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# PK–12 District Leadership for Equity: An Exploration of Director Role Configurations and Vulnerabilities

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**Purpose:** This study sought to understand PK–12 district-level equity directors' efforts to improve experiences of students of color and outcomes in US districts. **Research Methods:** We interviewed 13 practicing equity directors and analyzed artifacts such as meeting minutes, equity policies, equity mission statements, job descriptions, and organizational charts. **Findings:** Directors experienced structural and psychological vulnerabilities depending on how their districts structured the role with positional power, resources, and authority to carry out their leadership work. Equity directors' roles were often ambiguous and at times misaligned to the expected leadership tasks. Institutionalized racial and gender oppression compounded the vulnerabilities of the role. **Implications:** To realize the full potential of this new district leadership position, districts must attend not only to what they expect equity directors to accomplish but also to the configurations of the role as it intersects with labor-related racial and gender oppression in districts.

School districts across the United States continue to grapple with systemic educational inequities that are reinforced through anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and racist practices and organizational logics (Anderson 2016; Love 2019). In response to persistent race-based and other inequities, and spurred by mounting pressure from local and national education and political activist organizations, school districts across the nation are creating new district-level administrative

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roles called equity directors.<sup>1</sup> PK–12 districts employ equity directors to support the design and implementation of district strategies to improve the social, emotional, and academic experiences and outcomes of students whom districts traditionally underserve. Although a dearth of research examines PK–12 equity director leadership (Mattheis 2017), scholarship about social justice, culturally responsive, and anti-racist leadership that seeks to achieve deep systemic transformation of schools informs our exploration of equity directors' leadership approaches.

Social justice leadership is underpinned by leaders' actions to "make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision" (Theoharis 2007, 223) and centers on the complexities of addressing intersecting oppressions as a means to dismantle all forms of oppression (Capper and Young 2014; Dantley and Tillman 2006; Santamaría 2014; Theoharis 2007). Culturally responsive leadership emphasizes the practice of leveraging student, family, and community cultural assets and knowledge to create conditions through which liberating education is made possible (Khalifa 2018; Khalifa et al. 2016). Anti-racist leadership research focuses on leadership practices that prioritize naming, critiquing, and dismantling white supremacy (Holme et al. 2014; Welton et al. 2018). These overlapping research literatures not only focus heavily on school-level leadership but also address district-level and policy practices (Alsbury and Whitaker 2007; Kruse et al. 2018; Maxwell et al. 2013).

Although it is premature to suggest that equity director roles will actually affect districts' culture, student experiences, or outcomes (Gose 2006), we contend the role has the potential to expand the social justice, anti-racist, and culturally responsive leadership approaches that aim to confront oppressive education realities and transform schools and districts (Dantley and Tillman 2006; Khalifa

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2018; Khalifa et al. 2016). Grounded in discerning the potential of this new position, four research questions guided our inquiry:

1. What do districts expect equity directors to accomplish?
2. How have districts configured equity director roles?
3. What do equity directors experience as affordances and constraints of their work?
4. How do equity directors narrate their responses to the affordances and constraints inherent in their roles?

We explored these questions by conducting interviews with equity directors working in US school districts. PK–12 district equity directors' difficulties stemmed from multiple sources. Their roles were ambiguous, misaligned to the expected leadership tasks, or both. Districts did not uniformly extend equity directors the positional power, resources, and authority to carry out the work they expected them to accomplish. Further, institutionalized racial and gender oppression compounded the structural vulnerabilities of the role. Ultimately, our findings reveal that to realize the full potential of this new district administrative position, districts must attend more carefully not only to what they expect equity directors to accomplish but also to the configuration of the role and its intersection with institutionalized racial-gender oppression at all levels of school organizations. This study makes an important empirical contribution—one of the first—to the scholarship on equity directors.

## Literature Review

Leadership is crucial in any effort to transform schools and educational systems toward greater equity. Although the vast majority of the literature on anti-racist leadership and leading for equity focuses on school-level leaders (Dantley and Tillman 2006; Khalifa 2018; Theoharis 2007; Welton et al. 2019), superintendents play perhaps the most visible role at the district level in leading equity change. Superintendents lead for equity through leveraging their institutional position of authority to more equitably reallocate resources and create policies at a systems level. However, superintendents must respond to externally imposed policy demands, meet school board requirements, and liaise between their school district and local communities (Holme et al. 2014). Superintendents work in deeply racialized, political, and power-laden contexts (Alemán 2009; Horsford et al. 2019) where even the slightest hint of leading for equity, and in particular speaking about race and racism, can set off a firestorm of criticism and resistance from the broader community (Villenas and Angeles 2013). Given the potential for public scrutiny and resistance, many superintendents are unwilling

to engage in racial equity leadership. Still, far too many superintendents who are willing to take on racial equity work are unprepared (Tienken 2021).

Superintendents alone are not likely to enact the kinds of anti-racist, social justice, and culturally responsive work that is required to effect change. Rather, change-making across complex educational systems requires organizational leadership beyond the role of any individual (Irby 2021; Ishimaru and Galloway 2014). But even when district-level administrators engage in collective leadership efforts, district leaders' efforts range from harmful to ineffective to potentially transformative. In their study of three suburban school districts undergoing student demographic changes, Diem and colleagues (2016) found that district leaders' equity efforts varied based on the context in which they worked. In one district, leaders were ineffective because they named racial differences while not acknowledging how race mattered. District leaders in another case harmed their equity efforts by operating from a deficit notion that poverty, language, or culture differences in "learning styles" were the most salient equity considerations. The only district that offered a more culturally responsive response was located in a race-conscious state and local policy context that enabled "policy discourses and practices to shift in order to accommodate the needs of the district's diverse student population" (Diem et al. 2016, 758).

Still, most studies of district central office personnel focus on their role as policy implementers in scaling instructional improvement (Coburn et al. 2009; Honig 2012; Knapp 2008) while paying little explicit attention to issues of race, racism, or power inequities in either district change processes or organizational and student outcomes. The few studies that do pay explicit attention to inequities shed light on the political dimensions of equity-focused reforms (Sampson 2019; Trujillo 2012; Turner 2015). For example, "integration leaders" in Minnesota district central offices indicated their own racial/ethnic identities as assets in addressing equity issues with local constituencies and influencing state policies (Mattheis 2017). Salisbury and colleagues' (2020) study of a group of White district leaders' efforts to engender equity through elevating student of color voices in leadership revealed that, despite equity rhetoric, district leaders actually resisted students' efforts. The leaders regarded leadership as their "property" and ultimately used students, select teachers, and university partners to promote themselves as being committed to equity and justice. It is against this scant understanding of district-level equity leadership that districts have created equity director roles, having little precedent of knowledge of how the role fits into district-level leadership, how it might be configured for impact, and what districts can expect the role to accomplish.

