, emerges when fundamental values are

compromised, whereas learning anxiety is the apprehension of learning something new (Schein, 2017). Schein (2017) emphasizes that for change to occur, survival anxiety must be greater than learning anxiety, underscoring the importance of mitigating learning anxiety. Schein's (2017) first stage aligns with the critical first step in the transformative process of equity work identified by Shields (2020), dismantling and deconstructing beliefs, values, and assumptions.

Learning and change transpire in the second stage. New behaviours, beliefs, and values are learned through imitating a role model and identifying what is effective, or by scanning the environment and using trial-and-error strategies to determine what works (Schein, 1996, 2017). In this stage, principals will identify and engage in new approaches to leadership in service of the priorities of the future envisioned state. Schein (1996, 2017) emphasizes that although it is more important to begin by changing behaviour, new learning only occurs when cognitive redefinition is characterized by a change in beliefs and values. Cognitive redefinition results from new information that creates semantic redefinition, cognitive broadening, and new standards that shift the scales of judgment (Schein, 1996).

The final stage of the change process is characterized by internalization and learning agility (Schein, 2017). Schein (2017) builds upon Lewin's notion of refreezing, emphasizing that outcomes must uphold new learning. If improved outcomes do not materialize, disconfirmation will trigger another cycle of change (Schein, 2017). Given the dynamic nature of human systems, the change and learning process is continuous (Schein, 2017). Consequently, the organizational state that refreezes will be characterized by perpetual learning.

The integrative nature of the transformative and authentic leadership approaches seamlessly aligns with Schein's change theory (2017). In the first stage, both approaches will be instrumental as Schein (1996) emphasizes the importance of balancing the challenge of disconfirmation with creating psychological safety. Transformative leadership ignites this disequilibrium, while authentic leadership nurtures psychological safety. This blend of approaches remains advantageous throughout the second

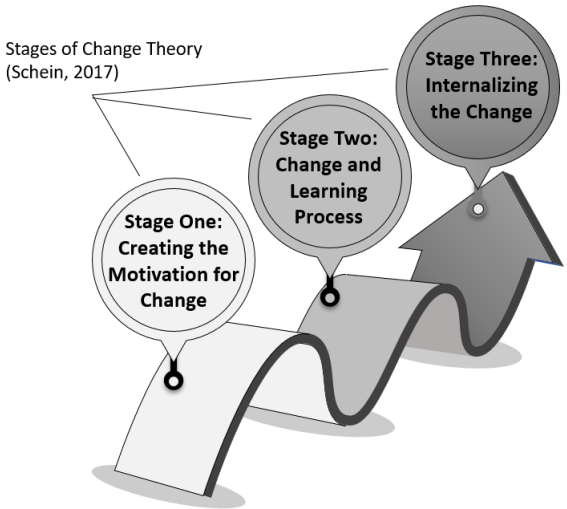
stage of learning and change, as well as in the process of internalizing new concepts during the final stage.

Limitations

In adopting any change process, it is prudent to acknowledge and mitigate potential limitations. Despite the credibility gained from Schein's (2017) alignment with other developmental behaviour change models, the three-step model itself has faced criticism for oversimplification, linearity, and rigidity (Burnes, 2020; Higgs & Rowland, 2005; Stacey, 1996). Indeed, Dumas and Beinecke (2018) contend that change is much more emergent and iterative than Schein's model suggests. To address these concerns, Schein's change process will be reconceptualized to reflect the complex ups and downs of the change journey (see Figure 6). This adaptation acknowledges that principals may move between stages or remain in transition, recognizing the variability and potential iterative nature of Schein's process as individuals and organizations progress through change at different rates.

Figure 6

Adaptation of Schein's (2017) Change Theory



Note. This figure illustrates an adaptation of Schein's (2017) stages of change theory to show that the change process is not linear.

Change as Managed Learning

Schein (1996) proposes viewing the change process as a form of managed learning. Disconfirmation acts as a form of unlearning, initiating subsequent learning and change. Schein's (2017) change model also holds potential for fostering triple-loop learning and third-order change. Recognizing different orders of change is crucial, as not all changes are equal in magnitude, with the implications of the change determining its impact (Waters et al., 2003). Acknowledging various orders of change increases the likelihood of successful planned change (Bartunek & Moch, 1987; Waters et al., 2003).

There are three distinct orders of change, each characterized by increasing levels of complexity and demand. First-order change aims to maintain the status quo by gradually improving existing practices or processes without challenging underlying assumptions or fundamental principles (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). Second-order change entails a deeper transformation that challenges assumptions, prompting a reevaluation of core beliefs and structures and resulting in practice shifts (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). Third-order change seeks fundamental shifts in perceptions and mental models, necessitating a profound alteration in the schemata that shape understanding of the world and guide actions (Bartunek & Moch, 1987).

Moving beyond first-order change, which maintains the status quo and avoids challenging underlying assumptions, is crucial, as highlighted by Shields (2020), who advocates for second-order change. Second-order change is disruptive and confrontational, leading to conscious incompetence (Waters et al., 2003) and aligning with disconfirmation and the unfreezing of schema in the initial stage of Schein's change process (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). A premise of this DiP is the belief that Schein's change process can facilitate third-order change. As praxis becomes more integrated into the final stage of the change process, it will merge with principals' identities and self-conceptions. To achieve third-order change, superintendents will need to create systems that empower principals to apply their new

frameworks in diagnosing and decision-making (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). This could involve modifying policies and practices and establishing platforms for principals to consider alternative perspectives.

Third-order change and triple-loop learning are interconnected concepts, signifying profound and transformative levels of change and learning. According to Flood (1996, 2018), triple-loop learning deepens the learning process by integrating single-loop learning, focusing on behaviour and execution; double-loop learning, which centers on thinking and strategic decision-making; and triple-loop learning, which involves transforming values and principles to determine what is right. As organizations often prioritize single-loop learning, they may overlook double-loop learning, which entails reflection and challenging assumptions to comprehend how conscious and unconscious choices influence actions (Senge et al., 2012). Third-order change and triple-loop learning will evolve throughout the change process, demonstrating an alignment of values with actions (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Schein's (2017) Change Process and Triple-Loop Learning

Stage of Schein's Change Process	Order of Change	Deepness of Learning
Creating the Motivation for Change	*Second Order Change*	*Single-Loop Learning*
Change and Learning Process	*Second Order Change*	*Double-Loop Learning*
Internalizing the Change	*Third Order Change*	*Triple-Loop Learning*

Note. This figure illustrates how the order of change and deepness of learning align with each stage of Schein's (2017) stages of the change process.

As leaders engage in the learning process, they will shift from a superficial understanding of equity to a commitment characterized by efforts to do things right. This represents single-loop learning. As learning evolves in the second stage, leaders will become more reflective, potentially leading to actions aligned to do the right things. This signifies double-loop learning. Finally, triple-loop learning occurs in the third stage, where it becomes intrinsic to consistently prioritize values and principles as a guiding framework for discerning what is right.

While Schein's (2017) framework will be used to lead the change process, Wang et al.'s (2020) framework will be used to assess readiness for change. This is discussed in the following section.

Organizational Change Readiness

Readiness for change is a critical precursor to successful change implementation (Armenakis et al., 1993). Before venturing upstream, it is critical to assess readiness to embark on the journey. Despite extensive literature about organizational change readiness, terminology lacks consistency, and there is limited evidence of validity or reliability for the range of measurement tools (Weiner et al., 2008). While quantitative tools exist, qualitative approaches can offer valuable, context-specific insights (Armenakis et al., 1993; Holt et al., 2007). Considering these factors, this section utilizes Wang et al.'s (2020) conceptual framework of readiness to appraise the readiness of the GNDSB for change. This is followed by a discussion of the responsibilities of individual actors within the organization.

Conceptual Framework of System Readiness

According to Wang et al. (2020), change readiness is a multidimensional, multilevel, and multifaceted construct essential for successful organizational transformation. Their conceptual framework builds on Holt et al.'s (2007) definition of readiness, which identifies key factors influencing change readiness: efficacy, valence, commitment, and leadership. Readiness, defined as the state of psychological and behavioural preparation for deliberate and planned change, underscores the importance of addressing both individual readiness for change, such as that of a school leader, and

organizational readiness for change, such as that of a school board (Wang et al., 2020). To assess the readiness of the GNDSB for change, the organization is evaluated using Wang et al.'s (2020) framework, considering both individual and organizational dimensions across each of the four key constructs.

Efficacy

Efficacy is a key change belief and reflects the confidence that change can be effectively implemented (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Holt et al., 2007). Personal efficacy is related to individual readiness for change, whereas organizational efficacy is the shared belief in the collective capability to engage in the action and is dependent upon the capabilities of different members and the capacity for professional learning throughout the organization (Wang et al., 2020). Principals' self-efficacy determines their persistence in seeking effective strategies and courses of action, particularly in challenging contexts (Ford et al., 2020). Although personal efficacy differs from organizational efficacy, they are related in that self-efficacy is influenced by the perception that the organization is capable of change (Wang et al., 2020).

In the GNDSB, qualitative data collected through conversations with principals would appear to demonstrate a range of self-efficacy and that many are not confident in their ability to foster change and achieve goals. A study by the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC, 2022) asserts that principals are worried about their effectiveness and feel inadequately prepared to create safe schools that reflect equity and anti-oppression. However, efficacy among superintendents seems to be more robust, perhaps driven by their role, agency, and responsibility for change. The shared conviction among senior leaders regarding collective capability, coupled with the organization's commitment to professional learning, significantly enhances overall organizational efficacy.

Valence

Valence is the extent to which the change is perceived as beneficial (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Holt et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2020). Individual valence is the degree to which one feels that one will, or

will not, personally benefit from the change initiative (Holt et al., 2007). Similarly, organizational valence is the perceived benefit of the change and the appositeness of the change initiative to address the gap between the present and envisioned future state (Wang et al., 2020). Valence is challenging to assess as the idea that equity-centred school leadership can address inequitable school outcomes has not yet been explicitly communicated. It is prudent to suppose, however, that valence may be low. Assuming that valence needs to be cultivated ensures that it will be attended to during the change process.

Commitment

Commitment is a key construct at both the individual and organizational readiness dimensions. Wang et al. (2020) explain commitment as the mindset that binds one to a course of action, although some individuals may be more inclined than others to embrace change (Holt et al., 2007). Organizational commitment is the shared resolve, including intention and participation, to implement change (Wang et al., 2020). Higher levels of personal commitment correlate with greater individual readiness for change, and similarly, heightened organizational commitment leads to stronger collective efforts (Wang et al., 2020).

Conversations with principals in the GNDSB suggest a strong commitment to their work and students, driven by the shared desire for all students to have positive, successful experiences at school. Vision statements and policy documents supporting equity substantiate evidence of strong organizational valence. At both the individual and organizational levels, commitment to the goals of the change process is robust. However, there is less clarity regarding commitment to the change process itself. Although there is a strong sense of commitment among the superintendents to the change process, the commitment of school leaders will need to be contemplated during Schein's (2017) first stage of creating the motivation to change.

Leadership

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping system readiness for change, operating at both individual and organizational levels. Personal leadership involves taking personal initiative, feeling empowered, and maintaining a proactive attitude toward change, often stemming from a sense of self-reference or autonomy (Wang et al., 2020). On the other hand, organizational leadership encompasses structural support, such as providing resources, establishing policies and procedures, and developing infrastructure, as well as cultural support, including fostering a shared vision, offering coaching support, engaging in persuasive communication, managing conflict, and providing encouragement (Wang et al., 2020).

Organizational leadership within the GNDSB demonstrates strength in both structural and cultural support. There is a consistent willingness to provide infrastructure, resources, and procedures to support student success. Additionally, superintendents effectively communicate the shared vision and offer support through coaching and encouragement. These organizational strengths will be leveraged to foster the individual leadership of principals throughout the change process.

Stage of Readiness

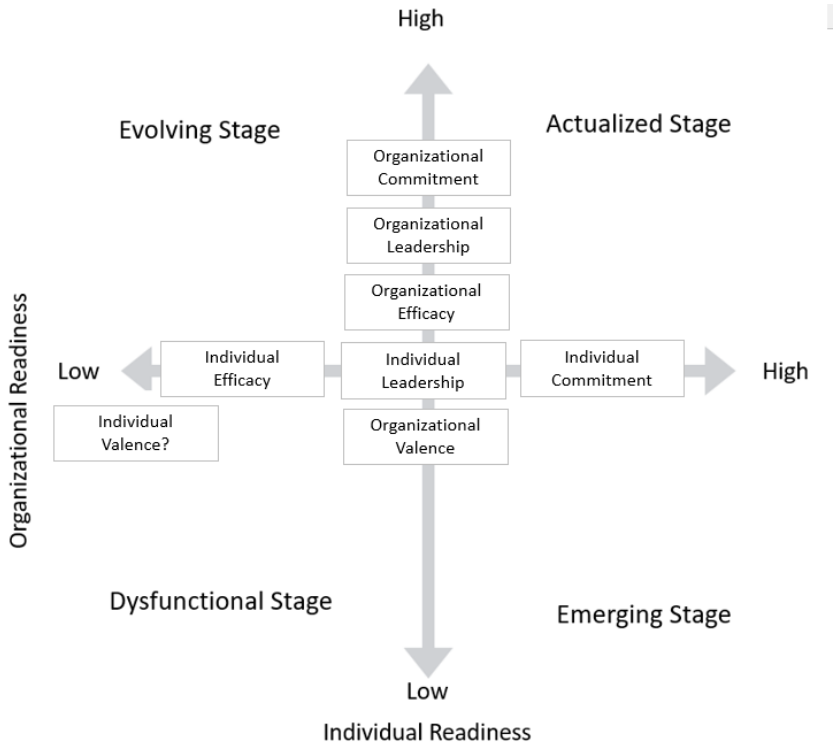
According to Wang et al. (2020), their conceptual framework of system readiness includes four evolutionary stages: dysfunctional, evolving, emerging, and actualized, which are dynamic, context-specific, and iterative. The process is non-linear, with opposite quadrants representing the dysfunctional stage, characterized by low individual and organizational readiness, and the actualized stage, characterized by high individual and organizational readiness.

