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Examining Educator Perspectives on Creating and Implementing Inclusive Curriculum in Suburban High Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine educators' perspectives on implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. This qualitative research study applied phenomenology through focus groups consisting of district-level and building-level administrators, along with suburban high school teachers. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Though the suburbs are becoming increasingly diverse (Frey, 2011; Frey 2022a), suburban high schools lack consistency in implementing inclusive curriculum measures (Ayscue, 2016). In recent years, both federal and state legislatures have directed public schools to diversify their practices. One recent implementation in the New York State Education Department (NYSED) was the Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework (NYSED, 2018). District leaders, building leaders, and teachers lack direction and confidence in navigating the implementation of such practices (Ezzani, Munn, & Lee, 2021). At the same time, teachers must grapple with their own struggles to meaningfully engage with and instruct content rooted in diversity (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). The findings from this study revealed: suburban school districts lack structures to support curriculum implementation; suburban high school educators believe students are ready for inclusive curricula and, although opposition is minimal, it is impactful. This research will help guide NYSED in supporting inclusive curricula implementation. The findings will also support leaders at all levels in school districts to consistently implement inclusive curricula.

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Dedication

I am grateful to God for putting this journey in my heart. I value this work in sharing my love for all of humankind.

Drs. Cianca and van Harssel, I am so grateful for your guidance and mentorship. I have learned immensely from the two of you. Your feedback and encouragement throughout this process helped me to stay focused from the most rewarding to the most grueling moments. I am proud to have worked alongside both of you on this journey. I look forward to our continued connections in leadership and inclusion.

Eric, thank you for encouraging me to finally embark on this journey. Our walks and talks are not only therapeutic, but they have helped me to separate the background noise from the priorities. I love you and the life we have built together. Go, Team Windover!

Sarah, Jonathan, and Elyse, thank you for sharing your mom with this research and program for the last 2 years. I hope I have made you proud. Each of you has sustained me at some point along this process. I cherish our talks and laughs, and I always will. You are each blessed with your own unique gifts that enrich everyone who is lucky enough to know you. You are incredible humans, and I am so proud to be your mom! I love you.

Mom, thank you for instilling the virtue of perseverance in me. It is not lost on me that I am the same age you were when you endured college and a career change while raising kids the same age as my own children. Only, you did it as a single parent, with four kids! You were fearless then, and you are fearless now. It is because of your example that I knew I could do this. Thank you for your support and encouragement throughout my whole life. I love you.

Grandma, although you're no longer here with me, you have been a massive influence on this work. Your stories of our family's immigrant experiences sparked my passion for inclusion. As a young person, you were courageous when you went to night school after working all day to support your family. You were courageous when you chose to be a working mother of five during the 1950s. You were even more courageous when you accepted a promotion to leadership, even though those around you did not support that move. In your life, you loved your faith and your family deeply. You extended that love to the patients and colleagues whose lives you touched. Thank you for teaching me compassion and courage. I love you and miss you.

To my family and friends, thank you for understanding and supporting my jam-packed schedule during the last 2 years. I am grateful to have each of you in my life. Much love!

To Team Trinity, our journey together was well in the works before we enrolled in this program. I am blessed to know each of you. I value the balance, enthusiasm, drive, encouragement, and perseverance we share. We have each pushed and pulled one another along this process. Thank you for all that you have been and continue to be in this transformative process.

To my Cohort Sweet 16 family, I have valued learning from you and along with you. Although part of our journey is complete, I know that our bonds and friendships will last a lifetime.

Biographical Sketch

Marie Windover is currently an Assistant Principal at Charles H. Roth Junior High School in the Rush-Henrietta Central School District. Prior to this role, she was the Dean of Students, English Curriculum Area Lead Teacher, and her building's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Co-Chair in the Finger Lakes Region of New York State. Mrs. Windover also taught ninth-grade English in the Finger Lakes Region for several years before taking on her leadership roles. Before that, she was the only high school English teacher in a one-building school district in the Catskill Mountains.

Before her career in education, Mrs. Windover's leadership journey began in the hotel industry as a sales and event manager. After her career in sales and event management, she studied English Literature at the State University of New York (SUNY) College at Brockport where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 2008. She went on to study Secondary Education at Saint Joseph's University and earned a Master of Science degree in Secondary Education in 2012.

Mrs. Windover came to St. John Fisher University in the summer of 2021 and began her doctoral studies in the EdD program in Executive Leadership. She pursued her research on Examining Educator Perspectives in Implementing an Inclusive Curriculum in Suburban High Schools under the direction of Dr. Marie Cianca and Dr. Casey van Harssel and received the EdD degree in 2023.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine educators' perspectives on implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. This qualitative research study applied phenomenology through focus groups consisting of district-level and building-level administrators, along with suburban high school teachers. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Though the suburbs are becoming increasingly diverse (Frey, 2011; Frey 2022a), suburban high schools lack consistency in implementing inclusive curriculum measures (Ayscue, 2016). In recent years, both federal and state legislatures have directed public schools to diversify their practices. One recent implementation in the New York State Education Department (NYSED) was the Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework (NYSED, 2018). District leaders, building leaders, and teachers lack direction and confidence in navigating the implementation of such practices (Ezzani, Munn, & Lee, 2021). At the same time, teachers must grapple with their own struggles to meaningfully engage with and instruct content rooted in diversity (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). The findings from this study revealed: suburban school districts lack structures to support curriculum implementation; suburban high school educators believe students are ready for inclusive curricula and, although opposition is minimal, it is impactful. This research will help guide NYSED in supporting inclusive curricula implementation. The findings will also support leaders at all levels in school districts to consistently implement inclusive curricula.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

Starting in the 1950s, each decade in U.S. history has produced policies reflecting nationally recognized social injustices (Lindsey et al., 2019). In June of 2021, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) called on all districts to make matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) an area of focus in their learning communities (NYSED, 2021). Immediately preceding this call to action, U.S. national headlines consistently highlighted several dangerous trends, including the current and historic challenges between law enforcement and communities of color, increased violence against Asian Americans, and the polarization and divide in U.S. politics (NYSED, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021a).

Even with the recently published Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework (CR-S) (NYSED, 2018), the work of inclusion is not without its challenges. One such challenge pertains to educators being at the helm of implementation. In the 21st century, schools are much more diverse than ever imagined 80 years ago (Lindsey et al., 2019). In fact, between 1990 and 2020, the suburban White population decreased from 81% to 55% (Frey, 2022). Perhaps shifting demographics encourage inclusive efforts in public schools, but research shows that current curricula lack representation of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), transgender, or disabled individuals (Armstrong, 2021). This might be problematic because the content of a curriculum impacts what students learn (Armstrong, 2021).

Educators who work with New York State's (NYS) diverse student populations must navigate the challenges involved in implementing inclusive curriculum practices. Uninformed assumptions might prevent NYSED's equitable frameworks from reaching students. The CR-S

education framework is not just focused on race and ethnicity (NYSED, 2018); it is focused on equity and inclusion efforts intersecting sexism, gender and sexual identity, ableism, and racism (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). This research examined educators' perspectives on implementing an inclusive curriculum.

Before the 1950s, segregation was commonplace (Lindsey et al., 2019). *Plessy v. Ferguson* established the infamous "separate but equal" laws that spanned nearly 60 years (Johnson, 2018). This law reinforced the post-Civil War culture and gave Whites superiority over minorities (Johnson, 2018). A closer look into the period of the *Plessy* ruling illustrates the roots of deep-seated disdain that can be associated with viewing those in minority populations as inferior. Prior to this ruling, lower-class Whites sat in unsegregated boxcars, along with newly freed people of color (Johnson, 2018). Once segregation became legal, lower-class Whites received a step up on the socioeconomic ladder (Johnson, 2018). Although the legislation ended in the 1950s, the sentiment lives on in parts of modern America: those perceived as inferior can be treated so (Johnson, 2018).

The 2017 events in Charlottesville were a clear example of such sentiments (Johnson, 2018). Sixty years after the end of segregation, White supremacists attended demonstrations carrying torches and weapons to protest the removal of a statue honoring a Confederate, Civil War general (Peters & Besley, 2017). During these protests, demonstrators made it clear that their primary motivation was securing a future for the White majority (Peters & Besley, 2017). The aftermath of such events might create tensions, making inclusive efforts by public leaders, a difficult feat (Peters & Besley, 2017).

Historically, student populations in urban areas have reflected their diverse communities (Ayscue, 2016). Public schools tend to be microcosms of the communities they serve. If the

curriculum represents the majority's background within the community, such efforts toward DEI might not be viewed as controversial. Inclusive efforts are not a controversial challenge with an already diverse population. On the other hand, suburban schools that have experienced recent growth in diversity, or even schools that lack diversity, might face different challenges in their efforts to align with DEI (Pourdavood & Yan, 2020). The end of legal segregation in 1954 from *Brown v. Board of Education* allowed for more diversity in public settings including public suburban schools (Johnson, 2018).

Disproportionate Demographics

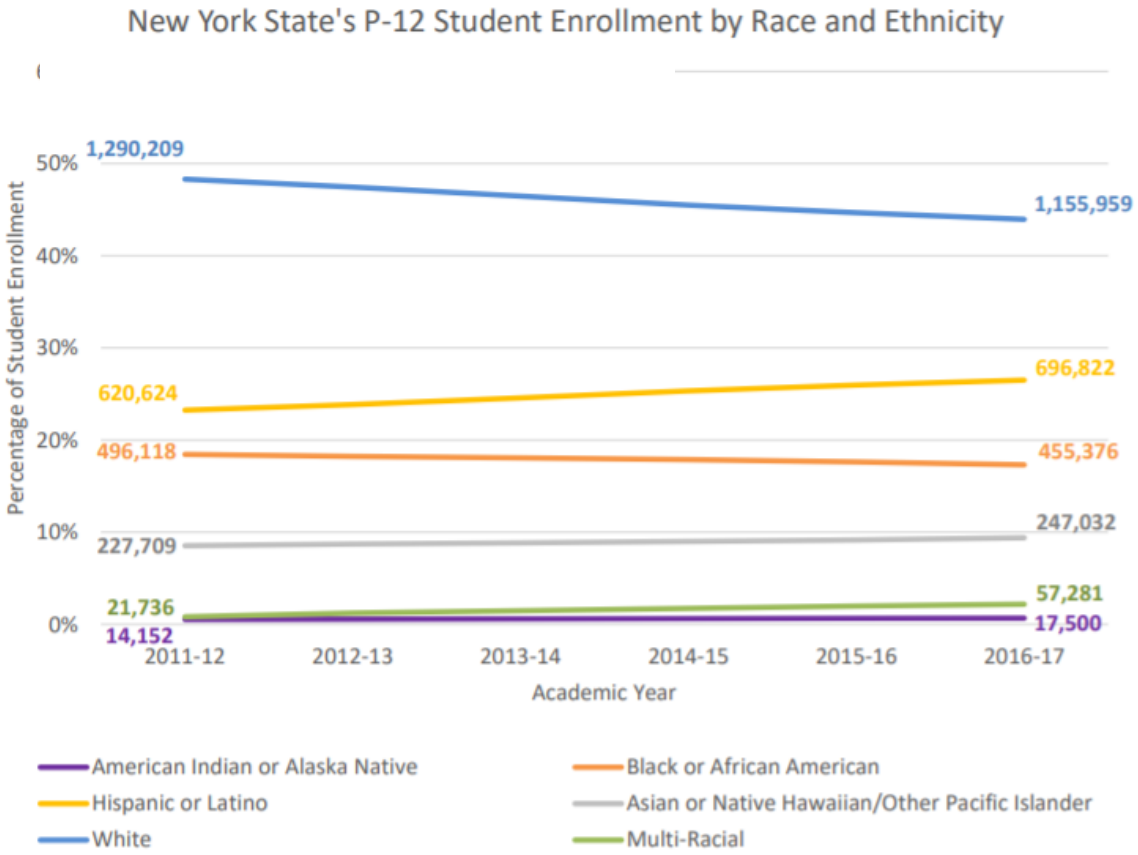
Over time, the suburbs have become increasingly racially diverse. By 2020, minorities made up 44.6% of the population in the suburbs of 56 major American cities (Frey, 2022a). Nearly 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, NYS published frameworks for marginalized students (NYSED, 2021). Johnson (2018) blamed the "collective consciousness of White America" (p. 331) for prolonging the process of equity and inclusion. This problem impacts schools because 80% of NYS public school educators and 43% of public school students are White (NYSED, 2019). NYSED's CR-S education framework (NYSED, 2018) is designed to engage students from all backgrounds in the classroom. If this framework is having a direct impact on student learning is not clear (Ladson-Billings, 2021b).

NYS educators and the students they serve do not share lived experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Students thrive with content and curriculum that values their heritage, and the students thrive, as well, when their teachers also see and value their heritage (Pourdavood & Yan, 2020; Ritchie & Smith, 2017). Teachers and school leaders must have a foundational knowledge of their students' backgrounds to engage their learning (Alismail, 2016). Educators might not feel prepared to engage in dialogue and self-reflection with students who have already

developed separate worldviews (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). Hesitance to engage in such conversations is especially relevant in a climate where discussions surrounding differences might be met with fierce opposition (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). Figure 1.1 shows the demographics of students enrolled in NYS schools from 2011 to 2017. Figure 1.2 represents educator diversity in the NYSED system from 2011 to 2017.

Figure 1.1

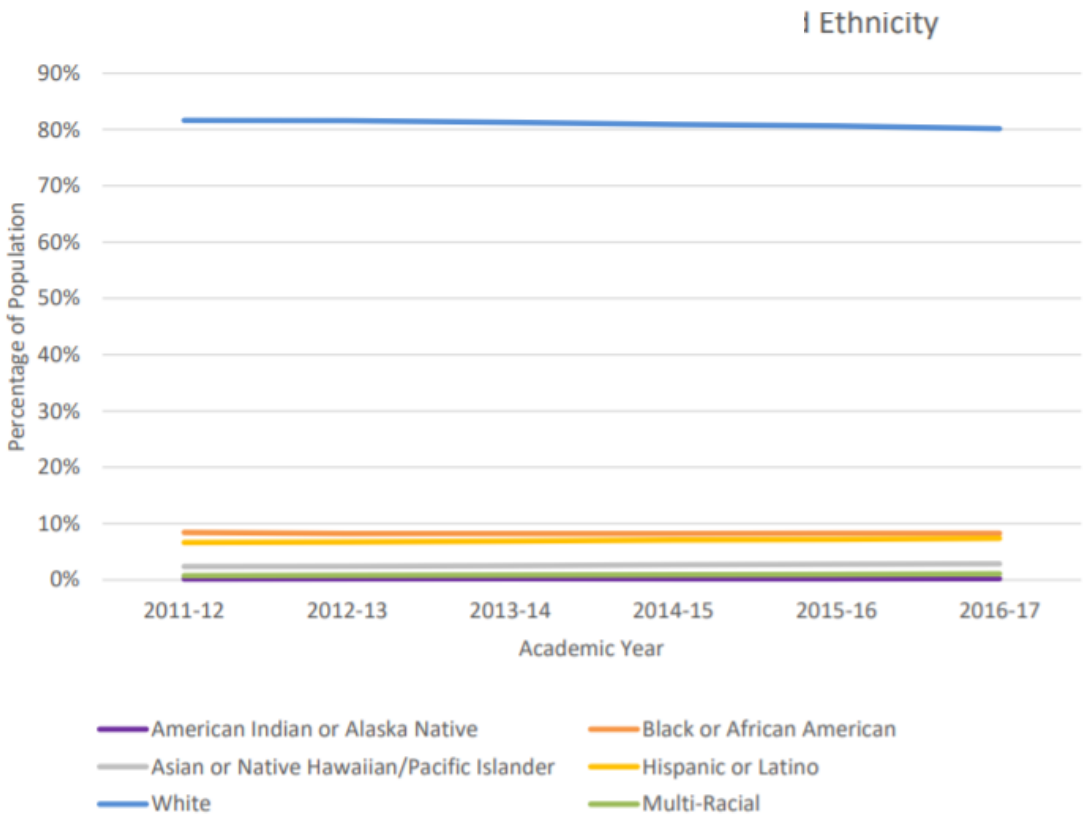
NYS P–12 Student Enrollment by Race and Ethnicity



Note. Adapted from "Educator diversity report: Submitted to the Governor and Legislature of the State of New York," by NUSED, 2019, p. 16.

Figure 1.2

NYS Teacher Workforce by Race and Ethnicity



Note. Adapted from "Educator diversity report: Submitted to the Governor and Legislature of the State of New York," by NUSED, 2019, p. 17.

Comparatively, the percentage of White students from 2011 to 2017 declined more significantly than the decline in the percentage of White faculty (NYSED, 2019). Another notable change in these demographics was the increase in Hispanic or Latino students. When one takes into consideration that educators create curricula for their students, the disproportionality between teachers and students in NYS presents a significant concern (Taylor et al., 2015). Especially after the increase in social justice conflicts during the Covid-19 pandemic, educators will play a crucial role in the recently spotlighted racial opportunity gaps (Ladson-Billings,

2021a). With 82% of teachers identifying as White, implicit bias is bound to surface in lesson and curriculum planning (Holme et al., 2014). This could be detrimental to the 57% of non-White students in the NYSED system. In fact, White students are in the minority of public school enrollment at 43% (NYSED, 2019). Regardless, an integrated school community offers benefits to students of all backgrounds (Frankenberg et al., 2016).

School Culture

Lindsey et al. (2019) highlighted school culture as essential for successful students. To be fully inclusive, school culture must reflect the diverse individuals it serves. One way to foster culture is through dialogue and self-reflection (Lindsey et al., 2019). While policies, procedures, and practices should be objective, they are implemented by people who have individual experiences that influence how they conduct themselves (Lindsey et al., 2019; Ritchie & Smith, 2017). In their 2017 research, Ritchie and Smith considered their participants' lived backgrounds. These backgrounds, in part, shaped participants' perspectives and actions as educators (Milner, 2017; Ritchie & Smith, 2017). Such reflection becomes more problematic when considering the disproportionate demographics of educators and students.

Regardless of what politicians, community members, and even some educators assume about culturally responsive education, school districts must engage every student in their diverse populations (Page, 2017). The marginalization of any student negatively impacts the school environment and affects learning (Page, 2017). School districts display their mission and vision statements in prominent places to communicate their values. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) has established standards for educational leaders (NPBEA, 2018). The 2015 standards require school mission and vision statements to directly

reflect diversity, equity, and community (NPBEA, 2018). Some view such statements as deficient based on some districts' practices and results (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020).

Still, it might not be fair to say that these districts are not trying to live by their statements. To be culturally proficient, many districts now offer equity and inclusion support with their students' best interests in mind (Lindsey et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it is difficult to look within one's district and identify practices that continue to marginalize students (Lindsey et al., 2019). Instead, districts focus on what they are doing to be more inclusive (Lindsey et al., 2019).

In addition to inclusive mission and vision statements, classrooms often display posters, flags, and bulletin boards. Classroom and even hallway décor is often peppered with inclusive and equitable messages (Trujillo et al., 2021). However, some administrators are concerned that these public adornments are false advertising for what is happening in their schools (Trujillo et al., 2021). One San Francisco school noted their achievement gaps among marginalized students compared to their visible statements on equitable opportunities (Trujillo et al., 2021). Just because a school appears to be providing equitable and inclusive curriculum measures does not mean that they are doing so successfully.

Ayscue (2016) recognized these attempts to incorporate recognition of multicultural influences and history throughout the academic setting as a step toward creating and implementing an inclusive curriculum. In isolation, these efforts might be perceived as shallow and cliched references, and revising the curriculum alone might not build inclusivity (Ayscue, 2016). For a curriculum to be fully inclusive, educators might require guidance regarding how to also implement scaffolding to support academic pursuits rooted in diversity (Ayscue, 2016)

Professional Development

Educators must meet professional development minimums to maintain their certification. As an educator in NYS, one must complete 100 hours every 5 years of continuing teacher leader education (CTLE) (NYSED, 2021). Such support might offer teachers and leaders the opportunity to identify privileges held by dominant groups (Alismail, 2016). Contemplating privilege and oppression opens the door for deconstruction on the path toward equity (Alismail, 2016). Nevertheless, even with such reflection, educators remain hesitant to address potentially controversial topics such as the marginalization of people (Alismail, 2016; Gay, 2013; Milner, 2017).

NYSED's required professional development for educators fosters learning growth beyond the initial certification. A teaching certification might provide the foundation for an educator to begin a career, but it does not always make one an expert. Ayscue (2016) found that even certified English Language Learner (ELL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers did not feel competent to support their students. As White, American teachers, their certifications alone did not prepare them to meet the diverse needs of their Spanish-speaking students (Ayscue, 2016).

Curriculum Planning

School district policies often determine the selection of curriculum materials. Some teachers are a part of this process. Often, the content of the lessons is more closely aligned with the classroom teacher's discretion (Taylor et al., 2015). In this manner, classroom instruction might include subtle, personal biases (Taylor et al., 2015). For districts to comply with NYSED's (2021a) recently published DEI and CR-S education frameworks, educators might benefit from bias-related professional development.

Holme et al. (2014) found that efforts to diversify instruction were more focused on differentiation for ability level rather than inclusivity. Educators in the Holme et al. study noted that such efforts were encouraged by state accountability standards from standardized test scores. Striving to meet these accountability measures for various subgroups gave faculty and administration a subtle perception that increased diversity presented a challenge rather than an opportunity (Holme et al., 2014). Still, a call to action for schools to implement DEI practices (NYSED, 2021) implies that diverse individuals are not currently treated with equity (Beachum, 2018). NYSED monitors this through compliance with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). Students are categorized into subgroups based on their social identities (NYSED, 2021). Within these subgroups, schools are measured by accountability designations (NYSED, 2023), and a level of needed support for the district is determined. While accountability measures aligned to inclusive initiatives are important for compliance, linking such measures to subgroup performance might overlook student engagement within a culturally rich curriculum (Samuels, 2018).

Inclusive curriculum planning using frameworks, such as culturally relevant pedagogy, is not a new concept. Ladson-Billings (1995) described this theory as fostering student achievement, cultural competence, and social-political awareness. More than 30 years later, pedagogy connected to diversity still comes under public scrutiny. In fact, in the wake of social unrest during the Corona virus pandemic, stakeholders and politicians in several states outlawed educational efforts connected to critical race theory (CRT) (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). Further, Ladson-Billings (2021b) posited that even some schools that have adopted culturally relevant pedagogy do not implement the framework with fidelity. Assignments that do not engage critical

thinking, though connected to social justice and diversity, do not align with culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021b).

Minkos et al. (2017) noted that, as leaders, school administrators must support their students and faculty while maintaining a welcoming environment for all. While some schools might be creating administrative positions specifically focused on DEI, the research has not yet identified the impact, if any, that these new positions have created on the learning environment. Although the NPBEA established standards for school leaders to promote equity, administrators need clear direction regarding implementation (Minkos et al., 2017). Academic leaders are not disconnected from the controversies teachers face when promoting culturally responsive education. The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) program standards emphasize establishing equitable support for all individuals within the academic community (NPBEA, 2018). Some efforts to promote equity and diversity might be received with contention (Gay, 2013). As such, DEI meetings might require school leaders to engage in courageous, and even vulnerable conversations (Minkos et al., 2017).

In NYS, excluding New York City, 91% of school administrators are White (NYSED, 2019). To be fully supportive of their diverse populations, administrators are encouraged to attend cultural proficiency seminars before turnkey training these lessons to their faculty. Such efforts require leaders to reflect on their practices and interactions with diverse populations (Ayscue, 2016). When the time comes for them to turnkey train these sessions with their staff, administrators might not have the confidence to lead their school toward meaningful change (Ayscue, 2016).

Problem Statement

In discussions of inclusive curriculum, many of the research studies have been conducted within urban areas rather than in suburban schools. Nonetheless, educators and students in suburban high schools must also be empowered to confront their own implicit biases because internal beliefs guide curriculum planning (Beachum, 2018). While suburban districts tend to be more homogenous than urban schools, diversity in suburban populations is on the rise (Frey, 2011, 2022a). NYSED's (2021b) concerns about historical injustices impacting all students, adds urgency to fostering inclusion in places where diversity has not always been commonplace. Specifically, this research was fitting for the suburban high school setting because students are engaging in more specific, civic-related content and history during the high school years (Frankenberg et al., 2016). Further, suburban high schools tend to be more diverse because Kindergarten through sixth-grade schools are often smaller and occupy more buildings within a community, which are, at times, neighborhood schools (Frankenberg et al., 2016.) In contrast, there might be just one or two high schools in a given district (Frankenberg et al., 2016). The suburban high school setting is a key setting for research because it may be the most diverse setting within a suburban district.

Curriculum and public education draw, at times, fiery attention during political debates. In the early 2000s, the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) found itself at the center of a political debate over its Mexican American Studies (MAS) curriculum (Blankenship & Locke, 2015). This was the first program in this district to directly teach the history of ethnicity rather than apply a color-evasive approach (Blankenship & Locke, 2015). After implementing this curriculum, the district boasted increased Hispanic successes including an increased graduation rate (Blankenship & Locke, 2015).

Ten years after implementation, local politicians opposing the curriculum sparked media and public outrage (Blankenship & Locke, 2015). Their messages portrayed the MAS curriculum as ethnocentric, "anti-American," (Blankenship & Locke, 2015, p. 341) and against social norms. Their legislation eventually passed, resulting in the state withholding a percentage of funds from schools supporting MAS programs (Blankenship & Locke, 2015). Similar efforts increased throughout the United States starting in 2021 (Frey, 2022b). States led predominately by Republican lawmakers began introducing legislation outlawing instruction or resources that resembled some form of CRT (Frey, 2022b). School administrators and teachers who value and promote such programs are thus faced with added challenges.

NYSED published the CR-S framework in 2018 and the DEI framework in 2021. Amid the full rollout for both systems, school districts battled pandemic measures as a priority. The unfortunate timing of the pandemic might have impacted educator perspectives on creating and implementing an inclusive curriculum within suburban schools. Research on such perspectives could help direct a more successful and purposeful implementation of the CR-S education framework (NYSED, 2018).