For now, chief diversity officer (CDO) roles in higher education are the closest administrative role we have to look toward to understand what PK–12 equity directors' roles might entail (Cooper 2014; Gose 2006; Leon 2014; Williams and Wade-Golden 2007a, 2013; Wilson 2013). In their formative research, Williams

and Wade-Golden (2007a, 2013) characterized higher education CDOs as “a senior administrator who guides, coordinates, leads, enhances, and at times supervises the formal diversity capabilities of the institution in an effort to build sustainable capacity to achieve an environment that is inclusive and excellent for all” (2007b, 8). Emerging in the early 2000s and taking cues from CDOs in corporate and nonprofit organizations, CDOs are now common in colleges and universities throughout the United States. CDOs exercise influence within their respective institutions by “elevating visibility and credibility of campus diversity, leading strategic diversity planning efforts, building new institutional diversity infrastructure, enhancing structural diversity success, informing faculty search processes, and building new academic diversity courses and initiatives” (Williams and Wade-Golden 2007b, 9).

Williams and Wade-Golden identified three organizational archetypes of vertical structure that informed the strategies CDOs used to move the culture of their institutions: Collaborative Officer Model, Portfolio Divisional Model, and Unit-Based Model. Each of the models has different purposes, structural constraints and affordances, and particular access to institutional power. The Collaborative Officer Model is composed of a single person with minimal resources and supports who relies “nearly exclusively on the reflective power of senior leadership, the ability to influence change through personal charisma, and the ability to leverage relationships and offer financial resources to broker new alliances” (Williams and Wade-Golden 2007a, 41). CDOs in the Collaborative Officer Model lack a reporting structure and often do not have an exclusive supervisory role over any unit. In Portfolio Models, CDOs have authority to restructure the organization by arranging campus units into an integrated portfolio to create institutional coherence, synergy between units, efficiencies, and broad unified vision for institutional change. These officers have lateral and direct collaborations with high-ranking administrators (e.g., president, provost) and units on campus (e.g., president’s office, multicultural affairs). The Portfolio Model is “the most vertically integrated of the three archetypes and includes characteristics of the Collaborative Officer and Unit-Based Models in addition to a compendium of direct reporting units” (Williams and Wade-Golden 2007a, 42). The third configuration Williams and Wade-Golden identified is the Unit-Based Model, which exists within a campus unit and blends Collaborative and Portfolio Models. Regardless of the model, “CDOs must have the power and authority to enforce the policies created to guide the institution into becoming more tolerant on diversity” and would ideally be “classified at an executive-level position that reports directly to the president” (Wilson 2013, 436).

The insights from CDO literature are useful for thinking about the purposes, structural factors, and forms of power and authority that might shape PK–12 equity director leadership but which may be taken for granted when studying superintendents or other well-established district leadership roles. But PK–12

districts are different from higher education settings. For example, attracting a more diverse student body is not a common priority for public school districts. They are already diversifying. Given the issues of organizational roles, power, and authority explored in CDO literature, we can also assume that equity directors' leadership affordances and constraints will differ from those of superintendents. Indeed, given superintendents' lack of preparedness to lead for equity, PK–12 equity director positions could be instrumental in improving schools. Better understanding the equity director role is consequential because PK–12 school districts are rapidly adopting this new administrative position that is largely informed by CDO work in higher education settings. Yet the director role remains inadequately understood in terms of the affordances, constraints, or effectiveness in the context of PK–12 district organizations.

### Theoretical Framework

Equity director roles in PK–12 settings are new and not well defined. We know little about the leaders who fill them, their experiences in the role, what works, or vulnerabilities of the role. To make sense of the novel ambiguities of this somewhat ill-defined leadership role, we draw on Mitchell and colleagues' (2017) concept of role vulnerability. Mitchell and colleagues employed the concept of role vulnerability to describe teachers' exposure to psychological, emotional, and physical harm, emotional labor, and confidence to perform in their new roles as assistant principals. They argued that teachers' job performance during transitions into assistant principal roles was diminished "by the nature of the position and perceived by the holders of the position" (Mitchell et al. 2017, 4). Mitchell and colleagues refer to the nature of the position and perceptions of one's capabilities within it as structural and psychological vulnerability, respectively.

*Structural vulnerability* is that which is inherent in the structure of a position (Mitchell et al. 2017). Structural vulnerability emerges when a person in a new or ambiguous organizational role has flexibility to address everyday demands while also having an "an unclear or inconsistent work portfolio" (Mitchell et al. 2017, 5). Individuals who experience role ambiguity are unable to prepare properly for their work because they are subjected to and responsible for responding to shifting demands and pressures of the overall organization as well as the needs of their supervisor (Mitchell et al. 2017). Put simply, structural vulnerability reflects a work role that actually minimizes a person's ability to carry out what they believe is the right work. *Psychological vulnerability* is the feeling of decreased self-efficacy, frustration, and self-doubt that emerges when a person experiences a gap between the work that they believe is the right work to undertake and the work tasks they are assigned to carry out (Gronn and Lacey 2004). Psychological

vulnerability often emerges when a person transitions into a role and is required to take on a new professional identity, such as when teachers transition into the assistant principal role, which is notorious for its ambiguous nature (Barnett et al. 2012; Grodzki 2011; Mitchell et al. 2017; Oleszewski et al. 2012).

Although psychological and structural vulnerabilities differ, they are mutually reinforcing, hence the importance of role vulnerability. Leaders who experience role vulnerability are affected on at least two levels (Mitchell et al. 2017). One is socioemotional and manifests in feelings of isolation, grief, anxiety, and stress (Celik 2013; Grodzki 2011; Mitchell et al. 2017; Oleszewski et al. 2012). A second impact is when directors cannot carry out work tasks at levels commensurate with their actual or perceived capabilities, expertise, and knowledge. In the context of vulnerable roles, task performance and experience is diminished, making it appear that leaders have lower efficacy, capacity, and competence to achieve intended results than is actually the case (Barnett et al. 2012; Mitchell et al. 2017; Oleszewski et al. 2012). People who work in vulnerable roles are constantly subjected to “role conflict, role tension and exposure to criticism on the job” (Nir 2001, 134).

Despite role vulnerability’s conceptual usefulness, it fails to account for institutionalized racial-gender oppression that is a well-documented aspect of many school organizations. Racial-gender oppression is evidenced when racially minoritized female PK–12 leaders face stressors that their White counterparts do not. For example, Rosette and Livingston (2012) concluded that leaders with dual-subordinate identities (female and racially minoritized) receive less support, face more pressure, and earn less praise for their organizational performance. In their study, they found that Black women’s coworkers were more critical in their assessments of Black women leaders than of any other group. They also found that Black women were more critical in their own self-assessments when their leadership efforts did not produce positive results. When Black women’s leadership efforts yielded favorable results, they were not rewarded or celebrated to any extent higher than male counterparts of any race (Rosette and Livingston 2012). Black women are vulnerable to more intense critical assessments when their leadership fails to produce favorable results. With role vulnerability and racial-gender oppression as theoretical lenses to interpret equity directors’ work in PK–12 district settings, we turn to an explanation of our research procedures.