In the GNDSB, organizational readiness is relatively high, but individual readiness varies, positioning system readiness predominantly in the evolving stage quadrant (see Figure 8). Specifically, efficacy, commitment, and leadership are strong at the organizational level, while valence is evolving as the goals of the change process become clearer. However, individual readiness is generally low overall.

While commitment to change goals is strong, efficacy is low, valence is uncertain, and leadership is moderate. Wang et al. (2020) characterize the evolving stage as performance-oriented, marked by the development of system-wide preparedness.

Figure 8

Wang et al.'s (2020) Conceptual Framework of System Readiness



Note. Adapted from "Creating Individual and Organizational Readiness for Change: Conceptualization of System Readiness for Change in School Education," by T. Wang, D. Olivier, and P. Chen, 2020, *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *26*(6), p. 15. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2020.1818131

Assessing the readiness level of the system serves as a foundational step in understanding the current state and determining the necessary actions to bolster readiness. Knowing this provides key information about moving both organizational and individual readiness toward converging in the

actualized stage. By learning together, individual leaders will build their capacity and deepen efficacy, valence, and leadership to foster system readiness (Wang et al., 2020).

Most change models acknowledge that readiness for change happens early in the change process during momentum building or unfreezing (Armenakis et al., 1993; Wang et al., 2020). Indeed, creating readiness for change is a key facet of Schein's (2017) first stage. In this context, readiness is created during unfreezing and pre-empts the resistance that may be experienced during the change process (Armenakis et al., 1993; Wang et al., 2020). The term readiness is preferable to resistance as it is a more positive approach to framing change (Armenakis & Harris, 2009) and positions the change agent as proactive (Armenakis et al., 1993). The role of the change agent and change recipients is discussed further in the next section.

Responsibilities of Individual Actors

Armenakis and Harris (2009) distinguish between two key actors in the change process: change agents and change recipients. Within this DiP, superintendents act as change agents, while principals are considered change recipients. According to Armenakis and Harris (2009), change agents proactively anticipate, evaluate, and strategize to impact the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of change recipients.

The dynamic between change agents and change recipients is shaped by the extent of recipient participation in diagnosing, interpreting, and addressing the problem (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). This is a crucial consideration for superintendents and will be incorporated into the change implementation plan. Participation enhances efficacy and valence (Wang et al., 2020) and is vital for sustainable change (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Wang et al., 2020). Furthermore, the influence of the change agent is strengthened by credibility, trustworthiness, and sincerity (Armenakis et al., 1993), underscoring the importance of authentic leadership in guiding the change process.

Change agents are responsible for convincing change recipients of the benefits of the planned change (Armenakis & Harris, 2009). Their influence strategies include persuasive communication, active

participation, and managing external information sources (Armenakis et al., 1993). Change agents must evaluate both the degree of readiness and the urgency for change when determining how to influence readiness (Armenakis et al., 1993). Nevertheless, the primary tool for creating readiness is the message, which should incorporate both discrepancy or the need for change and efficacy or the ability to change (Armenakis et al., 1993). A comprehensive strategy for communication is articulated in the change implementation plan.

Given the dynamics of the relationship between change agents and change recipients, ethical considerations in organizational change must also be considered. The following section discusses ethical leaders and ethical leadership.

Leadership Ethics in Organizational Change

Before contemplating strategies to address the problem of practice, it is prudent to recognize the pivotal role of ethics in organizational change (Sharif & Scandura, 2014). Society's increasing diversity and complexity, also reflected in the organizational context of the GNDSB, is heightening the need for ethically grounded educational leadership (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). Furthermore, in an era characterized by division and polarization, educational leaders must consider multiple ethical perspectives to navigate challenges effectively (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). This consideration aligns with the second guiding question of this DiP, which focuses on fostering change amidst polarized ideologies.

Ethics play a pivotal role in both leadership and the process of change, given the significant responsibility leaders bear in influencing both individuals and organizations (Ciulla, 2005; Northouse, 2019). Ciulla (2005) posits that the ethical conduct of leaders and the ethical nature of the leadership process are intertwined and crucial for effective leadership. The following section explores the concept of ethical leaders, followed by a discussion on ethical leadership, aligning with Nicholson and Kurucz's (2019) assertion that understanding who we ought to be precedes knowing what actions to take.

Ethical Leaders

Ethical leaders prioritize the moral purpose of education, uphold fairness and justice, are perceived as compassionate and principled, and advocate for inclusivity and social justice to ensure the success of all students, especially those who have been historically marginalized or underserved (Ehrich et al., 2015). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) emphasize the ethics of the profession, which includes justice, critique, and care, enriched by professional judgment and ethical decision-making. This ethic asserts that serving the *best interests of students* is the moral imperative for educational leadership (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022).

In Ontario, all principals and superintendents are members of the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), which promotes the ethical standards of care, respect, trust, and integrity (OCT, n.d.). These standards aim to uphold the dignity of the teaching profession, define ethical responsibilities, guide decision-making, and foster public trust (OCT, n.d.). While Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) caution about the limitations of professional codes of ethics, they also acknowledge their value as guiding principles. Ultimately, leaders must develop their own ethical code, drawing from personal values and professional standards, with a focus on prioritizing students in decision-making (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022).

Ethical leadership is particularly vital during organizational change as it enhances trust and credibility, which is crucial for fostering positive responses during challenging transitions (Sharif & Scandura, 2014). Transparency, a tenet of authentic leadership (Northouse, 2019), further reinforces the leader's ethical integrity (Sharif & Scandura, 2014). Authentic leadership, rooted in the fusion of leadership, ethics, and positive organizational behaviour, plays a pivotal role in driving change by creating energized fields of influence grounded in values, ethics, collective vision, and moral purpose while fostering a collective ethic of responsibility among others (Duignan, 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership pertains to how leaders lead and their relationship with those impacted by their actions (Ciulla, 2005). Consequentialism in ethics evaluates actions based solely on their outcomes, aligning closely with leadership and organizational change, where leaders and their initiatives are primarily judged by the results they achieve rather than their intentions or intrinsic qualities (Burnes & By, 2012). As leaders exercise their influence through power, persuasion, and coercion, they bear ethical responsibility for both their actions and inactions (Ciulla, 2005).

Within the GNDSB's hierarchical governance, superintendents and principals operate in an asymmetrical relationship, where superintendents hold authority (Durand & Calori, 2006). Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) advocate for an ethical leadership approach centred on relationships, promoting well-being through an ethic of care rooted in concern and connection (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). This relational leadership perspective views leadership as a social influence process that facilitates change (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Superintendents can nurture relational bonds with principals, addressing asymmetry and promoting well-being through solicitude, modelling, dialogue, and confirmation (Durand & Calori, 2006; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019), drawing on the principles of authentic leadership.

Ethical leadership lies at the intersection of ethics and effectiveness (Ciulla, 2005). Planned change is more ethical than emergent change and avoids reliance on power and manipulation (Burnes & By, 2012). The upcoming section is in service of planned change and discusses strategies for addressing the problem of practice.

Strategies to Address the Problem of Practice

While the preceding sections delved into the leadership approach, a change framework, and readiness for change, this section will explore potential strategies to address the problem of practice, charting the path for the journey upstream. Safir and Dugan (2021) differentiate between complicated challenges, where solutions are known beforehand and can be tackled with technical expertise, and

complex challenges, which have uncertain resolutions. Equity challenges typically fall into the latter category of complexity. In this DiP, the term *strategy* is intentionally chosen over *solution* to emphasize a more exploratory approach, indicating a plan of action open to inquiry rather than a definitive resolution. The section begins by outlining the drivers of change and the goals of the change process. Subsequently, most of this section will examine and compare three different strategies, concluding with identifying a preferred strategy.

Drivers of Change

Organizational change is influenced by two types of change drivers: internal and external. Internal drivers facilitate the implementation of change throughout the organization, whereas external drivers are the source of the organization's need for change (Whelan-Berry & Somerville, 2010).

Change leaders are internal drivers of change. In this DiP, superintendents serve as the change agents responsible for facilitating the implementation of change. As ethical leaders, superintendents are driven by the moral purpose of education and the best interests of all students (Ehrich et al., 2015; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). As internal change drivers, superintendents will actively exercise ethical leadership to implement the preferred strategy for initiating and advancing change.

Deszca et al. (2020) emphasize the significant influence of external change drivers. The GNDSB, along with public education as a whole, is particularly affected by movements such as the human rights movement. Current societal upheaval underscores the urgency of examining oppressive frameworks in educational settings (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021), framing the need to rectify marginalizing school practices as a human rights issue (Doan & Jaber, 2021). Considering education's recognition as a universal human right and priority (UNESCO, 2019), addressing equity and human rights concerns spurred by external forces is imperative.

Goal of the Change Process

The goal of the change process is to cultivate equity-centred school leadership. This DiP seeks to develop a strategy to address the problem of practice concerning how superintendents can foster that development. Recognizing that superintendents' adoption of a teaching and learning orientation is a promising lever for enhancing principals' practice (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Rogers, 2022), this approach will be prioritized within the preferred strategy.

Johnson (2008) suggests that leadership development requires two types of learning: informational and transformative. While informational learning enriches existing knowledge, effective leaders do not have more knowledge but have different mental models for dealing with complex challenges (Johnson, 2008). These mental models, governing vital cause-effect relationships, require challenging underlying assumptions (Stroh, 2015). Transformative learning, which induces profound shifts in perspectives, proves more beneficial than informational learning (Brown, 2004; Johnson, 2008; Wang et al., 2019), aligning with third-order change (Bartunek & Moch, 1987) and triple-loop learning (Flood, 1996, 2018). Given that the goal of the change process is to facilitate principal learning, the following section entails a thorough consideration and analysis of potential strategies aimed at addressing the problem of practice.

Possible Strategies to Address the Problem of Practice

Three strategies that superintendents could employ to cultivate equity-centered school leadership are examined: professional development, critical dialogue, and collaborative mentorship. Each strategy is scrutinized and compared across seven key dimensions. The preferred strategy should demand minimal human, time, and fiscal resources, align with the critical and ethical orientation of this DiP, be learner-centred, and promote transformative learning (Honig & Honsa, 2020; Wang et al., 2019; Zepeda et al., 2014). Furthermore, Honig and Honsa (2020) advocate for a job-embedded approach to addressing educational inequities, asserting that this work is too intricate to simulate.

Strategy One: Professional Development

In the first strategy, superintendents would coordinate and facilitate content-based professional development sessions. In the context of this DiP, professional development entails structured facilitation of informational learning through content dissemination, focusing on equity with practical applications (Battey & Frank, 2015; Riordan et al., 2019). Informational learning encompasses expanding knowledge, refining skills, and broadening cognitive abilities into new areas (Johnson, 2008). The objective of this professional development would be to provide targeted training to enhance the capacity for implementing equity-centred actions (Clayton & Nganga, 2022). Through these learning sessions, principals would deepen their understanding of equity principles and acquire practical strategies to enact the three priorities of the future envisioned state: belonging and inclusion, high expectations for learning, and restoration-focused practices.

Principals' meetings, a vital infrastructure for professional development (Midha, 2022), would serve as the primary platform. Within the GNDSB, principals' meetings already play a pivotal role in supporting principal learning. Superintendents lead sessions on strategic improvement priorities, sometimes with input from external experts, during both regular principals' meetings and annual summer sessions. Leveraging these meetings ensures seamless integration into existing structures, aligning with the ongoing learning needs of educational leaders within the organization.

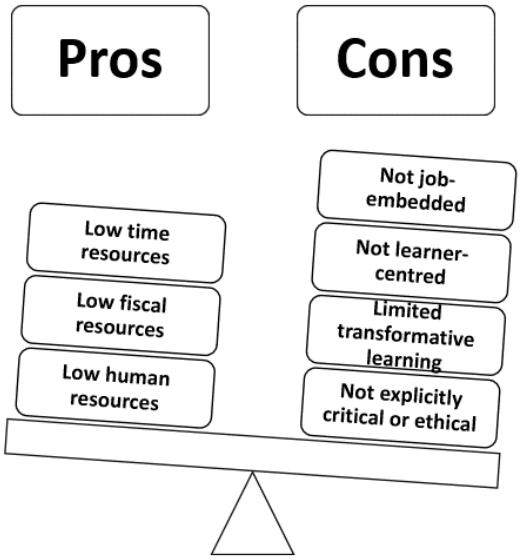
Strategy one possesses several strengths that contribute to its practicality and efficiency. Firstly, it capitalizes on existing organizational structures and practices, making it feasible and sustainable. The strategy minimizes the need for extensive restructuring or resource allocation by capitalizing on established frameworks. Furthermore, it demonstrates efficiency in terms of time, human, and fiscal resources. Professional development can seamlessly integrate into regularly scheduled meetings, optimizing the use of participants' time and reducing disruptions to their regular duties. While there may be some need for additional fiscal resources to bring in external experts or speakers, the overall

cost is likely to be manageable and not prohibitive. Collectively, these factors render strategy one a practical and efficient approach to professional development within the organization.

However, using professional development to address the problem of practice also presents drawbacks. While strategy one aligns with the critical orientation and leadership ethics of this DiP, this alignment may not be as explicit as in strategies two and three, depending on the content of the professional development. Additionally, strategy one lacks a learner-centred approach, failing to cater to the differentiated learning needs of school leaders. Moreover, professional development led by external individuals may not fully reflect the school board's context and could potentially foster polarized viewpoints. Lastly, content-based professional development sessions primarily disseminate information, limiting strategy one's potential to foster transformative learning. A comparison of the pros and cons of strategy one is provided in Figure 9.

Figure 9

Strategy One: Comparison of Key Dimensions of Professional Development



Note. This figure illustrates a comparison of the key dimensions of strategy one: professional development (Servant, 2024).