Culturally responsive teaching strives to make learning relevant to students of all races and ethnicities (Gay, 2013). This curriculum engages learners to read and discuss materials rooted in diversity (Gay, 2013). Such content can be met with hesitance and controversy (Gay, 2013). Politicians and media personalities often capitalize on public opinion regarding race-related news, and because diversity issues often connect to dissentious views, culturally responsive teaching is assumed to relate to only one side of the conversation (Gay, 2013; Lindsey et al., 2019).

To distance themselves from controversy or to make a stand for their interpretations, some educators are reluctant to engage in diverse curricula (Gay, 2013). In addition, teachers might hold a false assumption about DEI efforts by assuming that such initiatives further racism by noting the differences in races (Gay, 2013). It must also be noted that the research about DEI mostly relates diversity to race and ethnicity. Diversity pertaining to sexual identity, religious affiliation, disabilities, and socioeconomic status is also present in an inclusive curriculum and needs further exploration (Armstrong, 2021).

With the rapidly increasing diverse demographics in suburban schools (Frey, 2011, 2022), some educators might feel hesitant to lead open discussions in their classrooms (Holme et al., 2014). In such conversations, implicit biases might surface (Holme et al., 2014). While perhaps well-intended, such biases reflect long-instilled beliefs and practices (Holme et al., 2014). Educators might not be prepared to address implicit biases. Even more challenging, educators might struggle to confront their own implicit biases.

Based on gaps in the research, more studies are needed to determine if educators are receiving adequate support to implement an inclusive secondary curriculum. Inclusive curriculum implementation is uniquely important in suburban high schools (Frankenberg et al., 2016). With recent and significant increases in diverse demographics in the suburbs, suburban high school populations are becoming less segregated (Frankenberg et al., 2016; Frey, 2011, 2022). Specifically, suburban high schools tend to have greater diversity than elementary schools (Frankenberg et al., 2016). This is because the populations of multiple elementary schools tend to feed more centralized high schools (Frankenberg et al., 2016). Disproportionate demographics between NYSED's overwhelmingly White educator population (NYSED, 2019), compared to the diverse student population, highlight the incongruous life experiences between teachers and

their students. School districts might try to compensate for these differences by enhancing school culture to create a welcoming environment for students and staff from all backgrounds. At times, such efforts might be inconsistent or even superficial (Holme et al., 2014).

Another gap in the research pertains specifically to establishing an inclusive curriculum in suburban schools. Frankenberg et al. (2016) hypothesized that suburban schools have superficially responded to increased diversity. Rather than truly expanding diversified opportunities, some suburban schools focus on increasing academic achievement outcomes, making them more desirable among middle-class suburban families (Frankenberg et al., 2016). Current research considers the importance of inclusive school settings, procedures, and even discipline. The curriculum is the foundation of schools. It is no wonder that Holme et al. (2014) found some inclusive efforts to be superficial if curricula lack the identities of some learners.

In addition to district-developed professional development, current educators must navigate recently published laws and frameworks to outline expectations for creating and implementing inclusive curricula. To do so in a meaningful way, teachers and administrators need proper professional development. The research does not show that suburban, high school teachers are receiving such support with consistency. Interested educators could access the NYSED (2019) website for links to tools, legislation, and even suggestions for implementation. This self-guided exploration would not result in consistent professional training measures, and it is not mandated. There are no requirements for educators to attend professional development beyond the 6-hour Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) session (NYSED, 2019). This lack of education becomes increasingly problematic because educators may act with autonomy in selecting curriculum materials. Teachers' implicit bias might blind their attempts at selecting materials reflecting the diverse backgrounds of their students. Further complicating this

implementation process is the lack of professional development mandated for current building leaders.

Theoretical Rationale

In 2018, NYSED published the CR-S education framework (NYSED, 2018). This framework identifies goals for students, teachers, building administrators, district administrators, higher education, and state education (NYSED, 2018). CR-S education supports a student-centered approach and encourages meaningful connections (NYSED, 2018). This framework provides a pathway for educators to implement curricula connected to all backgrounds (NYSED, 2018). It gives educators direction to create a safe atmosphere for open dialogue and cross-cultural encounters. The CR-S education framework (NYSED, 2018) considers diversity an "asset" (p. 7) in public education.

History of the CR-S Education Framework

The CR-S education framework, in part, was NYSED's response to the ESSA (2015). This legislation was enacted in 2017 (ESSA, n.d.). ESSA evolved from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002 (ESSA, n.d.). This Act aims to ensure an equitable education for each student (ESSA, n.d.). The Act entrusts this goal to state education departments through design programs (ESSA, n.d.).

Led by Dr. David Kirkland, the CR-S education framework was created by stakeholders within NYSED for stakeholders within NYSED (NYSED, 2018, 2019). The creators of the CR-S education framework comprised a panel of educators, students, community members, higher education faculty, policy experts, and advocates (NYSED, 2018). The CR-S education framework strives to move beyond polarizing debates about education, and it aims to elevate diverse voices and educate informed citizens for a more equitable future (NYSED, 2019).

Four Principles of the CR-S Education Framework

The CR-S education framework was a fitting theory for this study because it is based on current research. This framework has roots in the Ladson-Billings (1995) research on culturally responsive pedagogy. It was developed by stakeholders with the vision of valuing diversity in education as an asset (NYSED, 2018). This framework provides all stakeholders with specific guidelines to foster inclusion in NYSED's public school system (NYSED, 2018).

The CR-S education framework has four principles of focus:

- a welcoming and affirming environment,
- high expectations and rigorous instruction,
- inclusive curriculum and assessment, and
- ongoing professional learning (NYSED, 2018).

This research specifically focused on establishing an inclusive curriculum. NYSED acknowledges in the CR-S education framework that teaching and learning should have roots in the diverse backgrounds represented in student populations (NYSED, 2018).

The CR-S framework provides teachers with clear guidelines to foster an inclusive learning environment through the curriculum (NYSED, 2018). As one example, best practices direct teachers to implement texts written by diverse authors about topics relatable to students from various backgrounds (NYSED, 2018). Such texts allow students to connect with the content in a way that speaks to their own lived experiences. Through the CR-S education framework, NYSED (2018) also encourages teachers to take an active role in helping schools to identify materials that will better align with their students' diverse histories.

A culturally responsive curriculum under this framework also promotes field trips and student-directed lessons to further personal connections (NYSED, 2018). Homework and

assessments would hold more relevancy if students felt there were more personal connections to their educational content (NYSED, 2018). Through the CR-S education framework, NYSED (2018) suggests that assessments be produced in several languages and measured in nontraditional formats (NYSED, 2018).

The CR-S education framework also provides direction for school leaders in inclusive curriculum measures. Leaders, too must support teachers to align diverse, equitable grade-appropriate curricula (NYSED, 2018). Administrators are directed to work with teachers to discern materials, approaches, and lessons that uphold a culturally responsive curriculum (NYSED, 2018). Further, leaders are positioned to direct school investments that support all the needs of their diverse learners (NYSED, 2018). The CR-S education framework requires school leaders to engage school community members to actively create an inclusive curriculum by expanding the learning environment beyond the classroom (NYSED, 2018). Students and their families should feel that their schools' curriculum seeks to include their unique histories and experiences (NYSED, 2018).

Criticism of the Theory

Published in 2018, 2 years before the global pandemic and during a period of national polarization, this framework has not yet produced its intended results (NYSED, 2021). It is very early to discern what challenges might lie ahead of the complete implementation process. One criticism of inclusive efforts within school districts pertains to the population of the district community. Ayscue (2016) found that some schools that attempted to establish community among marginalized students struggled because of the lack of diversity within their district.

Inclusive Education Theories

Ladson-Billings (1995) first identified the need for culturally relevant pedagogy as a model that emphasizes the importance of both academic achievement and the affirmation of cultural identity. Her model also addresses the need for students to build skills relating to critical perspectives, encouraging them to question inequitable practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Parents and students of color helped Ladson-Billings (1995) to develop this theory through their reflections on engaging and effective educational practices from their own experiences. Such reflections attributed these successes to educators who valued and respected their students' family culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The teachers also built relationships within their classrooms and showed genuine concern in preparing their students for the injustices they might experience later in life (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant pedagogy is designed to foster academic achievement, promote cultural competence, and inspire students to comprehend social justice (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021b).

Like culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy focuses on a student-centered curriculum (Samuels, 2018). Under this theory, educators value their students' culture and life experiences (Samuels, 2018). Educators who value culturally responsive pedagogy exhibit cultural competence, encourage excellence among their students, and continuously seek growth in their own learning (Samuels, 2018). In a culturally responsive classroom, student voice and safe exploration of topics allow students of all backgrounds to equitably engage in their curriculum (Samuels, 2018).

Especially after the 2020 global pandemic and with increased social unrest that followed, culturally relevant pedagogy provides the opportunity for educational reform (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). The three tenets of this pedagogy are achievement, cultural competence, and socio-

political awareness, and they allow educators and students to comprehend an expanded worldview (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). However, implementing such a pedagogy goes beyond the simple acknowledgment of diverse perspectives and histories. Culturally relevant pedagogy requires educators to restructure lessons to be more comprehensive of historical events, cultures, and persons (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). Hill-Jackson et al. (2022) provided the example of first teaching students about the African culture and history prior to teaching them African American history, which often starts with the history of enslaved persons in America.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research was to examine educators' perspectives on creating and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum. This research investigated potential barriers and opportunities that arise in suburban schools within the NYSED public school system. NYSED's publication of the CR-S education framework was intended to support these measures. Five years separated the release of the CR-S Education framework and the research. In that time, several social justice-related events drew attention. One goal of the NYSED CR-S Education framework was to encourage students toward changes in social justice (NYSED, 2018). Efforts to systemically implement social justice education follow hundreds of years of oppression for minoritized populations. Approximately 70 years separate us from the *Brown* (1954) ruling (Johnson, 2018). It has been less than 50 years since Section 504, an amendment of the Rehabilitation Act (1973), gave educational rights to those with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The current educators teaching suburban youth are likely the children and grandchildren of those who endured the civil rights era (Chapman, 2013). The educators who are expected to lead initiatives of inclusivity require consistent policies (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012), learning opportunities, tools, support systems, and guidance.

Research Questions

More research is needed to identify educator perspectives on creating and implementing inclusive curricula in suburban high schools. Such work requires educators to receive professional development (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022) in NYSED's recently published CR-S education and DEI frameworks. NYSED's demographics show disproportionality between teachers and students. Even with professional development in these areas, some efforts to turnkey culturally responsive pedagogy results in formulaic guidelines, overlooking a meaningful comprehension of the practice (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). Professional development in implementing an inclusive curriculum also requires education of the subgroups under the umbrella of diversity among students (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). Further, this work presents the opportunity to be immersed in culturally relevant pedagogy for the betterment of the whole public education system (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). The research questions that directed this research were:

1. What practices are currently in place for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?
2. What are the barriers and opportunities for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?

Potential Significance of the Study

Since the publication of the CR-S Education framework in 2018, much has changed. A global pandemic interrupted in-person learning. When in-person instruction resumed, hybrid schedules forced teachers and educators to become creative regarding how to implement effective lessons. Further, the 2021–2022 school years were fraught with challenges for students, educators, administrators, and families. Such challenges have included (a) decreasing value from

community members toward teachers as public servants, (b) increased shortage of faculty, (c) increased racial tensions, (d) increased public disapproval for inclusive efforts, (e) increased need for attention to social-emotional learning, (f) increased presence of technology-based instruction with limited professional development opportunities, and (g) the ongoing threat of the global pandemic (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022).

During a time when the profession is faced with increasing stress, decreasing applicants, and declining public revere, educator morale is weak. As such, to navigate daily expectations and conflicts, one would expect educators to work within the comfort zones of old practices rather than seeking professional growth. With all of these stressors, districts have not yet had the opportunity to thoughtfully, strategically, and uniformly implement the measures set forth by the CR-S education framework.

This study may guide NYSED to support in-service professional development measures for school districts. Guided by the state, school administrators may have a greater ability to implement consistent guidelines for creating and implementing an inclusive curriculum—specifically at the high school level. Suburban high school teachers may identify valuable support to help them design inclusive lesson plans. Such structures may help to allow students from diverse backgrounds to experience an education relatable to their histories and interests.

Definition of Terms

Many of the definitions of terms in this section are derived from the CR-S Education framework publication (NYSED, 2018).

CR-S (culturally responsive) education framework – structure published by NYSED (2018) that identifies four principles to support inclusion efforts in public schools.

Culturally responsive pedagogy – teaching practices that exhibit cultural competence, encourage excellence among students, and continuously seek growth in student learning (Samuels, 2018).

CRT (critical race theory) – the process of decoding and analyzing past and present events which have impacted various races (Chapman, 2013).

Culture – all categories within which a person belongs. This might be present in how an individual speaks, acts, celebrates, eats, thinks, and learns (NYSED, 2018).

Culturally relevant pedagogy – teaching practices designed to engage academic achievement, promote cultural competence, and inspire students to comprehend social justice (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021b).

Diversity – the practice of including or involving people from a range of different demographics, backgrounds, belief systems, gender, ability, sexual orientation, heritage, or socioeconomic statuses. NYSED seeks to promote positive and safe engagement in exploring these categories (NYSED, 2021).

Equity – fair and objective approaches. The equity system is a structure that enforces justice among constituents (NYSED, 2021).

Implicit bias – unconscious attitude or stereotype toward another's social identity (Chin et al., 2020).

Inclusive curriculum – an educational format that encourages real engagement from students of all backgrounds by centralizing content created by a diverse group of voices. Learning spaces in this type of format are designed so that students from all levels of society may be successful (NYSED, 2021).

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced a study of gaining educators' perspectives on creating and implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. Although the *Brown* (1954) ruling legally ended segregation in public schools, equity is still lacking (Johnson, 2018). One reason for this problem might stem from NYSED's (2019) disproportionate student and teacher demographics. NYS's majority of White teachers may not have the same lived experiences as their nearly 40% non-White students (NYSED, 2019). Inclusion goes beyond race and culture, and inclusion should also be considerate of gender, identity, ability, and religion. When schools attempt to create inclusive school cultures, some view these efforts as lacking because students of diverse backgrounds are marginalized, even in these settings (Lindsey et al., 2019). Unaware of their biases, educators might unintentionally add to this marginalization (Holme et al., 2018). Some efforts to differentiate curricula often leave out various subgroups in diverse populations (Taylor et al., 2015). Because school leaders set the tone for the environment in their learning communities, they may still face the same barriers as classroom teachers.

NYSED's CR-S education framework was created in 2018 to acknowledge and leverage diversity in the public school system for all. One of the four principles in the CR-S education framework instructs all stakeholders regarding how to implement an inclusive curriculum (NYSED, 2018). Research on the CR-S education framework is lacking, and the navigation of a global pandemic, along with increased stresses in public education, has taken the focus away from district implementation efforts.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature relating to planning and implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools, and Chapter 3 explains the methodology for this research.

Chapter 4 presents a detailed analysis of the results and findings, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to review the empirical research on the various challenges around creating an inclusive curriculum for diverse students within suburban American schools. The review of the literature considered (a) theories, (b) curriculum planning and implementation, (c) inclusive leadership, (d) changing suburban demographics, (e) professional development and training, (f) inclusive efforts at the faculty level, (g) the impact of teachers of color, (h) teacher preparation, (i) student engagement and (j) other influences on curriculum.

Research Questions

More research is needed to identify educator perspectives on creating and implementing inclusive curricula in suburban high schools (Zagona et al., 2017). Such work requires educators to receive professional development (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022) in NYSED's recently published CR-S education and DEI frameworks. NYSED's demographics show disproportionality between teachers and students. Even with professional development in these areas, some efforts to turnkey culturally responsive pedagogy result in formulaic guidelines, overlooking a meaningful comprehension of the practice (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). Professional development in implementing an inclusive curriculum also requires education of the subgroups under the umbrella of diversity among students (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Further, this work presents the opportunity to be immersed in culturally relevant pedagogy for the betterment of the whole public education system (Ladson-Billings, 2021b). The research questions to be used to guide this research are:

1. What practices are currently in place for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?
2. What are the barriers and opportunities for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?

To guide data analysis stemming from the above questions, several theories made up the theoretical framework for this research. Like the implementation of an inclusive suburban high school curriculum, these related theories have been met with controversy.

Theories

With the publication of the CR-S framework, NYSED also published professional development toolkits, supplemental articles, and a phased roadmap for implementation (NYSED, 2019). The extensive framework, toolkits, and additional materials provide educators with implementation suggestions and guidance (NYSED, 2019). Educators exposed to such materials received accompanying support to diversify their curriculum (Ayscue, 2016).

In the post-pandemic era, Ladson-Billings (2021a) likened the opportunities presented in changing public education to a "hard reset" (p. 72), such as that experienced by countries at the end of World War II. Previously mentioned national events, like social unrest, political divisiveness, and increased economic worries, happened on the watch of many public school graduates (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021a; NYSED, 2021). While education has the power to improve these outlooks, the stakeholders connected to public education must also be on board (Ladson-Billings, 2021a). One theory that Ladson-Billings (2021a) suggested applying in the hard reset is CRT (Dixson & Anderson, 2018). Legal scholars Dixson and Anderson (2018) originally developed this theory. Ladson-Billings (1995) later applied this framework to education in the mid-90s to study inequities relating to race.

Applications of CRT in education are not without controversy. CRT denotes race as a social construct and posits that structures such as race-dominance and color-blindness perpetuate racism (Dixson & Anderson, 2018). First applied to legal studies and practices, Ladson-Billings (1995) acknowledged the connection of CRT to education. Nearly 30 years later, acknowledgment of such ideas in education is met with significant resistance in the American public education system. Several states have even gone so far as to outlaw practices relating to CRT in all schools (Frey, 2022a; Kim, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Such efforts afford those in power to manipulate a curriculum that might encourage students to think critically about history and social identities in a manner that maintains the personal ideologies of those in power (Frey, 2022a; Kim, 2021). Dixson and Anderson (2018) encourage acknowledgment and discussion of these efforts to enlighten academic discussion among educational stakeholders. It is important to include the voices of marginalized populations, especially in conversations about policy and practices (Dixson & Anderson, 2018).

In this nascent stage of the CR-S education framework, studies on its effectiveness are lacking. More research is needed to determine if this framework is reaching students within the NYSED system. Researchers have conducted studies on similar theories. Samuels (2018) conducted focus groups on viewpoints about culturally responsive pedagogy. This practice is designed to engage student achievement through cultural competence and social justice related lessons (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021b). Participants in the Samuels study reported increased positive relationships and trust resulting from their culturally responsive classrooms. In the study, 200 teachers participated in focus groups over a 4-month time frame. Participants read literature and discussed connections to culturally responsive teaching practices. Participants reflected that their students, and subsequently, their families, were engaged, empowered, and

valued through culturally responsive teaching practices (Samuels, 2018). The educators who participated in these practices noted their own growth in understanding and valuing cultures other than their own (Samuels, 2018). In this structure, because learning is student-centered, teachers reported increased student engagement (Samuels, 2018). Such outcomes also allow students to have increased control and ownership of their education, making it more meaningful and relevant. Teachers within the Samuels study noted that implementation of such practices was not without challenges. In some instances, teachers expressed discomfort in engaging in topics that conflicted with their own values, such as Christian teachers engaging in LGBTQ discourse (Samuels, 2018). Another area of hesitancy surrounded teachers leading discussions where students in a class held opposing viewpoints (Samuels, 2018). Such reflections allowed teachers an opportunity for reflection and redirection.

Researchers found that fostering student ownership in the curriculum instills pride and confidence. Page et al. (2020) conducted a project-based study where teachers received professional development, were interviewed initially, implemented the curriculum, and were interviewed again. Educators in this study noted a shift in how they viewed their students through culturally responsive pedagogy (Page et al., 2020). Inclusive classroom dialogue allowed teachers to foster learning better rather than monitor classroom management (Page et al., 2020). Like the Samuels (2018) findings, participants in the study noted increased student ownership in the curriculum and even in the content selection (Page et al., 2020). This outcome, in turn, increased teachers' awareness of their students' identities, helping the teachers to become stronger advocates for their students (Page et al., 2020). Bonus results of this curriculum implementation related to a stronger community among the pupils and educators and increased life skills for the students (Page et al., 2020).

Curriculum Planning and Implementation

Thoughtful lesson and curriculum planning engage each student (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Dover, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Leonard & Moore, 2014). This type of planning requires educators to be mindful not only of their students' learning needs but also of their learning styles and even their interests and backgrounds. Dover (2013) interviewed high school English language arts (ELA) teachers to examine their perspectives on their practices of "teaching for social justice" (p. 7). After coding the responses of 24 participants from 13 states, Dover (2013) identified three essential aspects of a social justice curriculum: (a) reflection of students' backgrounds, (b) direct instruction of injustices, and (c) alignment between standards and "social justice topics" (p. 7). Together, these aspects created a meaningful experience where students were both connected to and bore responsibility for their education (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Participants noted the importance of students feeling connected to the curriculum by engaging in content that was relevant to their own lives (Dover, 2013). Not only was it an engaging experience for students to see themselves reflected in the content, but it also provided a safe space for peers to learn about various cultures within their school community (Aronson & Laughter, 2015). Participants in the Dover (2013) study elaborated on their efforts to make direct connections between historical injustices and modern-day oppression. The educators noted the importance of teaching oppression history to help explain the roots of current inequalities (Dover, 2013). In such lessons, teachers noticed their students applying critical thinking skills to identify similarities and connections in relating events at different points in history (Dover, 2013). Such a curriculum, participants noted, created an atmosphere that supported civic interest and involvement (Dover, 2013).

Some content areas have more obvious opportunities for social justice topics and civic engagement, such as social studies and ELA. It is also possible to build an inclusive curriculum in less obvious content areas, like math (Leonard & Moore, 2014). Leonard and Moore (2014) posited that engaging students in the social justice curriculum allowed students to notice, reflect on, and engage inequities within their own communities. In the Leonard and Moore study, teacher candidates designed lessons where smaller groups of students investigated community and school discussions such as building a wheelchair ramp or finding fair neighborhood grocery prices (Leonard & Moore, 2014). Researchers used pre- and post-essays from teacher candidate courses to gauge the value of the curriculum. While teacher candidates at the start of the program acknowledged the value of the social justice curriculum, their post essays revealed strong positive beliefs and student engagement in learning math skills through meaningful community applications (Leonard & Moore, 2014). Yet, although the teacher candidates noted the value of the engaging curriculum, one participant remained hesitant for fear of stakeholder dissatisfaction (Leonard & Moore, 2014).

Inclusive Leadership

School leaders at the building level and district level set the tone for the schools in their communities (Davis et al., 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Ezzani et al., 2021; Ortloff et al., 2012; White et al., 2023). Studies in this section explore leadership standards, community engagement, student engagement, and self-reflection.

In preparation for their leadership positions, leaders must learn and engage with national leadership standards (Davis et al., 2015). Once in positions of leadership, these leaders share responsibility with the stakeholders in the communities they serve to be inclusive of the diverse learners in their schools (DeMatthews et al., 2021). One aspect of inclusivity pertains to leaders

creating opportunities for each student to excel in school programs by nurturing the best of their abilities (Ezzani et al., 2021; White et al., 2023). To act on behalf of all of the diverse needs in their school communities, efforts on the part of leaders must start with their own self-reflection and educational journeys in culturally responsive education (Ortloff et al., 2012). Recently, suburban school leaders have navigated hostile board of education meetings with parents who have strong curricular views (White et al., 2023).

School district leaders must be well prepared for the many facets of their roles. It is paramount that school leaders' studies explore well-rounded content in consideration of all members of their communities. One hybrid study reviewed national school leadership standards through the lens of CRT. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the existence of race-related language in the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards and the Educational Leaders Constituent Council (ELCC) standards. Researchers found that while supporting documents published with the standards discussed "issues of race and racism" (p. 336), the standards themselves were silent in this regard (Davis et al., 2015). When researchers completed a keyword search within the language of both sets of standards, they found that the words culture, diversity, equity, and social justice were mentioned, in total, two or fewer times (Davis et al., 2015). Worse, the words race, ethnicity, and color were not mentioned at all (Davis et al., 2015).

Researchers have hypothesized that if inclusive words are excluded from leadership learning standards, one can assume that they are also excluded from planning and discussions in leadership programs (Davis et al., 2015). The Davis et al. research specifically looked for the presence of specific words in the language of the standards. While the standards do establish that school culture is foundational, Davis et al. (2015) found that the terms culture and climate were

used “interchangeably” (p. 352). The researchers noted that the appendix of the ELCC standards used the terms “Western and non-Western cultures” (p. 353), attempting to convey inclusivity of all students within a school family (Davis et al., 2015). The problem with this terminology, however, is that the terms Western and non-Western establish the standard by which all other cultures are compared, thus creating a dominant culture in the language of school leadership standards (Davis et al., 2015).

Under the umbrella of diversity, students with disabilities are often overlooked (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Furthermore, students with disabilities do not experience education in the same way as many of their peers. Thus, researchers must explore how leaders direct their schools to ensure inclusive educational practices for students with disabilities. A recent qualitative study used interviews with school leaders to understand how principals perceived students with disabilities in an immigrant community (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Principals who expressed interest in participating in the study were required to prove themselves as established inclusive leaders within their schools. Interviews portrayed these principals as instructional leaders who viewed inclusive efforts as achievable and paramount responsibilities held by all members of the school community (DeMatthews et al., 2021). DeMatthews et al. (2021) found that while teachers in the districts were prepared to educate students with disabilities, they were not all prepared to engage them in inclusive classrooms and curricula (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The school leaders in the DeMatthews et al. (2021) study settings worked to provide a variety of support systems to change those dynamics. To start, principals worked to support co-teaching units so that students could remain in the classroom with their general education peers (DeMatthews et al., 2021). To support this change, teachers participated in professional learning communities (PLCs) (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Educators needed to collaborate to find ways to

engage students of varying ability levels within one classroom (DeMatthews et al., 2021). One principal in the study noted that for that type of inclusion to be successful, it was important for the leaders to know the teachers and the students beyond the academic data (DeMatthews et al., 2021). When leaders were equipped with the proper knowledge, they were better positioned to make decisions that would result in successful inclusive classroom assignments (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Such knowledge led participants to uncover more barriers preventing successful inclusion (DeMatthews et al., 2021). One such barrier pertained to teacher perception of special education classification and student ability levels. Implicit biases toward this population of students were hurtful and unmotivating. In fact, some principals noted that some of the students struggled not because of their disabilities but because of the different treatment from their general education teachers (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Overall, DeMatthews et al. found that veteran teachers needed professional development to unlearn deep-rooted practices that fostered segregation within school buildings.