## Research Methodology

To carry out this study, we conducted in-depth interviews with district equity directors (or equivalent) from districts across the United States. Participants met

### *PK–12 Equity Director Role Configurations*

the following eligibility criteria: (a) employed in a PK–12 district-level leadership position created to support the design and implementation of district-wide equity reforms, regardless of their position titles (e.g., equity officer, equity director, director of diversity and inclusion) and (b) had been in their role for at least half of an academic year. We identified participants through purposive and snowball sampling procedures (Creswell and Creswell 2017; Miles and Huberman 1994). In the first recruitment cycle, we tapped into our professional networks to field participants. At the end of each interview, we asked participants if they knew other equity directors who might be interested in sharing their experiences and followed up accordingly.

Our final participants are summarized in table 1. Nine participants identified as Black or African American, one as Asian American, one as Latinx, one as biracial (Pacific Islander and White), and one as White. Eight participants identified as female. Five identified as male. Participants worked in school districts across several regions of the United States, including five from the Northwest, four from the Midwest, two from the Southwest, one from the Southeast, and one from the Northeast. On average, participants were in their role as equity director for 4 years. Seven participants worked in suburban districts and six worked in urban districts.

### *Data Collection*

We conducted audio-recorded one-to-one interviews as the primary method of data collection. We also gathered documents and artifacts related to equity work, such as school board meeting minutes, equity policies, district and equity office mission statements, job descriptions, and organizational charts. The documents helped us understand the work districts expected equity directors to carry out and goals they expected them to meet. We also gleaned information about each district's size, student population, and espoused commitments to district-level equity leadership. Each interview we conducted lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and covered three broad areas:

1. Participant's background, how they came into their equity director role, and how their role was organizationally situated within their school district
2. The nature of their roles, responsibilities, and their daily work designing and implementing district-level equity change efforts
3. The effectiveness of the role and how they or the district determined the immediate or long-term impact of their work

To explore what school districts expected equity directors to do, we drew on participant explanations of their official work responsibilities and used

TABLE 1

*Participant Profiles*

Director Name (Pseudonyms)	Racial and Ethnic Identification	Sex and Gender Identification	Highest Education Credential	Years in Role	District Name (Pseudonyms)
Linda Barrera	White (bicultural)	Female; heterosexual	Bachelor's; current PhD student	5	Valley Farm Area School District
Cole Blasingame	Black	Male; heterosexual	Master's	3	Outer Way School District
Tanya Fisher	Black	Female; cis-gender	Doctorate of education	3	Seaway School District
Martin Galloway	African American	Male	Unknown	6	Windsor Community School District
Wesley Gardner	Black	Male	Master's	5	West Mile School District
Lynne Hamilton	African American	Female; lesbian	Doctorate of philosophy	2	City Schools of Division
Shawn Jackson	Black	Male; cis-gender; heterosexual	Bachelor's	4	Broadview School District
Loretta Richards	Black	Female; heterosexual	Doctorate of philosophy	2	Mainline Public Schools
Jesus Salcedo	Latinx	Male	Master's	5	Richards County School District
Sara Singleton	Asian American	Female; cis-gender; heterosexual	Current PhD student	4	Bearclaw School District
Maria Sturtevant	Biracial (Pacific Islander/White)	Female; cis-gender; heterosexual	Doctorate of education	2	Fireside Public Schools
April Washington	Black	Female	Master's; current PhD candidate	6	Accelera School District
Tracie Yale	Black	Female	Master's	6	Westend County School District

### *PK–12 Equity Director Role Configurations*

documents to elaborate, clarify, and triangulate participants' explanations. We used interview data and documents, such as job ads, organizational charts, web information, and policies, to understand role configurations and interviews to understand their experiences in the role. Taken together, these documents helped us to triangulate findings from the interview data.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

We examined interview data in several stages to analyze the work of equity directors. First, four members of our research team independently coded two transcripts. Then we met to discuss our coding procedures. Once we reached agreement on our coding, members of the team analyzed the remaining interviews. We used ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software and employed a hybrid coding method to analyze and code the interviews (Creswell and Creswell 2017; Miles and Huberman 1994). During our initial analysis, we used an inductive process to capture participants' explanation of affordances and constraints. We constructed comparison tables to discern patterns in district expectations for director's work, their assigned day-to-day tasks, and the work directors themselves wanted to prioritize because they believed it would effect change. We next discussed how the themes compared across participants, which allowed us to synthesize our findings across participants as well as identify uniqueness within each of them. Throughout, we discussed the emerging findings and looked for disconfirming evidence and discrepancies (Creswell and Creswell 2017). Our analysis revealed that three competing demands shaped the nature of their work: what their district expected them to do, what they were assigned to do, and what they wanted to prioritize because they believed it would effect change. Collectively, equity directors' efforts to work within a set of demands created a precarious set of structural and psychological vulnerabilities that were exacerbated by race-gender oppression.

### *Delimitations*

This role configuration-focused article is part of a three-part series that shares findings from our study of PK–12 equity directors. In this article, we begin the exploration of racial-gendered experiences of PK–12 equity directors by sharing some of what we learned about how race-gender intersects with the structure of the role. However, we prioritize our findings related to how role configurations shape equity directors' work. In a separate manuscript that uses Black feminist intersectional analysis (Cho et al. 2013; Crenshaw 2017) and theories of racialized organizations (Ray 2019), we offer a more in-depth and nuanced

elaboration of race-gender oppression and how women of color brought assets to the role that disrupted racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression.

## Findings

We organized our findings to account for the three types of equity director work we identified in our analysis: the work they were expected to do as determined through codified responsibilities, the work they were assigned to do as defined by their role configurations, and the work they wanted to prioritize because they believed it would effect change. In the first section of our findings, we present what districts expected equity directors to do. Second, we present four role configurations that influenced equity directors' work, the work it afforded, and the work it did not afford. Third, we attend to the role configuration vulnerabilities that diminished directors' ability to carry out their prioritized equity efforts. Throughout, we show how equity directors used their own resourcefulness and agential actions to reconfigure—evolve, expand, and align—their districts' equity director configurations in ways that reduced some vulnerabilities and introduced others. Finally, we explain how racial-gender oppression intersects to exacerbate the vulnerabilities of women of color equity directors. Equity directors' actual work is the intersecting sum of the competing work demands. Given our findings, we suggest that districts be more intentional about configuring the roles to align with both district expectations and equity director priorities.

### *Codified Work Expectations: What Districts Expected Equity Directors to Accomplish*

Districts created equity director positions to address the deeply entrenched problems of educational inequity and achieve transformative goals making school equitable. To gain an understanding of what districts expected equity directors to do to address problems of systemic inequity, we listened as equity directors told us what they thought they were supposed to do, based on their interviews, district missions, and job descriptions. Typically, districts assigned equity directors day-to-day work that differed from what equity directors expected to do when they accepted the role. For example, Lynne Hamilton, who was in her first year serving as equity director for City Schools of Division, explained:

The job announcement had a full page of things that they were hoping to get from the person who was hired. So I have spent a lot of time doing that, but I've also done a lot of other things that district-level administrators are

### *PK-12 Equity Director Role Configurations*

required to do. I participate in a lot of meetings. We have 4-hour cabinet meetings every week. I participate in school board meetings, which are typically 5 to 7 hours long. In my role I'm expected to present to the board every month. They make different requests and ask different questions that I'm expected to answer. I have a standing item on the board agenda which was something that I didn't know would be required.