Strategy Two: Critical Dialogue

In the second strategy, superintendents would intentionally engage in critical dialogues with principals, delving into equity matters, challenging assumptions, and confronting norms to foster deeper understanding and facilitate positive change. The approach to critical dialogue within the context of this DiP involves direct confrontation with inequities and reshaping typical discussions to prioritize equity (Aguilar, 2020; Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Gorski, 2018). Shields (2004) argues that engaging in moral dialogue that challenges existing beliefs is pivotal for student success. These dialogues would leverage both the formal and informal daily exchanges between superintendents and principals. Superintendents would identify, name, and address inequities within each dialogue, raising awareness of alternative perspectives (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Gorski et al., 2022). This strategy aims to create a space for honest and constructive conversations, leading to a deeper understanding of equity issues and driving meaningful change within the educational system.

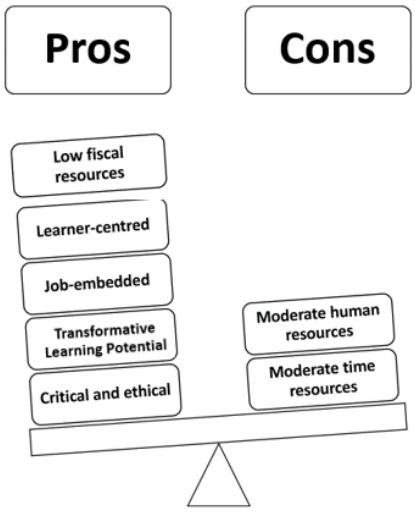
The critical dialogue approach strongly resonates with the DiP's critical orientation, emphasizing deep engagement with equity issues. It also aligns well with relational leadership, a core tenet of authentic leadership (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). Dialogue embodies principles of ethical leadership, ensuring that influence does not skew toward dominance (Durand & Calori, 2006; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019; Nielsen, 1990). Notably, the strategy's strengths lie in its learner-centred, job-embedded nature, facilitated through one-to-one interactions, promoting transformative learning experiences. Moreover, critical dialogue prioritizes both reflection and action, effectively addressing the third guiding question of the DiP.

A drawback of this second strategy is its demand for increased time and human resources. All superintendents would need to commit intentional and purposeful time to engage in critical dialogue. Moreover, limitations may arise concerning the resources of superintendents and their capacity for equity literacy. This aligns with the second guiding question, which contemplates how superintendents

will decenter themselves as experts. Despite these challenges, the benefits of this strategy are significant. Figure 10 outlines a comparison of the pros and cons of strategy two.

Figure 10

Strategy Two: Comparison of Key Dimensions of Critical Dialogue



Note. This figure illustrates a comparison of the key dimensions of strategy two: critical dialogue (Servant, 2024).

Strategy Three: Collaborative Mentorship

The third strategy entails superintendents facilitating collaborative mentoring among principals, where principals mentor their peers on equity-centered school leadership. This DiP adopts Lopez's (2016) definition of collaborative mentorship, emphasizing the development of leaders to address equity and diversity issues through mentor-mentee relationships. This approach encourages vulnerability and the exploration of tensions, fostering growth and learning. Through collaboration, mentors and mentees with diverse experiences can exchange ideas (Griffiths et al., 2021), creating trusting relationships centred on equity and diversity (Lopez, 2016).

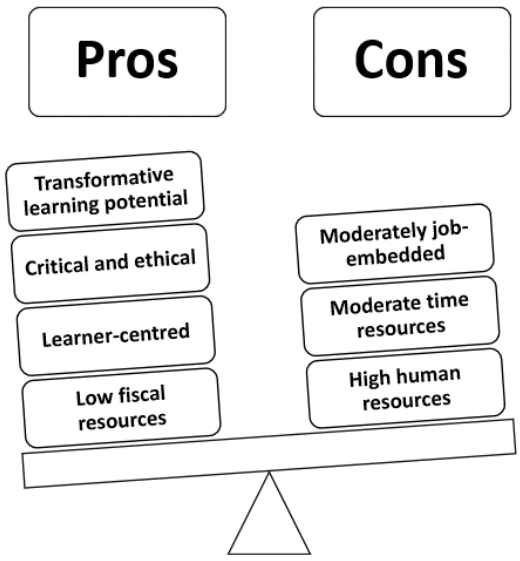
Similar to strategy two, collaborative mentorship strongly aligns with the critical orientation and leadership ethics of this DiP, emphasizing collaborative learning and fostering mutual support among

educational leaders. This approach is learner-centred and job-embedded, allowing for immediate application of learning within daily work responsibilities. It also requires limited fiscal resources, enhancing its cost-effectiveness. Moreover, collaborative mentorship leads to transformative learning experiences by prompting mentees to critically examine their assumptions and beliefs through dialogue and reflection within the mentorship relationship (Lopez, 2016), resulting in practices that are more critical, culturally responsive, and aligned with equity-oriented principles.

The limitations of collaborative mentorship are primarily related to time and human resources (see Figure 11). Time constraints arise as mentorship requires frequent face-to-face interactions to build relationships effectively (Lopez, 2016). Furthermore, the scarcity of principals with a deep understanding of equity-centred school leadership limits the availability of suitable mentors. Beyond logistical concerns, superintendents' roles in mentorship tend to be less direct and primarily operational.

Figure 11

Strategy Three: Comparison of Key Dimensions of Collaborative Mentorship



Note. This figure illustrates a comparison of the key dimensions of strategy three: collaborative mentorship (Servant, 2024).

Preferred Strategy

Each of the three strategies offers valuable potential for superintendents aiming to foster equity-centered school leadership (see Table 1). While the professional development strategy exhibits shortcomings in four key dimensions, critical dialogue and collaborative mentorship display strengths across various dimensions. However, the collaborative mentorship strategy encounters a significant challenge due to its high demand for human resources, particularly in terms of capacity. This challenge may pose practical obstacles to its effective implementation within the educational context.

Table 1

Comparison of Possible Strategies

	Strategy 1: Professional Development	**Strategy 2: Critical Dialogue**	**Strategy 3: Collaborative Mentorship**
Resources	Low time, human, and fiscal	Low fiscal; moderate time and human	Low fiscal; moderate time; high human
Learner-centred	No	Yes	Yes
Job-embedded	Low	High	Moderate
Critical and ethical	Not explicit	Yes	Yes
Transformative learning	Limited	Yes	Yes

Note. This table compares each solution in terms of the key dimensions.

Hence, the preferred strategy integrates strategies one and two, as illustrated in Figure 12. Critical dialogue emerges as the key piece in this puzzle, serving as the primary strategy for superintendents to foster equity-centred school leadership. However, critical dialogue and professional development are interconnected, forming a cohesive framework where each strategy complements the other. Strategy three, collaborative mentorship, is deferred due to resource limitations. However, it remains a potential consideration for the future, with the possibility of leveraging the leadership development of current principals to serve as effective mentors.

Figure 12

Integration of Preferred Strategies

Note. This figure illustrates the connection between critical dialogue and information, showing the strategy of collaborative mentorship deferred (Servant, 2024).

Critical dialogue, the primary strategy for addressing the problem of practice, deeply aligns with transformative leadership, as dialogue is inherent to this approach (Shields & Hesbol, 2019). It fosters critical inquiry, encouraging questions, concerns, and ideas to emerge (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023; Shields, 2004), closely aligning with the chosen change framework, as Schein (1996) emphasizes the effectiveness of conversation in discovering new information. Moreover, critical dialogue underscores the pivotal role of superintendents in actively supporting and developing principals through a learning and teaching approach (Honig & Honsa, 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2020; Thessin & Louis, 2019). Rooted in confident humility characterized by a balanced combination of self-assurance and openness to learning, this approach involves collaborative learning between superintendents and principals, addressing the second guiding question by positioning superintendents as learners alongside principals and mitigating potential limitations in equity skills and knowledge.

Professional development enriches critical dialogue by providing targeted content learning essential for both principals and superintendents. Gorski et al. (2022) advocate for an intentional learning plan that prioritizes ideological engagement in equity strategies and encourages personal

reflection. While superintendents will lead some sessions, external experts will also contribute. This addresses the second guiding question by positioning superintendents as learners alongside principals and integrating external expertise, resulting in robust professional learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Critically vetting session content will ensure that it aligns with the context of the GNDSB and emphasizes compassion, relationships, and learning while challenging entrenched structures and thinking, to address the first guiding question.

Critical dialogue and professional development form a comprehensive strategy for addressing the problem of practice, with each component enhancing the other. Superintendents will engage in critical dialogue to leverage insights gained from professional development sessions and to gather valuable data on the learning needs of principals, thus informing and shaping future professional development efforts. This integration ensures that the two solutions work synergistically, with critical dialogue providing a platform for reflection and discussion on professional development insights, and professional development sessions offering practical tools and knowledge to inform and enrich critical dialogue. Combining these approaches will create a continuous cycle of learning and improvement that enhances both the depth and effectiveness of their efforts to foster equity-centred school leadership.

Conclusion

Chapter two delineated a change plan for embarking on the journey upstream. It elucidated an integrative leadership approach that harnesses the principles of both transformative and authentic leadership. The chapter outlined Schein's process as the framework for leading the change process and delved into organizational readiness and the ethics surrounding organizational change. An examination of three strategies for addressing the problem of practice led to the conclusion that the most fitting strategy entails integrating professional development with critical dialogue. This will be the path taken in the journey upstream. Chapter three will formulate a plan for implementing, monitoring, and communicating the organizational change process.

Chapter Three – Following the Path

The first two chapters contemplated the problem of practice, exploring the role of superintendents in fostering equity-centred school leadership. They explored the *what* and *why* of this Dissertation-in-Practice (DiP) by framing the problem within the organizational context, describing the leadership approach and framework for leading the change process, and selecting the preferred strategy. Metaphorically, these chapters found and described the path upstream. However, ideas fail to yield value unless executed effectively (Deszca et al.,2020). Chapter three bridges the gap between the espoused theory and the theory in use (Senge, 2020), detailing the *how* of the implementation process. It provides a comprehensive account of navigating upstream, outlining stages of the change plan, communication tools, and evaluation methods highlighted as essential by Deszca et al. (2020). The chapter concludes by discussing the next steps for superintendents within the Great Northern District School Board (GNDSB).

Change Implementation Plan

The change implementation plan serves as a blueprint for addressing the problem of practice, delineating the specific steps and strategies. This section begins by identifying equitable leadership practices and presents a continuum for their development. Schein's (2017) change process is applied to the preferred strategies for change and is contemplated in terms of timeframe, leadership, and implications for managed learning. This section concludes by acknowledging potential implementation challenges and suggesting possible resolutions.

Equitable Leadership Practice

Two opposing theories juxtapose whether change plans should focus first on changing beliefs or first on changing practice. Some models propose beginning with self-reflection and challenging assumptions, positing that changes in beliefs will naturally lead to changes in practice (Brown, 2004; McIntosh et al., 2014; Singleton, 2014), though Ishimaru and Galloway (2021) challenge this idea. Strong

moral commitments to equity do not necessarily result in the skills or capacity to align practice with beliefs (Galloway et al., 2015). Ishimaru and Galloway (2021) suggest that an approach centred on changing beliefs might actually hinder changes to practice if positive outcomes do not materialize quickly. Conversely, alternative perspectives advocate for initiating changes in practice first, suggesting that positive experiences and successes from these changes will subsequently foster shifts in beliefs (Ahram et al., 2011; Fullan, 2020; Guskey, 1986; Schein, 2017). This approach anticipates that practical changes can serve as catalysts for deeper, enduring transformations in belief systems.

This change plan leans towards changing practice first, while also acknowledging Ishimaru and Galloway's (2021) proposition that shifts in practice and belief happen iteratively and concurrently. This bias toward action aligns with a critical theoretical approach (Apple, 2016). It leverages transformative leadership principles, where superintendents guide principals' actions while embedding values of equity and justice (Shields, 2022). Moreover, it addresses the third guiding question by centring critical consciousness and praxis into the approach to addressing the problem of practice.

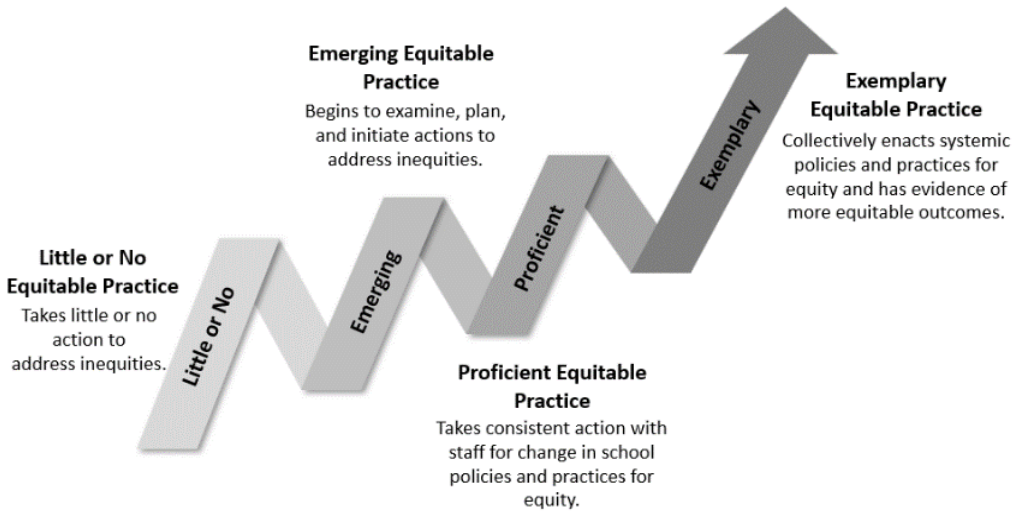
Translating theory into practice entails understanding theoretical concepts and applying practical skills to drive change within oneself, others, and the organization (Patti et al., 2015). Embracing a bias toward action resonates with the fundamental principles of authentic leadership, anchored in confidence, hope, and optimism (Northouse, 2019). It signifies a commitment to implementing concrete changes on the ground and reflects profound confidence in the capability and competence of principals to adopt equity-centred school leadership.