In the case study of one school district, Ezzani et al. (2021) examined how cultural proficiency goals impacted students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse (CLED) backgrounds and their enrollment in gifted and talented programs. This study branched off from a similar, but larger study. Researchers conducted focus groups, interviews, and document reviews within the school district. Three major findings in the Ezzani et al. research were district advocacy, communication pathways, and conceptions of giftedness. The superintendent of this school found that his focus on cultural proficiency had a superficial focus until he attended a conference on cultural proficiency. His experiences at this conference encouraged the superintendent to reflect on his own internal biases and work on changing his

own views. Such reflection led to the school district's renewed strategic planning and data-driven focus on their gifted and talented program. Researchers found that parents and students from diverse backgrounds were not aware of the advanced coursework opportunities accessible to them (Ezzani et al., 2021). Other leaders in the Ezzani et al. study viewed professional development around cultural proficiency as a box to check, but they would rather have avoided conversations relating to race.

Another finding in the Ezzani et al. (2021) study led researchers to consider how students were recommended for gifted and talented programs. Researchers noted that while common mistaken assumptions identify gifted and high-achieving students as the same, they are not (Ezzani et al., 2021). A gifted student might not regularly complete homework, have behavior concerns, or even learning deficits. If they have gifted knowledge in a certain content area or are critical thinkers, participants noted that teachers could push into regular classrooms to prepare these students for eventually advanced course placement (Ezzani et al., 2021). Such processes would have to be put into place by building- and district-level school leaders.

District-level leaders are also not fully prepared to navigate contentious board of education meetings (White et al., 2023). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents navigated unprecedented aggression toward their efforts as school leaders (White et al., 2023). Fueled by political leaders, parents began attending board of education meetings to dispute curriculum they perceived to be aligned with CRT (White et al., 2023). Researchers in the White et al. study received surveys from 944 school superintendents from around the nation. Of these, 314 superintendents led suburban schools. Survey results provided insight that suburban school superintendents navigated more hostile community environments than those in rural or urban settings (White et al., 2023). Participants in the study expressed

concern for their physical safety, stemming from threats of violence made toward them (White et al., 2023). Further, participants worried about the spread of false information creating barriers in securing community support for their school decision making processes (White et al., 2023). The researchers noted that district leader efforts to navigate these hostile community members took away from their availability for educational engagement within their districts (White et al., 2023). One suggestion for future leaders in this climate was to engage in skill-building activities relating to conflict resolution, cultural proficiency, and capacity building (White et al., 2023).

Changing Suburban Demographics

To support the changing demographics of their communities, suburban schools must engage students, families, educators, and community members from old and new populations (Ayscue, 2016; Diem et al., 2016; Frey, 2011, 2022; Holme et al., 2014). The 2010 U.S. Census report highlighted a trend of significantly increased diversity in America's previously homogeneous suburbs (Frey, 2011, 2022). Given that public school demographics represent the communities they serve, the census also reflects an increase in the diverse population of suburban school students.

To best support all students in their schools, educators must consider various student needs when implementing the curriculum (Ayscue, 2016). Curriculum changes, specifically the implementation of a culturally responsive curriculum have been met with resistance from long-time community residents (Holme et al., 2014). In many cases, professional development for teachers is decided by school leaders who might be under political pressure from these residents (Holme et al., 2014). Sometimes these efforts of inclusion and professional development are viewed as superficial (Diem et al., 2016). While school leaders are at the helm of school districts,

the pressure from suburban communities has proven to be a barrier to a culturally responsive curriculum (Diem et al., 2016).

Using the U.S. Census results, one report examined the trends of the 56 largest American cities during the 2000s (Frey, 2011, 2022). The researcher took note of the increased influence of racial and ethnic shifts in the suburbs during this time (Frey, 2011). Though much of this report focuses on metropolitan areas, the reflection includes an analysis of the changing suburban demographics (Frey, 2011, 2022). In all 56 cities, the White population declined (Frey, 2011, 2022). The researcher found that, as of 2010, in 36 of these cities, 35% of the suburban residents were of minority populations (Frey, 2011). Frey (2011, 2022) also uncovered that more than half of the minority populations resided in suburban areas. This significant, rapid growth supports the need for suburban schools to respond accordingly. The increased diversity in the suburbs reflects a call on suburban districts to adjust to serve their shifting student demographics.

Ayscue (2016) evaluated how suburban schools responded to increasing racial diversity. The researcher interviewed 19 schools, within six suburbs across the United States, to understand better how educators were adapting their policies and practices to support their racially diverse students. The schools in this study all experienced a notable decrease in their White student enrollment. Some responses from schools highlighted practices that led to helpful academic environments. Others exposed potentially harmful practices.

Among the positive responses, five out of six high schools in the Ayscue study made concentrated efforts to strengthen access to advanced placement (AP) courses for students of color (Ayscue, 2016). Within these efforts, educators sought to build community among these students by structuring classrooms reflective of the students' diverse backgrounds (Ayscue, 2016). In addition to supporting diverse enrollment in upper-level coursework, these schools also

built support for students, in general, and in special education courses (Ayscue, 2016). One such support included a diversified revision and restructuring of the curricula, in response to identified achievement gaps among students of color (Ayscue, 2016). Additionally, these schools recognized that struggling students benefited from tutoring and credit-recovery opportunities during the school day (Ayscue, 2016). Seven of the schools in this study even hosted multicultural events to further engage diverse students in their communities. Still, Ayscue (2016) noted that to avoid potentially superficial attempts at inclusion, more work is needed for effective curriculum reform.

Also, among the positive practices in support of increases in diverse student enrollment, 12 schools in the Ayscue study integrated professional development opportunities for their staff. White building administrators at the helm of such efforts admitted their careful attempts at leading their White faculty through in-service activities (Ayscue, 2016). One principal noted that becoming aware of his unintended microaggressions led to difficult conversations when he led professional development. To help navigate such situations, some schools in the study reached out to outside presenters (Ayscue, 2016).

Ayscue (2016) uncovered significantly fewer harmful practices among districts responding to increasingly diverse student populations, nonetheless, they existed. Such harmful practices included segregating ELL students and concentrated test preparation efforts. While intended to provide needed scaffolding for diverse learners, these practices were exclusionary and thwarted inclusive efforts (Ayscue, 2016). In line with previous studies noted by the researcher, another adverse response to increased diversity noted by five schools in the study was an increase in disciplinary practices targeted toward students of color (Ayscue, 2016). Three schools noted that the coincidental timing of increased security measures in their buildings

unfortunately aligned with more students of color on their roster (Ayscue, 2016). Such measures made it difficult for parents to be present at school activities and events (Ayscue, 2016). An increase in security measures for parents, while the schools experienced an increase in diversity, sends a deficit-based message that the measures were taken in response to the increased diversity (Ayscue, 2016). A final finding in the Ayscue (2016) study was that three schools in this study did not make notable changes to support increases in diverse student populations. Certainly, this lack of effort on the schools' behalf did not lead to inclusive learning environments for their students (Ayscue, 2016).

Brezicha and Hopkins (2016) investigated community and school responses to a rapidly increasing immigrant population in a northeastern suburb. Through the board of education minutes, district policies, local newspapers, and interviews with 21 stakeholders, researchers discovered an uninviting reception for these new community members. The White residents of the community viewed the immigrant population as criminals, and they were vocal about their disdain for immigrants (Brezicha & Hopkins, 2016). This disdain was influential for the board of education members and even the school district leaders. In fact, when the schools became crowded and resources were lacking, the board of education minutes captured a member downplaying the problem as one that would go away sooner than later (Brezicha & Hopkins, 2016).

When the Committee for Special Education (CSE) meetings required bilingual translators, one school board member suggested that an ESL teacher could perform this duty (Brezicha & Hopkins, 2016). Such a comment highlighted the board of education member's unawareness that ESL teachers are not translators, and none in the district were bilingual (Brezicha & Hopkins, 2016). Such perspectives would likely not lead to inclusive curricula to

engage these immigrant students. The researchers identified a former board of education member who stepped down from her position and created a program to help support immigrant families in the school (Brezicha & Hopkins, 2016). With leaders from within the immigrant community, she helped to find translators for CSE meetings and implemented after-school programs to scaffold learning for struggling immigrant students (Brezicha & Hopkins, 2016). In time, community and school leaders saw the value in supporting these new community members. Still, some members of the immigrant population would have liked to see teachers in the school who looked like them and policies implemented to better support ELLs (Brezicha & Hopkins, 2016).

To best support students from all backgrounds in an inclusive school experience, teachers and leaders must enact carefully thought-out support. Educators must consider the backgrounds of their students and be ready to recognize and change their own implicit biases. One qualitative study used the zone of mediation framework to examine factors that shaped how suburban school districts responded to increases in diverse student demographics (Holme et al., 2014). Nineteen schools from six suburbs participated in the interviews. Of the 54 respondents, 74% were White (Holme et al., 2014). Researchers used purposive sampling to select the participants (Holme et al., 2014). In the study, researchers found several responses that led to helpful school environments about inclusion, and some potentially harmful responses (Holme et al., 2014). Among the helpful responses, researchers found practices where participants facilitated diverse student groupings and modified their curriculum and instruction to be more inclusive (Holme et al., 2014).

Some teachers in these schools noted that students of color tended to be their more challenging students (Holme et al., 2014). Among the harmful practices, Holme et al. (2014) found that some schools conducted inequitable discipline practices. These discipline practices led

to further alienation of students of color (Holme et al., 2014). Another harmful practice uncovered was that of no policy or practice change (Holme et al., 2014). Some schools did not recognize a need to implement change because of changing student demographics (Holme et al., 2014).

Tyler (2016) interviewed teachers, principals, and assistant principals to learn how diverse suburban schools conceptualize diversity. One limitation of the Tyler study was purposive sampling that specifically targeted schools employing practices to support their diverse populations (Tyler, 2016). The researcher uncovered a mixture of positive and negative discourse among educators in their districts. Enthusiasm to teach diverse students, while positive, gave the researcher the impression that some educators were eager to work with the "exotic other" (Tyler, 2016, p. 295). An example of a negative discourse was that some educators applied colorblind approaches when discussing subpopulations of students (Tyler, 2016). An example of this type of language was evident when educators used neighborhood descriptions to socially lump students into residential categories. Tyler (2016) also found that some educators made assumptions about the home support provided to students of low socioeconomic backgrounds. They assumed that students from this demographic were academically less prepared than their peers, and therefore not qualified for upper-level coursework (Tyler, 2016). One last finding from this study was that educators felt underprepared and overwhelmed about teaching diverse populations of students (Tyler, 2016). Teachers reported an increased need to differentiate lesson plans for special-education-classified students and ELLs (Tyler, 2016). This led to burnout, which led to deficit-based thinking when the teachers were preparing to teach students in these subpopulations (Tyler, 2016).

Another study of three school districts from different regions of the United States examined how suburban schools responded to increases in the diversity of their student populations (Diem et al., 2016). The researchers conducted interviews and case studies focusing on building- and district-level supports. The researchers used expert sampling in selecting their participants through district leader identification of educators (Diem et al., 2016). To analyze the collected data, researchers applied critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how dominance is created through structures and interactions (Diem et al., 2016). Diem et al. (2016) noted that the suburban schools in Texas and California applied color-blind motivators to their educational changes. Specifically, the school in California exhibited "color-conscious, but race-neutral practices" (Diem et al., 2016, p. 745). Rather than discussing issues related to race, the leaders in the schools turned their attention to socioeconomic demographics. Administrators commented that students in the diverse populations experienced difficulties because of their low socioeconomic status (Diem et al., 2016). Because of these perceived difficulties, educators modified their practices to support differentiated instruction for varied learning needs (Diem et al., 2016). Educators noted that students in these populations experienced achievement gaps (Diem et al., 2016). They were concerned about diverse student performance on state assessments and meeting subgroup accountability measures set forth by their states (Diem et al., 2016). Diem et al. (2016) noted that when discussing issues related to increased diversity in their schools, leaders reflected on stereotypes. The leaders did try to increase their knowledge in cultural proficiency through professional development and book studies, but the researchers noted that these efforts seemed superficial (Diem et al., 2016).

It seems that top-down policies from states had an impact on school inclusion efforts. As the previously mentioned schools focused on their inclusive support to prepare for state

accountability measures, a school in Minnesota worked to align with state-directed diversity measures (Diem et al., 2016). While this school noted more community pushback, they worked to strengthen race-conscious practices (Diem et al., 2016). The district offered professional development in intercultural competency and led staff reflections pertaining not only to the achievement gap but also to discipline practices (Diem et al., 2016). In these reflections, educators noted that they tried not to consider socioeconomic status when reflecting on the achievement gap for diverse students because there were many White students within the low socioeconomic demographic (Diem et al., 2016). Further, leaders in the school acknowledged that for students of color to truly experience inclusion, their teachers needed to engage in PLCs (Diem et al., 2016). In these collaborations, educators noted that they were not specifically looking for solutions, rather, they were brainstorming strategies that might target gaps (Diem et al., 2016).

Though the school in Minnesota made attempts to create a welcoming and inclusive educational setting for their rapidly growing diverse student population, their efforts were not well received by all (Diem et al., 2016). Parents and community members opposed the school's inclusive efforts. They viewed their predominantly White community as an affluent area and did not welcome diversity (Diem et al., 2016). Some school leaders were taken aback by racist comments from parents as they navigated negative community responses to their culturally responsive approaches (Diem et al., 2016). Such community responses created added challenges for the school leaders engaged in creating inclusive suburban schools (Diem et al., 2016).

To further build community, some schools created new positions and hired student learning advocates (Ayscue, 2016; Holme et al., 2014). These non-teaching positions provided support for students and families in the areas of academics, mentoring, and social-emotional

health (Ayscue, 2016; Holme et al., 2014). Thirteen of the schools in the Ayscue (2016) study identified the need to hire teachers from diverse backgrounds. The researcher found that efforts to recruit and retain teachers of color in suburban districts showed room for improvement (Ayscue, 2016). Leaders also noted their attempts to hire teachers of color, but they struggled because diverse teachers might not have felt welcomed among their largely non-diverse staff (Diem et al., 2016). These administrators noted that diverse faculty would help to change the culture shift in their schools (Diem et al., 2016). Not only would these teachers be a positive support for their diverse students but having colleagues of color could be an asset for other teachers, too (Diem et al., 2016). Educators of color could offer another perspective to their White colleagues (Diem et al., 2016).

The Impact of Teachers of Color

Regardless of content, some studies urge the inclusion of teachers of color who could better connect with students of color and educate their colleagues in diverse perspectives (Thomas & Warren, 2017; Warren-Grice, 2017; Zagona et al., 2017). In a qualitative case study, Thomas and Warren (2017) examined the ways ELA teachers in a diverse high school discussed the conflict in professional learning communities. The researchers investigated a case study from a larger piece of research. The participant was selected for this study as he was the only teacher of color who participated in the larger study. Researchers noted the participant's interactions with his student teacher, who was a woman of color. The lead researcher in the study was also a woman of color. These demographics are important as one finding noted that colloquialisms in African American language were exchanged among these three people. The leading teacher gave the student-teacher constructive feedback. By informally speaking in a culturally comfortable conversation, the leading teacher could navigate a potentially tense conversation with sympathy

and empathy (Thomas & Warren, 2017). This allowed the student-teacher to receive constructive feedback in a manner where the language put her more at ease. Researchers noted that the exchange was an example of how teachers of color might foster similar connections through dialogue with their students of color (Thomas & Warren, 2017).

One 2017 qualitative study attempted to understand the experiences of Black educators in predominantly White suburban schools (Warren-Grice, 2017). The researcher conducted three interviews, including one focus group (Warren-Grice, 2017). Warren-Grice acknowledged subjectivity in the project using Lawrence-Lightfoote's portraiture lens and the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy. The participants were five Black educators who initiated programs at their schools to support students of color, particularly African American students (Warren-Grice, 2017). The findings of the research might prove to be important reflections for suburban schools attempting to foster true racial inclusion within their districts.

Beyond the benefit of racially diverse students learning from professionals who look like them, teachers of color could have a profound impact on the communities they serve (Warren-Grice, 2017). African American teachers were assets in their building among their colleagues, too. They led professional development for their colleagues. Their diverse perspectives helped the faculty to see how some training on cultural proficiency might operate from a deficit-based point of view (Ayscue, 2016; Warren-Grice, 2017). Additionally, the professional development sessions provided an opportunity for White faculty members to reflect on traditional practices that might make their students of color feel excluded in their instruction and curriculum (Warren-Grice, 2017). The teachers were able to use their perspectives to mediate conversations among students of color, their families, and other school employees. Their mature, life experiences

helped them to inform students of color regarding how to address White teachers who had made them feel uncomfortable (Warren-Grice, 2017).

In the Thomas and Warren (2017) study, researchers also noted the teacher of color and his interactions with White faculty in professional development settings. Among his White colleagues, rather than feeling like he brought diverse perspectives, this teacher often fell silent when his colleagues failed to see his point of view (Thomas & Warren, 2017). Frustrated from not being heard, the teacher decided it would be better to not say anything, rather than engage in an argument with teachers who made assumptions about their mutual students and school needs. When prompted by the researchers to express their perspectives, the White teachers nodded in agreement with points made by their African American colleagues (Thomas & Warren, 2017). Like the Deim et al. (2016) study, these African American teachers were not made to feel welcomed, and their perspectives were educational for their White colleagues.

Inclusion Efforts at the Faculty Level

In addition to influences from school leadership, state education departments also greatly influence content planning and delivery for teachers (Sherman-Morris et al., 2012). One way to help foster inclusion for students is to hire diverse faculty members. (Girard et al., 2020; Ortloff et al., 2012; Page, 2017; Sherman-Morris et al., 2012; Thomas & Warren, 2017; Warren-Grice 2017; Zagona et al., 2017). However, studies have shown that hiring and retaining teachers of color presents a challenge for suburban school districts (Sherman-Morris et al., 2012; Thomas & Warren, 2017; Warren-Grice 2017). This is especially true in suburban schools. In fact, recent reports show that while urban schools in NYS employ an average of 20% faculty of color, the suburban schools employ 0% to 2.9% faculty of color (NYDatabases.com, 2022). Simply training White educators to work with students of color would not work. One barrier could be

that while teachers might be open to attending professional development to broaden their knowledge of culturally relevant education, they receive few incentives to do so (Ortloff et al., 2012). In creating a curriculum, teachers practiced autonomy (Girard et al., 2020). Such autonomy could be influenced by implicit bias and might lead to inconsistencies in content coverage within subject areas (Girard et al., 2020). Where some teachers chose to include a curriculum representative of their students, others might choose a curriculum that will not stir up controversy within their community (Girard et al., 2020).

While leaders created and directed policy for school districts, the teachers spent their time working face-to-face with the students. In researching inclusive curriculum practices, it is important to review the experiences at the faculty level. The purpose of one 2012 quantitative study was to identify teacher preferences for professional development relating to increased diversity in the geosciences (Sherman-Morris et al., 2012). Researchers wanted to know if teachers from different racial backgrounds preferred different settings for science-focused professional development (Sherman-Morris et al., 2012). Researchers surveyed 185 teachers in Mississippi. Survey questions were designed in a Likert-scale model (Sherman-Morris et al., 2012).

Contrary to the researchers' original hypothesis, African American teachers preferred learning in a lab, while Caucasian teachers preferred engaging in outdoor professional development (Sherman-Morris et al., 2012). This research is important because other studies recognize the need to hire and retain teachers of color to help build on their inclusive efforts (Thomas & Warren, 2017; Warren-Grice, 2017; Zagona et al., 2017). Knowing the type of preferred professional development teachers of color in the field of geoscience will help to

improve inclusive efforts (Sherman-Morris et al., 2012). In turn, these efforts might better engage students of color in this content area (Sherman-Morris et al., 2012).

To better understand the elements in international education, Ortloff et al. (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study. Researchers administered surveys throughout the department of educations for midwestern states. Over 24 states and 15 schools were represented in the study. They found that while school leaders identified school mission and vision statements often about inclusion, much like Trujillo et al. (2021) discovered, these statements represented superficial efforts (Ortloff et al., 2012). While 60% of school principals had some knowledge of languages other than English, most did not have speaking skills in these other languages (Ortloff et al., 2012). Researchers also found that only 11% of these leaders participated in professional development relating to international education (Ortloff et al., 2012). Most educators reported that there were little to no incentives for attending such programs, resulting in less than one-third of educators participating in this type of professional development (Ortloff et al., 2012). Of the 15 schools in the study, only one of the schools offered the International Baccalaureate (IB) program (Ortloff et al., 2012). Researchers found that the teachers with a strong knowledge of international education cited their passion for such content as the foundation of their efforts (Ortloff et al., 2012).

As content-area specialists, teachers have autonomy in designing lessons for their content areas. Lesson planning might present an array of struggles in preparing for differentiated needs that might change with the class period. In a mixed-methods study, Girard et al. (2020) sought to understand the factors history teachers used to determine content for their classrooms. Researchers also investigated teacher perceptions of their autonomy in content selection. Over 200 secondary history teachers from 29 states responded to nationwide email requests for

participants. Participants completed survey responses and researchers followed up with interviews based on questions left from the survey responses. Researchers found that teachers indicated having more autonomy in content selection than in-text selection (Girard et al., 2020). To identify class content, teachers tended to look for historically significant content, with major impacts on society (Girard et al., 2020). Some teachers responded that they designed history lessons more aligned with the history of their local communities and overall school demographics (Girard et al., 2020). Researchers found that teachers aligned course content more closely to the content standards in the courses responsible for conducting standardized tests (Girard et al., 2020). Other teachers built on students' cultural knowledge and personal interests to enhance content engagement (Girard et al., 2020). Teachers in the Girard et al. (2020) study expressed hesitation with some content areas pertaining to race and religion. Because of controversial community views, teachers relied on historical importance and state standards to uphold their defense of such content (Girard et al., 2020). Some teachers identified community views and personal political views that gave them the reason for added caution in some areas of the content. This led teachers to being careful in the phrasing of their language (Girard et al., 2020).

From the perspective of Black educators, Warren-Grice (2017) identified many strengths that culturally diverse educators bring to their students, schools, and communities. These educators were committed to racial uplift in their buildings, particularly among their Black students. Other studies noted that counted among the students of color, Asian students did not experience achievement gaps, like other students in this demographic of diversity (Diem et al., 2016; Warren-Grice, 2017). Even parents valued their students learning from Black role models (Lewis-McCoy, 2016). They feared that some White teachers who applied color-blind

approaches did not prepare their children for the real world (Lewis-McCoy, 2016). Beyond uplifting minority students, these educators acted as advocates for the students of color to seek academic challenges in the pursuit and successes of AP coursework (Warren-Grice, 2017). These teachers were careful to encourage several students to take AP courses, to ensure that they would not feel singled out as the only Black student in the upper-level courses (Warren-Grice, 2017). Finally, the teachers guided their students in Black excellence beyond their school's level by taking them on college visits and cultural field trips (Warren-Grice, 2017). One group even attended former President Barack Obama's inauguration (Warren-Grice, 2017).

Teacher Preparation

Zagona et al. (2017) used a mixed-method study to examine educators' experiences and preparation to provide inclusive education for students with disabilities. The researchers wanted to know if there was a relationship between educators' self-reported preparation and their skills in delivering inclusive education and working collaboratively (Zagona et al., 2017). Participants in the study held certifications in either general education or special education; two also held certifications to teach ELLs (Zagona et al., 2017). Respondents answered 15 items on a Likert-type scale (Zagona et al., 2017). Some also participated in interviews after submitting their survey responses (Zagona et al., 2017). The researchers found a significant correlation between the teachers' certifications and their preparation for inclusive instruction (Zagona et al., 2017). They also found that the teachers who took university courses on inclusion were more significantly prepared to teach in diverse classrooms including with special education students and students of color (Zagona et al., 2017). Some of the well-prepared teachers were confident enough in their own abilities to lead professional development classes for their colleagues (Zagona et al., 2017). Still, even with these strong skills, the well-trained teachers experienced

some challenges. One such challenge pertained to supporting students who experienced significant health impairments (Zagona et al., 2017). These teachers also struggled when working with colleagues who did not share the same level of expertise or beliefs in supporting the diverse needs of their students (Zagona et al., 2017). With proper support and preparation, educators can feel confident and well-equipped to create an inclusive environment for their students.

Page (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study to observe the existence of a queer-related curriculum in grade 7–12 ELA classrooms. The researcher also examined teachers' knowledge of such curricula (Page, 2017). Nearly 600 teachers participated in the study, representing 83 out of the 87 counties in the state (Page, 2017). Heterosexual females between the ages of 41 and 50 years old made up most of the study participants (Page, 2017). The respondents completed an online survey and 30` teachers participated in follow-up interviews (Page, 2017). The survey questions followed a Likert-type scale and allowed for some open-ended responses (Page, 2017). This researcher only included statistically significant data in the findings report (Page, 2017). Just over half of the teachers who participated expressed their comfort in teaching and discussing texts with LGBT characters represented (Page, 2017). Slightly more teachers expressed their comfort levels in promoting literature with LGBT characters to their students (Page, 2017). The researcher found that the teachers who expressed discomfort in engaging with this type of curriculum held reservations because they were afraid of potential controversies (Page, 2017). The teachers were hesitant because they did not want to face challenges from parents, administrators, or board of education members (Page, 2017). Some untenured teachers feared for their jobs, while tenured teachers expressed fears of being micromanaged by their superiors for teaching these inclusive texts (Page, 2017). Even with these identified concerns, more than half

of teachers who participated in the study expressed comfort with teaching an LGBT-inclusive curriculum. While teachers are aware of their comfort level and even support systems to aid in their efforts (Page, 2017), it is not clear that teachers are, in fact, teaching this curriculum.