Lynne described her expected work, as reflected in official district documents, as different from her actual work. Her job description, like others in our study, read like a laundry list of tasks. District's equity purpose statements also signaled what work districts expected equity directors to carry out. Table 2 presents examples of three equity director organizational purpose statements. Some statements were far-reaching and expansive. Others were rigidly specific. Some offered examples of how the work might be carried out, naming particular frameworks such as cultural responsiveness. Others did not.

Drawing on role vulnerability theory (e.g., Mitchell et al. 2017), we assumed the novelty of the equity director role, its varied expectations and purposes, was a source of vulnerability. Were it this simple, a logical solution might be to more clearly define the positions' purpose and leadership tasks. However, further analysis revealed a more complex source of vulnerability stemming from the ways districts configured the role itself. The role configurations offered a more nuanced perspective on equity director experiences. If job ads, position descriptions, and purpose statements offered insights into district expectations, role configurations offered insights into the nature of equity directors' assigned equity leadership work.

### *Work Assignments: Role Configurations, Constraints, and Affordances*

The work that equity directors were assigned, such as Lynne's requirement to "participate in a lot of meetings," is best understood through the configuration of equity director roles. We use the term "equity director role configurations" to reference (a) the position of the role within the organizational structure and (b) the forms of organizational power and authority equity directors are afforded to carry out what becomes their assigned work. Across interviews, participants explained four forms of formal organizational power and authority as consequential in shaping their assigned work, or what the district asked them to do (and not). These included

1. supervisory responsibility and authority,
2. influence on superintendent and board relations,
3. financial resources and budgetary discretion, and

TABLE 2

*Sample Purpose Statements*

Purpose Statement	Role			Configuration Affordances	Configuration Constraints
	Ambiguity	Configuration	Seeding		
The Department of Equity and Student Support is committed to understanding the root causes of disproportionality; providing input on discipline policies, practices, and culturally relevant pedagogy; engaging faculty and staff in cultural awareness and cultural proficiency professional learning activities; and strengthening family and community partnerships.—Division	Low		Seeding	Understand disproportionality Provide input on discipline policies and practices Family and community partnerships	Culturally relevant pedagogy Faculty and staff professional development
Support the district in consistent and equitable resource allocation, evaluation, development, and implementation of tools, policies, and practices to achieve racial and social equity for students, teachers, staff, and the community, regardless of race, ability, socioeconomic status, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and other human differences.—Accelerator	Low		Collaboration	Policy development and implementation	Resource allocation Evaluation
The purpose of the Equity Department is to create urgency and immediate impact on students of color and culturally and linguistically diverse students using culturally responsive practices and policies, while building racial equity awareness and skills with staff.—Seaway	High		Collaboration	Create urgency	Culturally responsive policies Build staff racial equity awareness and skills

### *PK–12 Equity Director Role Configurations*

4. influence on district professional development related to curricular and instructional matters.

Varied access to power and authority resources informed how participants narrated the nature of their assigned leadership work and abilities to fulfill district expectations. Table 3 provides a summary of the role configurations we constructed, a description of the work associated with the configurations, and the forms of relative power and authority assigned to each.

To be clear, role configurations overlap and diverge in unique ways. Although some equity director role configurations fit more neatly into a single category, several enabled more than one type of equity work. This is expected given the vastness of equity work to be done in school districts. A hybrid configuration appears in the third column of table 4, indicated through a hyphenated role configuration label. Through our analysis of school districts' organizational charts, job descriptions, and interviews, our findings indicate that districts positioned equity director roles within existing organizational units. One stand-alone "equity office" operated independently of preexisting units. Position titles reflected the organizational house and proximity to the superintendent's cabinet and ranged from "director" and "chief" to "specialist" and "coordinator." Twelve titles incorporated the word "equity." None of the study participants' positions or offices shared the same title. The location of the position in the organizational chart and title offer an important hint to the affordances and constraints of the role.

### *Equity Seeding Configurations*

We characterize equity seeding configurations as those suited for leadership activities that plant core equity ideas into the district's guiding documents, policies, and discourses. We categorized Division and Mainline district's roles as configured for seeding equity. Both district's equity directors, Lynne Hamilton and Loretta Richards, characterized their most impactful work as drafting and shaping equity policies, creating and delivering presentations, curating outside resources and supports (e.g., articles, consultations), and gathering and organizing data to make the case for equity to internal and external stakeholders. They participated in insider cabinet meetings. They offered one-on-one thought partnership and equity influence by way of information sharing (e.g., disaggregated district data, latest research on equity). Director roles configured for seeding did not provide leaders with extensive supervisory responsibility, the exception being managing the work of interns and select specialty hires. Although seeding work influenced board decision-making, through floating policy

ideas, shaping district equity policies and discourses, and generating focused responsiveness to local and national injustices, participants in seeding configurations self-assessed their work as inconsequential absent the approval of more powerful organization members.

### *Equity Collaboration Configurations*

We categorized four districts as having role configurations that assigned directors to equity collaboration, broadly defined as supporting and working with a broad range of stakeholders to advance equity. Equity collaboration configurations offered the closest resemblance to Mitchell and colleagues' (2017) concept of role vulnerability, where equity directors encountered flexibility to address everyday demands but with unclear or inconsistent work portfolios. These equity directors spent most of their time "supporting" or "implementing" district or school-based equity initiatives, mostly in the form of sporadic professional development. People whose work was configured as such described their work as all-encompassing. They experienced lower levels of supervisory authority and responsibility and less frequent interaction with superintendents and board members. They worked with limited or no budgetary authority and had little latitude in decision-making.

### *Equity Management and Compliance Configurations*

A third role configuration is equity management and compliance. We identified four districts with this configuration. Equity directors working in equity management and compliance configurations enjoyed relatively high-level access to superintendents and budgetary discretion. These roles offered more substantive supervisory responsibility than those in equity collaboration configurations. However, their work was overwhelmingly managerial and compliance oriented. For several participants in our study, their authority usually rested in management and improvement of preexisting district programs or initiatives, such as bilingual education or family engagement. Management and compliance role configurations afforded more autonomy and authority than roles configured for equity collaboration. As the name suggests, they primarily required management of programs, logistical maintenance of partnerships, and oversight of initiatives that previously existed. They often did not fit easily into other district units. Defining features of this configuration included responsibility over substantial resources, busyness, and an inability to undertake equity work they believed would effect change.

TABLE 3

*Role Configuration Characteristics*

Configuration	Role Description (Common Leadership Tasks)	SOURCES OF FORMAL POWER AND AUTHORITY			
		Supervisory Responsibility and Authority	Superintendent Access and Board Influence	Resource and Budgetary Authority	Curricular and Instructional Influence
Seeding	Writes policies and drafts language, creates equity documents, provides district and community stakeholders with presentations, educational resources, data, and access to student, parent, and community perspectives that make the case for why equity is important. Can be situated in multiple parts of the district but often lacks power or influence to do more than present information.	Minimal	Moderate	Minimal	Minimal
Collaboration	Collaborates with other district employees to support a wide range of equity initiatives, such as parental engagement, principal and teacher professional development, and special programming. Does not work directly with superintendents, has small or no budget, and no program oversight or supervisory responsibilities.	Minimal	Moderate	Minimal	Moderate

Management and compliance	Manages and improves a portfolio of mostly preexisting district programs and initiatives by creating equity accountability systems, consolidating programs, and creating coherence. Usually reports to a department head but has routine access to superintendent. Oversees a small staff—usually fewer than 10—and is provided with a modest budget.	Moderate	Substantial	Moderate	Minimal
Innovation and development	Creates and develops equity initiatives, programs, and professional learning opportunities. Is a partner with district superintendent, oversees a substantial budget, provides program development and oversight, and directly supervises more than 10 district employees (e.g., department heads).	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Minimal

NOTE.—Interview conducted in 2017.