Given the emphasis on changing practice, it becomes imperative to discern and describe the markers of transformed practice, a task achieved by revisiting Ishimaru and Galloway's (2014) conceptual framework of equitable leadership practices outlined in the depiction of the future envisioned state. In their framework, Ishimaru and Galloway (2014) offer a valuable continuum that illustrates the extent to which leadership practices are implemented to produce more equitable

outcomes (see Figure 13). This continuum provides a nuanced perspective of the progression towards equity-centered practices, offering clear benchmarks for assessing and measuring the effectiveness of efforts to foster equitable leadership.

Figure 13

Continuum of Equitable Leadership Practices



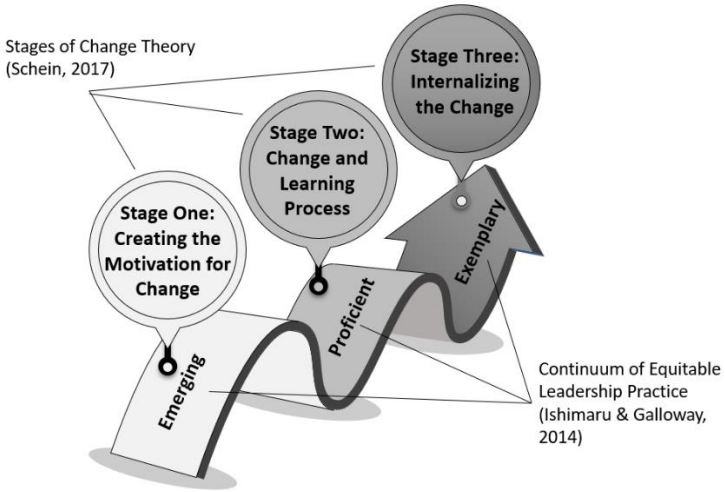
Note. This model illustrates the continuum of equitable leadership practices described in "Beyond Individual Effectiveness: Conceptualizing Organizational Leadership for Equity," by A. M. Ishimaru and M. K. Galloway, 2014, *Leadership and Policy in Schools*. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2014.890733

Embedded in the continuum are benchmarks related to the priorities of belonging and inclusion, high expectations for learning, and restoration-focused practices. These benchmarks serve as critical touchstones for gauging progress and guiding development along the path of equitable leadership. While Ishimaru and Galloway (2014) caution against viewing the continuum as strictly linear, they emphasize that it offers discernible markers of increasingly equitable leadership practice. Aligning these benchmarks with the stages in the change implementation plan (see Appendix C) allows superintendents to map the journey towards equitable leadership within their organization.

The change implementation plan strategically aligns Schein's (2017) change theory, the framework for leading the change process, with Ishimaru and Galloway's (2014) continuum of equitable leadership practice (see Figure 14). By leveraging the preferred strategies of professional development and critical dialogue, superintendents will actively support leadership growth and advancement along the continuum outlined by Ishimaru and Galloway.

Figure 14

Alignment of Change Framework with Continuum of Equitable Leadership Practice



Note. This figure illustrates how Schein's (2017) stages of change align with Ishimaru and Galloway's (2014) continuum of equitable leadership practice.

Stages of the Change Plan

The change implementation plan aims to cultivate an equitable school culture characterized by the priorities of belonging and inclusion, high learning expectations, and restoration-focused practice. It delineates leadership actions for superintendents at every phase. This three-year plan is structured into distinct stages, with the first stage intended for the fall of year one, the second stage spanning the remainder of year one and all of year two, and the third stage beginning in the third year. The key components of each stage are detailed in Appendix C.

Structures will be established to ensure coherence among superintendents. Coherence involves fostering shared understanding, collective purpose, collaborative cultures, role clarification, deepening learning, and securing accountability (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Regular bi-weekly meetings will provide opportunities for superintendents to review the plan and engage in capacity-building. Acknowledging varying levels of knowledge and the lack of diversity within the superintendent team, critical friends like outside experts and the board's Human Rights Officer will be invited as needed. Incorporating expert support and research-based practices is crucial for professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Stage One – Creating the Motivation for Change

In the first stage, superintendents will focus on motivating principals to embrace change. This will involve fostering discomfort, a precursor to readiness for change, by inducing disconfirmation, guilt, and learning anxiety (Schein, 1996, 2017). Disconfirmation introduces new knowledge that challenges existing beliefs (Coghlan, 2021; Schein, 2017), while disorienting events disrupt current mental models (Johnson, 2008), as unexamined mental models hinder the capacity for change (Senge et al., 2012). The urgency for change will be instilled through approach motivation, aiming for the future state, and avoidance motivation, distancing from the status quo (McLaren et al., 2023).

Both professional development and critical dialogue will be pivotal in fostering disconfirmation. In this initial stage, professional development content will focus on ideological shifts, particularly addressing deficit thinking, as emphasized by Shields (2020). This learning will be central to the principals' summer session, which may be led by an external expert. Superintendents will integrate this expert knowledge into future principal learning, ensuring a robust learning process (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). These ensuing sessions will occur during monthly large group principal meetings, where principals will analyze discipline, attendance, and achievement data to raise awareness of disproportionate practices and outcomes. Superintendents will convene to reflect and plan before and after each principal meeting, incorporating feedback from the previous sessions.

The critical dialogue approach will utilize job-embedded learning, capitalizing on superintendents' regular interactions with principals during school visits and video conferencing. This aligns with existing organizational structures, as superintendents routinely engage with principals through their portfolios. To prevent pockets of excellence or the outlier syndrome (Safir & Dugan, 2021), superintendents will ensure the active involvement of all principals in regular dialogue. These interactions will be documented and shared for internal use to facilitate transparency and accountability and will also serve as a rich repository of knowledge and best practices.

Superintendents will adopt a listening stance to understand principals' perceptions (Safir, 2017). They will foster respectful discourse, directly confronting deficit-based statements and engaging in open discussions about uncomfortable truths (Safir, 2017). Superintendents will actively challenge deficit beliefs, steering discussions toward a structural perspective to identify and dismantle marginalizing mechanisms (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023; Jacobs et al., 2023). Strategic questioning techniques (see Figure 15) will be employed to disrupt deficit-oriented discourse and challenge assumption-based decision-making (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014), striking a balance between advocating for their perspective and inquiring into the viewpoints of principals (Senge et al., 2012).

Figure 15

Stage One Sample Questions for Critical Dialogue

Sample Questions for Critical Dialogue – Stage One
• Can you help me understand your thinking? • What factors or observations are influencing your interpretation of this situation? • Can you delve into the underlying beliefs or assumptions that form the basis of your perspective? • In what ways might your culture and background have shaped your thinking on this matter? • What challenges and barriers might the student (or family) be experiencing? • How else can you interpret what you see that does not apply a negative or deficit lens? • Do you notice any patterns of over or under-represented in your discipline, attendance, or achievement data? • Are all students provided with equitable access to opportunities and resources?

Note. Adapted from Aguilar (2020), Gorski & Swalwell (2023), Safir (2017), and Shields (2020).

Critical dialogue will be intentionally crafted, prioritizing the principle of direct confrontation to address prejudice by exposing biases and prompting individuals to reflect (Chaney et al., 2021; Gulker et al., 2013). Gorski and Swalwell (2023) assert that confrontation involves candidly identifying factors perpetuating inequity without fostering antagonism. Given their shared identity markers, principals in the GNDSB are likely to respond receptively to confrontation from superintendents, especially if the focus remains on addressing behaviour rather than intentions or character (Gulker et al., 2013).

The principles of transformative and authentic leadership will be vital in motivating change. Transformative leadership will prioritize equity, justice, and acknowledging students' lived experiences (Shields, 2020). Authentic leadership will utilize positive psychological attributes (Northouse, 2019) to engage in dialogue without hostility and ensure that principals' questions and concerns are not silenced (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023). This approach addresses the second guiding question by emphasizing a leadership style prioritizing relationships, compassion, and continuous learning.

Given the presumption that principals are doing their best, encountering disconfirming information might evoke feelings of guilt or survival anxiety, as it could be interpreted as a sign of ineffectiveness (Schein, 1996, 2017). This anxiety may lead to resistance, necessitating measures for alleviation (Schein, 1996, 2017). Superintendents will leverage authentic leadership, prioritizing emotional safety through empathy and compassion while maintaining focus on the overarching vision (Patti et al., 2015). Strategies for fostering psychological safety encompass providing a compelling vision, training, resources, role models, support groups, and supportive structures (Schein, 2017; see Appendix D), vital for embracing disconfirming information without denial (Schein, 1996).

In the first stage, superintendents will evaluate progress by monitoring changes in principals' language and actions, with a particular emphasis on the adoption of a diversity mindset over equality and meritocracy (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Superintendents will collaboratively review qualitative data from these observations during bi-weekly meetings to assess readiness for advancing to the next

stage of change. Given Schein's change process's variable nature, some principals may oscillate between stages or be in transition. However, the learner-centred critical dialogue strategy is equipped to provide differentiated support in such instances.

Stage Two – Change and Learning Process

The second stage of the change implementation plan centres change and learning. Schein (2017) proposes that new behaviours are learned through imitation or environmental scanning coupled with trial and error. While imitation can be efficient, it may not always lead to solutions aligned with the vision, making scanning, trying, and reflecting on new practices the preferable mechanism (Schein, 1996). Moreover, in a psychologically safe environment, self-discovered insights may emerge, enhancing the learning process (Schein, 1996).

Superintendents will guide the scanning process through targeted professional development and critical dialogue. Monthly principals' meetings will feature professional development sessions, planned and facilitated by superintendents or external experts and designed to introduce new leadership practices aligned with the three priorities. These sessions will be tailored to address the evolving learning needs of principals. Key topics will include strategies for fostering belonging and inclusion, promoting deep learning, utilizing performance assessments, trauma-informed teaching, and implementing restorative practices. Continuing the approach from the first stage, superintendents will engage in pre- and post-meeting discussions to gather feedback, assess progress, and refine plans, ensuring responsiveness to principals' needs.

In this second stage, superintendents will deepen the critical dialogue approach, maintaining meaningful engagement with principals through school visits and video conferencing. They will continue carefully tracking interactions to ensure consistent and intentional engagement with all principals, fostering an environment where every principal feels supported and connected. Superintendents will make explicit connections between the theoretical aspects of professional development and the

practical challenges and opportunities principals encounter in their schools. By doing so, they will illustrate how the principles discussed in professional learning can be applied directly to real-world situations, thereby leveraging the job-embedded nature of critical dialogue. Professional learning improves through facilitated follow-up, blending external and internal expertise (Jacobs et al., 2023).

Critical dialogue serves as a catalyst for challenging entrenched mental models through collective meditation, which involves deliberate contemplation by slowing down to make these models explicit and assess their effectiveness (Stroh, 2015). Superintendents will guide principals through this reflective process by employing targeted questioning and facilitating connections to practical applications (see Table 16). During these dialogues, superintendents will actively introduce alternative schemas and interpretations of events, rather than remaining neutral. This approach, inspired by Bartunek and Moch (1987), encourages principals to consider new perspectives and reinterpret their experiences in light of these alternative frameworks. Conversations which involve sharing and discussing diverse interpretations are fundamental for acquiring new information and fostering cognitive restructuring (Schein, 1996).

Figure 16

Stage Two Sample Questions for Critical Dialogue

Sample Questions for Critical Dialogue – Stage Two
• What underlying beliefs and values informed that approach? • What biased or inequitable thinking may be embedded in this practice? • What assumptions could be limiting understanding of this issue? • How might this situation look different if considered from an equity-focused perspective? • What alternative action or strategy could address this situation more effectively? • How can this practice be changed to redistribute access and opportunity justly? • How can you shift your discipline practices to prioritize restorative over punitive measures? • What might be the intended and unintended consequences of this practice? • What aspects of institutional culture or ideology allow this practice to exist in our school or district?

Note. Adapted from Aguilar (2020), Gorski & Swalwell (2023), Safir (2017), and Shields (2020).

Incorporating principles from authentic leadership, superintendents will adopt the warm demander stance when engaging in critical dialogue. This approach, deeply rooted in building relational capital and trust, emphasizes strategic listening, reflective questioning, and experimental action (Safir, 2017). As warm demanders, superintendents will create an environment that fosters encouragement while maintaining high expectations for principals and their work (Safir & Dugan, 2021). Drawing from the tenets of transformative leadership, superintendents will actively invite principals into the equity work, avoiding strategies that may evoke fear and distrust (Safir & Dugan, 2021). This warm demander approach addresses the first guiding question by creating a supportive yet challenging environment that encourages principals to engage deeply with equity work. It acknowledges the complexities and difficulties of making significant changes in thinking and practice but emphasizes the importance of compassion, relationship-building, and continuous learning.

Furthermore, within these dialogues, superintendents and principals will collaboratively examine data to uncover patterns and disparities. For instance, they may disaggregate achievement data by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and other demographic factors to ensure that students' identities or backgrounds do not predict their academic outcomes (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015). Additionally, they will scrutinize disciplinary practices to determine if they disproportionately affect certain student groups. This involves examining suspension and expulsion rates, behavioural referrals, and other disciplinary actions to see if disparities are based on race, gender, disability status, or other characteristics. Through these data-focused dialogues, superintendents and principals will identify areas where change is needed and develop and implement strategies to address these issues. This culture of inquiry, where data serves as a catalyst for driving practice change, is a key indicator of proficient equitable leadership on the continuum (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014).

In this stage, critical dialogue transcends mere reflection by integrating actionable steps, embodying the principles of critical consciousness and praxis and addressing the third guiding question.

It encourages principals to reconsider their existing mental frameworks and actively apply newly acquired insights to their leadership practices. This approach ensures that theoretical understanding translates into tangible changes in how principals lead their schools.