Student Engagement

A superficial glance at U.S. suburban schools might give the perception that these buildings offer foundational inclusive approaches (Bottiani et al., 2014; Bussert-Webb & Zhang, 2016; Dee & Penner, 2017; Diem et al., 2016; Frey, 2011, 2022; Hartwell & Kaplan, 2017; Marrun et al., 2021; McKinney de Roytson & Madkins, 2019; Parkhouse et al., 2021; Trujillo et al., 2021). Rather, these efforts seem to be added in response to the changing demographics in America's suburbs (Diem et al., 2016; Frey, 2011, 2022). Whether these efforts are foundational or reactive, suburban schools are not homogeneous (Frey, 2011, 2022). Educators have an obligation to impart knowledge to all their students, regardless of their demographics and abilities. Students of diverse backgrounds tend to fare differently than their peers who do not have diverse backgrounds (Bottiani et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Marrun et al., 2021; Parkhouse et al., 2021). Researchers have suggested strategies for schools to include the needs of diverse students by hiring more teachers of color, engaging more authentically with families, setting challenging and rigorous expectations for all students, and engaging students in a culturally responsive curriculum (Bottiani et al., 2014; Bussert-Webb & Zhang, 2016; Dee & Penner, 2017; Hartwell & Kaplan, 2017; Marrun et al., 2021; McKinney de Roytson & Madkins, 2019; Parkhouse et al., 2021).

Leaders and teachers have their own set of struggles when implementing inclusive education practices. Whether or not these efforts work depends on the student experience. One comparative, participatory study between two schools found that promoting social justice in

schools could highlight inequities within the system (Trujillo et al., 2021). To educate students about social justice, schools must first recognize that injustices do occur. Trujillo et al. (2021) explored common experiences of educators and students in Norway, compared to those in San Francisco, CA. They found that while American schools seemed to promote acceptance and inclusion, they encouraged students to protect their rights as individuals (Trujillo et al., 2021).

American participants in this study reflected that school building adornments celebrating diversity did not align with school outcomes (Trujillo et al., 2021). Norwegian participants who visited the American schools reflected that the posters promoting social justice movements gave the message that all students were not only valued, but they were also prepared for civic integration (Trujillo et al., 2021). Rather, regular practices, specifically aligned with discipline, disproportionately impacted students of color, compared to their White peers (Trujillo et al., 2021). Additionally, the American school building décor led the Norwegians to believe that American schools were welcoming and collaborative. Upon further investigation, researchers found that U.S. educators and students worked with more autonomy and in isolation (Trujillo et al., 2021). The American students in the study lacked valuable resources like meals outside of school and welfare programs to support other necessities (Trujillo et al., 2021). Researchers found that school leaders in America had to give ample time to help families secure these resources, which took time from their academic pursuits (Trujillo et al., 2021).

In a quantitative study using a regression discontinuity design, Dee and Penner (2017) examined the effects of an ethnic studies course on students identified as at-risk youth. This study collected data from ninth graders in three high schools. To be categorized as at-risk, these youth obtained grade point averages of 2.0 or less (Dee & Penner, 2017). Researchers collected attendance records, discipline records, demographics, and academic transcripts. To adjust for

internal validity, researchers anticipated other potential influences on student achievement and conducted several tests by removing various achievement measures. They found that students who were deemed at-risk had significantly improved GPAs than their previously higher-performing peers after engaging in an ethnic studies curriculum. The higher-performing peers did not take the same course as the at-risk youth. Demographically, the at-risk youth were more diverse than the other peer group. A possible reason for the increased academic results might be connected to the students relating to the culturally relevant pedagogy (Dee & Penner, 2017).

Student engagement can make content more interesting for both students and teachers within a classroom. In a mixed-methods study of high school science students, Hartwell and Kaplan (2017) examined the connection between content and student identity. The students answered open-ended questions in essay responses after three science lessons. They also responded to survey questions created after the researchers coded the student essay responses. Hartwell and Kaplan found that when prompted, students were able to make personal connections to their content. One student noted a connection to ionic bonds in their experience of changing school districts (Hartwell & Kaplan, 2017). Researchers noted that when students were able to identify personal connections to the content, they appeared to have more interest in the subject. These findings align with Dee and Penner's (2017) research on CLED students in an ethnic studies course. In both studies, coursework had a connection to student identity.

In a quantitative study of 58 volunteering school districts in Maryland, Bottiani et al. (2014) examined the differences in Black and White students' experiences relating to school climate. These climate surveys measured students' perceptions of caring, equity, and engagement from their teachers. Researchers noted demographic disparities between students of color, at 75%, and their White teachers, at 76%, in one of the schools. Findings in this study indicated

that, overall, the Black students experienced a lower school climate than their White peers (Bottiani et al., 2014). These researchers also found that teacher burnout impacted student connectedness. Interestingly, while teacher burnout correlated with lower reports of equity for White students, the correlation of equity for Black students under these circumstances increased (Bottiani et al., 2014). Overall, White students experienced higher levels of connectedness, caring, and equity than their Black peers.

In a mixed-methods study, Marrun et al. (2021) used CRT as a theoretical framework to examine students of color's perceptions of their high school experience and the teaching profession. Marrun et al. conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups. They found that students viewed teachers as stressed, disengaged, and lacking respect. Students observed their White teachers' as seemingly unprepared to teach students of color (Marrun et al., 2021). These students conveyed that their teachers had lower expectations of them compared to their White peers (Marrun et al., 2021). Students reported that they did not aspire to enter the teaching profession. Perhaps, some students reported, if they had teachers of color to look up to when they were younger, they might have desired to become teachers one day (Marrun et al., 2021). These students did not feel encouraged by their teachers to attend college and enter a field where they estimated the financial payoff would not be worth the efforts (Marrun et al., 2021).

Chapman (2013) conducted a qualitative study using CRT as a theoretical framework and identified colorblindness as a misleading term (Chapman, 2013). Their stance was that while those who employed colorblind practices avoided verbally acknowledging race, implicit bias was not as easily suppressed (Chapman, 2013). Researchers posited that traditional curricula and policies uphold colorblind practices, which indirectly apply racism by "attempting to treat all students the same" Chapman, 2013, p. 617). This practice is problematic because not all students

are the same, and therefore it is not possible to treat them so. The researchers asked Black students about their experiences in majority White suburban schools. Pertaining to this research, student responses to their curriculum experiences highlight Chapman's (2013) perception of the misleading aspect of colorblindness. During limited content relating to the African American experience, Black students reported that they felt as if they were on a stage as minorities in their classrooms (Chapman, 2013). Similarly, Asian students felt this way during lessons about China, even though their descendants were not Chinese (Chapman, 2013). Participants reported receiving uncomfortable questions from their peers connecting minorities to certain historical events (Chapman, 2013). The responses from educators in these situations were noticeably absent from the participant reports.

Lewis-McCoy (2016) interviewed parents of Black boys in suburban schools about their experiences in social and academic settings within their schools. While the study focused on the parents of elementary students, one mother recounted how her 15-year-old son's academic struggles began with elementary school practices (Lewis-McCoy, 2016). Through practices like social promotion, regardless of academic achievement, parents perceived that their students were just moved along to the next grade level. One parent's perception of this type of promotion was that teachers did not expect much accomplishment from the participants' students (Lewis-McCoy, 2016). Such practices created a larger achievement gap between majority and minority populations (Lewis-McCoy, 2016). Furthermore, parents reported their students received less classroom time than their peers, students were pulled out of class to receive special education services, or they were removed from the classrooms for behavioral reasons (Lewis-McCoy, 2016). This resulted in significantly fewer classroom interactions than their peers. The parent of the 15-year-old Black male student questioned how her son could be promoted beyond the fifth

grade if he only had a fifth-grade reading level (Lewis-McCoy, 2016). Because of this, he struggled in high school classes that he was not academically prepared to navigate.

Another study set out to examine the reading attitudes of Grade 9 through 12 students in Texas schools (Bussert-Webb & Zhang, 2016). The dependent variables were based on student and school backgrounds (Bussert-Webb & Zhang, 2016). The researchers used random sampling surveys through the lens of reading attitude theory and practical social justice frameworks. Over 2,000 students participated in Likert-scale surveys administered by their classroom teachers. Due to the perceived lack of resources, the researchers hypothesized that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color would have more negative reading attitudes than their peers (Bussert-Webb & Zhang, 2016). The findings negated the researchers' hypothesis. The study findings indicated that older female students had the highest positive attitudes toward reading and that the urban students had more positive reading views than the rural students (Bussert-Webb & Zhang, 2016). The most interesting finding was that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color had significantly higher positive reading views than their affluent and White peers (Bussert-Webb & Zhang, 2016).

Using qualitative methods, McKinney de Roytson and Madkins (2019) explored full-service community schools (FSCS) within the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) during the 2013–2014 school year. This educational model was set up in a manner that approached education holistically, including the diverse needs of the families within the school district. Like Trujillo et al., (2021), McKinney de Roytson and Madkins found that their school systems could help families secure supplemental resources, making education more equitable and accessible to students of diverse backgrounds within their communities. Researchers in the study sought to examine how FSCSs could disrupt systemic inequities within a school community. Outside

researchers spent a school year engaged in interviews, focus groups, and observations with various willing stakeholders. They examined how initiatives were comprehended and applied within the schools. The transcripts of these meetings were coded for emerging themes and patterns. Within the structure of the FSCS design, the schools helped families and students secure childcare, wellness supports, and access to technology, food, school uniforms, and mental health services, among other vital resources (McKinney de Roytson & Madkins, 2019). Families and teachers also reflected that consistent, open, and honest dialogue between the school and home helped to strengthen relationships and expectations for both parties (McKinney de Roytson & Madkins, 2019).

Through semi-structured interviews Rowland and Shircliffe (2016) set out to understand educators' perspectives in expanding access to AP courses in a suburban Florida high school. Though the student demographics were largely diverse, with 57% diversity, that was not the case in the upper-level course rosters (Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016). Traditionally, entrance requirements for AP courses were navigated by teacher and counselor recommendations. The College Board, the parent organization of AP courses, mandated open enrollment in some areas, including the district of focus for the Rowland & Shircliffe (2016) study. Educators reported that even with open enrollment, the disproportionate demographics of these rosters did not change appreciably. In some cases, lower-performing students enrolled in AP courses and found success (Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016). The school eventually saw a larger increase in Black students enrolling in these courses after an African American principal reached out to the students' parents with an information night designed especially for the families (Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016).

Researchers in the Rowland and Shircliffe (2016) study uncovered a conflict in motivating educators' support of open enrollment for AP courses. While district-level leaders received incentives from the College Board for the number of students enrolled in AP courses, teachers, in some states, received incentives from College Board for high-achieving test scores (Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016). Concerning students with varied social identities and varied academic abilities in AP courses, teachers felt increased pressure in preparing their students for exams (Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016). One teacher expressed his concern that parents and students might expect a modified curriculum to support potential learning barriers, but such modifications might not prepare students for rigorous exam expectations (Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016). Another teacher in the study stated that his colleagues held a stigma against any student who did not fit the mold of the previously traditional AP student (Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016). Regardless of their test scores, exposing students to the rigors of an AP curriculum prepared them better for higher education experiences than traditional high school courses (Rowland & Shircliffe, 2016). This view was more in line with the College Board incentives for mandating open enrollment for AP courses.

Teachers spend more face-to-face time with students than any other educators in the profession, including support staff and leaders. In a qualitative multi-case study, Parkhouse et al. (2021) examined how teacher action research might impact culturally relevant education in schools. The participants for the study responded to an emailed flyer for teacher action research. Of the 14 applicants, eight were selected from varying grade levels and content areas. In this study, teachers selected their own research questions and collected their own data. Parkhouse et al. (2021) conducted interviews and collected audio recordings from the participants. The teachers reported that their research aided in their professional knowledge of awareness of

systems, policies, and practices. Parkhouse et al. found that the teachers had an increased awareness of their roles as equity advocates and related problems that existed in their schools. Like Warren-Grice (2017) and Thomas and Warren (2017), Parkhouse et al. (2021) identified the need for more teachers of color in the profession. Teachers in the study also noted that culturally relevant pedagogy exposed students to a curriculum that was beneficial for all students, including White learners (Parkhouse et al., 2021). Like the leaders in the Ezzani et al. (2021) study, these educators identified a need for deeper self-reflection to foster intergroup connections in cultural proficiency (Parkhouse et al., 2021). Through action research, the teachers in the study uncovered their own education, making them more aware of opportunities to enhance culturally relevant educational practices for the benefit of all their students.

Four themes emerged from the McKinney de Roytson and Madkins (2019) study about the creation of an inclusive school setting: race and class-conscious school setting, commitment to equity, concern for supporting the whole student, and commitment to providing student and family access. The themes connected to pedagogy because students felt connected to their teachers and their school. Teachers were able to engage in dialogue about stereotypes and guide students to deliberately debunk them (McKinney de Roytson & Madkins, 2019). The relationships also helped to guide teachers to develop and engage in culturally relevant pedagogy, adjusting their lessons to connect with their students' diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995; McKinney de Roytson & Madkins, 2019). Educators acknowledged that a barrier to the FSCS structure was that not all teachers "bought into the vision" (McKinney de Roytson & Madkins, 2019, p. 261). As Page (2017) found, this resulted in inconsistencies in producing a culturally relevant education for all students.

Other Influences on Curriculum

A common goal of high schools is to prepare students for either higher education or the workforce, and in general, life beyond high school (Gurin-Sands et al., 2014; Frankenberg et al., 2016; Frey, 2022b). Pathways toward achieving this goal vary among districts. In educating their students, schools must maintain support in curriculum, structures, scaffolding, relationships, and ongoing dialogue (Frankenberg et al., 2016; Gurin-Sands et al., 2014). Such efforts are thwarted when states implement legislation preventing students from learning about systemic injustices (Frey, 2022b). Problems arising in any of these areas might affect the other areas.

Frankenberg et al. (2016) conducted fieldwork studies in Florida schools experiencing increased racial diversity. Participants in the study included educators from several backgrounds, including teachers, counselors, administrators, and support staff. Through interviews and coding of emerging themes, researchers uncovered efforts by the districts to maintain or increase enrollment and desirability for their schools, while promoting academic achievement for their students (Frankenberg et al., 2016).

One finding of the Frankenberg et al. (2016) was similar to the Ayscue (2016) study that found that increasing access to AP courses offered stronger academic opportunities for diverse students. To remove placement barriers, schools in this study did not require enrollment criteria for AP courses (Frankenberg et al., 2016). While enrollment in these programs increased, teachers and administrators acknowledged the importance of providing scaffolding, such as positive relationships and academic support for enrolled students who might not have the same home and community supports as their peers (Frankenberg et al., 2016). Access to tutoring, however, created another barrier. Even if schools could secure teachers to provide tutoring after

school hours, some students in need did not have transportation to attend the sessions (Frankenberg et al., 2016).

Frankenberg et al. (2016) found other inclusive scaffolding efforts in these Florida schools. The educators noted that many of their diverse college-bound students were the first in their families to attend college (Frankenberg et al., 2016). These students needed assistance navigating college searches, applications, school selection, financial aid, etc. In addition to school counselors supporting these efforts, one school hired a youth advocate to help students and families (Frankenberg et al., 2016). These educators also worked together to help support students with poor attendance, who were deemed to be at-risk because of their lack of academic effort (Frankenberg et al, 2016).

While these participating schools were public, suburban schools, they were in an area that allowed school choice. Families could choose to send their students to a particular high school within a community. School administrators recognized that the schools seemed to be segregated based on program offerings (Frankenberg et al., 2016). For example, schools that offered the IB program tended to attract more White and Asian families, as opposed to schools that offered trade-based programs, like magnet programs (Frankenberg et al., 2016). One school viewed its program offerings as a "niche" (Frankenberg et al., 2016, p. 399) for its school identity Rather than trying to compete with other area schools, they prided themselves on the opportunities they offered interested students and families.

Researchers in the Gurin-Sands et al. (2014) study hypothesized that intergroup dialogue would affect how students wrote about education and collaborative action regarding social justice. Like the Leonard and Moore (2014) study, the researchers analyzed and coded pre- and post essays written by the research subjects. Over 1,000 participants of varied gender and races

participated in the study. Participants engaged in race-based and gender-based dialogues with fellow participants. Overall, student writing about social action increased, along with the use of more emotionally charged words in their essays (Gurin-Sands et al., 2014). After engaging in dialogue with other participants, post essays revealed an increased collaboration with those of different social identities (Gurin-Sands et al., 2014). In general, participant responses were directly affected by dialogue and collaboration in structured activities, alliance building, and psychological processes like thought, emotions, and identity (Gurin-Sands et al., 2014).

Frey (2022b) found that parents of school-aged children support an education that teaches students about past inequities. Using national polls, Frey (2022b) revealed that politicians target older White Americans, who are not college educated, in their anti-CRT rhetoric. Initiatives, such as CRT bans and book bans are associated with Republican politicians (Frey, 2022b). Using fearmongering tactics, these lawmakers manipulate the beliefs of some older Americans that the changing American demographics are an indication of national decline (Frey, 2022b). Frey (2022b) referred to the generation gap by comparing the interests of voters over age 65 compared to the voting trends of those aged 18–29. This gap is also an important consideration regarding future generations. As the large population of those who are older than 65 advances in years, the younger population has not increased at the same rate (Frey, 2022b). Still, though the population is not increasing at the same rate, it is becoming more diverse. Frey (2022b) found that diversity among those who are younger than 18 has increased by 20% since 1990.

America's changing demographics tell the story of our history. Suppressing parts of that history through academic bans does not adequately prepare future generations (Frey, 2022b). These future generations will one day make up the labor force who will care for and support current voters (Frey, 2022b). Based on voting trends, Frey (2022b) found that just 30% of

eligible voters reside in households with school-aged children. Nearly 80% of those voters are under the age of 50 (Frey, 2022b). Just one-third of these voters are White, non-college educated citizens (Frey, 2022b). This is important because voters in this demographic tend to support Republican candidates (Frey, 2022b). When educators hesitate to teach inclusive curricula because of community backlash, they are responding to a minute number of parents (Frey, 2022b).

Literature Gaps

Nearly 70 years after the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), American public schools still struggle to implement consistent inclusivity for their diverse student populations (Johnson, 2018). Researchers have written inclusive pedagogical theories and frameworks, but to date, none of these are aligned with consistent accountability measures. Adding deeper barriers is the political divisiveness among policy writers and stakeholders pertaining to educational efforts (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021a). School administrators and educators are caught in the middle of implementation and providing what their diverse student bodies need and deserve. Research does not reveal how suburban educators perceive inclusive efforts in their districts (Tyler et al., 2016).

Chapter Summary

In creating inclusive educational experiences for public school students, various stakeholders expressed barriers preventing them from achieving true inclusion. School leaders try to balance leading their districts and buildings according to state guidelines and legislation, while also building community in their schools and fostering an academic environment in the best interest of each student. Striking this balance with rapidly changing student and community demographics adds a layer of difficulty and significance to this work. Educators look to their

leaders and colleagues for direction. Some are brave enough to step up in their own leadership efforts within the realm of their positions. Professional development practices, content autonomy, and community pressures create barriers for teachers attempting to provide inclusive curricula for their students (Girard et al., 2020; Ortloff et al., 2012; Sherman-Morris et al., 2012; Warren-Grice, 2017; Zagona et al., 2017). All these efforts culminate in the student experience. Based on demographics, home support, ability levels, and other factors, some students do not get the same educational opportunities as their peers (Bottiani et al., Bussert-Webb & Zhang, 2016; 2014, Dee & Penner, 2017; Hartwell & Kaplan, 2017; McKinney de Roytson & Madkins, 2019; Parkhouse et al., 2021). To create an inclusive environment, some schools attempt to increase program access, scaffolding, and social identity dialogue (Frankenberg et al., 2016; Gurin-Sands et al., 2014). Resistance to such programs largely stems from political pressure targeted toward nonparent stakeholders (Frey, 2022b). More research is needed to direct the decisions of those involved in creating an inclusive education for diverse students in suburban school districts.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

With diversity rapidly increasing in suburban schools (Frey, 2011, 2022), educators would benefit from clear and consistent practices to support each of their students. Researchers have found many of the current inclusive efforts within schools to be largely superficial (Holme et al., 2014; Trujillo et al., 2021). Suburban high schools tend to serve a less diverse population than urban high schools (Frey, 2011, 2022), and not all aspects of a diverse social identity are obvious. An individual might identify as diverse based on several attributes including race, ethnicity, native language, gender identity, sexual identity, sexual orientation, or various ability levels (Annamma & Morrison, 2018).

Suburban high schools are not excluded from controversy relating to divisiveness in the American political agenda (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022; White et al., 2023). While events of racial inequities are on the rise in the United States, educators are positioned to address student questions and concerns related to such events (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). Such work can be challenging because some community members might view an educator who addresses race-related conversations as a supporter of (CRT; Hill-Jackson et al., 2022; White et al., 2023). Merely the mention, or even the hint, of CRT in suburban high schools is subject to the backlash of a stakeholder who views this theory as a socialist plot to overthrow the government (Blankenship & Locke, 2015; Hill-Jackson et al., 2022; White et al., 2023). Educators must walk a careful line while addressing student inquiries, curriculum standards, and the will of parents and stakeholders.

Educators are also subject to their own implicit biases (Holme et al., 2014). While educators might not recognize these unconscious beliefs, they can surface in curriculum planning and student engagement (Holme et al., 2014). Further, the demographics in the NYSED system show a significant gap between the vast diversity of the student population compared to the minimal diversity of the educator population (NYSED, 2019). The very make-up of social identities within these two populations can create an instant disconnect. Administrators and teachers must engage students who have different lived experiences than theirs.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine educators' perspectives on implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. After the data were collected and analyzed, this researcher identified suggestions to guide inclusive curriculum practices in suburban high schools. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What practices are currently in place for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?
2. What are the barriers and opportunities for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?

These research questions were examined through a lens applying the NYSED recently published CR-S education framework (2018). This framework was published as a guideline to enact inclusive practices in all public schools (NYSED, 2018). The CR-S education framework states that to create a learning environment where each student is engaged and empowered in their schooling experience, schools must provide a welcoming and affirming environment, a rigorous education with rigorous expectations, inclusive curricula and assessments, and ongoing professional learning and supports for the educators (NYSED, 2018).

Research Design

A phenomenological study guided this research. This type of study allowed the researcher to interpret the "meaning of lived experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78) of educators. Van Manen (2016) described phenomenology as an attempt to derive meaning from the foundations of mankind's lived experiences. Through this method, the researcher endeavored to interpret the point of view of school administrators and teachers who attempt to implement inclusive practices in suburban high schools (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hall, 2020). The researcher invited administrators and teachers from suburban high schools located within the Western New York region to participate in this study. It was beneficial to understand the various social and cultural responses to educator practices (Hall, 2020). Through focus group interviews, the researcher gathered the educators' perceptions of potential barriers and opportunities in implementing an inclusive curriculum. This knowledge will support strengthening professional development and future implementation procedures.

The topic of implementing inclusive curricula has been met with public scrutiny (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021a; White et al., 2023). Further, efforts to create an environment of belonging in public schools where students are meaningfully engaged in socially just curricula have been an ongoing focus of some educators and legislatures (Johnson, 2018; NYSED, 2021). Still, given some stakeholder views, educators might be reluctant to share their perceptions of a potentially contentious goal. Teachers and administrators might hesitate to discuss their perspectives in an individual interview yet be open to participating in a conversation with others who share their lived experiences during a focus group setting (Hall, 2020). The setting of a focus group of individuals on the same professional level inspired reflection and

conversation among participants who have similar lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

Mentler (2020) suggested that research participants might be more inclined to discuss their perspectives and potential barriers in a larger group setting of approximately six to eight participants (Mertler, 2020). In a group of this size, it was important for all participants to have an opportunity to share their views (Mertler, 2020). The researcher for this study closely monitored the participant interactions to avoid individual dominance in the conversations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were divided according to their educator roles. The atmosphere of discussion in a focus group invites participants to reflect on similarities and differences in their experiences, leading to meaningful data for the researcher (Hall, 2020). Further, in this setting, the researcher was able to take on a less prominent role than when conducting individual interviews (Hall, 2020).

To ensure proper retention of the participants' responses, the researcher recorded each focus group session. The data were collected from three fully attended focus groups, which were grouped as district-level administrators, building-level administrators, and high school teachers.

Research Context

Suburban high schools in NYS participate in intermediate education units (IEU; NYSED, 2011) to share academic programs and services among suburban districts within a specific region (NYSED, 2011). Schools in the major cities of NYS are excluded from IEU membership (NYSED, 2011). At the time of this research, there were 37 regional IEUs in NYSED, serving 700 school districts. This research collected data from the focus groups within the Glacier Valley IEU in the region of Western NYS. Glacier Valley is a pseudonym. There are 10 suburban high schools in the Glacier Valley IEU.

While it is true that suburban demographics are changing to become more diverse, the suburban high schools in the Glacier Valley IEU lack diversity compared to the neighboring city, Duluth, NY (data.nysed.gov, n.d.). Duluth is also a pseudonym. The Duluth City School District serves students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds of which only 9% identify as White (data.nysed.gov, n.d.). In contrast, 44% to 91% of students within the suburban high schools in the Glacier Valley IEU are White (data.nysed.gov, n.d.). NYS also keeps track of data regarding students under the diverse categories of ELLs, classified with a disability, and economically disadvantaged (data.nysed.gov, n.d.). While NYSED does retain data on gender, other aspects of social diversity, such as gender identity or sexual orientation, are not recorded. ELL students represent 0% to 12% of these student populations (data.nysed.gov, n.d.). Students with disabilities make up between 9% to 16% of the student bodies (data.nysed.gov, n.d.). Students who are at a socioeconomic disadvantage account for the largest area of diversity in these schools with percentages between 2% to 64% of the student population (data.nysed.gov, n.d.).

This region of Western NYS also offers nine colleges. The top employers in this region are a private college and its affiliating hospital network, a multistate grocery store chain, and a global corporation. The median age in this area is 40 years old (Census Reporter, n.d.), and 32% of the area's population of over 1 million people identify as races other than White (Census Reporter, n.d.). The median household income is $65,957 (Census Reporter, n.d.), and over 13% of the population lives below the poverty line (Census Reporter, n.d.). While most residents have completed high school or some level of college education, 40.4 % of the residents have completed a bachelor's degree or higher (Census Reporter, n.d.).

Research Participants

The researcher conducted three focus groups of practicing educators: one for central office administrators, one for high school-level administrators, and one for high school teachers. The roles in the like groups helped with triangulation of the data from the participants with similar positions. Each focus group consisted of three to five participants for a total of 11 participants from six high schools in this region. The research focused on nine of the 10 districts in the Glacier Valley IEU because of the researcher's affiliation with one of the districts. The sampling methods used for this research were purposive and homogenous. The selection of the Glacier Valley IEU was purposive as this organization works in collaboration with suburban districts with varying levels of diversity, similar to other American suburbs (Frey, 2011, 2022). Purposive sampling allows researchers to reach participants who are related to their phenomenon of study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the process of organizing the focus groups from participants within the Glacier Valley IEU, the researcher applied homogenous sampling. In this process, participants were separated based on their role as a specific type of educator. As professionals at the same level in their schools, the organization of homogenous sampling allowed for more productive conversations within each focus group (Hall, 2020).