TABLE 4

*Equity Director Roles*

District	Equity Director Title and Year Created	Configuration	District "House"	About the Role	Budget and Resources
Accelerera School District	Cultural proficiency and inclusiveness director—2013	Collaboration	Professional Development	Reports to the director of Social and Emotional Learning; positioned four people away from superintendent in organizational hierarchy	Very small budget of \$50,000; no staff; her position supports 11,000 staff across the district
Bearclaw School District	Administrator for equity and inclusion—2015	Management and compliance	Department of Teaching and Learning	Single-person role, which has evolved; started working in district in 2007, then became administrator in 2014 for current role	Midsized budget of \$206,000 + \$600,000 for one specific district program; eight persons on staff (including four teachers on special assignment, two of whom are in another department)
Broadview School District	Director of equity and graduation success—2013	Innovation and development	Student Services	Started as director of graduation success; after 11 months he stepped into the equity director role; reports to the executive director for student services; positioned as the executive of the cabinet as department head	Undisclosed budget information; has a staff of 17 individuals

City Schools of Division	Equity director—2017	Seeding	Not available	A part of the superintendent's cabinet; directly reports to the superintendent; first district-led equity position; created by new superintendent who wanted to close disparities for Black students	Small budget that is still being finalized, nothing permanent currently in place; no staff
Fireside Public Schools	Executive director of equity for scholar and family success—2013	Management and compliance	Student and Family Services	A part of the superintendent's cabinet	Midsize to large budget of \$175,000 + \$500,000 for AVID; midsize to large staff of 16 department heads
Mainline Public Schools	Equity specialist—2015	Seeding-collaboration	Professional Development	Reports to director of Department of Organizational Development and to chief innovation and information officer; first district-led equity position; created based on Black Lives Matter resolution; position has shifted organizationally at least three times and is four layers removed from the superintendent	Small budget; budget allocated based on district resolution; includes four positions: equity specialist, diversity specialist, student engagement coordinator, and director of business and community partnerships; supervises three teachers—ethnic studies and culturally responsive teacher

TABLE 4 (Continued)

District	Equity Director Title and Year Created	Configuration	District "House"	About the Role	Budget and Resources
Outer Way School District	Deputy chief of equity (senior advisor of equity, diversity, and inclusion)—2016	Innovation and development	Equity	Directly reports to the superintendent as a cabinet member; only person in role; has been directing African American Male Achievement for 8 years—shifted to district-wide role 2 years ago	Large budget of \$5.7 million (60% foundation funded); large staff—oversees four "targeted strategies"—African American Males, African American Females, Latinx, Asian Pacific Islander Achievement; community engagement for seven networks
Richards County School District	Director of equity and diversity—NA	Innovation and development	Professional Development	Has access to the superintendent as the direct advisor; reports directly to the superintendent	Office has a specific budget; oversees a staffed department with 19 full-time bilingual parent coordinators
Seaway School District	Director of equity and family engagement—2016	Collaboration	Instruction	Reports to assist superintendent in the Instruction Department; has "special"/temporary cabinet access; first person in this role	Small budget of \$35,000; no staff

Valley Farm Area School District	Director of Bilingual Programs and Instructional Equity—2014	Management and compliance	Instruction/Bilingual Education	A part of the superintendent's cabinet; directly reports to the superintendent; created as a result of growing bilingual population in the district; equity may have been an "attachment"	Small, but "adequate," budget; oversees 20–25 staff including district translators, bilingual staff, family-community liaison, continuous improvement coordinator, and 10–15 paraprofessionals
West Mile School District	Supervisor of equity and student services—NA	Collaboration	Professional Development	Three positions away from the superintendent in the organizational chart; positioned as a part of the district's instructional framework	No budget but has access to resources if necessary for equity work; does not have staff or oversee a specific department; works with instructional equity coaches across school district
Westend County School District	Equity and diversity coordinator—2013	Management and compliance	Unknown	Has access to and meets monthly with the superintendent; positioned as the second person down from the superintendent in organizational hierarchy	Midsized staff of 11 people including a secretary, 3 equity and diversity specialists, and 1 Indian education specialist; budget is taken from the district's general fund; budget receives no grant support or title funds

TABLE 4 (Continued)

District	Equity Director Title and Year Created	Configuration	District “House”	About the Role	Budget and Resources
Windsor Community School District	Chief officer of hu- man resources and equity—NA	Management and compliance	Human Resources	Role existed for more than 20 years prior to stepping into current equity/community role; has direct access to the superintendent and reports directly to su- perintendent; member of the executive cabinet	Budget spent on “equity- related things”; small staff of approximately seven people

Maria, whose title was Fireside School District's executive director of equity for scholar and family success, worked within a role configuration that was primarily management-compliance (but that hybridized with collaboration). As did people working in collaboration configurations, she explained her role as the go-to person for equity:

Maria: In a nutshell, my roles and responsibilities are to help teachers and staff, all 11,000, develop an understanding of how their personal background impacts the decisions they make, the interactions that they have with students, with families, with other staff, and ultimately how that supports the educational success of the students in our school district.

Interviewer: I just want to be clear. Prior to you receiving this grant, you were tasked with supporting 11,000 teachers and staff by yourself?

Maria: Yes. I still am, technically. It's mostly going to schools to do cultural proficiency trainings. You can take however many staff that are at those 10 schools that are now supported by the grant off my plate. The eight grant-funded people now directly support those 10 schools. But, yeah. I am still responsible for the rest of them. By myself.

Her account underscored her busyness, which coincided with her inability to undertake the equity work she believed would effect change. She explained the supervisory and district partnership coordination roles that characterize those working in the equity management and compliance configuration:

I supervise 16 different people and basically 16 different programs. I was charged with launching a national consulting groups' work, although it had already been agreed upon what that would look like. They pretty much have a standard model, so my role was mostly managing logistics for the consultants. As for the programs, I oversaw all elementary family liaisons. Positive Behavioral Supports implementation Pre-K through 12, homelessness, the truancy process, athletics and activities counselors, Advancing via Individual Determination, all the discipline, and native education. . . .

I was the lead de-escalator with any very upset person that would come into the district. I would be the one that typically handled the de-escalation. I worked with the Office of Civil Rights and the Ombudsman on a couple of different issues that were brought to the district by parents. Finally, I served on the superintendents' executive board. I was required to attend all the school board meetings. And I was required to provide PowerPoints

### *PK–12 Equity Director Role Configurations*

and all supporting documentation to prepare the superintendent for board meetings.