During this second stage, superintendents will notice principals engaging in double-loop learning focused on thinking and doing the right things related to the priorities (Flood, 1996, 2018). They will monitor for the indicators of proficient equitable leadership as described on Ishimaru and Galloway's (2014) continuum: an equity mindset; student, family and community input in decision-making; and the use of data to inform practice (see Appendix C). An ongoing collaborative review of this qualitative data during bi-weekly meetings will assess either readiness for progressing to the next change stage or that some principals are fluctuating between stages or both. In response, superintendents will offer differentiated support as needed and begin to create the structures integral to the third stage.

Stage Three – Internalizing the Change

In the third stage, principals will incorporate new understandings of their practice into their professional self-concept and relationships (Coghlan, 2021; Schein, 1996, 2017), often referred to as refreezing. As principals become exemplary equitable leaders, evidence of an equitable school culture characterized by belonging and inclusion sustained through collaboration, collective responsibility to a high standard of student learning, and restoration-focused inclusive practices will emerge (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). Moreover, as exemplary equitable leaders, principals will engage in collective leadership through ongoing collaboration with the entire school community (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). When leaders centre the voices from the margins, they will have arrived further upstream.

While professional development will continue, its role will diminish as the focus shifts towards transformative learning associated with third-order change and triple-loop learning that focuses on the broader implications of actions and the underlying principles that drive them. In this stage, the emphasis will be on reshaping the conceptual frameworks that guide principals' actions and decisions (Bartunek &

Woodman, 2015). Principals will move beyond merely improving existing practices (first-order change) or modifying their strategies (second-order change) to fundamentally rethinking and redefining their approach to school leadership (third-order change), leading to triple-loop learning where values and principles undergo a transformation as a guiding lens (Bartunek & Moch, 1987; Flood, 1996, 2018).

In critical dialogue, superintendents will centre reflective questions (see Figure 17) to facilitate this deep transformation. The goal is to help principals systematically organize their thoughts to uncover and understand underlying realities (Freire, 1970/2018). This reflective process encourages principals to question and adjust their mental models to better comprehend and address complex, multifaceted issues (Johnson, 2008). In this phase, cognitive redefinition becomes paramount. This involves significant shifts in beliefs and values, essential for true learning and transformative change (Schein, 1996). Continuous action, reflection, and experimentation are evidence of leadership praxis (Safir, 2017) and address the third guiding question.

Figure 17

Stage Three Sample Questions for Critical Dialogue

Stage Three Sample Questions for Critical Dialogue
• How do your current practices reflect your commitment to equity? • What inequities do you continue to permit? And why? • What barriers might you be facing in implementing equitable practices? • If you had the chance to do it again, how would you approach this differently? • How do you measure the impact of your actions and decisions? • How are you actively engaging and centring the voices of marginalized individuals or groups? • What specific actions are you taking to ensure their perspectives are heard and valued? • What steps have you taken to build trust and relationships with marginalized communities? • How do you respond to feedback from marginalized groups about their experiences?

Note. Adapted from Aguilar (2020), Gorski & Swalwell (2023), Safir (2017), and Shields (2020).

Given the premise that new learning becomes stable when reinforced by tangible results (Schein, 2017), superintendents will establish cycles of inquiry with principals, leveraging diverse forms of quantitative and qualitative data to guide decision-making and evaluate the effects of changes in

practice (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). These data will be linked to the three priorities, encompassing key metrics such as attendance rates, suspension rates, and academic achievement scores. Appreciative inquiry, a generative approach that spawns new ideas and practices through powerful questions, emerges as a potent tool for reshaping mindsets (Drew & Wallis, 2014; Grieten et al., 2018; MacCoy, 2014), thus making the final stage more robust and rebuking the limitations of refreezing. Moreover, appreciative inquiry fosters the exponential inquiry effect, wherein the nature of our questions shapes the outcomes we achieve (Grieten et al., 2018; MacCoy, 2014). By fostering a culture of inquiry with principals, superintendents step away from the traditional role of experts and position themselves as co-learners alongside school leaders, thereby addressing the second guiding question and cultivating an environment conducive to ongoing growth and development.

During this final stage, superintendents will monitor for the indicators of exemplary equitable leadership as described on Ishimaru and Galloway's (2014) continuum: collaborative action towards systemic change, addressing power dynamics, ongoing collaboration with the entire school community, and engaging in inquiry that drives the process of equity-focused improvement (see Appendix C). Recognizing the need to sustain effectiveness amidst evolving visions and shifting realities, continuous learning and engagement will safeguard against regression (Burnes, 2020; Stroh, 2015). This necessitates a shift from professional isolation to collaborative learning processes characterized by dialogue, alignment, and coherence (Fullan, 2016; Safir & Dugan, 2021). To this end, professional learning networks will be established to bring all principals together and foster critical conversations, fostering diverse perspectives and encouraging collaboration (Stroh, 2015).

The change implementation plan adeptly addresses the three guiding questions of this DiP. Through the integrated leadership approach, established thinking and structures are challenged through transformative leadership principles, while authentic leadership emphasizes compassion, relationships, and learning. Furthermore, the strategies chosen to address the problem of practice facilitate

superintendents in stepping away from the role of experts and instead positioning themselves as learners alongside principals, engaging in a stance of confident humility. Lastly, the bias toward action in the change implementation plan prioritizes critical consciousness by emphasizing changes in practice, while also integrating reflection and awareness.

Potential Implementation Challenges

Anticipating potential implementation issues is crucial for effective resolution (see Appendix C). While disrupting the status quo is vital for achieving equity of opportunity and outcomes, it will inevitably lead to challenges. The organizational context, inclined toward slow and gradual change stemming from its structural functionalism and interpretivist orientation, poses obstacles in terms of entrenched beliefs or inert ideas (Whitehead, 1929, in MacBeath, 2020). Educators resistant to change, termed fundamentalists by Muhammad and Hollie (2012), may prioritize personal agendas over collective ones, resist reform initiatives, and hinder progress.

Superintendents must be vigilant for signs of fundamentalist tendencies among principals, adopting a proactive stance to identify individuals for targeted and more frequent critical dialogue. Effective responses to resistance include curiosity, active listening for unmet needs, and addressing underlying emotions like anger and grief (Aguilar, 2020). Furthermore, the protocols offered by Senge et al. (2012) to enhance advocacy and inquiry, as well as to resolve disagreements and impasses, will serve as valuable tools for superintendents (see Appendix E). Integrating the soft power of authentic leadership with the moral courage of transformative leadership will empower superintendents to effectively confront and challenge entrenched beliefs resistant to change.

The second potential implementation challenge pertains to the second guiding question. For superintendents, embracing the role of co-learner and decentring from the role of a perceived expert may prove challenging. Superintendents are pivotal change agents throughout the change plan, yet encountering situations without clear answers seems inevitable. Embracing humility and acknowledging

one's own lack of expertise amidst expectations to have all the answers poses an arduous challenge for leaders (Schein, 2017). Moreover, as superintendents grapple with humility, they may also be becoming increasingly aware of their own contributions to perpetuating the same beliefs and practices that are now being challenged (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023).

In addressing this challenge, superintendents must embrace confident humility, maintaining a balanced mindset that blends self-assurance with openness to learning from others while graciously acknowledging limitations and welcoming feedback. This entails leading by example and actively participating in professional development alongside principals (Fullan, 2020; Schein, 2017). Furthermore, it also requires recognizing unwitting contributions to the problem and assuming responsibility by questioning preconceived notions, identifying areas for improvement in practice, and developing a richer understanding of the diverse lived experiences of students and families (Chunoo et al., 2019; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Stroh, 2015). Self-awareness, confidence, and resilience, core tenets of authentic leadership (Northouse, 2019; Walumbwa et al., 2019), are crucial for adopting learning-oriented leadership. Sustainable change is most likely when all participants reflect on and adjust their intentions, assumptions, and behaviour (Stroh, 2015).

In addition to the stages and priorities of change, communication is a key component of the change implementation plan. The strategy to communicate the need for change, the participatory approach, and knowledge mobilization are discussed in the subsequent section.

Communication Plan

Effective communication is a crucial lever in the successful implementation of the change implementation plan and incorporates delivering, receiving, and reacting to messages (Malek & Yazdanifard, 2012). Change communication significantly influences how change is perceived, potentially reducing resistance, generating support, sustaining interest and commitment, and instilling confidence (Deszca et al., 2020; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019; Smith, 2005). Given its strong correlation with the

success of change initiatives (Beatty, 2016), adopting a research-informed change communication strategy is imperative. The following sections detail the change message, the participatory approach, and the role of professional learning networks in knowledge mobilization.

Communicating the Need to Change

Early positive communication about change is crucial for garnering support and minimizing resistance (Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019; Smith, 2005). Principals' perceptions of the change context will significantly influence their receptiveness or resistance. Change readiness is fundamental to successful change implementation (Armenakis et al., 1993; Rafferty, 2013). Armenakis and Harris (2002) assert that messages that effectively foster readiness and support include discrepancy, which is the belief that change is necessary; efficacy, or the confidence that the change can be successfully accomplished; appropriateness of the proposed change to address the discrepancy; principal support and commitment of senior leaders; and personal valence.

Maintaining a balance between discrepancy and efficacy is crucial (Lewis, 2019). Superintendents will need to communicate enough disparity between the current and desired states to justify change, without overwhelming principals. To achieve this, superintendents will leverage transformative and authentic leadership. Even after acknowledging the need for change, superintendents must persuade principals that equity-centered school leadership is the appropriate solution for addressing opportunity and outcome disparities. Lastly, superintendents will foster valence by supporting principals to recognize personal value through appeals to ethics, ethical leadership, and alignment with the envisioned future state.

The communication plan's strategies and goals will evolve as change progresses (Deszca et al., 2020; Schein, 1996). Initially, the focus will be on preparing the organization's members, transitioning to reporting progress, and ultimately celebrating achievements (Klein, 1996). Appendix C outlines how the communication objectives align with each of Schein’s (2017) stages of change.

In the first stage, communication sets the groundwork for change by offering justification and rationale (Klein, 1996). As Klein (1996) suggests, the first message should be delivered by a senior member of the organization during the principals' summer session, outlining the necessity for change and its rationale. This involves articulating the vision, contrasting it to the present reality, and fostering a shared understanding. This shared understanding is crucial for identifying systemic issues and fostering accountability for the entire system (Stroh, 2015). This approach leverages motivational factors by elucidating the significance of the future state (McLaren et al., 2023). The message needs to be carefully scripted to avoid implicating blame, criticism, or offence toward current practices (Beatty, 2016).

While the message will emphasize the benefits of change, principals may still be considering the drawbacks of adopting new approaches and the advantages of maintaining the status quo. Addressing and responding to these concerns and identifying unchanged elements is crucial (Beatty, 2016; Malek & Yazdanifard, 2012; Schulz-Knappe et al., 2019). Follow-up communication, both through dialogue and written channels like email, will adhere to the principles of message redundancy, multimedia use, and authority in face-to-face interactions (Klein, 1996). These messages will be collaboratively developed during the bi-weekly meetings to ensure consistency across different superintendent communications.

In the second stage, communication aims to build momentum by fostering understanding, tracking progress, and celebrating achievements (Klein, 1996). A clear definition of expected behaviours will bridge the gap between theory and practice (Schein, 2017). Superintendents will need to sustain and reinforce changes through ongoing, multidirectional communication (Armenakis & Harris, 2002; Klein, 1996). Facilitating open dialogue for sharing problems, solutions, and feedback, while also highlighting successes, is crucial during this phase (Klein, 1996). This approach leverages the principles of authentic leadership, particularly in encouraging diverse viewpoints and cultivating collaborative relationships (Avolio et al., 2005).

Additionally, during the second stage of change, it will be crucial to ensure that individuals not directly engaged in the change process, such as teachers, students, and families, receive sufficient information about the developments and their implications to clarify misinformation and address skepticism (Klein, 1996; Rafferty, 2013). For example, it will be key that everyone comprehends the shifting pedagogical and disciplinary practices. Neglecting to share all change-related information can lead to rumours, negative sentiments, and resistance (Schulz-Knapp et al., 2019).

The communication plan reflects empirical principles, emphasizing face-to-face interaction, message redundancy, and the supervisor's role as the primary communicator (Beatty, 2016; Klein, 1996). Ensuring message redundancy through consistent repetition and diverse methods is essential for effective communication (Beatty, 2016; Klein, 1996; Malek & Yazdanifard, 2012). Critical dialogue will occur primarily face-to-face, leveraging regular in-person meetings and video conferencing between superintendents and principals. This interactive approach fosters immediacy, empathy, engagement, and clarity (Beatty, 2016; Klein, 1996). Furthermore, it enables superintendents to gather feedback from principals to inform future actions, such as developing written guidelines or protocols to address operational issues, as decided collaboratively during bi-weekly meetings.

Within the established hierarchical structure of the GNDSB, messages conveyed by superintendents hold substantial credibility and significance (Beatty, 2016; Schein, 1996). However, superintendents must be mindful of Beatty's (2016) caution that alongside formal communication channels, staff members are also keenly attentive to informal cues, including casual remarks and inconsistent behaviours. Therefore, superintendents must ensure consistency between formal communications and actions, as inconsistencies can undermine trust and credibility.

Participatory Approach to Change Communication

Schulz-Knapp et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of a communication strategy that addresses both the informational and emotional needs of principals. Russ (2008) distinguishes between

two communication modes: programmatic and participatory. The programmatic approach involves hierarchical dissemination of information to ensure compliance and acceptance, while the participatory approach fosters dialogue and input from principals, promoting collaboration in decision-making.