Collecting data from the educators in three different professional roles guided this study to develop a more comprehensive review of the practices, barriers, and opportunities in implementing inclusive curricula within suburban high schools. Other than sharing a professional field, there were no known connections between the researcher and the participants. As an educator with similar lived experiences, the researcher planned a comfortable interview atmosphere for the participants in these focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018, van Manen, 2016).

This research represented data from suburban high schools in the Western NYS region. High schools in these areas have been experiencing increased diversity (Frey, 2011, 2022). Participants from this specific group allowed the researcher to obtain perspectives from a clearly defined, yet not too limited, participant pool (Adams & Lawrence, 2019). To be eligible to participate in this study, the participants had to work in a role as a central office or a high school administrator or as a high school teacher within one of the nine schools associated with the Glacier Valley IEU. The selection criteria for the district-level administrators required that they worked in areas that were related to either DEI initiatives or curriculum.

Demographic Information of the Research Participants

Data for this study were collected using focus groups of educators at different levels in suburban high schools. Three separate focus groups were held over a 3-month period. Participant selection was based on interest in participation from the educators within the Glacier Valley IEU. In total, there were 11 educators from six different suburban high schools represented in this study. The district leaders represented the largest demographic group with five participants. Both the building leader and classroom teacher focus groups included three educators each. There was a fourth teacher in the classroom teacher focus group who decided not to participate when she recognized a colleague was also participating. Table 3.1 outlines the educator roles, pseudonyms, and participant codes for each focus group participant.

Table 3.1

Participant Role, Pseudonym, and Code

Educator Role	Pseudonym	Participant Code
District Leader	Elyse	DL-1
District Leader	Patricia	DL-2
District Leader	Eric	DL-3
District Leader	Jonathan	DL-4
District Leader	Sarah	DL-5
Building Leader	Ronnie	BL-1
Building Leader	Helen	BL-2
Building Leader	Jack	BL-3
Classroom Teacher	Michella	CT-1
Classroom Teacher	Christina	CT-2
Classroom Teacher	Jacqueline	CT-3

Researcher Positionality

At the time of this study, the researcher of this study had worked in suburban public education for 10 years. She taught various levels of high school English courses for 9 years. Her own K–12 school experience was a combination of private and public suburban schools. As a student in the public education system, she witnessed the difference in inclusion she experienced compared to her twin sister, who was classified as a student with a learning disability. Later, as an educator, the researcher endeavored to connect with students and families of all backgrounds and abilities. The researcher also served as a teacher on special assignments as the Dean of Students, a lead teacher of the English department, and as her building's DEI co-chair. In all roles, the researcher navigated changes in curriculum, stakeholder involvement in curriculum, and efforts to build more inclusive school environments. These lived experiences positioned the

researcher as one who has lived the phenomenon of inclusive curriculum implementation (van Manen, 2016).

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The previously stated research questions established the foundation of this research (Hall, 2020). The first question addressed procedures already in place within a suburban high school to support educators in implementing inclusive curriculum practices. The second question searched for both barriers and opportunities for suburban high schools to grow in regarding their inclusive efforts for each enrolled student. The questions outlined in the interview protocol stemmed from these two questions. To support an understanding of the context in the protocol questions, the participants had access to a definition of terms handout. Additionally, each question aligned with one of the four principles of the theoretical framework for this study, NYSED's (2018) CR-S education framework. In developing these questions, the researcher was careful to construct clear language to elicit open-ended answers and dialogue among the participants of each focus group (Hall, 2020).

The researcher, as the focus group moderator, also served as an instrument in data collection (Hall, 2020). The moderator was careful to allow participant responses to guide the discussions within each segment of questioning (Hall, 2020). Another role of the moderator was to encourage the quieter participants to engage in the discussion (Hall, 2020). The moderator, as a research instrument, attended to the questions, participants, and data collection, while mindfully maintaining a distance from the conversation to keep the integrity of the research data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hall, 2020). In addition to moderating the focus group discussions, the researcher remained a "sensitive observer of subtleties" (van Manen, 2016, p. 29). It was also important for the researcher to remain objective while maintaining trustworthiness among the

research participants through balanced and specific questions (van Manen, 2016). During and after the focus group sessions, the researcher recorded written analytical memos. The researcher later applied three rounds of coding to the data, which are explained in further detail in the data analysis section (Saldaña, 2021). In addition to analyzing the data through coding, the researcher used the analytical memos to further understand the participants' emotions and experiences on the topic.

Procedures Used for Data Collection

Prior to conducting this study, the researcher obtained approval from the St. John Fisher University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Part of this approval process required researchers to receive training regarding how to conduct research with human participants safely. Once the approval was secured, the researcher sent a letter to the Glacier Valley IEU superintendent. The IEU superintendent distributed the research materials to the component school district superintendents. Through written and verbal means, the researcher invited participation from suburban high school central office, building-level administrators, and suburban high school teachers. As the participants agreed to participate in this study, the researcher guided them through the informed consent form. The procedures for collecting data in this research included:

1. Completed and submitted the required materials to secure IRB approval.
2. Inspired by purposive sampling, submitted a letter summarizing the research and the need for seeking participants to the IEU superintendent.
3. Worked with district and IEU leadership to develop a process for distributing information on the research.
4. Distributed the research summary for potential participants within the districts.

5. Secured interested participants from the information distribution. The participants received a $30 Amazon gift card.
6. Conducted a pilot focus group in a district not affiliated with the study.
7. Adjusted focus group protocol, as needed, based on the piloted focus groups.
8. Secured time and sent Zoom link for to the participants for the focus groups. Arranged for like-role sampling with three focus groups: one for central office administrators, one for building-level administrators, and one for high school classroom teachers.
9. Emailed and completed informed consent forms and definition of terms handout to focus group participants prior to conducting the focus groups.
10. Conducted the focus groups using the interview protocol questions.
11. Wrote analytical memos during focus groups.
12. Distributed electronic Amazon gift cards to the participants through an emailed link.
13. Transcribed the responses from the focus groups using Rev.com.
14. Wrote additional memos after each page of transcription.
15. Developed themes from the coding cycles.

Procedures Used for Data Analysis

Through coding, researchers identify meaningful data from interviews, and they categorize the data based on the meanings (Hall, 2020). The researcher employed intra-coder reliability through three cycles of coding. Responses were coded in the first cycle using the a priori coding method. The researcher identified established codes based on the field of study pertaining to education (Saldaña, 2021). The four principles of the CR-S education framework formed the first cycle of coding through an a priori method. The four principles are welcoming

and affirming environments, inclusive curriculum and assessments, high expectations and rigorous instruction, and ongoing professional learning and support (NYSED, 2018). In vivo coding, the second round of coding, created codes from the specific language used by the focus group participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using language directly from the participants helped the researcher to identify a storyline of the lived experiences of the educators as they navigated implementing an inclusive curriculum (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). The third and final cycle of coding highlighted patterns and emergent themes from the focus group responses. The compilation of the three coding cycles helped to maintain the integrity of the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher also used analytical memos to help synthesize the data. After each page of transcription, the researcher recorded notes on the emotions, connections, and her interpretation of the participants' perspectives. These memos aided in interpreting the participants' perspectives regarding implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools.

Chapter Summary

With increased diversity in suburban schools, educators have an obligation to implement inclusive practices to support each of their students. This research examined the potential barriers and opportunities identified by central office administrators, building-level administrators, and high school teachers. This study followed a phenomenological research approach through focus groups. The researcher conducted focus groups with participants who, at the time of the focus groups, were educators in various school districts within an IEU in nearby suburbs in Western NYS. Each focus group represented a homogenous selection of educators at the same professional level: central office administrators, building-level administrators, and high school teachers. The researcher served as the moderator of the focus groups and asked questions from

the interview protocol. Once transcribed, the interview responses were coded in three cycles and analyzed to identify themes that emerged.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

In the industry of public education, terms related to inclusive curriculum have become trigger words for some in suburban high school communities (White et al., 2023). Still, the 2020 census results indicated that suburban demographics are more diverse than ever; a trend that has increased steadily for 3 decades (Frey, 2022a). Even though the suburban high school workforce significantly lacks diversity (NYSED, 2019), the student populations in these schools are becoming increasingly diverse (Frey, 2022a). To truly engage all students, suburban high school educators are to immerse students in a curriculum that represents diverse identities (Gay, 2013).

While (NYSED published the CR-S education framework in 2018, the state does not require that schools implement its recommendations. NYSED provided supplemental materials for educators, such as links and suggestions for the implementation of the CR-S education framework (NYSED, 2019), but teachers are not required to attend professional development classes related to inclusive curriculum practices. A state-provided framework on inclusive curriculum holds lofty significance, yet educators are left without clear direction on how to transfer this framework to their customary practices.

This study examined educators' perspectives on implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. The experiences of the educators were explored from the perspective of district- and building-level administrators and classroom teachers who worked in suburban high schools. This examination was conducted through the lens of the four principles of the CR-S education framework: welcoming and affirming environment, inclusive curriculum and

assessment, high expectations and rigorous instruction, and on-going professional learning and support. The data from the focus groups for this study answered the following research questions:

1. What practices are currently in place for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?
2. What are the barriers and opportunities for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?

Chapter 4 addresses the data analysis and findings of this study. The data and findings are presented in the order of the research questions. The findings for each research question are grouped under themes and subthemes. Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of the findings.

Research Question 1

What practices are currently in place for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?

This study focused on examining the educators' perspectives on implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. The focus group protocol questions were designed to provide insight as to how the educators perceived their implementation practices of inclusive curriculum measures. The participants were forthcoming in sharing their perspectives in the like-role focus groups.

When interpreting the responses from the participants, consideration was given to NYSED's CR-S education framework. Two themes resulted from the data analysis of Research Question 1: Wild West and snippets of professional development. Table 4.1 presents the themes, subthemes, and the corresponding branch of the CR-S education framework for Research Question 1.

Table 4.1

Research Question 1 – Themes, Subthemes, and Framework

Theme	Subtheme		Framework
1.1 Wild West	1.1a	Awareness of the process	Inclusive curriculum and assessment
	1.1b	Inconsistent implementation and accountability	
	1.1c	Auditing existing curriculum	
1.2 Snippets of Professional Development	1.2a	They don't know what they don't know	Ongoing professional development
	1.2b	Time to truly dig in	
	1.2c	Relying on our early adopters	
	1.2d	It starts with us	

Theme 1.1: Wild West

This theme refers to the inconsistent practices of curriculum writing and inclusive curriculum implementation. Inclusive curriculum and assessment is one of the principles of the CR-S education framework. The participants in each group reflected on the inconsistent practices in their districts regarding curriculum writing practices in general. Without a consistent practice in place to write content area curriculum, the task of adding inclusivity becomes even more challenging. A classroom teacher, Michella, stated, "I've been here for 10 years, and I can't tell you what the process is" (CT-1, 27). There were different levels of awareness of the curriculum writing process based on the role of the participant in the school district.

Subtheme 1.1a: Awareness of the Process

While district leaders were able to articulate the curriculum writing processes their schools followed, they acknowledged that these practices have been and continue to be a work in progress in recent years. Elyse stated, "When I arrived, there wasn't any agreed-upon templates, value statements. The curriculum was like the Wild West, anybody did anything" (DL-1, 35–37).

Her colleague, Patricia, agreed, “That lack of process was really a lack of anything” (DL-2, 56–57). Inspired to identify a process, these leaders collaborated with other leaders in their district to construct not only a process but a culturally responsive process. The leaders in other districts related to their reflections. Eric stated:

> We’re taming the wild just a bit. We didn’t even have a scope and sequence for the department to have any agreed-upon basic skills, concepts that somebody would have in a particular grade level. As a teacher comes in, they [might say] “So what do we have here?” (DL-3, 89–93)

Eric’s implication highlighted a lack of curricular consistency within a content area. When a new teacher came onboard, they did not have definitive curricular guidelines to follow.

The district leaders recognized that their districts lacked a consistent process within their schools, and they have worked to improve process during their tenure. As leaders working to build a consistent process, they spoke to what they did. Jonathan reflected, “As curriculum directors, we lead each of our department’s curriculum work, and we identify specific department needs . . . the teachers are working with the curriculum directors to identify what those are” (DL-4, 71–75). Some educators at other levels, however, were not as aware, if aware at all, of the curriculum writing processes in their districts.

When asked to describe the curriculum writing process in their schools, the high school building leaders knew less than the district leaders, but they knew more than the classroom teachers. Jack stated, “For me, there’s really not a good process. We have teacher leaders that provide updates and, as necessary, will suggest curricular revisions, as needed, at the times they’re needed” (BL-3, 24–26). Helen acknowledged a pending change in the process with the

hiring of "a new person in (their) executive director of curriculum role," but the "(the) reality is, right now, we have some courses that don't have any curriculum at this point" (BL-2, 28-34).

Another building leader, Ronnie, recognized that her district offered tangible channels to go through for implementing inclusive curriculum:

> For example, I'm trying to get a[n] African American studies course included in the social studies department, and so I had to speak to the director. First, I talked to my principal about it. Then I talked to the director of humanities. I had researched different African American studies curriculum just so that I would have something to present to the director of humanities so that she can see what's out there already. And then she took it to the superintendent and his cabinet, and then they will make a decision on whether or not they want to move forward with the African American studies course. (BL-1, 51–59)

Earlier in the focus group, when asked about the curriculum writing process, Ronnie stated that she was too new to know what the process was, yet her experience having gone through these steps seemed to outline a process.

The classroom teacher focus group shared its desire for a definitive process. Michella stated,

> This is actually an area I think we need to develop. A lot of it is just teacher initiated, teacher led. So, if there's something that I want to write for my department or collaborate with on, we just kind of advocate on our own to district-level leadership. But I think it's ebbed and flowed over the years depending on who's leading that charge. (CT-1, 22–26)

Michella is the same teacher who had been in her district for 10 years and could not identify their curriculum writing process.

The inconsistent awareness and systems described by the participants who worked at various levels in the suburban school districts supported the Wild West notion of curriculum writing. Such inconsistencies in standard curriculum writing could create a larger barrier for modifying curriculum to be more inclusive. When structures are lacking to write curriculum, implementation practices also become inconsistent. This especially impedes implementing guidance from the CR-S education framework, specifically the principle on inclusive curriculum and instruction (NYSED, 2018).

Subtheme 1.1b: Inconsistent Implementation and Accountability

Along their path toward creating a consistent implementation process, the district leaders acknowledged the lack of accountability in previously undefined structures. Patricia stated:

> Reflecting back what we had now versus when I first wrote curriculum, I had no clue what I was doing, and it was more just, "Who wants to write curriculum?" "Okay," and you got chosen for no rhyme or reason. I had no training whatsoever. And I look back at my time doing that and I (think), "How in the world did I even do this or know what I was doing was acceptable?" (DL-2, 57–61)

At that time, teachers in her district "have to apply to write curriculum" (DL-2, 63–64). They were required to be "a little bit more explicit about . . . what (will be) produced at the end of the time (and) why the course needs curriculum writing . . . to justify their work" (DL-2, 67–69). The leaders in this district had a more detailed implementation and accountability process than the leaders in other districts.

A district leader from another school did not articulate the process that their educators went through to propose or apply for curriculum writing and implementation. Instead, he

described a training program required of staff after the proposal was accepted and before the curriculum writing began. Jonathan stated,

> We don't have a common curriculum document. We had a common pre-work (for) all of our teachers who did write curriculum. So, it was usually an hour to an hour and a half at the beginning of the first day of curriculum writing summer curriculum for us. And it anchored into what our big rocks were for the year. So, it was standards, alignment, it was the culturally responsive-sustaining framework . . . . That's something that we've tried to do, but it's still a bit wild, wild . . . it's more of a Wild West, and it used to be wild, wild. (DL-4, 76-88)

Another district leader from the same district, Eric, acknowledged the work of their district leadership to implement consistent practices. In part of their system creation, the leaders were also building in opportunities to include inclusive curriculum measures, as mentioned above by Jonathan referencing the CR-S education framework.

Eric first started in his position in 2015, and he reflected that, at that time, his department did not have scope and sequence. Building scope and sequence is something he had been a part of creating:

> We have a scope and sequence, at least by grade level, that we try to have in there, and then at least we can refer back to it as we're working through what our program goals are . . . . Our summer work has [been] rooted in the new language of the standards, just trying to make sure that we're more on a common footing for the vocabulary related to it; it's tough to know the process if you don't know what you're talking about. (DL-3, 97–107)

The foundation provided by the creation of a defined scope and sequence created an opportunity for his department to progress. Eric continued, "we've tried to spend our department meetings

during the year . . . [on] a focal point . . . knowing that we need to do some nuts and bolts types of things, too, but that we keep referring back to the goal" (DL-3, 110–112). In his case, the scope and sequence helped them to develop a goal, which provided accountability during curriculum-related conversations throughout the school year.

> Another district leader, Sarah, reflected on the beginning stages of their updated process: Just this year, we're looking to develop a curriculum review process and cycle. So, that really is the work right now. So, taking a look at the development stages, how we're using research, research-based practices, how we're folding in culturally responsive practices and expectations so that there's clarity, first, around what that means so that folks know how to employ that. (DL-5, 120–126)

Sarah's district recognized the opportunity to build inclusive curriculum measures as part of the review process. She was also reflective of this process as part of a strategic plan. Sarah continued, "The other piece, I think, that is really important is just focusing on how we're going to structure which curricular areas we want to focus on over the next 5 to 7 years" (DL-5, 126–128). Sarah's reflection acknowledged that having a "clearly defined process" provided "clarity for everyone" (DL-5, 129–130).

At the building level, the leaders recognized these practices were coming together. Helen stated, "I think we're also in a place where . . . we're on a path, but we're not at a level where it's systemic yet" (BL-2, 104–105). In these nascent stages, the practices are inconsistent. In response to a question about modifying their curriculum to be more inclusive, Jack responded:

> Similar[ly], we are looking to have a more formalized plan. Right now, if a teacher says, "this is something that I'm interested in," we refer them to other leaders, other trailblazers, other like-minded, which sounds horrible; we should all be like-minded in

> the work, but I think that there are some that are moving forward at a different pace than what others are, and we all know who those people are in our buildings. And, so, when we get those questions, we try to just create those partnerships. (BL-3, 127–132)

In Jack's case, the system for making the curriculum more inclusive was a bottom-up approach with the leaders responding to the teachers who were interested in doing the work. These leaders referred those teachers to other teachers who were also interested in implementing an inclusive curriculum, rather than the leaders guiding the teachers in the work. Another building leader expressed a similar process. Ronnie stated,

> I would just say professional development is available to teachers. They're more than welcome to come to administrators and discuss with us their ideas. And if they're looking for the green light, we would give them the green light because we're doing the work of the New York State Culturally Sustaining Framework. So, I don't think there is a formal process that they have to go through. (BL-1, 136–140)

In these cases, motivated teachers seek approval to implement inclusive curriculum measures from their leaders. There does not seem to be a consistent process for the educators to make such requests.

The classroom teacher focus group responses mirrored these reflections. Additionally, there seemed to be even less of a process for those who taught elective courses. Christina stated,

> There are days when they've offered curriculum writing to other departments, but I don't think mine gets that attention because I'm not a required course. Being an elective, it's kind of up to me to tell the lead teacher that we're going to change a couple of things. They ask me what my plan is with it, and if it fits the budget, they kind of go for it. (CT-2, 36–40)

These teachers felt supported by their district in their desire to write or modify curriculum to be more inclusive. Still, they expressed a desire for a consistent process with accountability measures.

When asked about the factors that might interrupt their curriculum implementation process, Michella, an ELA teacher, commented,

> I think part of what might interrupt it is there isn't really a system in place to support that. And if there is, it hasn't been communicated or there's no central place to go for, if I want to write curriculum—how to go about it . . . . With that said, though, any time I've ever wanted to write curriculum, it's always been very well received. So, if I initiate it, the administrators are always on board and they'll sit down and meet with me and kind of talk about how we can move it forward and align it. But I think the major stumbling block, in terms of getting the project going and then also that after once it's written, the accountability piece is lacking. (CT-1, 47–55)

In this reflection, the teacher was at the helm of curriculum implementation. Her perspective was that the curriculum development guidance from her leaders was minimal. It also left out a process for setting objectives and accountability measures to later review those objectives. Another teacher shared this perspective. Jacqueline added,

> I just agree with what she just said about accountability . . . we're doing a big curriculum writing initiative, but I teach two classes that don't have state testing or maybe as big of an emphasis on curriculum, and I actually have to design my own curriculum . . . . There is a little uncertainty sometimes about how to get started and then who's looking at it after we rewrite it. I think there's a little bit of an accountability issue there as well . . . .

> Our district's very eager to have people write curriculum and supportive and offer time to write curriculum. (CT-3, 57–65)

These perspectives established these suburban high schools as supportive of the teachers in their efforts to implement inclusive curriculum measures. The teachers recognized that their schools cared about increasing inclusive curriculum practices, but they "don't know how they're supporting it or checking it" (CT-3, 68-69) in other content areas, like social studies. Michella remarked about the definition of the word "inclusive":

> Definitely a buzz word right now . . . there's no accountability for that . . . people might be doing curriculum projects in isolation or they're integrating texts in their classroom or instructional strategies that are more inclusive, but there's no . . . check[s] and balance[s] on it. (CT-1, 81–85)

With significant loose ends in terms of a defined process and accountability measures, it is possible that the quality of the inclusive curriculum to be implemented will be lacking. This realization might have motivated districts to work with outside consultants to review their current curriculum practices.

Auditing Existing Curriculum

Some educators acknowledged that in the work of implementing an inclusive curriculum, they should first audit their existing curriculum. Sarah, a district leader, noted that their process included,

> Analyzing the current curriculum . . . making some . . . informed decisions based on data, and then progressions over time. Thinking about the researched best practices and standards review, having data review, and then that shared vision for development . . . bringing everybody in so that there is an opportunity to analyze where we've been but

> then, more importantly, where we find ourselves as a district needing to go. (DL-5, 142–150)

This is a process that takes time and careful planning. It should also be backed by current and relevant research. Sarah continued,

> I think for us having more inclusivity means research and access to resources, materials, and things we hadn't traditionally included as part of the traditional curriculum…For example, one of the things that we've done…is, we've been very intentional about release days with each of the departments so that …they're paying attention to where harmful language is, discriminatory language lives in our current curriculum (DL-5, 156–163).

The auditing process also required vulnerability on the part of the educators for the benefit of their students. Sarah added:,

> Inclusivity then opens us up to exposing our students and ourselves to researching and digging a bit more deeply in ways that we hadn't in the past, so that inclusivity is present. . . . . We're not just specifically looking at races and ethnicities, but we're really trying to fold in some of those other groups that have been traditionally left out of curriculum . . . . We have intentionally paid attention to the ways in which inclusivity wasn't present in the past and being thoughtful of how we're making sure to do it going forward. (DL-5, 166–174)

This work can be a large task for some districts, and it is an area where some districts looked to their intermediate education unit (IEU) for auditing support. Eric reflected that the IEU equity audit in his school helped them in terms of:

> Knowing where [they] are, what is [their] current state and looking at what [they] offer to students, not only in program, but within the program, the topics, the pieces, the people that are represented, and then also saying, "Who is in [their] class?" (DL-3, 176–180)

Beyond the IEU-led audit, Eric's school district continued to use other resources:

> [To] examine what we do already and then say, "Okay, where's an area for growth," once we identify who is represented or is not within it. We also dove into the data, just around statistics of student demographics and seeing who is represented, as well as overlaying free-and-reduced lunch into that, just about inclusion. Also, for having students just have access to your program. (DL-3, 187–192)

This detailed process helped these leaders to identify their unique population of students. Through a similar auditing process, another district was able to modify their elective choices to be more inclusive of their student population. Patricia noted that "coupled with the" school-based audit, "and the IEU department . . . one of the things [they] looked at" (DL-2, 272–276) was their electives offerings. She continued to explain that they "were educated on a data science course and the possibility" (DL-2, 277–279) of offering that course to more students in their district. Patricia was referring to a math course, unlike traditional math offerings, which created more pathways for students to engage in that content. In this way, the implementation of an inclusive math course countered a perceived antiquated math student thought process that "if you're not good at math . . . you're going to fail at life, because that's not reality" (DL-2, 286–287).

The building-level leaders also acknowledged some steps in a curriculum auditing process. Jack mentioned that "when looking at curriculum revisions, it's generally acknowledged that it needs to pass through an equity lens" (BL-3 64–65). He reflected that to do this properly, educators needed professional development. Helen's school also worked with an outside auditor

in support of their curriculum efforts, but they were at the beginning stages of this work. Unlike the processes described by the other educators, Ronnie's school used a "culturally responsive rubric to determine if curriculum are [*sic*] inclusive" (BL-1, 75–77).

The classroom teachers did not share a deep knowledge of curriculum auditing measures. Christina remembered,

> Superintendent days where each of our department heads spent time with us looking at ways we could make our curriculum more inclusive across the board with everybody just trying to make sure that we're all on the same page with things. We have hired [an] assistant superintendent. I think that's the title of inclusivity, that type of stuff. But again . . . I think I don't hear as much about it as my colleagues do. (CT-2, 75–80)

With the infrequency of conference days each school year, it would not be possible for educators to make effective changes in the curriculum.

The perception of Wild West practices and systems to support curriculum implementation, in general, does not portray strength in the suburban high school districts' efforts or abilities to strategically implement an inclusive curriculum.

Theme 1.2: Snippets of Professional Development

Another area of focus in the CR-S education framework is ongoing professional development. While the participants in this study acknowledged that they received ongoing professional development on implementing an inclusive curriculum, there was a consensus that more professional development is needed. The educators acknowledged that they were not yet experts in this practice.