A critical point that reveals how power works in role configurations is Maria's narration of her work in a discourse of compliance. She, as did others in management and compliance configurations, talked about what she was "charged, required, and had to" do more so than what she believed would effect change (this was different for innovation and development configurations). The emphasis on management and compliance and the experiences of busyness it created persisted regardless of where districts housed management and compliance configured roles.

### *Equity Innovation and Development*

A fourth configuration that emerged in our findings is equity innovation and development. The three directors who worked in roles configured for equity development and innovation experienced higher levels of supervisory authority and responsibility, more frequent interactions with superintendents and board members, more control over financial resources, and decision-making latitude. Equity innovation and development configurations were afforded a relatively high level of autonomy and influence on the direction of district equity programs and initiatives. Cole, the chief of equity for Outer Way School District, best exemplified the affordances of working in a role configured for innovation and development. He explained: "You're not going to find me based on role. But I am a cabinet member. I report directly to the superintendent. I am paid as a founding executive director of my previous position. So the point from which I'm funded has not changed. But when we evolved to the office of equity and I became the deputy chief of equity, I continued that reporting directly to the superintendent. I now supervise a team of directors: of African American Male Achievement, Latinx Student Achievement, African American Female Excellence, and Asian Pacific Islander Student Achievement."

As the deputy chief of equity, Cole was a cabinet member who worked in partnership with the district superintendent and oversaw a nearly \$6 million budget (more than half of which he was responsible for fundraising from outside sources). Outer Way Unified School District's position was rare in terms of budget, responsibility, and decision-making latitude.

Yet, despite the autonomy that role configuration afforded Cole, his directors, and his office, its configuration did not afford influence over long-standing organizational units. Cole shared, "We haven't been able to really penetrate teaching and learning, [human resources], talent investment, research assessment and data," which reveals that all configurations have baked-in constraints

that shape equity directors' abilities to carry out the work they believed would be most impactful.

### Work Directors Believe Should Happen: Role Vulnerabilities and Reconfiguration

Although districts had expectations for equity directors, directors brought a wellspring of ideas, beliefs, theories of change, and priorities to their work. And the role configurations they inherited created affordances and constraints for directors to enact what they believe needs to happen to improve the social, emotional, and academic experiences and outcomes of students. Directors in seeding configurations developed policies and presented data but had little power to implement policies or influence principals, teachers, or any stakeholder for that matter. Directors in collaborator roles were subjected to far-reaching yet ill-defined responsibilities that resulted in them doing “any and everything related to equity” and working at the whim of whomever needed support at a given time. People in management and innovation roles were better resourced and thus assigned more influential equity work but still had little direct influence on the instructional culture of schools. Equity directors realized role constraints and affordances. To respond, they engaged in the largely invisible practice of job molding—evolving their roles to be better configured to the work responsibilities and tasks they considered most consequential. In what follows, we explore in more depth the vulnerabilities of the roles while also emphasizing equity directors' agential actions to reconfigure them for greater influence and impact.

#### *Structural Vulnerabilities*

Extant literature theorizes structural vulnerabilities as embedded in the ambiguity of the organizational role, flexibility to address everyday demands, and unclear or inconsistent work portfolio (Mitchell et al. 2017). In our study, we found that equity director structural vulnerabilities stemmed primarily from their role configurations—the position and its contingent power and authority resources. In particular, equity directors describe the roles as restrictive rather than flexible. They worked amid an unspoken assigned “place” (role configuration) that districts inadequately resourced and/or misaligned to district equity expectations. Structural vulnerabilities manifested as equity directors not being able to carry out expected or prioritized work. Lynne talks about how she found herself hamstrung by her seeding configuration role, which left her unable to carry out the work she believed needed to happen: “I am a department of one for

### *PK–12 Equity Director Role Configurations*

right now. So I have no one else who reports to me. And really no one else on my team. I am a part of the superintendent's cabinet. I'm his direct report . . . I never know how that works. I do partner with other people in the superintendents' cabinet, including the executive director of curriculum and instruction, special education, and student support. We all sort of work together, but that's where my role fits."

Lynne's statement underscores how her being the only person in her department created a sense of vulnerability for her position. She was inadequately resourced. She also reported to a supervisor whom she considered incapable of supporting her. Loretta, Shawn, Cole, and Wesley shared the same conundrum: their supervisors had formal power and authority to shape the district's efforts and the equity director's role and work. Their roles lacked authority and power. By organizational standards, Lynne held a relatively powerful position. However, the role configuration minimized her ability to effect change. Her influence was primarily lateral. In her role, she did not directly influence principals or teachers (i.e., what actually happens inside of classrooms) as much as she interacted with the school board members. Her job description suggested her work would be on implementation of equity efforts, but the fact that the role was configured as part of the superintendent's cabinet required her to commit substantial time and energy doing, as she stated, "things that district-level administrators are required to do," which is often not implementation. In short, the role, as it was configured, did not allow Lynne to carry out the district's expected work or the work she believed was the most important work.

### *Psychological Vulnerabilities*

If structural vulnerabilities constrain directors by creating unspoken relegations to assigned daily work, psychological vulnerability is its counterpart. Psychological vulnerability emerges as self-doubt and stress that a person experiences as a gap between the work tasks they are actually assigned to carry out and the work that they prefer (or believe is the right work) to undertake (Gronn and Lacey 2004). For equity directors, psychological vulnerability revealed a threefold experiential gap between what the district expected them to do, what they were assigned to carry out by virtue of their role configuration, and what they believed they should be doing to effect change. This multifold gap created stress that was exacerbated by the difficulties equity directors often faced in their efforts to reconfigure their roles for influence and impact.

Loretta Richards, the equity specialist from Mainline Public Schools, explained the chasm she experienced working in a seeding equity configuration for a district that expected her to collaborate. Loretta's early work focused primarily on a nondiscrimination policy that she revived "to include gender

identity, gender expression, and gender nonconformity, and a comprehensive guidance document to accompany what that actually means in practice.” During the time she rewrote the policy, her work was well configured for equity seeding, allowing her to successfully usher the policy through the superintendent and board of education approval. After this success, she shifted her focus “to work on implementation of that policy,” which was outlined as an expected requirement in the position job description. However, the district’s seeding role configuration did not afford her power to achieve any semblance of implementation. As she worked to implement the newly adopted policy, she found herself facing multiple constraints, including resistance from supervisors who did not share her priorities: “Initially I was going to report to the director of innovation, who reports to the chief of innovation, who reports directly to the superintendent. But nobody really knows what the heck to do with this work. Bless my director. She’s sweet as pie but she don’t get it [equity leadership]. And so to do the kind of work that I needed to do, I needed to have some of those layers removed.”

As noted previously, Loretta perceived she did not have adequate power or authority to carry out implementation work. She explained how her relatively low position in the organization, the lack of knowledgeable supervisors, and “layers” interlocked to create a set of vulnerabilities that she tried her best to navigate. As Loretta experienced the structural vulnerabilities of the role, she took it upon herself to fix it. She commented: “I began to just report directly to the chief of innovation. I was the only specialist to do so. Since that was ‘out of order’ so to speak, they put me under professional development so could I report to a director. The director of professional development is in the Department of Organizational Development. So I’m in the Office of Innovation, but I report to the senior director of organizational development, who reports to the chief of innovation, who reports to the superintendent.”