Programmatic communication will be ubiquitous throughout the change process, especially in the first two stages. This approach serves to convey the vision and objectives, aiming to cultivate understanding (Malek & Yazdanifard, 2012). Superintendents will disseminate information in a top-down fashion to foster motivation and readiness to change and to share new practices related to the priorities. This highly centralized and prescribed communication is primarily monologic, seeks fidelity, and emphasizes the cognitive aspects of the change (Russ, 2008; Schulz-Knapp et al., 2019). However, as it overlooks opportunities for meaning construction and consensus building, programmatic communication may risk disengagement, resentment, and resistance (Russ, 2008).

Russ (2008) advocates for the integration of programmatic and participatory approaches. Superintendents will utilize critical dialogue to facilitate multidirectional communication, fostering consensus and prioritizing commitment over mere compliance (Russ, 2008). Participatory efforts involve principals in analyzing the current state and enhancing beliefs in change necessity and feasibility (Lewis, 2019). Schulz-Knapp et al. (2019) highlight that participants are more supportive of change when they feel valued and actively engaged. However, superintendents must be cautious of communication ambiguities and draw from authentic leadership principles to ensure sincerity (Russ, 2008).

Knowledge Mobilization Plan

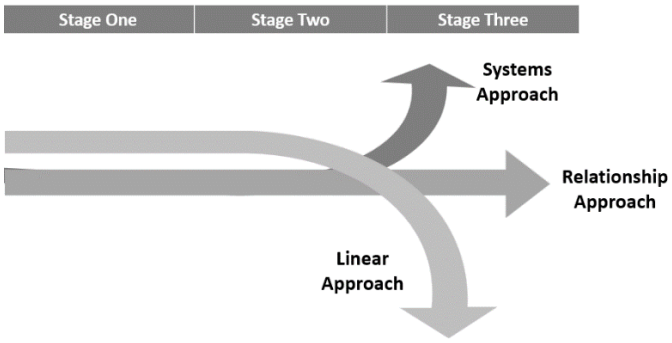
A key component of the communication plan is considering how knowledge will be mobilized. Knowledge mobilization weaves together theory, research, policy, and practice and plays an important role in education reform (Lavis et al., 2003; Malik, 2020). The essence of change emerges from generating or enhancing knowledge rather than solely relying on existing knowledge (Katz et al., 2009).

Within this DiP, knowledge mobilization aims to address inequity of opportunity and outcomes by bridging theoretical research on equity-centered leadership with the practice of principals.

Best and Holmes (2010) propose three conceptual approaches to knowledge mobilization: linear models, emphasizing one-way dissemination; relationship models, involving multidirectional sharing through networks; and systems models, adding collaboration and co-production of knowledge. Heeding the recommendation of Campbell et al. (2014), the path for mobilizing knowledge in this DiP is a hybrid of all three approaches (see Figure 18).

Figure 18

Hybrid Approach to Knowledge Mobilization



Note. This figure illustrates how each approach to knowledge mobilization will transpire across the three stages of the change implementation plan (Servant, 2024).

The linear approach will pervade the initial change stages, as researchers' knowledge is disseminated unidirectionally by superintendents and external experts to principals for implementation. Despite criticism for its limited impact on practice change (Best & Holmes, 2010; Campbell et al., 2014; Tseng, 2012), one-way transmission remains necessary, especially early in change initiatives. Specifically, dissemination will focus on information related to the three priorities. However, as the change process progresses, the linear approach will diminish in favour of the other two approaches.

Across all stages, the relationship approach to knowledge mobilization will foster bidirectional connections between superintendents and principals, encouraging engagement with research and

practical knowledge aligned with priorities. Reciprocal exchanges, as emphasized by Lavis et al. (2003), where both parties learn from each other, are crucial. This approach, especially vital in the third stage of change, enhances awareness and engagement with research and practical knowledge to address the second guiding question by positioning superintendents as co-learners.

In the final stage of the change process, a systems model emphasizing interaction and knowledge creation will emerge. This model transcends the mere diffusion of research-to-practice, where principals acquire and integrate knowledge, to a practice-to-research dynamic, where principals and superintendents share and collaboratively construct knowledge (Revai, 2020; Tseng, 2012). Green (2006) advocates for a shift towards more practice-informed evidence, recognizing that valuable insights often arise from practitioners themselves (Fullan, 2020). This systems approach aims to address challenges and promote the development of evidence-informed practices through multi-level networks that prioritize user engagement and idea exchange, in contrast to traditional producer-driven approaches (Best & Holmes, 2010; Campbell et al., 2014).

A key challenge for education is to structure activities to foster continuous knowledge creation and sharing among community members (Katz et al., 2009). In the systems approach, professional learning networks (PLNs) will be key for mobilizing knowledge (see Appendix F). PLNs have a profound impact on principals, reflecting the significance underscored by social learning theory regarding a cycle of inquiry, further fueled by the knowledge that they report back to their esteemed peers (Clayton & Nganga, 2022). PLNs deeply influence principals, resonating with social learning theory's inquiry cycle and fueled by their reporting back to esteemed peers (Clayton & Nganga, 2022).

For effective networks, structured engagement is essential, beyond merely bringing principals together (Katz et al., 2009; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016). Each superintendent will lead a PLN consisting of a small group of principals, selected based on criteria like school grade level and location. PLNs will convene twice a month, once in person at the monthly principals' meeting and once at a

different school site each time. During school visits, half of the meeting time will be dedicated to observing a strength of the host school, while the other half will focus on addressing specific areas where the host principal seeks targeted feedback.

As PLN facilitators, superintendents will adopt a teaching-and-learning approach (Honig & Rainey, 2020) and shift relationships from supply-driven to demand-driven, compliance-oriented to learning-oriented, and bureaucracy to movement-oriented (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016). Supporting PLNs aligns with socio-cultural learning theory, emphasizing community of practice features like collective effort, utilizing all principals as learning resources, and fostering challenging conversations (Honig & Rainey, 2014). Superintendents will act as brokers of external resources, facilitating bridging activities and shielding PLNs from unproductive distractions (Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2020). Effective PLNs emphasize collaborative inquiry as principals reshape knowledge and practice through experimentation, learning from setbacks, and gradual improvement over time (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016).

In addition to the communication strategy, the monitoring and evaluation plan is also a key component of the change implementation plan. The following section explores the models utilized for monitoring and evaluation and discusses data considerations.

Monitoring and Evaluation

A comprehensive and responsive strategy for monitoring and evaluation serves as the linchpin of the change process, offering strategic insights into progress and guiding pivotal decision-making. An approach that integrates Deming's plan-do-study-act model (PDSA; Christoff, 2018) and the equity transformation cycle (Safir & Dugan, 2021) will serve as the anchor by providing a structure for assessing the effectiveness of change initiatives and identifying areas for improvement. The forthcoming section begins by clarifying the types of data and the methods used for their collection.

Data for Monitoring and Evaluation

Data types and collection methods are fundamental considerations for monitoring and evaluation. They directly affect the accuracy, reliability, and relevance of the data collected, ensuring informed decision-making and thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation efforts. Safir and Dugan (2021) delineate three levels of data: level one, encompassing satellite data on a large scale; level two, consisting of map data focused on schools; and level three, involving street data for finer-grained insights. All three levels of data will be used at different times and for different purposes throughout the change process.

Level One Data

Level one data consist of broad, quantitative metrics (Safir & Dugan, 2021), commonly utilized in the GNDSB and other school boards in Ontario. Examples of readily accessible level one data within the GNDSB include graduation rates, Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) scores, attendance rates, suspension rates, and student census and well-being survey results. Although some data is provided by the ministry of education, superintendents and team members will be tasked with collecting and disaggregating level one data since the GNDSB lacks a dedicated research department.

Level one data will support disconfirmation in the initial change stage. In the second stage, indicators like improved attendance and reduced suspension rates will reflect the impact of changed principal practices aligned with priorities such as belonging and inclusion, high expectations for learning, and restoration-focused approaches. Additional level one data sources, including graduation rates and results from the student census and well-being survey, will become more relevant in stage three, reflecting the effectiveness of the change implementation plan in addressing disparities in opportunity and outcomes.

While level one data may offer valuable insights, superintendents should exercise caution in relying too heavily on this information. These data often lack context, perpetuate deficit thinking, and

lag behind real-time changes (Safir & Dugan, 2021). Moreover, data tied to external accountability measures tend to focus on problems, potentially fostering resistance to change and exacerbating inequities (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Datnow & Park, 2018; Park, 2018). Instead, the bulk of the approach to monitoring and evaluation will heed the plea for broader, more inclusive ways of defining and evaluating achievement (Campbell et al., 2018; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Shields, 2020; Toulouse, 2016).

Level Two Data

Level two data, including classroom-based literacy and numeracy assessments, as well as surveys of students, staff, and families, are essential for trend analysis (Safir & Dugan, 2021). These data offer insights into student performance and community perceptions, which can be discussed during critical dialogues between superintendents and principals. Furthermore, utilizing data to inform and change practice is a key indicator of proficient equitable leadership along the continuum (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014).

Despite the contextual insights provided by level two data, it may lack the human element necessary for making equity-driven decisions related to the priorities (Safir & Dugan, 2021). While these metrics offer quantitative insights, they may not fully capture the lived experiences and individual perspectives of students and families. Therefore, it is essential for leaders to complement level two data with qualitative information to ensure a comprehensive understanding of equity issues.

Level Three Data

Level three data are qualitative and experiential measures that emerge from human interaction and are current and contextual (Safir & Dugan, 2021). Deszca et al. (2020) assert that the choice of measures is related to the complexity of the change context and the duration of the change process. Since the change context is complex and ambiguous and the time to completion is long, informal and qualitative methods and tools are appropriate for monitoring this change plan.

The gathering of level three data will adopt a human-centred approach, as superintendents take the time to deeply listen to the perspectives of students, families, and staff (Safir & Dugan, 2021). This deep listening involves uncovering root causes, prioritizing voices from marginalized groups, and remaining open to new insights (Safir & Dugan, 2021). Level three data, obtained through observations, conversations, and artifacts (see Table 2), will be indispensable for monitoring both impact and process.

Table 2

Sources of Level Three Data

Conversations	Observations	Artifacts
• Focus groups with students or families on the margins • Advocacy groups • Quick student interview • Student voice	• Empathy interviews • Equity participation trackers • Learning walks in schools/classrooms • Equity audits • Instructional rounds	• Student work • Professional learning agendas • Hallway/classroom walls

Note. Adapted from "*Street Data: A Next-generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation,"* by S. Safir and J. Dugan, 2021, Corwin.

Level three data, being informal, qualitative, and approximated, are vulnerable to biases like confirmation, recency, loss aversion, and outcome bias in monitoring and evaluation (Deszca et al., 2020). Senge et al. (2012) describe a ladder of inference to illustrate how individuals unconsciously progress from observable data to conclusions and actions, influenced by their interpretations, assumptions, and beliefs, ultimately shaping their perceptions and decision-making. To mitigate these risks and the inclination to defend uncomfortable truths, superintendents will employ protocols and structured processes for fostering focused and productive conversations and establishing collective understanding during the bi-weekly meetings. Two helpful protocols are the iceberg protocol (see Appendix G), which helps explore and address underlying issues and assumptions within a group (Senge et al., 2012), and the peeling the onion protocol (see Appendix H), a method for systematically uncovering layers of complexity within a situation or problem (School Reform Initiative, n.d.).

All three data levels will be integral in informing the monitoring and evaluation processes. The subsequent section elaborates on how these data sources will contribute.

Monitoring and Evaluating the Change Plan

Effective monitoring entails tracking milestones to steer corrective action, inform readiness, and ensure learning (Deszca et al., 2020; Markiewicz & Patrick, 2016). Iterative testing of change is essential for continuous learning, allowing for flexibility and adaptability in actions (Reed & Card, 2016). Two valuable tools for this purpose are PDSA and the equity transformation cycle. Together, these tools provide a comprehensive framework for effective monitoring and iterative improvement in the change implementation plan.

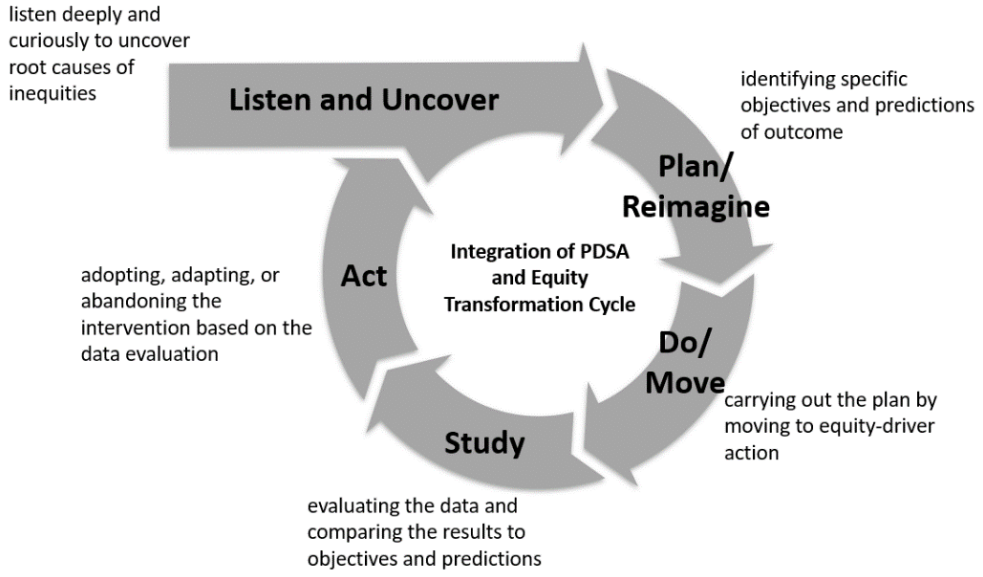
PDSA, a research-based process, involves four steps: identifying specific objectives and outcome predictions (plan), executing the plan and recording data (do), evaluating the data against objectives (study), and then adopting, adapting, or abandoning the intervention based on the data evaluation (act) (Christoff, 2018). While widely used, PDSA has been criticized for its simplicity, lack of context, and for starting with planning rather than listening to marginalized voices (Datnow & Park, 2018; Safir & Dugan, 2021). However, its focus on translating theory into action makes it suitable for this DiP (Reed & Card, 2016). In contrast, the equity transformation cycle roots monitoring and evaluation in both context and equity. It is also a circular change process with four phases: *listen* deeply to cultivate awareness, *uncover* the root causes of inequities, creatively *reimagine*, and *move* to equity-driven action (Safir & Dugan, 2021). Both methods are designed for short, iterative cycles of emergent change (Christoff, 2018; Safir & Dugan, 2021).