Subtheme 1.2a: They Don't Know What They Don't Know

In their conversation, the district leaders acknowledged the challenges of implementing an inclusive curriculum with educators who were unaware of the implications stemming from traditional curriculum practices. In their engagement with auditing processes and other resources, these leaders developed a new awareness around inclusivity. Eric remarked,

> It brought a lot of learning for our staff members, as well, to other resources that are out there because they don't know what they don't know. And as I look across our department of mainly White, middle-aged adults, we were brought up in what we know, but it isn't who our students are any longer. (DL-3, 229–233)

Beyond accessing resources, the work of implanting an inclusive curriculum required the educators to acknowledge the need for self-reflection and personal development. Eric continued,

> We've had to challenge ourselves to look into what we teach and what other options are there, because it's not that the things we had selected were bad, so to speak, but maybe they're not as impactful in what we could do, and as engaging for students who might see a different option. (DL-3, 234–237)

Eric recognized that a motivation for implementing an inclusive curriculum is not an opportunity to rebuke the previous curriculum, but rather to increase engagement and impact for students. Using this realization, he led the curriculum work within his school's social studies department. Their curriculum work aligned with the questions, "Whose stories aren't being told?; Why?"; and "How are we showing agency?" (DL-3, 243, 244). Asking these questions was an attempt to spark awareness because, "A fish doesn't know that they're swimming in water, and, so, how are we going to bring that up and challenge [it]?" (DL-3, 251–252). One such challenge that Eric brought up in his district is that the languages they teach "were all languages of

domination and colonialism" (DL-3, 256). Another opportunity for awareness was that "gender is important in the construction of language" and teachers needed assistance in maintaining sensitivity "around our students who are non-binary" (DL-3, 263–264).

Another district leader acknowledged the difficulty in reflecting on these questions, adding that, "It all stems from educating" just like "teachers don't know what they don't know." We, as administrators, don't know what we don't know. So, we can't make effective change until we learn about it" (DL-2, 269–271).

Patricia reflected that educators need to be educated in "infusing" (DL-2, 288-290) inclusivity with state-required courses. The challenge that faces the educators is in determining "how can we take some of these concepts to give students agency and voice in the class and to be seen, and not just a body going through the traditional motion" (DL-2, 290–292). One way to approach these questions was "to know, personally, where we're seated in this as educators to then do better professionally for our students" (DL-5, 318–319).

The concept of they don't know what they don't know did not come up directly within the building leader or classroom teacher focus groups. To support his reflection that curriculum revisions "pass through an equity lens" (BL-3, 65), Jack added that he "would have to imagine that further professional development is needed and that there's not a universal understanding in what that is" (BL-3, 65–67). One way that Ronnie's school started this work was through "faculty meetings in which teachers are trained on identifying microaggressions and how they impact students and faculty" (BL-1, 84–85).

When asked about things that could improve the curriculum writing process to be more inclusive, a teacher, Jacqueline, responded that, "they're still expecting us to completely understand how to write almost a new curriculum where . . . some help . . . who have done it in

the past in your subject area and how they added certain things and what worked and what didn't work" (CT-3, 214–217). In that case, the provided training came from a fellow teacher who shared perspectives from trial and error. If the fellow educator held biases, it was possible that those were also shared in this mentoring process of curriculum writing.

One teacher acknowledged the need for awareness. In response to a question about engaging students from diverse social identities, Michella stated that, "Step is just having that awareness that we need to be reflective on that" (CT-1, 129). Still, the process of building that awareness takes time and immersion in supporting resources.

Subtheme 1.2b: Time to Truly Dig In

Because of the disproportionality between NYSED's educator demographics and the students they serve (NYSED, 2019), educators must engage themselves in the work of inclusion. The creators of the CR-S education framework included ongoing professional development as a measure to support educators in this work (NYSED, 2018). Sarah noted that "self-study for us as educators" is important to "stay immersed in what's happening to support the changing demographics of our students and the diversity in front of us every day" (DL-5, 307–309).

The building leaders reflected that after awareness, the next step is, "the actual instruction . . . the application stage . . . [is] where further professional development is needed" (BL-3, 95–100). To support this idea, Jack posed the question, "We're learning about race and racism. What does that mean for teaching? And what does that mean for our curriculum as we move forward?" (BL-3, 101-102).

In the teacher focus group, Michella shared a similar thought that, "Step 2 is actually making changes to the curriculum to then meet those students where they are. And I think the awareness piece is there; it's just making those changes . . . it can be slow moving" (CT-1, 129-

132). Michella continued to reflect on the need for time to implement change in saying, “We know this stuff; it’s just having the time to pick new and relevant texts that meet all those standards” (CT-1, 139–140). When reflecting on barriers in implementing an inclusive curriculum, Michella later continued:

> I know it’s such a cop out to say time, but I think it’s time, honestly. There isn’t time to write curriculum. There isn’t time to truly dig in to this whole culturally responsive, inclusive education. We have snippets of PD [professional development] on it, but it doesn’t feel like we’re completely immersed in it. And I think until we are completely immersed in it, it’s really challenging, then, to develop, write, and implement curriculum if it’s not ingrained in you. (CT-1, 206–211)

The timing of when curriculum writing happens has been woven throughout these reflections. Some educators referenced the summer curriculum writing days and others referenced release days. Doing this work during the summer might have left out key players because “maybe one or two people . . . could participate” (BL-3, 43–44), and some teachers “want no part of” (CT-3, 214) summer hours. With these acknowledgements in mind, it might benefit school districts to find another way to weave time for immersion in inclusive practices into the fabric of their district. Jacqueline reflected that an inclusive curriculum:

> Shouldn’t be a buzz word. It should be how we teach. So, maybe less professional development days and just more, like, “this is who we are as a school culture and this is what we expect our teachers to do.” (CT-3, 364–366)

One challenge in getting to that point might be the large spectrum of readiness for this type of work. One district leader reflected that he always wanted to “find more time in the year” for team collaboration, “even if it’s a few minutes here and there, it builds up over time” (DL-3,

410–412). Some educators reflected that they were still at a point where their early adopters were leading the way for the rest.

Subtheme 1.2c: Relying on Our Early Adopters

In the triangulation of these focus groups, the school building leaders were positioned between the school district leaders and the classroom teachers. Often, school building leaders are the link between these two roles in education. The school building leaders recognized that the work of implementing inclusive curriculum practices was led by the early adopters in their buildings. Jack stated, "I think there's a lot of good things happening. There's conversations. There's some PD. But I think we're more in a phase where we're relying on our early adopters, and we're not systemic across the board yet" (BL-3, 105–108). While conversations and professional development are important, there seems to be a gap between engaging in those outlets and instructional implementation. Helen echoed the reliance on early adopters, "We're starting with our work with [an outside consultant] who's going to be available as a resource and then relying either on early adopters or other administrators within the district in terms of support" (BL-2, 121–123).

The participants in the teacher focus group might have been perceived as early adopters within their schools. When asked about their level of comfort in implementing an inclusive curriculum, overall, the teachers expressed some level of comfort. Jacqueline stated, "I feel pretty comfortable because of the content that I teach. I think that it's really important for a health teacher to . . . understand inclusivity" (CT-3, 226-227). She acknowledged the nature of her content as providing a means of comfort, which also seemed to be true of another participant. As a culinary teacher, Christina reflected, "My curriculum lends itself to being flexible. I look forward to change. I get tired of the same thing . . . I am pretty comfortable with anything that

would . . . get [students] invested" (CT-2, 243–247). The English teacher in the group also expressed comfort in engaging with an inclusive curriculum. The fact that they participated in the focus group also spoke to their comfort in engaging in this topic. Still, even though they expressed a drive for implanting an inclusive curriculum in their suburban high schools, all participants acknowledged the need for more professional development and collaboration.

Subtheme 1.2d: It Starts with Us

The educators in each role recognized the value of professional development and ongoing support through professional collaboration. This aligns with the CR-S education framework principle of engaging educators in ongoing professional development (NYSED, 2018). In communicating and sharing ideas, educators can learn about inclusive curriculum practices in a safe setting before implementing them in the classroom. One district leader acknowledged the benefit of their group of directors establishing "common learning across the district," which had "made a difference in the last couple of years" (DL-3, 115–117). Eric acknowledged the work also being done at the building level with classroom teachers:

> The lead teacher team . . . [has] been doing with their PLCs, a variety of work . . . at each one of their four buildings, it means something a little different to them because of who the teachers are and what classes are represented and the students that sit in them. So, it's nice to hear each month when we get together, "All right, here's what we tried." "Oh. Okay, we're gonna try that," or "Hadn't thought of it that way," and then the conversation keeps going. (DL-3, 199–205)

This manner of having collaborative building-level PLCs within one district invites the opportunity for tailored professional support and idea sharing based on the unique student population in each building. Eric facilitated this opportunity for idea sharing among his teachers.

While he was the facilitator, the teachers led the conversation. It was also an appropriate way to support ongoing professional development in alignment with the fourth principle of the CR-S education framework (NYSED, 2018).

Stemming from their work in the IEU-led equity audit, mentioned by other participants, Elyse's district adapted an instrument she referred to as a "curriculum scorecard" (DL-1, 206–209). After their music department presented their findings to the District Diversity and Equity team, she "created a parallel PD" (DL-1, 209–211). Other departments collaborated on the tool and then turned in their findings to the district to receive professional development credit (DL-1, 211–214). Elyse reflected that her school district's

> High school English and social studies department really took advantage of that and [district leaders] received very thoughtful reflections from teams of teachers who teach the same course . . . saying, "Oh, we did it. Here's our findings, here's our gaps, and here's our next steps in curriculum writing." (DL-1, 215–219)

Elyse expanded that the work "went beyond representation" (DL-1, 223). She stated that some of the work was about "how are people portrayed and are we seeing respectful discussions and joyful lives" (DL-1, 225–226) in the people represented in various content areas. This method of professional collaboration both motivated teams of teachers and provided an opportunity for them to experience immersive evaluation of their content through an inclusive lens. Such efforts are the essence of designing inclusive curriculum and assessment, as suggested by the CR-S education framework (NYSED, 2018). Engaging students in such a curriculum also encourages high expectations and rigorous instruction (NYSED, 2018).

One district leader acknowledged the benefit of engaging students and families as part of this collaborative professional learning experience. Sarah asked,

> How are we inviting students to the table to help to plan and design what it is that they're going to ultimately be responsible for knowing and learning? I think that [the] partnership that we have with students, and ultimately, with families, is also going to change the way in which our students are learning. But it . . . starts with us. (DL-5, 313–317)

The other educators reflected on the benefit of engaging students in developing an inclusive curriculum. Sarah's reflection adds that this practice not only helps to inspire representation but also a sense of accountability and ownership of the students' education. These efforts inspire a welcoming and affirming environment (NYSED, 2018).

At the building level, Jack noted that there were "different skill levels when it comes to assessing curricular materials for bias and adequate representation across the board" (BL-3, 67–69). One of the classroom teachers, Michella, said that to aid in that application process, having a team of teachers "collaborating together" is important "so that all the kids have a similar experience regardless of (the) teacher" (CT-1, 140–141). When teachers are not working together, they are "not sure what other disciplines have done" (CT-2, 145), which robs them of that collaborative opportunity to learn what inclusive measures have been successful or not. This also impedes efforts to engage students in high expectations and rigorous instruction, as outlined by the CR-S education framework (NYSED, 2018).

Another teacher expressed interest in collaborating with other districts. Jacqueline commented that her curriculum "could be a lot better . . . with support from other districts or other people who teach similar curriculum . . . might make [them] feel a little bit more . . . comfortable" (CT-3, 231–234). Ultimately, Michella expressed, "teachers need time and support to move the work forward" (CT-1, 370).

Reflective of the educators at all levels, the reflections in the "it starts with us" section portrayed how educators might apply the four principles of NYSED's CR-S education framework (NYSED, 2018). The next section of Chapter 4 presents two themes that emerged from the analysis of the collected data to answer Research Question 2.

Research Question 2

What are the barriers and opportunities for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?

Two themes resulted from the data analysis of Research Question 2. The first theme was the kids are ready. The three subthemes were students want representation, just let them talk it out, and new ideas for adults. The second theme that emerged was mindsets are hard to overcome. The three subthemes were shift in diversity, spectrum of readiness, and discomfort is where we grow. Table 4.2 presents the themes, subthemes, and the branch of the CR-S education framework for Research Question 2.

Table 4.2

Research Question 2 – Themes, Subthemes, and Framework

Theme	Subtheme	Framework
2.1 The kids are ready	2.1.a Students want representation 2.1.b Just let them talk it out 2.1.c New ideas for adults	Welcoming and affirming environment; high expectations and rigorous instruction
2.2 Mindsets are hard to overcome	2.2.a Shift in diversity 2.2.b Spectrum of readiness 2.2.c Discomfort is where we grow	Inclusive curriculum and assessment; ongoing professional development

Theme 2.1: The Kids Are Ready

The participants in each focus group shared the same sentiment that suburban high school students are ready to engage in an inclusive curriculum. In response to the protocol question, "What is your perception of students' level of comfort in engaging in an inclusive curriculum?" several participants responded with enthusiasm, acknowledging that their students were ready for the material. One district leader did not attempt to hide emotion when she expressed, "The kids are so far beyond the adults, it's ridiculous" (DL-1, 502). As she continued, she addressed some of the barriers educators face when attempting to implement an inclusive curriculum but acknowledged that the problems stemmed from the adults. Elyse reflected:

> All of our worry and hesitation is silly . . . . The young adults are having this conversation all over the place and all the time. They are way more evolved than their teachers in a lot of this conversation. I just think it's really the grownups that are the barrier. (DL-1, 502–507)

The consensus from the educators was that students were ready and eager to engage in a curriculum where they would see their own diverse experiences connected to the content.

Subtheme 2.1a: Students Want Representation

The educators spoke about their perceptions that students want to see their characteristics and histories represented in their academic curriculum. One benefit of students with diverse social identities being represented in their content is that all students are exposed to diverse perspectives, identities, and backgrounds. It was up to the educators to provide that inclusive experience. Ronnie, a building leader, perceived:

> Students . . . want to be open and accepting of diversity . . . to embrace that, but we have to cultivate the space for them to do that and let them know it's okay. What we're

> teaching in school, a lot of times, it's not being reinforced at home . . . [in] exposing them to diversity, inclusivity, then that's how we expect them to move forward in life, embracing those values. [They] . . . want that inclusivity. They want to learn about different things, diverse people. (BL 1, 186-193)

Jack agreed with Ronnie about students wanting "to see themselves represented in the curriculum," but he added that, "there's a greater opportunity . . . in the resources at our teachers' disposals. And if those resources exist, then the gap is in knowing how to access and get those resources" (DL-3, 194–197). In this sense, even though the students are ready to be engaged in an inclusive curriculum, this leader perceived that one barrier to implementation was educator access to inclusive resources. To be truly inclusive, the building leaders specified that diversity includes, "a disability lens," and "our LGBTQ+ population, and how and when and where they see themselves" (BL-2, 157; BL-3, 201–202).

Like the building leaders, the district leaders perceived that the students were more adaptable to inclusive practices than the adults around them. Sarah agreed with her colleague's earlier comments, adding,

> I agree completely with Elyse that our students are ready. I think culturally, socially, where they are, the access that they have to information really puts them in a place to be primed for this type of learning and experience and exposure. I think that they are like sponges. (DL-5, 531–534)

Sarah recognized that students were already accessing inclusive information outside of their academic responsibilities. She saw an opportunity for educators to channel these interests by modifying academic content and increasing student engagement. Sarah later continued that "if

we are ready and prepared to teach them differently, they will embrace it. And they have, [I have] seen it" (DL-5, 540–542).

The classroom teachers did not mention representation, but they agreed that students were ready to engage in an inclusive curriculum. Their responses gave the perception that it was not a question they had previously considered. Relating to their perspective of student readiness to engage in an inclusive curriculum, one teacher directly stated, "I never really thought about [it], but I do think that high school students in particular are . . . more willing to talk about things and ask questions than . . . adults" (CT-3, 264–266). The teachers based their responses on the conversations that they had overheard students having in their presence. Participants at each of the three levels of suburban educators agreed that students want to engage in a curriculum with roots as unique as their own.

Subtheme 2.1b: Just Let Them Talk It Out

Another concept that emerged from the theme of the kids are ready was the subtheme, just let them talk it out. This reflection comes from the educators who had witnessed students engaging in inclusive side conversations throughout their school day.

When asked how they engaged students in critical thinking within content related to social justice, the classroom teachers noticed that the concept of social justice is a topic that has come up frequently in the past few years. Jacqueline reflected,

> It's been kind of a hot topic for a lot of kids. I just let them talk it out. I have them sometimes find some research that can back up things that they're passionate about, but believe it or not, a lot of kids in high school really do a nice job expressing themselves about some of the social injustices that we see in our country and how it relates to my

> curriculum . . . [it's] more like a conversational piece when it comes up. It's not something that we plan to talk about, but sometimes it happens. (CT-3, 159–166)

While Jacqueline did not attempt to teach social justice-related topics, she provided a safe space for her students to have meaningful discussions. The same was true for Michella:

> It's much more organic and, so, when it does come up, giving the kids the time and the space to really just talk about it amongst themselves and just be more of a fly on the wall to facilitate that conversation if necessary. But [I] wouldn't say that it's explicitly taught. (CT 1, 168-171)

Like Jacqueline, Michella recognized the need for students to have these discussions, so she allowed them to unfold. She assumed her role in the background, allowing her students to lead the conversation in a manner that was comfortable for them. Christina noticed the same phenomenon among her students:

> When they're cooking, they have conversations that you would not believe. There's a comfort level when they're working with food together and . . . I just randomly make the groups so that they're not with people they know [and are different from] . . . I have the unique opportunity where I can just get them comfortable when they're cooking and eating, so that when something happens, that's what they talk about. I'm more like facilitating and trying to listen and steer in a direction if things get heated. But . . . it's just a natural thing that happens because they're comfortable at that level. (CT-2, 172–184)

It did not seem to be the case that the educators were directed to facilitate or monitor such conversations among their students. Like the students, these classroom teachers naturally assumed their role in the spontaneous inclusive conversations. One participant noted that her

students of diverse backgrounds were more comfortable participating in inclusive conversations than some of their White peers. Christina stated,

> I would say my students of different culture[s] are a little more . . . receptive. My students who are born White American are a little . . . I wouldn't say resistant. I think they're not sure if they're comfortable or not because they don't want to offend somebody. Sometimes they're afraid to ask questions . . . because they're worried about hurting someone's feelings [and] they're afraid their interests can come across as being nosy or being rude. (CT-2, 250–257)

Christina did not feel that this perceived student hesitation was an indication that educators should avoid inclusivity. Rather, she interpreted her students' caution as a desire to learn more. She continued,

> I think my students would love it. They just aren't sure how to do it . . . in a setting where we have kids who are learning English or come from a different home life than they have. I guarantee their [receptiveness is] based on the conversations that I've heard them have about issues in the news or things that have happened at school . . . . I'm just not sure if they quite know how to do it. (CT-2, 258–262)

Through these organic conversations, the students were showing their teachers what inclusive classroom discussions might look and sound like.

Similarly, Jacqueline related her answer to this question based on social conversations among students who she had witnessed in her physical education and health classrooms. She considered:

> We probably give them less credit than they . . . deserve . . . a lot of kids do the right thing by asking questions in a mature and a respectful way. And when others feel like

> they're not, and they get called out, they're usually like, "Oh, okay, why was that maybe racist?" Or "Why? Was that sexist" or "what was culturally inappropriate about that?" I do think we could give them a little bit more credit. (CT-3, 266–272)

These skills impressed Jacqueline when she reflected on her perceptions of how adults navigate similar conversations. She stated:

> We struggle with trying not to offend anybody and maybe we overly think that out and that it . . . could be . . . offensive by not even asking the question to get to know people a little bit better, where I think kids, they just ask it. (CT-3, 275–277)

Jacqueline's takeaway echoed earlier sentiments that adult hesitancy is a larger barrier than student readiness. Michella agreed with her classroom teacher colleagues' observations. She noted their ease with inclusivity when she said,

> I definitely think they're more comfortable talking about it, but I don't think they understand it . . . . Part of that is just the culture and society around us. There's a disconnect between how they interact and treat one another, how they interact on social platforms . . . the . . . music they're listening to, where some things are more acceptable in that world and not so much in the classroom and in the curriculum. I think they're aware of it, and they're comfortable talking about it, but it's not necessarily . . . the right way, but . . . it's important for us, as educators, to be well versed in that so we can steer them in a good direction. (CT-1, 281–289)

Michella's point was that students were already consuming inclusive content in many aspects of their lives. By addressing it in the safety of a classroom setting, she felt that the educators were in the position to positively support their exploration.

The conversation in the building leader focus group mirrored the classroom teachers' responses. Ronnie echoed Michella when she reflected that in 2023, "students aren't learning the same way we did back in the 1990s . . . they've been exposed to so much more" (BL-1, 183–185). Jack agreed and added that "our community, whether it's our micro communities, New York State, or our nation, are ready to continue the conversations in that regard" (BL-3, 202–204). Helen added:

> I agree with both. I think our students are ready. I think we see the huge interest area, especially thinking about our multi-language learners and knowing that all students are ready for this. I think the barrier, at pockets of time, can come more from community and family members. (BL-2, 205–208)

The educators agreed that the discomfort of some outside of the public education system can impact practices within the system. Helen later added, "We need to be able to provide the right kind of materials, instruction, curriculum to be able to provide (students) with experiences to let them be fully functioning members in our society as we move forward" (BL-2, 274–277).

Like the reflections shared earlier among the classroom teacher participants, this building leader recognized that the students are already engaged in inclusivity. The next logical step, according to Helen, is to equip educators with the resources to support student interests with the curriculum. Even the participants in the district leader focus group had witnessed these natural conversations among students. Eric acknowledged that he:

> See[s] what they're drawing or what they're researching on their devices, or just the open table conversation that's not even about the [content], they're so free with their opinions . . . and [when] an adult . . . float[s] in . . . they just keep right on going . . . they're open to

chat about it and there's power in that if it can be harnessed in the freedom of opinion. (DL-3, 508–515)

The educators at each level recognized the desire of the students to engage in inclusive conversations with their peers. Interestingly, their common practice was to let the students talk it out. These unspoken practices created a welcoming and affirming atmosphere and allowed students to engage in rigorous instruction, even if it was not related to the instructional content (NYSED, 2018).

Subtheme 2.1c: New Ideas for Adults

The third subtheme that arose from Theme 2 was the concept of new ideas for adults. Through their own life experiences and interactions with inclusive content, the students were indirectly introducing the adults around them to new ideas for curriculum.

One classroom teacher briefly touched on the drive to include student voice in curriculum planning. Michella acknowledged that when writing curriculum, she tried, "to think of it from their perspectives, their lens, from different cultures, different backgrounds, different races, different identities" (CT-1, 124–125). When she was about to engage in a reading with them, for example, she tried to consider, "what background they are bringing to the table and how . . . they are able to connect with it in some way" (CT-1, 126–128). Another teacher, who taught culinary arts, added that, "oftentimes I'll have a student who is so excited because they make something at home, so . . . they're able to help me and they get very excited . . . . There are always things I can learn" (CT-2, 240–243). The concept of bringing student perspectives to curriculum planning helps to create a welcoming and affirming environment, but the increased perspectives also increase the rigor of the instruction (NYSED, 2018).

When asked what could be done to improve the curriculum writing process, one building leader responded that "including student voice," (BL-3, 147) would be an important step. He acknowledged that this was not something that was currently practiced, and he suspected that doing so would create an "opportunity to [go] beyond the standards" (BL-3, 151–153). This concept of using student voice to go beyond the standards would not only help to increase student ownership and engagement, but it also might add enrichment opportunities within an otherwise traditional curriculum. This would most likely increase academic rigor, resulting in high expectations and rigorous instruction (NYSED, 2018).

The district-level leaders reflected that student voice had a direct impact on content elective offerings based on what the students sign up for. One leader commented that, "Our students are choosing to take a class, or not take a class, and we're talking about staffing . . . and they get to vote . . . on what they see in our program . . . whether they choose to take [a class] or not" (DL-3, 516–519). He continued that in this manner, it could be hurtful to the educators who had designed an elective, but it could also be an opportunity for those educators to be "willing to change and ebb and flow with what we have in front of us" (DL-3, 524–525).

Still, the leaders recognized that this type of change might require educators to step outside of their comfort zones. Sarah added:

> If we want our students to be critical thinkers and really have a place in conversations that position them to be thinking about differences . . . in ways they may not have in the past, it opens them up even that much further. I think our students are ready. (DL-5, 536–540).

Creating critical thinking opportunities aligned with open conversations is a practice that the adults in education could learn how to do by observing their students. These educators had

shown that inclusive conversations were already taking place in suburban high school classrooms when students are at the helm. The kids are ready, and the adults can learn from them.

Theme 2.2: Mindsets are Hard to Overcome

A key concept that came up repeatedly in the three focus groups related to awareness. The participants at each educator level in the suburban high schools reflected on the need to be aware of how ready all stakeholders were for inclusive curriculum in their schools. One classroom teacher admitted that "there's kind of this negative stigma attached to the inclusivity piece of it. And I think they're just afraid of the unknown" (CT-3, 321–322). While maintaining the balance of teaching standards, engaging students, and gently navigating perceived stigma relating to curriculum, the suburban educators are facing unprecedented challenges.

Subtheme 2.2a: Shift in Diversity

The concept of shifting suburban demographics emerged as a subtheme of mindsets are hard to overcome. The teachers and district leaders noted that as their suburban demographics changed, there were new opportunities and barriers in implementing an inclusive curriculum in their suburban high schools. Even with these shifts, populations of historically marginalized groups remain in the minority within the participants' districts. The educators recognized that as their community demographics change, their educator demographics should also shift. One teacher noted,

> I can tell you, at our district, we have very few people who are culturally different. Very few . . . a number of [our predominately White] faculty members graduated from the district. We have asked to hire a more diverse staff. I know they have that [advertised] on our website. We advertise in the city to try and get people to come out to our suburban district, but I think having a culturally diverse staff would be tremendously helpful in

> getting some awareness . . . and helping with curriculum writing . . . I think our barrier is we're pretty cookie cutter in the district. (CT-2, 188–196)

From this perspective, the educators who taught in the districts they graduated from had a presumed limited awareness when it came to implementing an inclusive curriculum. That created a barrier when it came to engaging students who did not share social identities with the majority population in their school community. Another teacher added:

> Our student population is very diverse. We're a suburban school, but we are urban-suburban enrollment. We have a lot of students, recently, in the last couple years coming straight from Ukraine and Russia and speak very little English. So, English as a second language has really kind of skyrocketed in our district and our teacher population is primarily White [and English speaking], so I do think that does hold a barrier even if you . . . don't want to admit that there might be some bias there. There probably is. So, I do think that there is that barrier that maybe if we had more of a diverse teaching staff or admin staff or overall staff, it might be easier to be able to make sure that we're teaching to all the kids. (CT-3, 197–205)

The teachers agreed that to help engage their growing number of students with diverse backgrounds, they would benefit from fellow educators who also had diverse backgrounds.