Her agential actions, in the form of going around her direct report, expanded the equity specialist role to include limited professional development design and implementation. From there, she designed and implemented district-mandated equity and cultural responsiveness professional development and trainings for principals but noted that “central services units were not mandated to have the trainings.” Again, the configuration, this time its low rank in the organizational hierarchy, stifled her progress because she did not have power and authority to influence directors of more powerful district units. People within the organization ridiculed her efforts and admonished her for overstepping her role. The compounding experiences manifested as psychological vulnerability, self-doubt, and stress. In the following exchange, Loretta talks about how difficult it is to count her “wins” as constituting success:

I’ve talked to principals about equity and cultural responsiveness. I worked in some departments. Yes, I have an equity policy that was passed under my

leadership. We did a gender inclusion revision to our nondiscrimination policy. But at the end of the day, if the kids aren't achieving, then we ain't doing our job. So I don't care how hard I'm working or if I did this and I did that. I struggle with defining what success is in this role. I have kids from the Performing Arts High School, where many don't have binary identities, leaving campus to use the bathroom. Students are altering what they eat so they don't have to pee because there's no gender-neutral facility in their school. So, yeah, I did policy, I did training, but that's still happening in schools. So I don't feel successful.

Despite the productive ways she pushed the district, Loretta regarded her efforts as less than impactful. She perceived that people did not appreciate her efforts, expressed feelings of isolation and being misunderstood, and labeled what she regarded as agential equity advocacy as being "out of order." Ultimately, the district assigned her to provide training and professional development for "whoever requested it." She described her job as being the "go-to person if it relates to issues of equity," a statement that typified how people in equity collaboration configurations described their day-to-day work. Through her experience, she endured substantial stress, as described as follows: "I do believe very strongly in the vision that our superintendent set. But it's a struggle mentally and spiritually, even physically. I really should not be stressed out the way I am because I'm not a shot caller. I provide best practices and suggestions and professional development, that's good. But when you don't hold the final decision [it doesn't matter]. Shot callers really have to have the mindset to do the work. That's all I can say."

Ironically, for many equity directors, their own efforts to reconfigure their roles to align with their priorities for equity work exacerbated their psychological vulnerability. Often, the emotional labor, psychological harm, and ultimately the benefits of this powerful yet potentially personally damaging equity work went unnoticed, by both districts and directors alike. Loretta's experience presented previously illustrates this well. In particular, our participants talked about but never directly named job molding as equity leadership work.

Like Loretta, almost all of the directors in our study explained that they themselves did the politically fraught equity leadership work of job molding and reconfiguring their roles to make them capable of carrying out the work they believed was most important. For example, Tanya took agential action for about 5 years to reduce the vulnerabilities inherent to her work in Seaway School District. She explained her efforts in great detail (which is edited down here for space considerations):

Interviewer: So you mentioned earlier how your department went from 2 to 11. Can you explain that?

Tanya: The department is a little over 5 years old. I was the first district equity coordinator. Before I explain, I will say that our district decided to do this work but didn't know how to do this work. I don't think that there was any expectation about what this work would actually look like. I'm all about strategic moves.

We have this grant that was funded under someone else. I said, "How about give me those positions under the grant. Let me kind of restructure them and let's see what happens." So they gave me the positions. That was the last year.

So we structured the position for it to have some accountability and some data tracking, and we created a system for reporting. And so we were able to show in that final year that they had made contact with over 220 more unduplicated students compared to what they had years before. And I said, "So if I make these part-time positions and take them off as independent contractors, would you fund them from the general fund for the district?" And they said, "Yeah."

Now I have an Indian education specialist, two equity diversity specialists, and myself that handle professional development. I have two student graduation advocates that work in the schools with our Native American, African American, and Pacific Islander students. I have three language instructors that work with the schools' cooperating teachers that are funded through another grant.

Ironically, equity directors' own efforts and "successes" in their roles (although many did not define their efforts as successful) are what generated the need for new role configurations. Their efforts played a substantial role in shaping what the equity director configuration eventually looked like. There were exceptions, as some participants in our study were not in the positions long enough to see the fruits of their reconfiguration efforts.

### *The Permanent Vulnerability of Race-Gender Oppression*

As illustrated previously, equity directors reconfigured their roles to redress the myriad vulnerabilities inherent in role configurations. But the ways that districts responded to equity directors' agential efforts differed based on racial-gender identities. Racial-gender oppression within school organizations exacerbates the structural and psychological vulnerabilities that equity directors experienced. We arrived at this claim through noting the marked racial-gender differences in both the resources male equity directors had at their disposal and their role configurations, as well as the stark differences in how they narrated their

experiences. Male participants occupied management and innovation configured roles. Black women occupied seeding and collaboration, and management and compliance configured roles. This held despite the fact that overall, the women who participated in our study had completed or were pursuing a terminal degree in education. Male participants held bachelor's and master's degrees. Simply put, districts extended male leaders forms of formal power and authority that women appeared to be denied. Moreover, racism and sexism diminished and distorted the intersectional identities leaders brought to their work, which manifested in males having a more positive self-concept and assessment of their efforts.

For example, although male participants experienced misaligned roles, they narrated very different experiences about reconfiguring the role. Shawn Jackson, an equity director who worked in a role configured for innovation and equity, noted initial vulnerabilities related to his lack of direct support. But he reconfigured the role to align with his own vision of equity leadership work:

Organizationally, there was a point in time when I first took the role, I reported to the superintendent. I put a squash on that because I was so new in the organization that I needed a good level of support. I needed someone to be there, ride or die, with me every single day. And when you're reporting to a super, and you take someone like me who's come from a legacy of nonprofit into a public sector role, I just always needed some constant support, like some daily constant support. So my role is under an executive director now, but I have my own sort of vision and mission stuff. I have key norms and goals. I'm set up as a department, as an authentic department. And I'm one of the 14 people on the executive cabinet.

Shawn, like all male study participants, talked about possessing the autonomy to craft his own "sort of vision and mission." We inferred, based on his comment "I put a squash on that," that he played an active part in reconfiguring his role to align with his own beliefs about what the equity leadership work should accomplish. However, he did not characterize his agential efforts as a struggle or in as much detail as did female of color study participants. Cole, from Outer Way School District, worked in a role configured primarily for innovation and development, which had not always been the case. During our interview, he referred to himself as an "architect" of his district's equity efforts. He explained the time and effort required to create the innovation and development configuration he led from as a "beautiful struggle":

I think it's important to know this now is that it's my eighth year, with five superintendents. You can only imagine five superintendents; each time there's tectonic shifts. I'm moved all over the place. When we

evolved to the office of equity and I became the deputy chief of equity, I continued that continuity of reporting directly to the superintendent.

I now have a team of directors. I'm the architect [of our evolution], if that makes sense. . . . It just speaks to the complexity of trying to grow something when you're constantly changing and still trying to calibrate with the traditional structure while the structure makes these shifts. You think you're about to have a grip, then [things change and we ask] what do we do? Then you're trying to sustain this work. That is the beautiful struggle.