Acknowledging the strengths of both PDSA and the equity transformation cycle in monitoring and evaluating the change implementation plan, they will be amalgamated into a cohesive model (see Figure 19). This approach resonates with Reed and Card's (2016) recommendation to adapt PDSA to suit different problems. As they also suggest conducting investigations before initiating PDSA to ensure

accurate problem understanding and framing, beginning with the additional phases of *listen* and *uncover* and incorporating *reimagine* and *move* from the equity transformation cycle in the integrated approach effectively addresses this criticism. It ensures that the process begins with deep listening and understanding of the context and equity considerations, enhancing the effectiveness of subsequent planning and actions.

Figure 19

Integration of PDSA and Equity Transformation Cycle



Note. This figure shows the integration of PDSA and the equity transformation cycle (Servant, 2024).

The iterative approach of this model suggests that at least one monitoring and evaluation cycle will be employed for each stage of Schein's (2017) change process. In the first stage, superintendents will *listen* to principals, students, and families to *uncover* the root causes of deficit ideology. This will inform objectives for fostering disconfirmation in the *plan/reimagine* phase. In the *do/move phase*, superintendents will engage in critical dialogue, facilitate professional development, and collect level three data. The phases of *study* and *act* will be the work of bi-weekly meetings, as superintendents

engage in impact monitoring by examining level three data for the emergence of a diversity mindset to determine if there is a readiness for stage two or if strategies need to be adapted.

In the second stage, superintendents will *listen* to principals, students, and families to *uncover* insights about the three priority practices of equitable school leaders, which will inform the objectives of the *plan/reimagine* phase. In the *do/move* phase, superintendents will engage in critical dialogue, facilitate related professional development, and collect level two and three data. The phases of *study* and *act* will continue to be the work of the bi-weekly meetings, as superintendents engage in impact monitoring by examining level two and three data to inform the timing and topic of professional learning sessions and to identify which principals may need more support through critical dialogue. As monitoring and evaluation establish that principals are achieving the key priorities and indicators of stage two, a shift toward stage three and the processes for internalizing new concepts can begin.

In stage three, superintendents will maintain their focus on *listening* to *uncover* insights. The *plan/reimagine* phase will prioritize building trust within school communities, fostering collective responsibility for student learning regardless of background, and implementing restoration-focused inclusive practices. During the *do/move* phase, superintendents will continue to engage in critical dialogue, facilitate some professional development, and establish PLNs to promote collaboration and inquiry for ongoing knowledge mobilization. Bi-weekly meetings will address the *study and act* phases, with these processes also occurring within PLNs as superintendents and principals collaborate, utilizing data from all three levels. Safir and Dugan (2021) provide a protocol for analyzing level three data in Appendix I, aiding PLNs in identifying and reflecting upon trends and patterns.

Refining Implementation

The iterative processes of both monitoring and evaluation are vital to help steer and refine implementation (Markiewicz & Patrick, 2016), particularly in the *plan/reimagine* stage. Effective implementation of critical dialogue and professional development strategies are contingent upon how

nimbly GNDSB can respond to the learning needs of principals. Deszca et al. (2020) liken monitoring and evaluation processes to steering controls navigating the change journey, akin to a vehicle's navigation system providing insights into the current position and the need for route adjustments.

To refine implementation, data will be triangulated through multiple sources and levels of data to confirm conclusions and inform the next steps for communication and action (Datnow & Park, 2018; Deszca et al., 2020; Park, 2018). However, data alone will not lead to refining implementation. Ongoing monitoring and commitment are vital to ensuring that the direction is correct and will inform nimble shifts along the path or if a new path may be needed altogether.

A potential implementation challenge lies in the inclination to revert to familiar strategies (Safir & Dugan, 2021). To counter this, superintendents must uphold internal accountability, described by Fullan (2020) as clear goals, collaborative cultures, collective efficacy, transparent practice, and the absence of judgment. To this end, the bi-weekly meetings will prioritize internal accountability, while it will be a briefer standing agenda item during weekly administrative council meetings. It will also inform both the next steps and future considerations, which are discussed in the next section.

Next Steps and Future Considerations

The change implementation plan presented in this DiP is a comprehensive, research-informed blueprint that addresses the problem of practice exploring the role of superintendents in fostering equity-centred school leadership. While the plan charts a course upstream, there are future considerations and next steps for the journey. Looking ahead, there are important factors to consider and subsequent actions to take to ensure sustained progress and lasting impact.

Future Considerations and Next Steps

Embracing challenging equity feedback and accepting it graciously as a source of learning offers a path for growth (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023). Future efforts should focus on enhancing the use of all levels of data and deeper disaggregation to uncover patterns and guide next steps. Prioritizing deep

listening and street data, especially from marginalized communities, remains crucial, involving reflection on whose voices are heard or silenced. Amplifying student voices, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, is a critical next step, recognizing them as truth-tellers and moral guides for equity efforts (Safir & Dugan, 2021).

As knowledge creation emerges from the systems approach to knowledge mobilization in PLNs, data utilization will shift from diagnosing and managing change to inspiring new ideas (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Grieten et al., 2018; MacCoy, 2014). Lopez (2016) underscores ongoing inquiry as pivotal for reflecting on the past, envisioning future possibilities, and driving change. The boundless potential of imagination is illustrated by Safir and Dugan (2021, p. 11), who highlight Audre Lorde's quote, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Moving forward, alternative approaches and perspectives not bound by the limitations of existing power structures will be critical.

A final future consideration lies in the responsibility to accelerate momentum by actively seeking opportunities to drive change within the GNDSB and beyond through allyship, advocacy, and activism. Lopez (2017) urgently calls on all educators to intensify their efforts for students who remain underserved and marginalized. This means more than addressing immediate issues; it requires a persistent push upstream to identify and tackle root causes. Engaging in this work is a commitment to continuous improvement and the pursuit of creating an equitable educational landscape, where every student can succeed regardless of their identity or circumstances.

Conclusion

Chapter three navigated the course of the change implementation plan aimed at addressing how superintendents can foster equity-centred school leadership. The plan outlined three steps to facilitate the execution of the preferred strategy: creating the motivation to change, the change and learning process, and internalizing new concepts. It provided a timeline and highlighted key benchmarks pertinent to the priorities. Given the significance of the components of communication and monitoring

and evaluation, more detailed explanations were provided. As the chapter drew to a close, it offered follow-up actions, acknowledging the ongoing nature of change and managed learning. Serving as a compass, this chapter charts the course for superintendents and principals to embark on an upstream journey.

Narrative Epilogue

These three chapters merely capture my current best thinking, which is unfinished and imperfect, caught in the flux of discovery and growth. As a scholar-practitioner, my understanding grows daily, shaped by every encounter and interaction. Amidst the quest for clarity, I have more questions than when I began, and I embrace all that I have yet to learn and unlearn with eagerness and humility. While I am further upstream from where I started, I know my journey is far from over.

Over the past several years, my personal and professional journey has been marked by significant changes and growth that have shaped my perspectives, values, and approach to leadership. I continue to contemplate the influence of educational leaders and endeavour to embody the principles inherent in my role. As a superintendent, I am privileged to have both the opportunity and duty to champion equity of opportunity and outcomes. Central to my leadership philosophy is an unwavering belief that every child deserves to be valued and supported, regardless of their identity or background. The conviction that there are no "throw-away children" resonates deeply within me.

As I continue on this journey, I am committed to walking in my title - to being a leader who not only talks about equity but lives it out in every decision and action. Reflecting on the profound wisdom of Battiste (2013), I am moved by the idea that those who love learning must possess the courage to reimagine education, lest they betray it. Embracing the ethos of reimagining, I see this DiP as a commitment to challenging the status quo and working toward a future where equity of opportunity and outcomes shape a landscape where every learner can flourish and thrive.

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Appendix A: The River Parable

There once was a small village nestled along the banks of a swiftly flowing river. People in the village bustled with growing food, making blankets, and cooking meals. One fateful day, a villager noticed someone being swept downstream, battling against the current's merciless grip. Without hesitation, he plunged into the frigid waters, bravely swimming against the torrent to save them. Each passing day brought new cries for aid as more people found themselves in the river's treacherous embrace, and each day, the villagers answered the call, leaping into action to rescue them.

In the time that followed, more and more people struggled in the turbulent currents. Soon, the whole village was involved, and they saved as many people as possible. The villagers, being compassionate and humane, collaborated and organized themselves. They erected watchtowers and trained rescue teams. They grew more food, made more blankets, and cooked more meals.

One day, a villager decided to venture upstream to investigate why so many people were falling into the river. Upon inquiry, he discovered that the bridges upstream varied in their conditions, each telling a story of its own. Some stood steadfast, forged with sturdy materials and resolute craftsmanship, while others languished in neglect, their frames marred by missing planks and wobbling railings. It became evident that most accidents happened on the decrepit bridges, whereas those near the sturdy ones remained safe. Although all bridges required reinforcement, it was clear that some were in more urgent need of attention. Recognizing the urgency, the villagers turned to their upstream neighbours for their wisdom and guidance on how they could contribute to the repairs. They understood that prioritizing the reinforcement of the failing bridges could significantly reduce the number of people at risk of falling into the river.

Note. This is a retelling of a parable about addressing root causes rather than treating symptoms (Servant, 2024).

Appendix B: Comparison of Transformational and Transformative Leadership Approaches

Transformational Leadership	Transformative Leadership
Setting Direction	Need for deep and equitable change
Redesigning the Organization	Deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and reconstruct more equitable knowledge frameworks
Not addressed	Address the inequitable distribution of power
Not addressed	Schooling as both a public and private good
Improving the instructional program	Focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice
Developing people	Emphasis on interdependence, interconnectedness, and global awareness
Not addressed	Engage in both critique and promise
Not addressed	The need for moral courage

Note. Adapted from "Transformative leadership theory: A comprehensive approach to equity, inclusion, excellence, and social justice," by C. Shields, 2022, in *Leading for Equity and Social Justice: Systemic Transformation in Canadian Education* (p. 30), A. Gélinas-Proulx & C. Shields, C. (Eds.), University of Toronto Press.

Appendix C: Change Implementation Plan

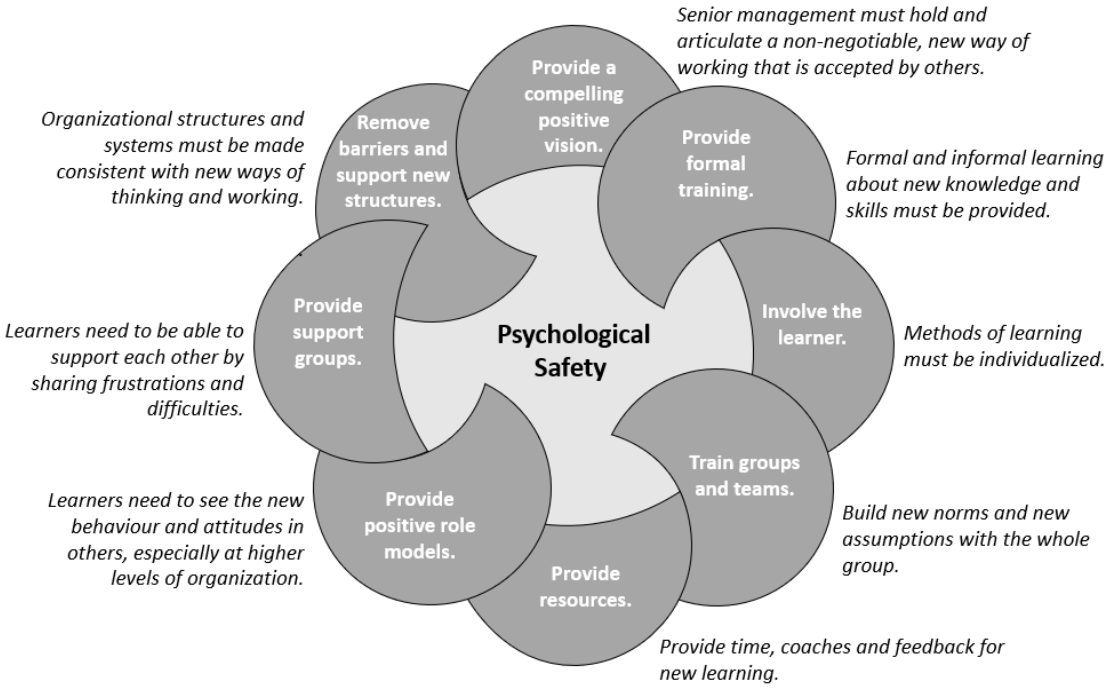
Timeline		Short-term (summer/fall of year one)	Mid-term (winter of year one through year two)	Long-term (beginning spring of year two or fall of year three)
Schein's (2017) Change Theory		Creating the Motivation to Change	Change and Learning Process	Internalizing New Concepts
Order of Change		Second-order	Second-order	Third-order
Deepness of Learning		Single-loop learning	Double-loop Learning	Triple loop learning
Integrated Leadership Approach	***Transformative Leadership***	Deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity by centring lived experiences of those experiencing inequities; disrupt the status quo	Rectify and reconstruct structures that perpetuate inequities and reconstruct more equitable knowledge frameworks;	Foster more equitable knowledge frameworks
	Authentic Leadership	Build collaborative relationships and credibility; foster respect and trust of followers; foster psychological safety	Link personal values and convictions with ethical practices; warm demander approach; bias toward action	Foster self-confidence and efficacy
Preferred Strategy	***Professional Development***	Focus on ideological shifts by facilitating learning about deficit thinking	Learning sessions about inclusion, high expectations for learning, restorative practices	Ongoing learning about shifts in beliefs and practices
	Critical Dialogue	Interrupt negative talk about students and parents; name deficit ideology; and redirect the conversation toward a structural perspective	Use prompts for reflective inquiry to facilitate dialogue about principals' practice	Use prompts for reflective inquiry to transform conceptual frameworks