One of the teachers who was a graduate of the school, in which she currently taught, reflected that her "district is very diverse, but [I] went to the same school district a long time ago and when [I] was there, it was not diverse" (CT-3, 298–299). She recognized the need for awareness as one response to the shifting diversity because, as she stated,

> There [are] people who were maybe born and raised here, and they don't see that the kids coming in from different countries or different cities experience quite different lifestyles.

> And I think that's where you might see a little bit of a barrier. And then that's again where [the White students] might ask questions that they aren't just expecting an answer for . . . getting them to think globally is sometimes hard for kids that are 14, 15, 16 years old. (CT-3, 300–305)

In this case, when the educators looked for opportunities to engage their students of diverse backgrounds, they were providing an exemplar for others in their classroom to follow.

Beyond modeling inclusive practices, the teacher participants noted the importance of creating an atmosphere of belonging for their students of all backgrounds. One teacher noted,

> I think my kids who are not your typical student or who are coming from the urban-suburban program or other countries absolutely need to feel connected. They need their voices heard, so I think it [implementing an inclusive curriculum] is hugely important . . . . And I know for sure it would really help some of the kids who might not necessarily feel connected to the school, to feel connected, to feel heard, and to have people understand their history. (CT-2, 351–358)

In her reflection of students' needs, this teacher touched on the NYSED's CR-S education framework's first branch, a welcoming and affirming environment. Within this environment, students are primed for learning.

The school building leaders did not speak about the shifting diversity ratios in their schools, but one building leader acknowledged that the work of implementing an inclusive curriculum is,

> Definitely not easy, and mindsets are hard to overcome. You really have to get that staff buy-in in order to move forward with it. And it's all about building the relationships, but making sure that faculty, they understand the why, and they understand the how, but

everything that you do to move towards it, it has to be purposeful. You don't want this repetitive work that is really not impacting anyone. (BL-1, 247–252)

This work could be challenging in areas where diversity is lacking. Those who value the work of increasing inclusivity understood the importance of relationships to get the work started.

In the district leader focus group, one participant found value in the openness within her school community. She stated, "I don't know if it's because we are such a diverse district that people are more open-minded to wanting to educate and allow our students to learn this way versus such traditional practices" (DL-2, 577–579). In her case, the increased diversity provided openness within the school community to implement an inclusive curriculum.

Subtheme 2.2b: Spectrum of Readiness

This subtheme emerged as a subset of mindsets are hard to overcome. Those who chose to participate in this study expressed their comfort in their own practices pertaining to implementing an inclusive curriculum. While their practices varied, and some of them lacked an understanding of their district procedures, each participant had their own approach to engaging students of diverse backgrounds.

In the district leader conversation, one participant commented that there was a "continuum of comfort" in implementing inclusive curriculum practices (CT-5, 469). The teachers who were most comfortable with such practices "have been doing the work for years" (CT-5, 471) through their own research, learning, and growing. They do this work because they believe in it and know that it is "integral to the success" (DL-5, 481) of all students. Still, educators on this side of the spectrum of readiness need support from their leaders. It is important for leaders to consider that, like the way we instruct our students, ongoing professional development should be designed to meet educators where they are. One district leader added,

"that's where leadership comes in, . . . ensuring that their teachers are at their leading edge . . . you don't want to have teachers who are immersed in this sitting through a, 'let's define what cultural responsive education is' training" (DL-4, 486–489). Not engaging these educators in fitting professional learning could be insulting and disengaging. They must be engaged in ongoing professional development that will help to advance this work, and to avoiding plateaus (NYSED, 2018).

Simultaneously, there were "some folks on the other end . . . at that entry, and you've really [need] to support . . . to pour into them to give them the resources. They're not out there seeking them on their own" (DL-5, 472-475). Somewhere in the middle of the presumed inclusive curriculum experts and the novices, there are educators who see the importance of this work and might even be testing the waters. The district leaders recognized that those educators "still need . . . the resources [and] the pedagogical tools to really set them up for success" (DL-5, 483–484). Awareness of this spectrum provides insight for leaders on the varieties of scaffolding that should go into ongoing professional learning and support (NYSED, 2018). One leader also added that,

> The inclusive curriculum has to come after some personal evolution and some personal development has occurred. And you can invite all day long, people to step on that train. So, I feel, even in a district . . . where we do have a great buy-in, but we have this gulf opening between the movers and the growers and the developing folks and the people who are waiting it out. (DL-1, 659–664)

This creates difficulties for leaders because they see the importance of and the need for this work, but they do not want to rush it and risk having an unsuccessful implementation of inclusive curriculum.

In a follow up to her reflection about feeling comfortable teaching an inclusive health curriculum, Jacqueline added,

> I would feel maybe more comfortable if there was a little bit more outside help. I really developed my entire high school curriculum and then my two co-teachers did the middle-level curriculum, and we wrote the whole thing with very little support (CT-3, 228–230)

Although she was comfortable with the instruction, without specific training or support in writing an inclusive curriculum, this teacher would have appreciated a tangible support system. Jacqueline continued, "We think it's great, but maybe it's not, or maybe it could be a lot better. So even . . . support from other districts or people who teach similar curriculum I think would make us feel a little bit . . . more . . . comfortable" (CT-3, 230–234). As the only teacher of this content in her building, Jacqueline was siloed within her curriculum area. She might have had the ability to collaborate with her building colleagues when it came to classroom practices, but that was not helping her to grow her inclusive instructional skills.

One of the building leaders mentioned the idea of providing teachers with an exemplar to follow for inclusive curriculum implementation practices. Jack reflected:

> I'm somebody, and I know that there are others like me, that want to see an exemplar . . . I would love to see how a school district took a curriculum and passed it through an equity and inclusivity lens and almost see the strike-throughs and the additions and know their process and how they went through it and what worked for them and what didn't work for them, and then see their final product. That would be incredibly valuable seeing it start to finish. (BL-3, 254–262)

In his reflection, Jack added that this exemplar would serve as a guide, rather than a copy-and-paste type of document. He noted that it would be important for schools to follow the exemplar

in a way that represents the unique diversity within their respective districts. One benefit of following an exemplar would be that, “we don’t make the same mistakes, unless the mistakes were valuable in the learning process” (BL-3, 262–263).

In the teacher focus group, Jacqueline echoed that having an exemplar might be helpful. She expressed:

> They’re still expecting us to completely understand how to write almost a new curriculum where maybe, again, some help from people who have done it in the past in your subject area and how they added certain things and what worked and what didn’t work might make people feel like they have the time and it wouldn’t be wasted time. (CT-3, 214–219)

Gaining access to an exemplar might require collaboration with other school districts. In the district leader conversation, Eric added what this might require:

> Keeping it real with other school districts . . . then you go back to your own corner, and you try to do work with your people, but remembering that it’s not just you, it’s others . . . [in] just keeping that going . . . we lift each other. (DL-3, 670–675)

The idea of working with others and lifting one another mirrors the type of support Jacqueline was looking for in her reflections during the teacher focus group. Jack, a building leader, added that this process might include, “Starting with the end in mind and having what that idea and that concept of that finished product can build towards efficiency, and I think that there are goals that can be generated from it as well” (BL-3, 265–267).

The state-created CR-S education framework provides a lens for districts to use in developing their version of inclusivity. Like the educators, suburban high schools fall within a

spectrum of readiness in implementing the four principles of this framework. One district leader noted:

> The framework is great. It's also late for us. We had already created one for our use, so I was a little irritated, and actually have resisted putting the New York State framework in front because we had already made such a statement that this is how we define culturally responsive curriculum here. But we're starting to integrate them and make connections between them, obviously. (DL-1, 380–383)

This leader worked in a district that was more cultural diversity than those of the other participants in this study. One might assume that their comparatively early adoption of a culturally responsive curriculum was, in part, a response to a shift in their demographics.

Even though the CR-S education framework came after her district's initial shift to inclusivity, Elyse did "appreciate that [the state] came out publicly and said, 'This is the thing you guys need to be working on.' Obviously, that always gives . . . some more leverage" (DL-1, 384-387). One district leader, whose school was on the other end of the spectrum of readiness, stated that the CR-S education framework:

> Provided almost a third point for conversation, that this isn't just the next thing that an administrator went to a conference or read an article about, that it comes from State Ed derived [research] . . . they know a heck of a lot more than me . . . this is from the whole state. (DL-4, 327–332)

There is merit to the framework as a state-provided resource. The leaders viewed the CR-S education framework as a valuable tool. They also appreciated the direction of the framework when it came to high expectations and rigorous instruction. Jonathan considered it:

> A great tool to leverage conversation, particularly as it relates to high expectations. . . . Obviously, we want to have representation, but if we don't expect that a kid can pull those words off the page, and we just assume, because a student fits a certain demographic, that they're not going to be able to do it . . . we have to really challenge those notions and push. (DL-4, 333–338)

Another district leader concluded that districts, at their varying degrees of readiness, could use the CR-S education framework "as a way to support [them] in understanding how that could impact curriculum in any area in which [they] teach" (DL-5, 374–375). Applying the principles of the framework in this manner might "foster more of an inclusive experience for . . . students long term" (DL-5, 375–376). In this way, there would be an opportunity in using the CR-S education framework as a long-term guide to support inclusive curriculum implementation and sustainability.

The district leaders' conversation also covered the idea that to create a richer experience for everyone in this work, there must be components of vulnerability, risk taking, trust in those around you, team building, and explicit acknowledgement. Eric noted:

> I think the conversation just gives us the "what does it look like," and, so, if we can define what we're already doing, again, . . . next thing that somebody saw, it's just good teaching and it's good interaction. And in an ensemble setting where you are going to take a risk and put yourself out there, you have to trust those people that are sitting around you. (DL-3, 389–394)

To embark on this curriculum means to change, or modify, previous practices. That requires vulnerability and trust. Eric continued:

> Teachers already do team building types of activities and different welcoming and affirming engagement pieces throughout their year. So, it's just calling what it is, making it more explicit, and highlighting that, "Hey, you already do this." So, if we just added fill in the blank to it, then it could be even richer of an experience for everybody in the room. (DL-3, 395–399)

To create a richer experience for everyone in this work, there must be components of vulnerability, risk taking, trust, team building, and explicit acknowledgement. Eric added:

> I don't see it any different, really, than the observation process if it's, from a coaching standpoint; you're trying to highlight what teachers do well in their instructional practices, and give them an alternative view to think about along the way. And it can be in the "culture is staying" as well, and just trying to shift it over to more student-centered activities and options and choices for them. (DL-3, 400–404)

Like the traditional observation process, teachers need guidance at their level of ability to increase inclusivity practices. To be successful in this, there might need to be a shift in culture and practices. This can be a process to highlight what teachers are already doing as well. A next step might be to help them make a student-centered shift. Eric added:

> Our art teachers talk all the time that they never want 25 of the same thing at the end of the project. They want to see 25 different versions that are all inspired, maybe, by a root concept or material, but then, the student gets to put themselves in it. So, do we offer that opportunity for our students [in all content areas]? And that comes by planfully going about that, as the educator, ahead of time. And we have to do that as a team, which I always want to find more time in the year to try to do that. (DL-3, 405–411)

Projects, in this setting, are as different as the students creating them. To mimic this type of inclusion in other content areas takes purposeful planning from the educator. Teachers need time and collaboration to do so. Small amounts of planning time accumulate throughout the year. Eric continued:

> Even if it's a few minutes here and there, it builds up over time, to continue doing the pat on the back for something that they're already doing. Maybe we're going to call it a little something different to have the common vocabulary across all departments. That could be the power of it, too, because you have pockets that are doing something really well . . . but we're not all using the same framework. Then, students don't have to be a shapeshifter throughout their day and figure out the way to do something in a different place. (DL-3, 412–419)

Using one consistent framework and commonality in language strengthens inclusivity and provides consistency for students.

Eric, a district leader, saw the potential in current educators where those who fell on some ends of the spectrum of readiness would make shifts that would result in meaningful change. Another district leader disagreed with one of Eric's statements. Elyse responded:

> I agree with you, Eric, that I think in courses where self-expression has been the center, like the arts or music, that it's closer to reality on a day-to-day basis. But I reject the statement that the culturally responsive curriculum framework is just good teaching, because if it was, we'd have just good teaching happening all over the place, and we don't. So, we wouldn't have kids having to say, "Here's how your language is harming me." (DL-1, 420–425)

This reflection relates to an earlier statement about teachers having a continuum of readiness to embark on this work. Some teachers practice inclusivity consistently and meaningfully. Others do not. Elyse continued:

> I think we're pretty far from really actualizing what that framework's calling for. I think you live in a world where it's closer, because I think what you focus your time on is so much about who are these kids and what do they have to say? But most high school science teachers don't give a flying flip about that right now. So, we got a ways to go. (DL-1, 426–431)

Elyse was referring to Eric's reflections regarding how this work related to his content area of specialty, the fine arts. His reflections expressed that diversity, equity, and inclusion tend to be regularly applicable in the fine arts. That might be because in the fine arts, students are more frequently given a blank canvas, rather than being guided through predetermined practices. Relating to the spectrum of readiness, Elyse added, "I'm only bringing this up because I've been trying to get people not to say that, because it's more than good teaching, or at least, just good teaching as most teachers conceptualize it" (DL-1, 432–434). Elyse also made the point that the work of implementing an inclusive curriculum can be minimalized by the term "just good teaching." Eric understood her point:

> That's fair, yep. And I see Elyse's point in there about being creative or recreative. It is composition and just, "Here's a blank canvas. Go." We don't do a lot of that. There's a lot of guiding in our systems across the board (DL-3, 435–437)

Through inclusive curriculum measures, students are engaged in a manner aligned with their unique identities. This process takes careful planning and time. With that in mind, Jonathan added:

> We have to think about the kid, too, and how do you find that right balance, because sometimes we can't wait. [For] a kid who's in 10th grade, a 5-year implementation plan is all well and good, [but] they're all long gone. So, what can we do in the short term to move things for them? (DL-4, 494–498)

Still, if this process is rushed, it will not have the intended outcomes. Sarah noted:

> I think when you think about the professional learning parts of it, it really has to be connected to supporting people and meeting people where they're at. In order for us to really have the outcomes that we're intending, and that we want to have an inclusive curriculum, we've got to get folks at a place . . . . It doesn't mean that we are not doing the work. It does mean, though, that we have to support them, coach them, be available to them, and continuously pour into them the ways that they may need it. (DL-5, 615–621)

Sarah worried that if schools implement inclusive curriculum mandates without providing appropriate support for educators, it could result in more harm for students. She added that, "everyone's going to need something that's a little different, every team, every department's going to need something a little different" (DL-5, 622–623). Differentiated supports require careful planning and support from leaders. Sarah continued, "you have to give them the time and attention they need in order for our students to benefit in ways that we want them [to] and need them to benefit" (DL-5, 623–625).

Professional learning for inclusive curriculum implementation is best when it is tailored for the various levels of need, based on the educator's readiness. Sarah continued:

> We can't just say to teachers that they're doing X and then [move on haphazardly]. To me, that's more harmful to our students, because they're not going to go into it teaching our students in the ways that we need them to be teaching them. (DL-5, 626–628)

If practices are put into place without providing appropriate support for teachers, this district leader worried that it could result in more harm for students. One opportunity she suggested seeking was, "Fostering the relationships and strengthening our teachers in order for us to get the outcomes for the inclusive curriculum that we need in our schools, particularly at the high school. But for me, it's K–12" (DL-5, 630–632).

To help support educators at their various places on the spectrum of readiness, one opportunity lies in leadership. Jonathan noted:

> Leadership matters immensely throughout the building. Teacher leadership matters, administrative leadership matters, district office-level leadership matters, student leadership matters. And our audio has to match our video, or else our kids will call BS on us. And when they do, we have to be willing to listen because their perceptions are their realities. (DL-4, 63–-637)

Even without specific practices in place, these leaders felt that fostering relationships and teacher leadership are starting places to reach educators in support of inclusive curriculum implementation. In this manner, leaders can begin to support efforts to create a welcoming and affirming environment and inclusive curriculum and assessment (NYSED, 2018).

One area on the spectrum of readiness for inclusive curriculum implementation, which came up, referred to a group of educators who were labeled "the waiter-outers" in this conversation. These are the educators who viewed inclusivity as another trend on the pendulum of education. Regarding these educators, Elyse reflected, "the fact that you're having a conversation about inclusive curriculum means that you've had an exclusive curriculum. So, how long are we going to wait to fix that?" (DL-1, 653–656). This consideration might encourage those who are motivated on the spectrum of readiness to hasten inclusivity. Elyse added:

> It is that personal development has to come first . . . [in] working on the anti-racist curriculum project, [if we] put that anti-racist curriculum in the hands of a racist teacher, [we would have done] a lot of harm. The inclusive curriculum has to come after some personal evolution and some personal development has occurred. And you can invite, all day long, people to step onto that train, and lots of people aren't stepping on that train . . . . We have this gulf opening between the movers and the growers and the developing folks and the people who are waiting it out . . . . It's hard, from the administrative seat, to see that and to feel . . . "What am I gonna do? I'm gonna put kids in the classrooms with those teachers who are refusing to see this conversation?" That doesn't feel healthy. (DL-1, 653–658)

This creates difficulties for educators who see the importance and value of inclusivity. They do not want to rush it or implement superficial practices and risk creating an unhealthy environment for their students.

Subtheme 2.2c: Discomfort Is Where We Grow

As the final subtheme of mindsets are hard to overcome, discomfort is where we grow applies to all stakeholders in suburban high schools. The route to inclusivity requires vulnerable reflections and a willingness to change. When asked what potential barriers, if any, might interfere with inclusive curriculum improvements, one building leader, responded:

> I would say teacher bias. It's that personal disposition that gets in the way of a lot of things, but especially this work. And, then, I think the mentality of, "we've been doing things this way for so long, let's keep doing it the same way" instead of having an open mind and embracing new ways of doing things. (BL-1, 160–163)

The mentality this leader referred to is a deep-seeded system that many are reluctant to change. This leader, a person of color, continued with her perspective:

> I just think inclusivity is, especially race, it is a sensitive subject, and it brings forth discomfort. And I'm just going to be frank, White people are experiencing a lot of discomfort around inclusive curriculums and talking about race, and it's not a good feeling, but in that discomfort is where we grow. So, it's important to learn to embrace the discomfort as opposed to rejecting it and sticking to the traditional . . . in which things have been done. (BL-1, 163–169)

With the previously mentioned demographic make-up of suburban high schools, the suggestion of White discomfort hints toward a foundational barrier in implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. Jack, a White male, agreed with Ronnie, "I don't know how to say it any better than what Ronnie just said. So, I echo those sentiments, and I think that that discomfort is a barrier for some" (BL-3, 170–171). He added:

> I also think that, again, that further professional development is needed in what this actually translates into in the classroom, the teaching and learning piece, and how do we partner with students and parents, community stakeholders to be part of the curriculum writing process? (BL-3, 171–175)

In this case, Jack's suggestion that professional development includes stakeholders requires educators to be open to collaborating with voices outside of, but impacted by, their profession. Such a setting could create discomfort. Helen, another White building leader, also agreed with Ronnie's reflection.

Along with ongoing professional learning and support, NYSED's CR-S education framework also encourages high expectations and rigorous instruction (NYSED, 2019). Holding

students to high expectations allows educators to "really change . . . notions and push students," (DL-3, 359) beyond predetermined or assumed expectations. One systemic practice that hinders this push is the opportunity for students to be enrolled in an advanced math program at the fifth to sixth grade level. Jonathan considered this,

> I think about the [Grade] 5 to 6 math recommendations . . . . In many districts, you start your advanced math in sixth grade . . . that decision is one of the most impactful decisions. Talk about high-stress environments. One of the most impactful decisions is that Grade] 5 to 6 advanced math designation because that sets them up, that sets up their schedule. And we know what kind of instruction comes out of that. (DL-4, 339–345)

The impactful decision creates a trajectory and widens the achievement gap at a young age. Students who begin to advance at 11 years old will continue that path through middle and high school.

Jonathan also saw opportunities for high expectations and rigorous instruction in adding inclusivity to the existing format of science instruction (NYSED, 2018). He continued:

> Really pushing on these traditional . . . very Eurocentric look at how science is done . . . the scientific method gave us eugenics, the scientific method told us that that dinosaurs were lizards . . . . Maybe the scientific method isn't infallible, and maybe there are other ways to gain and test knowledge, and maybe we should be considering those. (DL-4, 346–352)

By continuing to instruct students in a manner that has been in place for decades, or longer, the public education system prevents growth and in turn, inclusivity. Sarah added her insight to these thoughts:

> That principle, in particular, I think we've touched upon it, is really specific to disrupting bias. So, when you think about that inclusive curriculum and assessment, that principle specifically talks about an opportunity or opportunities for our students, again, to have that agency voice of choice. (DL-5, 353–356)

These district leaders saw an opportunity in breaking free from systemic practices in public education. By adding instruction from thought processes not founded in Eurocentric ideas and including student voice and choice, students might have a richer academic experience.

The classroom teachers also considered barriers toward making their curriculum more inclusive. Like previous thoughts, the comfort of systemic practices limits opportunities for inclusive curriculum implementation. When asked about potential barriers for implementation, Michella responded:

> I think it depends on the class itself. Especially at the high school level when you've got Regents exams . . . it's a little bit trickier because you're tied to those Regents exams. Math and science [are], again, it's very tricky . . . the humanities classes allow a little bit more flexibility when it comes to choosing articles or texts or pieces that can meet that culturally responsive lens. (CT-1, 134–138)

The teachers were unsure how to add inclusion into their curriculum because their courses are tethered to a state exam at the end of the school year. An inclusive curriculum becomes something to add to an already packed curriculum. This practice is easier in some content areas than others. Another teacher agreed with Michella's reflection of this barrier:

> I think [Michella] makes a good point. I have a little bit more flexibility because I can design my own curriculum. We have state standards, but we don't have a state test, so if something takes longer than something else, it doesn't really matter. (CT-3, 148–150)

Jacqueline had the flexibility to "add culture as a content area for health . . . in last few years" they "talk about what culture is, what it means, what it can look like for each person" (CT-3, 146–148).

The combination of the ability to find flexibility in a content and a teacher's comfort with the material helped to implement an inclusive unit within a curriculum area. Christina found this to be true in her content area as well, "we added a global culinary course, so students have the opportunity to take that as well" (CT-2, 142–143). While these opportunities were clear in some content areas, one teacher added that she was "not sure what other disciplines have done" (CT-2, 145). The participants in these focus groups repeated the notion that teachers work in silos. This practice limits collaboration and growth, thus increasing the struggle of implementing an inclusive curriculum.

The process of collaborating to find opportunities to add inclusivity to more content areas takes openness from all stakeholders within a school community. There are pockets in suburban communities that are ready for this opportunity. Still, the discomfort of others might create a barrier for this change. Ronnie reflected, "I think mindsets [are] a challenge, depending on the type of community that the school district is in' (BL-1, 218–219). The educators were forced to consider, "Is it a community that embraces inclusivity or not?" (BL-1, 220). The community support, or lack thereof, might influence student openness to engage in an inclusive curriculum. Ronnie continued:

> I think students are ready, for sure, but they need to see their parents, the community standing up for what is right and being social justice advocates so that then they can follow. Whether we believe it or not, the students are always watching us. They're

> watching the folks in the community to see how they respond to various events that go on. (BL-1, 220–224)

The idea of students watching the adults in their lives for their responses could provide educator insight when encountering student bias. Ronnie added, "it's the mindset . . . the personal dispositions . . . the bias that folks have within that really causes a strain on moving forward with an inclusive curriculum" (BL-1, 225–227). Even if it is small, this bias can cause a strain on making progress with implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. Jack agreed with Ronnie and added that in addition to bias,

> There's just an overall lack of knowledge of protocols and procedures that exist within schools. Most people's experience with school is just they, themselves, as a student and as parents . . . unless you work in a school district, you don't know necessarily that there's a curricular review process and that curriculum undergoes revisions and that it's necessary and important. We move forward in the direction of making sure that there's representation and all voices are there. (BL-3, 228–234)

Without access to this insider knowledge, some community members might feel left out regarding how curricular changes are implemented. To address this barrier, Jack considered:

> Before we can even start to talk to parents about the work that needs to be done and the why with respect to CR-SE and inclusivity, we almost have to let them know just a little bit about our protocols and procedures that exist in schools and encourage and invite our parents to be part of all the opportunities that exist, almost so that curriculum writing and including parents isn't a one-off, but it's just that this is what we do, that we have protocols and procedures where we seek out and value parent and student input—that curriculum writing is one more of those things. (BL-3, 236–242)

Perhaps with more knowledge and participation in the process, stakeholders might have more value for inclusivity in education. Such a process would create an opportunity for the diverse voices in a school community to be present in curriculum implementation practices. Ronnie agreed with Jack's reflection. Helen added that, in her district, "it tends to be a smaller group, but there can be some community challenges, unfortunately (BL-2, 283–285).

Including students in culturally sensitive conversations could create discomfort for some students. One practice that helped Jacqueline's students was, doing "a lot of restorative . . . and kind of get to know each other a little bit better, which allows to understand cultures a little bit more" (CT-3, 151–152). Jacqueline was mindful that the method could take time to implement and might take away from other content in a curriculum. Still, these practices helped students to learn about perspectives outside of their own identities. Michella's insights in this part of the conversation echoed the building leaders' reflections. She stated:

> Sometimes it's a person's culture, the way they're brought up . . . in that small . . . family culture, [or] where they live, that sometimes can be a barrier for kids to understand that there's a lot more that people experience than maybe they have. And I think sometimes when you explain, "Well, this is why this hurts this person's feelings, or this is what this person has experienced," it's hard for them to [understand that] that's something that kids . . . go through. (CT-1, 295– 311)

The educators were faced with the challenge of delicately balancing respect and acknowledgement of a student's home culture, while also having the same regard for each culture represented in their student population. Michella added insight:

> As humans, we're not necessarily programmed to always think through the lens of other people's perspectives. That has to be taught. So how are your actions impacting those

> around you? We have to really, explicitly, teach that to kids and how different cultures and how you're raised and what your family situation is like at home. All of those things could be barriers to what is in the classroom setting. (CT-1, 306–311).