Here, Cole described superintendent leadership turnover as a source of vulnerability. He also noted vulnerabilities that stemmed from the uncertainty, constant change, and complexities inherent in the work. All equity directors who participated in our study experienced structural and psychological vulnerabilities. Still, Cole viewed his efforts as worthwhile and in a favorable light. Female leaders narrated oppression that males did not—both explicitly with stories and implicitly through how they conveyed their struggles, which women did not characterize as beautiful. Despite a common practice of agential job reconfiguring, male participants narrated having adequate resources, positive agential experiences, and positive outlooks and self-assessment of their work. The fact that equity directors undertook similar reconfiguration leadership work regardless of race-gender but had very different experiences points to the need to further explore district institutionalized racial-gender oppression as a source of the problem in and of itself. Such an exploration may reveal ways that female equity leaders of color draw on race-gendered knowledge, agential practices, and resilience to challenge systemic inequities that, absent an intersectional analysis, may go overlooked.

## Discussion of Findings

In this research study, we sought to understand the potential that district-level equity leadership might have in expanding the social justice, anti-racist, and culturally responsive leadership approaches and the role that equity director roles have in fulfilling this potential. This article answered our research questions by exploring what districts expected from equity directors and how they configured equity director roles to carry out the expected tasks. The conundrum that emerged in our analysis is that district boards and superintendents expect equity directors to address deeply entrenched issues of racism and inequality that they themselves have been unable to solve. Yet districts extended to the equity directors in our study varied ranges of formal authority and autonomy that were more often than not insufficient to drive change. For example, although some of

our participants talked extensively about their success ushering in policy changes, they often pointed to limited authority and resources to implement the policy. Another example is that their direct influence on principals and teachers remains unclear at best, and minimal at worst. Through focusing on how equity directors narrated their access to institutional power and authority to carry out expected, assigned, and preferred leadership tasks, our study extends the existing body of literature by identifying four role configurations and the constraints and affordances of each. Each equity director, regardless of their role configuration, experienced structural and psychological vulnerabilities inherent in the role configuration and the tasks it dictated.

We expected to find (and did) that the equity director role is unique from all other school district positions that have traditionally driven organizational change (e.g., superintendents, school board members, principals, teacher leaders). Equity directors explicitly center their leadership on addressing issues of exclusion, racial disparities, disproportionalities, implicit bias, and marginalization in a broad range of different domains, from educator professional learning to data use for accountability, from human resources to curriculum and policy (activities we examine in another article). In contrast to superintendents, equity directors appear to contend with less external political scrutiny and pressure from broad public constituencies in their roles. Also, unlike many superintendents, equity directors in our study possessed the experiential knowledge, skills, and willingness to lead for equity. Although we expected districts would identify individual leaders who can succeed in the role, our study offers district considerations about how definitions of equity leadership, the configuration of the role, its purposes and expectations, and the formal authority and power it offers influence what equity director leadership entails on a day-to-day basis.

Our study also makes an important contribution to the literature by revealing how both equity director role configurations and associated role vulnerabilities are more complex in PK–12 districts than is accounted for in the literature. For instance, participants' job molding stories underscored the fact that director role configurations evolve. Thus, it is important to conceptualize equity director role configurations as an active, contested, evolving, and hybridizing process within school districts. Such a conceptualization contrasts with the role as a position on an organizational chart with a discrete set of responsibilities and activities. It also takes a cue but departs from the model conceptualization that is often used to characterize higher education CDO roles (Leon 2014; Williams and Wade-Golden 2007a). Understanding the role as a continuously changing process is important because, if the role continually evolves (and is evolved), this feature should be acknowledged as a defining structural characteristic of the role itself. If structural vulnerabilities stem from flexibility to address everyday demands but an unclear or inconsistent work portfolio (Mitchell et al. 2017), then clarifying that the role is structured to continually change may reduce its ambiguity. By

extension, this clarification may reduce the psychological vulnerability equity directors experience as they try to reconcile the contradictions between what they are expected to do, what they actually do, and what they believe they should be doing.

Superintendents and district leaders in well-established roles are less likely to experience the psychological vulnerabilities that equity directors do because superintendents have more formal power and authority to carry out the work that they prefer (or believe is the right work; Gronn and Lacey 2004). Our findings suggest that, for equity directors, psychological vulnerability stemmed from a threefold experiential gap between what the district expected them to do, what they were assigned to carry out by virtue of their role configuration, and what they believed they should be doing to effect change, but often could not. This theoretical contribution is essential because it provides more clarity around constraints that equity directors experience in their roles and how these tensions affect their role and work. In addition, Black, Asian American, Latinx, and Indigenous leaders, especially those who have dual or multiple minority identities, experienced tokenization, racial battle fatigue, and stereotype threats that White and dominant male leaders did not (Rosette and Livingston 2012). Gender-racial oppression interlocks with the vulnerability inherent in the configuration of equity director leadership roles.

## Conclusion

The equity director role is different from any other role in a school or district because it is shaped by the external and internal demands and pressures that school districts experience related to racism and all intersecting forms of inequity and oppression. This current study—one of three in a series that examines equity director leadership—demonstrates that equity directors themselves are the primary agents who advocate, seek out, and scrape together resources and supports to sustain and improve the role. District-level administrators should recognize and name the invisible job molding and role reconfiguration labor that this first wave of equity director leadership demands. If district leaders recognize these efforts, it would allow equity directors to play a substantially more active role, and potentially experience less resistance, in setting out the district's equity agenda. It would also mean that districts afford equity directors the required resources, scope of responsibilities, and configurations that would reduce the structural vulnerability of the role, and that districts, not equity directors, would procure the resources required for equity directors to achieve success. In sum, our findings suggest the field think critically about how to configure equity director roles for impactful change-making. Giving careful attention to role configurations might reduce the structural and psychological vulnerabilities of and

harm to individual equity directors who fill the roles and who are disproportionately women of color subjected to racial-gender oppression.

This line of research would be strengthened through replication to increase the number of participants and districts. In particular, more research is needed to better understand the race and gender positionalities of equity directors and how their identities intersect with organizational structures to shape their work, which is a topic we will explore with greater depth in the second article of this series. Given the emergent findings about the evolving nature of roles, future studies are also needed to explore the work of equity leadership—including, but not only, equity directors—more in-depth, over time, and across districts. This might include a multisite analysis of the work of districts with equity directors to better understand how equity leadership confronts deep-seated district inequities. Finally, additional research is needed to examine how school districts might construct the role as more of a networked position that is connected to other key positions in a district or region. Growing a body of research on district-level equity leadership and the roles equity directors play in that leadership effort is essential for continuing to expand the social justice, anti-racist, and culturally responsive leadership approaches that aim to confront oppressive education realities and transform schools and districts to benefit students whom districts traditionally underserve.

## Note

1. The name of the role varies based on how a school district situates the role. For example, directors may be called equity director, equity officer, chief equity officer, diversity officer, or equity specialist, to name a few.

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*PK-12 Equity Director Role Configurations*

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