	Continuum of Equitable Leadership Practice (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014)	Emerging	Proficient	Exemplary
Key Performance Indicators (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014)	***Framing Disparities and Actions***	Diversity frame emerges to disrupt deficit orientation, equality discourse, meritocracy, and status quo	Equity frame and discourse; actions to change policies and practices	Equity frame and discourse; collaborative action toward systemic change; addressing issues of power
	Construction and Enactment of Leadership	Principal involves teachers in equity work but does not actively build their capacity or engage them consistently	Leadership distributed amongst staff; student, family, and community input considered in decisions	Ongoing collaboration with the whole school community, particularly non-dominant students and families
	Inquiry Culture	Data considered but not used for improvement or reflection	Data used to change practices and policies	Inquiry fuels the ongoing process of equity-focused improvement
Goals/Priorities of an Equitable School Culture (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014)	***Culture of Belonging and Inclusion***	Examination of how school culture excludes voices, values, and experiences; articulates need to build relationships	Staff collaboration to build culture that includes all voices, values, and experiences; relationships prioritized	Sustained collaboration with staff, students, families, and community members; trusting relationships
	High Expectations for Learning	Rejection of explanations that limit students' capacity to learn; acknowledgement of school's responsibility to address inequities	Belief that student capacity is limited is challenged; collective responsibility for each student's learning is fostered	Evidence of collective responsibility across entire school community for every student's ability to achieve high academic standards, irrespective of their background
	Restoration-focused Practice	Examination of disciplinary practices for disproportionate impacts	Disciplinary policies and practices monitored and changed to decrease exclusionary practices	Evidence of restoration-focused practices, elimination of disproportionate impacts

Potential Challenges		Status quo highly immune to change	Decentring selves as experts	Decentring selves as experts
Objectives of Communication (Klein, 1996)		Justifying the change: readying the organization, challenging the status quo, providing a rational	Reporting the change: dealing with uncertainty, shifting from theory to practice, reporting the progress	Celebrating the change: building understanding of structures and processes; understanding personal implications
Knowledge Mobilization Tactics	***Linear***	One-way dissemination of information about the status quo and deficit thinking	One-way dissemination of information about priority-related practices	Dissemination of information responsive to needs identified by PLNs
	Relationship	Multi-directional connections to foster awareness of and engagement in research about the status quo and deficit thinking	Multi-directional connections to foster awareness of and engagement in research and practice knowledge related to the priorities	Multi-directional connections to foster awareness of and engagement in research and practice knowledge
	Systems			PLNs share and construct knowledge
Monitoring and Evaluation	***Model for Monitoring and Evaluation***	Hybrid of PDSA and Equity Transformation Cycle		
	Level of Data	Level Three Data: • Conversations • Observations	Level Three Data: • Conversations • Observations • Student Work Level Two Data: • Achievement Data • Suspension Data • Attendance Data	Level Three Data: • Conversations • Observations • Student Work Level Two Data: • Achievement Data • Suspension Data Level One Data: • Census and Well-being Survey • Graduation Rates

Note. This table illustrates the elements of the change implementation plan across the three stages of change.

Appendix D: Strategies to Create Psychological Safety



Note. This figure represents the strategies change leaders use to create psychological safety, as described in "*Organizational Culture and Leadership* (5th ed.)," by E. H. Schein, 2017, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

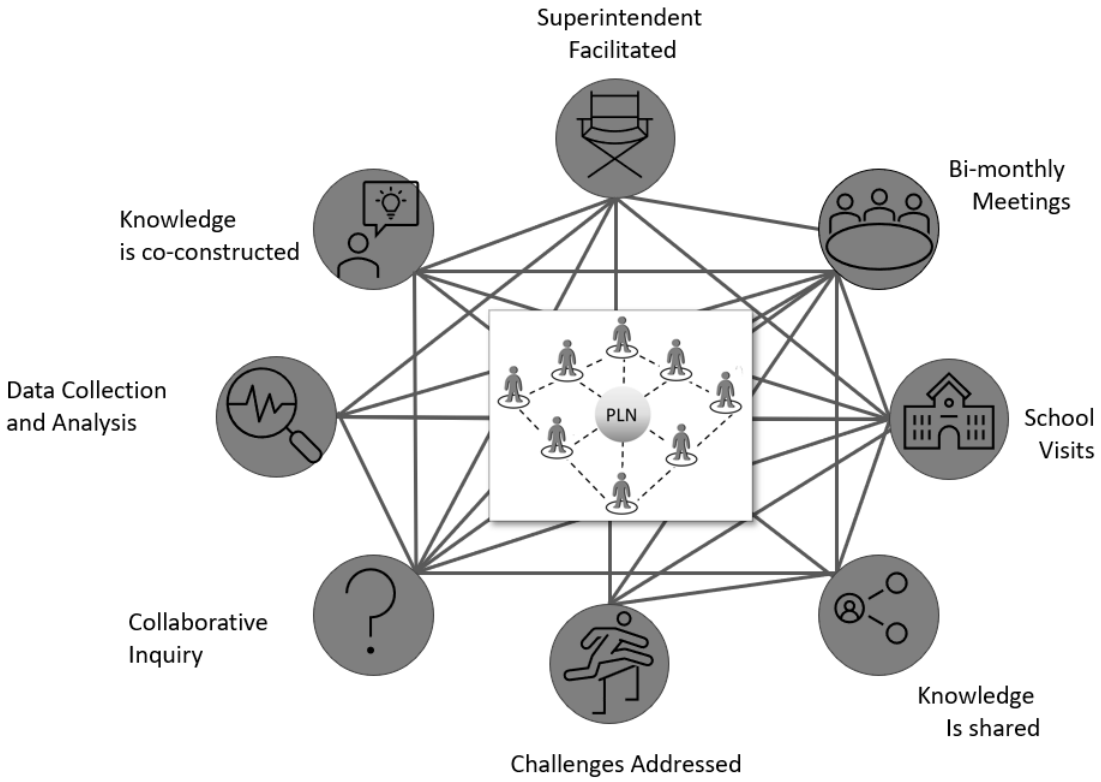
Appendix E: Protocols for Balancing Inquiry and Advocacy

Protocols for Improved Advocacy	
What to do	What to say
State assumptions and describe the data that led to them.	Here is what I think, and here is how I got there.
Make reasoning explicit.	I came to this conclusion because …
Explain the context of the viewpoint. Who is affected? How are they affected? Why? Give examples, even if hypothetical or metaphorical.	Imagine that you are a student coming into this school. How would this idea affect you?"
Openly test conclusions and assumptions.	I am proposing this because (your observations or data) have led me to believe that (your conclusions). Is this a fair conclusion?
Encourage others to explore alternative models, assumptions, and data.	What do you think about what I just said? Or do you see any flaws in my reasoning?
Reveal misunderstandings.	Here is one aspect which you might help me think through…
Even when advocating, listen, stay open, and encourage others to provide different views.	Do you see it differently?
Protocol for Improved Inquiry	
What to do	What to say
Gently walk down the ladder of inference and find out what data is informing assumptions.	What data do you have for that statement? What leads you to say that?
Use unaggressive language, particularly with those familiar with these skills.	Instead of "What do you mean?" or "What is your proof?" say, "Can you help me understand your thinking here?"
Draw out reasoning.	What is the significance of that? Or how does this relate to your other concerns?
Explain reasons for inquiring and how inquiry relates to concerns, hopes, and needs.	I am asking you about your assumptions here because …

Protocols for Disagreement	
What to do	What to say
Ensure understanding.	If I follow you correctly, you are saying that …
Explore, listen, and openly offer views.	Ask, "Have you considered …" and then raise concerns and state what is leading to them.
Protocols for an Impasse	
What to do	What to say
Embrace the impasse and tease apart the current thinking on both sides.	What do we both know to be true? Or, what do we both sense is true, but have no data for yet?
Look for information that will help move forward.	What do we agree on, and what do we disagree on?
Consider each person's mental model as a piece of a larger puzzle.	Are we starting from two very different sets of assumptions here? Where do they come from?
Ask what data or logic might change views.	What would have to happen before you would consider the alternative?
Ask for the group's help in redesigning the situation.	It feels like we are getting into an impasse, and I am afraid we might walk away without any better understanding. Do you have any ideas that will help us clarify our thinking?
Do not let the conversation stop with an agreement to disagree.	I do not understand the assumptions underlying our disagreement.

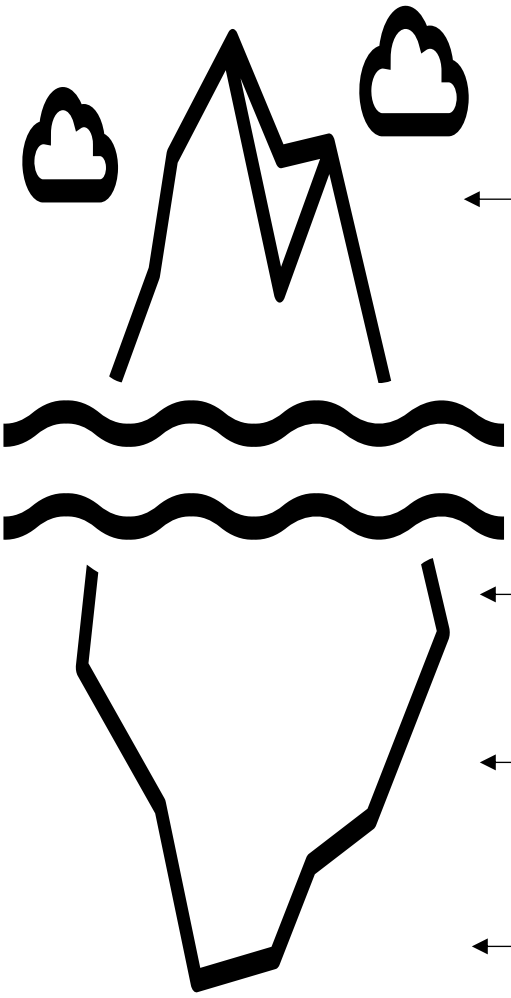
Note. Adapted from "*Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education*," by P. M. Senge, N. Cambron-McCabe, T. Lucas, B. Smith, & J. Dutton, 2012, Crown Business.

Appendix F: Knowledge Mobilization Through Professional Learning Networks



Note. This figure illustrates the multi-directional systems approach to knowledge mobilization through a professional learning network (Servant, 2024).

Appendix G: Iceberg Protocol



Step 1: Events
What has occurred? Identify a critical event or issue and take 15 to 20 minutes to contemplate its significance and the reasons it persists as a problem. What has been the reaction to this event? What efforts have been made to address it?

Step 2: Patterns/Trends
What events have unfolded? Have similar situations been encountered in the past? Explore the historical context of the event outlined in step one. Track the progression of related events over time and visualize them on a graph. What patterns are emerging?

Step 3: Systemic Structures
What factors are influencing these patterns? How do these systemic elements interact with each other? What core elements need to be changed to shift the patterns?

Step 4: Mental Models
What aspects of our thinking enable this situation to persist?

Note. Adapted from "*Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education*," by P. M. Senge, N. Cambron-McCabe, T. Lucas, B. Smith, & J. Dutton, 2012, Crown Business.

Appendix H: Peeling the Onion Protocol

Step 1	The keeper of the dilemma describes the problem/dilemma and asks a question to help focus the group's responses.
Step 2	Clarifying questions from group members to the presenter that are informational in nature.
Step 3	A series of rounds begins, in which each participant speaks to the same prompt. During the rounds, the presenter remains silent and takes notes. The facilitator may choose to repeat a round if new responses emerge. Prompts: • "What I heard [the presenters} say is …" • "One assumption that seems to be part of the dilemma is…," or, "One thing I assume to be true about this problem is … " • "A question this raises for me is…" • "Further questions this raises for me are…" • "What if…?" Or, "Have we thought about…?" Or, "I wonder…?"
Step 4	The presenter reviews notes and reflects aloud. Group members are silent and take notes.
Step 5	Together, the presenter and participants discuss the possibilities and options that have surfaced.
Step 6	Debrief the process. How was this like peeling an onion? What about the process was useful? Frustrating? Interesting?

Note. Adapted from School Reform Initiative. (n.d.). *Peeling the onion: Defining a dilemma protocol.*

https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/peeling-the-onion-defining-a-problem-protocol/

Appendix I: Street Data Analysis Protocol

Time	Protocol Steps	Facilitator Tips
10 minutes	**Connect:** What was the process of gathering this street data like for you? What do you predict the data may reveal?	Frame as an opportunity to practice vulnerability. Go first to model vulnerability.
15 minutes	**Observe:** What are we hearing from our students and families? Read through the data with a highlighter. Look for patterns (e.g., repeating words, narratives). Reflect as a group: What stands out from the data?	Frame the importance of staying low inference. Provide an example of a low-inference versus a high-inference statement.
20 minutes	**Interpret:** What does this data reveal about the experiences of our most vulnerable learners? Try to name the patterns/themes in three words or less, using sticky notes. If more than three or four themes emerge, ask the group: Which theme/pattern feels most important and why?	Use a poster, whiteboard, or shared digital document to track the group's discussion.
5 minutes	**Reflect/consider:** What matters about this data? How does it (or doesn't it) stand up to our vision? Where is our greatest opportunity? What will help us learn more? What will help us move toward the pedagogy of voice? What steps or actions might come next?	Offer possibilities for next steps.

Note. Adapted from "*Street Data: A Next-generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation,"* by S. Safir and J. Dugan, 2021, Corwin.