It is important for educators to be able to appropriately address student questions and curiosities about those who have different social identities from their own. This engagement helps to prepare students along their path as global citizens.

An opportunity that came up repeatedly in the focus groups related to including student voice in developing and implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. To support this opportunity, Sarah's school had "done a ton of work around harmful language and discriminatory language, and . . . creating a document that has been co-created by students" (DL-5, 357–359). Her district was inspired to create this document after meeting with students.

> A year ago . . . to ask them in which ways they felt that they had been harmed in our school and district community, using their voice to have that as a teaching experience for our teachers. So, even using language like, instead of "slave," saying "enslaved," instead of saying "master," [use] "the enslaver." (DL-5, 360–364)

The conversation inspired them to also think "about even the terminology that we use to have that inclusive component, thinking about our students of the LGBTQIA+ population and making sure that they're represented in some of the ways in which we are having conversations" (DL-5, 365–368). In that manner, the "inclusive piece is disrupting all the ways in which harm [is] present" (DL-5, 368–369).

The district leaders discussed that the CR-S education framework should be used as a long-term guide for creating inclusion. When the educators did this work to expose and remove harmful practices and language barriers, including student voice, they created a welcoming and

affirming school environment. It is important to work in inclusive terminology with respect to not only race, but also to gender, LGBTQIA+, and ability.

When asked about the barriers and opportunities in securing support from stakeholders, the conversations in each focus group related to the concept that "discomfort is where we grow." One building leader, Helen, reflected: "Sometimes when people hear diversity… within the community or within a small subpopulation of the community, they kind of set off alarm bells, and in terms of doing some education in terms of what that really looks like" (BL-2, 285–288).

Some people are immediately triggered by the term diversity. These people do not seem to understand how it applies to education. It is important for educators to not cater to those mindsets. Helen continued, "while not necessarily catering to that, but recognizing that we need to be following the CR-SE, that's an important component of what we need to be doing in schools (BL-2, 288–290). The conversation in the district leader focus group mirrored these sentiments. Elyse added:

> Obviously, this has become very politicized. The frustrating thing is that the people, and there's very few in our district, . . . they're very ill-informed; they believe what they believe, and they have a lot of misinformation. And, really, that, for me ,is just very difficult because I know we are doing the morally and ethically right thing in finally addressing some of this, [and] to have somebody come at you swinging because they heard somewhere that you are doing something egregious. (DL-1, 545–553).

While diversity has become a politicized topic, those who vocally oppose an inclusive curriculum were very few in number in the schools. Still, the oppositions created frustrations for the educators who knew what they were doing was the morally responsible pathway for their students. Elyse continued that these stakeholders were,

> Not really interested in . . . I shouldn't say that. We have had people who come to the table whom we have engaged with, even become part of our DEI Committee who are, 180, now saying, "I had no idea," and, "Oh." So, we have had some successes with that, but others aren't really actually interested in learning, they're only interested in accusing and following up on things that they've heard on social media or whatever. So, it's difficult. (DL-1, 554–560)

A district leader, Elyse's reflection regarding this small number of naysayers created a barrier of frustration in conducting the work of implementing an inclusive curriculum. Her efforts to educate a few willing naysayers proved to be fruitful, yet the frustration of some others not being open to learning presented a barrier in securing whole-community support for inclusivity. Still, she felt that her superintendent took more of the ire from the opposers. She reflected:

> It is a worry, I know, at the superintendent's level. They may be receiving more negative messaging than gets to us because I think, in some ways, our superintendent's [say], "Keep doing your work, I'll take this," which I also don't love that she feels she has to shoulder that by herself. But it's just not real. So, that's frustrating. (DL-1, 561–565).

The sources of misinformation that fueled the opposers was not reliable. Still, those sources inspire eager protesters of inclusive curriculum implementation practices. Elyse added the insight that the opposing argument has, "been created to win some politicians some points" (DL-1, 566). Although there was a small number of these stakeholders, their opposition inspired hostility in the school community. Elyse shared her feelings that, "on the shoulders of our children, it's just egregious, it's sinful . . . . It really gets under my skin, as you can tell. So, we haven't gotten a lot of it, but when it comes, it's super frustrating (DL-1, 567–569). Patricia agreed with Elyse and added:,

> I don't even know if "educating" is the right word, because, like Elyse said, where people get their information from, it's hard to educate them if that's not even a reliable source. And they come in, guns ablaze, to prove why this is not good. (DL-2, 570–573)

The challenges the participants described create unprecedented turbulence for the field of education. The mindsets encouraged by those with an agenda are emboldened to challenge professionals at all levels of education. Thankfully, district leaders shield the teachers from a lot of the turbulence. Still, the teachers were aware of these mindsets and the negative stigma surrounding inclusive curriculum. Jaqueline admitted that she, "personally [hasn't] had any pushback or anything like that from parents or stakeholders or admin" (CT-3, 315–316). She continued to share:,

> If there were people . . . pushing back a little bit, it's something to think about because it's their culture . . . maybe [this] isn't something that they learned when they were in high school. And they have this idea that certain things are going to be pushed down their kids' throat essentially, and it's really not what it's about. (CT-3, 316–320).

The concept of "pushing [diversity, equity, and inclusion] down kids' throats" related to the political misinformation discussed in the district leader focus group. Fear of being accused of doing so might create a barrier in implementing inclusivity for some suburban high school teachers. One way to view opposition is to consider it as a cultural practice. Jacqueline tried to consider that, "understanding that a parent pushback is probably just a cultural thing as well" (CT-3, 323–324).

Michella also had not experienced any opposition, but she acknowledged that "there has been push back in [my] district and other disciplines and at other grade levels (CT-1, 327–328). Much of the opposition in Michella's district pertained to library books. She echoed reflections

shared in the district and building leader focus groups that, “a lot of times when people hear the word culturally responsive or inclusivity, we automatically go . . . to, like race . . . as the first thought. And it is so much bigger than that, right?” (CT-1, 329–333).

In school districts with greater diversity, constituents tended to be more open-minded than in less diverse school districts. One district leader shared that, “It’s fascinating. I live in a district that is very different than [the district I work in] and people that come out, support or against, where I live, is nothing that I’ve really experienced in [this district]” (DL-2, 573–576). The district that Patricia lived in was much less diverse than where she worked. She was surprised by the amount of pushback that her hometown district received.

Jonathan also discussed his perspective relating to stakeholder pushback. He shared:

> I definitely have had a fair number of extraordinary [conversations]. And when ‘they have come my way, I always try to enter in with an open mind that I'll be able to provide some information . . . the other piece is that I don’t want there to be a sense of we’re hiding anything. [I offer that] this is what we have. Here’s our docket. Here’s where we are getting our information from. Here’s where you can go and check it out, and then call me back and let’s talk some more. (DL-4, 583–589).

His approach in trying to authentically present the whole picture to curious stakeholders helped him to “get a lot of really good traction” with some people (DL-4, 590). His practice required not only the stakeholder to have an open mind, but it also required patience and time on behalf of the educator. Even if he was not successful in reaching some opposers, Jonathan hoped that the people would walk away from the conversation feeling that they were “at least treated respectfully.” (DL-4, 591–592)

Such exchanges led stakeholders to regularly reaching out to Jonathan to follow up on information they may have received from unreliable sources. He recalled conversations with community members:

> Every couple [of] months I'll get a message from a certain parent, "Hey, I'm hearing this. Can you . . . ." It started [when] somebody . . . saw something on Facebook that supposedly happened during a lesson . . . about Black Lives Matter. And it was just a screenshot. And, of course, you could see where that's going to go. This was part of a broader unit around protest and protest movements in the United States. (DL-4, 592–599)

Sometimes these challenges were difficult, and Jonathan admitted that he "gets a little fired up about this too," (DL-4, 600–601). Still, he bore in mind that these stakeholders were also a part of his school community. So, he tried, "to understand where their information may be coming from and to what extent is their pliability" (DL-4, 601–602). As a public servant, Jonathan attempted to "take the high ground on that conversation, and hope they come back" (DL-4, 603-604). He added:

> It's also [important to] remind folks more broadly, our colleagues, that . . . it's a very small database. We have to be very careful not to be responding to a database of two or five or even 10 in this community with 50,000 people. (DL-4, 608–611)

It helped the educators to remember that while the opposers were stubborn and consistently changing their inclusive practices, they were comparatively small in number when considering the population of a school community.

The insights shared in the teacher group aligned with the value of such practices as discussed in the other focus groups. In her final thoughts, Jacqueline shared:

> It's just important that districts stress it's a necessity, not like a professional development day. . . . it takes a little stress off teachers knowing this isn't something we just have to do for a couple years and then the next buzzword's going to come through. It's something that we should be doing already . . . It should be how we teach. So, maybe less professional development days and just more, like, "this is who we are as a school culture and this is what we expect our teachers to do." (CT-3, 359–366)

One major opportunity is for schools to establish that this work is more than professional development. Although some consider inclusivity to be a buzzword, it should be what educators do. While the participants saw some progress in their districts, they acknowledged that there was more work to be done.

Another opportunity is to acknowledge what students are taking from inclusive efforts. One district leader closed his thoughts by adding:

> We can't just assume, just like I taught the American Revolution, the kids should know it just because we put an author in front that [has a diverse social identity] doesn't mean that . . . [if a] kid comes back and says, "I don't feel it," we shouldn't discount that. We have to be willing to acknowledge that we have a lot of work still to do. (DL-4, 638–642).

If the implementation on behalf of the educator is not authentic, students will notice it. It is also important for educators to acknowledge that students' perceptions are their reality. Practices like simply offering a text written by an author of a diverse background might not be enough to engage students who are looking for representation.

The transition from previous curricular practices will take consistent efforts, regardless of the barriers. In his closing thoughts, Eric shared in the midst of those who were waiting out this

period of change, “we [must] stay after the intent and the impact potential that we have in front of us, then the change difference can be there” (DL-3, 643-646). The participants in each of the three focus groups agreed that the work of implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools is not a pendulum practice. Rather, it is a necessary practice to engage, inspire, and educate their learners.

Summary of the Results

Chapter 4 presented the results of three focus groups conducted separately with like-role educators from suburban high schools. For Research Question 1, the data were analyzed to determine the practices that were in place for the suburban teachers and the administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum. Two themes emerged from the results of this analysis. The first theme of importance was the Wild West. This theme identified inconsistent practices and systems in curriculum writing. The second theme that emerged was snippets of professional development. Analysis of this second theme determined that the suburban high school educators were receiving limited professional development and support in implementing an inclusive curriculum.

Research Question 2 focused on the barriers and opportunities for the suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum. Two themes emerged from Research Question 2. The first theme was the kids are ready. Analysis of this theme determined that students, in many circumstances, were more ready than many adults for an inclusive suburban high school curriculum. The second theme that emerged for Research Question 2 was the concept that mindsets are hard to overcome. The analysis of this theme determined that other mindsets presented a challenge for the teachers and administrators when trying to implement an inclusive suburban curriculum.

Connections to NYSED's CR-S education framework emerged from the data analysis. Review of the analytical memos from the focus groups aided in analyzing the findings in Chapter 4. While all of the participants outlined the work that their district was doing to implement an inclusive suburban high school curriculum, more work in this field is needed.

Chapter 5 discusses the research implications based on the results of the findings in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 also provides recommendations for implementing an inclusive suburban high school curriculum.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Although researchers have created inclusive pedagogical theories and frameworks, these measures are not aligned with consistent implementation or accountability measures. Such elements are relevant for suburban high schools as trends in demographics are shifting, making these communities more diverse than ever (Frey, 2011, 2022a). To help guide public schools to engage learners of all backgrounds, NYSED published the CR-S education framework in 2018. This implementation came 2 years before a global pandemic interrupted in-person learning. The rollout of the CR-S education framework was also overshadowed by the unprecedented political divisiveness with areas of emphasis on social inequities (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021a). The purpose of this study was to examine educators' perspectives on implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of this study and includes the implications of the findings. Additionally, Chapter 5 discusses the limitations and provides recommendations for future research and professional practice. The framework for this study was NYSED's CR-S education framework with the four principles of being a welcoming and affirming environment, having inclusive curriculum and assessment, requiring high expectations and rigorous instruction, and setting a goal for ongoing professional development. This study was guided by two research questions:

1. What practices are currently in place for suburban teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?

2. What are the barriers and opportunities for suburban high school teachers and administrators in planning and implementing an inclusive high school curriculum?

Implications of Findings

From the results of this study, several implications emerged that related to implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. The first finding was that, in general, suburban high schools lack a structure around curriculum writing. Having little to no structure for writing new curriculum creates larger challenges for inclusive curriculum implementation. While the district leader participants in the study were able to articulate systems they used to implement curriculum, the other educators could not. Generally, these systems were inconsistent. The building leaders and teachers were unsure of the processes their schools followed to implement their curriculum. This lack of awareness in district systems has the potential to impact implementation efforts. With specific regard to inclusive curriculum implementation, the schools allowed teacher autonomy in the development of curriculum writing. They also relied on early adopters to engage in such efforts. These educators, however, did not have clear direction or resources to support their efforts in writing and implementing an inclusive curriculum.

A second finding of this study was that the suburban high school educators believed that their students were ready to engage in an inclusive curriculum. Such perceptions were determined based on witnessing organic conversations among the high school students within academic settings. The educators in all three focus groups provided examples of students engaging in mature conversations relating to culturally relevant topics.

A third finding of this study was that, although opposition to inclusive curriculum practices was minimal across stakeholders, the influence of such opposition was impactful. While the opposition came from external factors, it impacted what happened within the school.

The district leaders seemed to have more direct involvement with curriculum opposition than the other educators. All the educators were at least aware of opposition in their districts. The participants in each group acknowledged that the amount and frequency of opposition was minimal. However, it seemed to be an influential barrier.

Lack of Structure in Curriculum Development

Curriculum is the foundation of education. Without consistent curriculum writing and implementation practices, room for bias grows. As leaders, school administrators bear the responsibility of implementing systems that serve each learner in their schools (Ayscue, 2016; DeMatthews et al., 2021). It is also the responsibility of these leaders to design and implement professional development for the educators at various levels in their districts (Holme et al., 2014). Such professional development helps to keep educators current with best practices, policies, and frameworks, including NYSED's CR-S education framework. Although the CR-S education framework was published in 2018, several district-level participants in this study were still at the beginning stages of implementation. On the other hand, some district leaders found the 2018 rollout too late for inclusive efforts that were already underway in their districts.

Several inconsistencies pertaining to curriculum writing, in general, surfaced in this research study. At the time of this study, the current district leaders reflected that when they began working in their school districts, there was no prescribed process for updating or writing new curricula. In fact, they reflected that when they first started, they were unsure of their own abilities to write curricula or design a process for others to follow. In their roles, these leaders identified a need and collaborated with colleagues in their respective districts. These efforts resulted in some defined processes for curriculum development. Each process varied from district to district and even between leaders within the same district.

One district leader had recently determined a scope and sequence for a content area in his district. Another leader in the same district did not have a common curriculum document but had a system where teachers had to apply to write curriculum. These leaders used district goals to guide their summer curriculum writing practices. A recent goal in their district was to align content standards with NYSED's CR-S education framework. They acknowledged that in their capacities as district leaders, they were attempting to build consistency where it previously did not exist. Although these practices aligned with district goals, if they did not reach the classrooms, the goals became superficial (Ezzani et al., 2021).

The district-level leaders from two other school districts within the same county shared different areas of focus regarding curriculum development. One district had been implementing consistent and inclusive practices for about a decade. For those leaders, the rollout of the CR-S education framework was late. By 2018, they had already identified culturally responsive principles to guide their work. Still, they had recently decided to align their culturally responsive practices with the four principles of the CR-S education framework. One measure they used to guide their work was the application of a curriculum scorecard.

These efforts were contrasted by a district-level participant from another school district. The leader from the third district was in the first year of implementing the CR-S education framework principles. Her district was focusing first on the welcoming and affirming principle as directed by the framework. They were also working to collaborate with stakeholders, including students, to audit the existing curriculum.

Not all the practices described in the district leader group were aligned with efforts to increase inclusivity. Still, these leaders had a better understanding of curriculum implementation

practices than the participants in the other groups. One district leader identified a gap where, although resources existed, the educators did not know how to access or apply them.

The participants in the building leader and classroom teacher focus groups could not identify the processes their schools used to implement curriculum. It was clear in both groups that if a teacher wanted to write curriculum, they were approved based on interest. The building leaders acknowledged that teachers who were early adopters led the inclusive curriculum implementation in their districts.

Like others in the literature (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012), the classroom teacher participants expressed a desire for their schools to either develop or clearly communicate curriculum development measures. Like Girard (2020) found, teachers have autonomy within their curriculum. They apply the standards in ways that they anticipate students will learn and be engaged. Although they valued their autonomy and felt supported by their districts, the teachers lacked confidence in curriculum writing and implementation. They considered their units to be well written but wondered how they measured up to others in the field. Additionally, NYSED-provided data (2019) portrays disproportionality between teachers and students. The more than 80% White teachers are faced with the challenge of creating curricula for their students, of which more than 50% have diverse social identities (NYSED, 2019). Teachers must anticipate curriculum measures that might engage students whose lived experiences are much different than their own (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2015). With no clear system in place, there is a large opportunity for bias to surface in curriculum writing and implementation (Holme et al., 2014).

The teachers also expressed a desire for accountability after they complete curriculum writing. Once the practice was complete, they did not receive follow-ups to be sure that they

were teaching the new material. There were also no measures to assess the results of the new material. Additionally, the teachers felt siloed in curriculum writing and implementation practices.

The building-level leaders and classroom teachers had some knowledge of the CR-S education framework. They also attended professional development sessions relating to DEI. They were unsure, however, how many of their learnings transferred into practice. Further, they were unsure if or how their colleagues were implementing inclusive curricular practices. When professional learning opportunities do not clearly transfer to practice, one can understand why they are considered superficial (Diem et al., 2016; Holme et al., 2014).

Educators Believe Suburban High Schools Students Are Ready

A clear opportunity for implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools is that educators perceive that students are ready. The participants were emphatic in expressing their perception of student readiness. In fact, several participants perceived that students navigated inclusivity better than the adults. NYSED's teacher demographics portray very little diversity compared to student demographics (NYSED, 2019). With such disproportionality, it makes sense that students are more ready than adults. The students might be more prepared for inclusivity because they are more diverse.

Previous studies have concluded that students thrive when their heritage is connected and valued in their schools (Dee & Penner 2017; Pourdavood & Yan, 2020; Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Samuels, 2018). Some schools from the literature attributed increased student success to inclusive curriculum implementation (Blankenship & Locke, 2015; Dee & Penner, 2017). This might be because, in an inclusive curriculum, learning becomes relevant to students of all social identities (Gay, 2013). Relevancy relates to the CR-S education framework through the principle

that guides educators to foster a welcoming and affirming environment (NYSED, 2018). The CR-S education framework helps to elevate diverse voices and educate students as engaged and informed citizens (NYSED, 2019).

The educators in this study explained that their efforts to implement an inclusive curriculum were in their selection of content resources. When selecting material, they attempted to approach it from the lens of their various learners. Some leaders were even working to include student voice in curriculum and policy planning. While the participants identified student readiness in these areas, they were more impressed by something else. They recognized student readiness based on unstructured classroom conversations.

These educators had each positioned themselves in the background of DEI-related conversations among their students. Rather than facilitating these discussions, the educators quietly listened, ready to interject if needed. The participants noted their impression of the maturity and natural progression of such conversations. Some reported that students questioned each other about why something might be offensive or hurtful. Others acknowledged the grace with which some students redirect biases. Interestingly, this all happens without direction from the adults. If students are able to navigate inclusivity so well on their own, doing so, aligned with academic instruction, could be a richer experience for them (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Currently, rather than being part of the curriculum, such conversations are anecdotal. Page et al. (2020) posited that an added benefit of an inclusive curriculum was the strong community between students and educators. Educators have an opportunity to better connect with their diverse students in inclusive content discussions. One participant commented that she does not plan for social justice conversations to come up, they just happen. Though not planned

for, the participants noted their ambition to provide a safe space for students to engage in this manner.

The educators also noted the level of comfort among most of their students in these spontaneous, inclusive conversations. Some of the participants pointed out that this might be because of student interest outside of academics. The music they listen to, their social media activity, and their interest in social events all provide outlets for inclusivity. From these interactions, students are primed to engage in related discussions and activities connected to content. One participant stated that if students were already engaging in this content on their own, it made sense to address it in the safety of a classroom setting. The participants felt that educators could steer this interest in a positive direction.

Not all students portrayed comfort in these conversations. The teacher participants perceived that some of their White students were not as comfortable as some of their peers. Their perspective was that such interactions might not be reinforced at home. This led some students to be hesitant to engage in their peers' discussions, because they were unsure how to conduct themselves. One educator reflected that this hesitancy was not a desire to disengage from inclusivity. Rather, the perception was that the students wanted to learn more and how to properly conduct themselves. This realization made this role even more important for the educators, especially if students were lacking support outside of academics.

Another interesting aspect of this finding was that these organic conversations were happening in a variety of content areas. The participants noted these inclusive peer-to-peer interactions were in content areas like physical education, health, culinary, the humanities, and in fine arts. Some researchers also noted how to build inclusion within science, technology, engineering, and math (Hartwell & Kaplan, 2017; Leonard & Moore, 2014). In addition to the

variety of content areas, the students were engaging in thoughtful inclusive conversations in the presence of their building and district leaders as well. To engage so comfortably in the presence of principals and directors, there must be a level of confidence in the discussion. Additionally, if these conversations are occurring in all content areas, regardless of the audience, this is an indication of strong student interest in inclusion.

Student readiness to engage provides a secure foundation for the application of the CR-S education framework. In this manner, students have fostered their own welcoming and affirming environments. Educators now can strengthen this principle and build on the other three principles. Through inclusive curriculum and assessment, educators can engage students in high expectations and rigorous instruction. To do so, they require ongoing professional development. These educators already had an exemplar from their students for application. Rather than hesitancy from the students, the barrier was hesitancy from the adults.

Inclusive Curriculum Opposition is Minimal but Impactful

Although minimal, a barrier for the suburban educators in implementing an inclusive curriculum was the opposition they faced. This negative attention caused hesitancy among some educators to engage in relevant conversations with their students (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). The classroom teachers and building leaders reported that words like inclusivity or diversity triggered politically motivated ire toward public education. These educators were afraid that they might be met with aggressive resistance from opposing stakeholders (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). In fact, in Arizona, despite increased graduation rates among diverse students relating to inclusive curricula, politicians revolted (Blankenship & Locke, 2015). They forced the removal of a Mexican American studies (MAS) curriculum (Blankenship & Locke, 2015). This resistance grew in the aftermath of the social unrest during the Covid-19 pandemic (Hill-Jackson et al.,

2022). Some politicians even went so far as to outlaw inclusive curricula in their states (Frey, 2022b; Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). These actions cultivate added challenges for administrators and teachers who see the value in an inclusive curriculum. It is not surprising that the educators remained in the background of student-generated culturally responsive conversations (Holme et al., 2014).

The district leaders suggested that those who opposed DEI efforts in schools were encouraged by politicians who are looking to gain favor. These efforts maintain the personal ideology of the politicians who instigate the opposition (Kim, 2021). Such polarization fosters contentious board of education (BOE) meetings where school leaders must navigate hostility (Diem et al., 2016; White et al., 2023). Researchers found that suburban BOE meetings were more hostile than those in rural or urban areas (White et al., 2023). With such intense encouragement for hostility, it is easy to assume there are many opposers. That was not the case for the participants in this study. As stated by a district leader, Eric, in a community of approximately 50,000 residents, fewer than 20 people expressed their opposition to inclusive curricula. This made sense because Frey, (2022b) found that most opposers of inclusive curricula do not have children in school. Frey's (2022b) findings identified that these stakeholders believe politically charged messaging from politicians with an agenda. This aligns with what Elyse, another district leader, reported about those who opposed DEI efforts in her school district. She believed that the stakeholders were fueled by political misinformation.

Of the three levels of educators, the district leader participants were more connected to the resisters. Still, they wondered if even they were sheltered from some hostility directed toward their superintendents. The participants shared that they received somewhat frequent communications from the same stakeholders who are misinformed by social media. The

information shared is either incorrect or out of context. For example, one stakeholder complained about a Facebook post highlighting the Black Lives Matter movement. There was a concern that teachers were forcing their political views in class. Upon further inspection, the lesson in question was about protests and demonstrations, in general.

The district leaders expressed frustration that many who voice their opposition are not interested in learning another perspective. According to the participants, these stakeholders only wanted to share their opposition to inclusivity. The participants wondered if the oppositional stakeholders fully comprehended what inclusion was about. Although these reflections stirred up negative emotions for the district leaders, it was clear that the leaders took the brunt of the adversity. The district leaders took phone calls and met with concerned stakeholders, which protected the building leaders and teachers from these potentially negative interactions.

The building leaders and teachers were aware of the stakeholders who were not supportive of inclusive curriculum efforts. The teachers reflected that they had heard of aggressive opposition but never related it to their own practices. They felt that their districts did a good job of protecting them from these challenges. Yet, the teachers recognized that some of their students learned similar views from home. One teacher added that to be truly inclusive, these students must also feel welcomed. Although informed by misinformation and political pressure, these views shaped some of the students' identities.

Regardless of identities, an inclusive curriculum provides the opportunity to improve outlooks, instill confidence, and foster ownership in learning (Ladson-Billings, 2021a; Page et al., 2017). As stated by multiple participants, educators do not have an agenda that they are trying to push down their students' throats. Page et al. (2017) also found that views opposing an inclusive approach created barriers for well-intended educators.

Leaders also discussed that a less obvious, but impactful, barrier was the reluctance among educators to change. One building leader reflected that regarding conversations about race, the White educators were experiencing discomfort. The participants noted that personal bias and dispositions got in the way of progress (Ayscue, 2016; Ortloff et al., 2012). It is also possible that some of the educators accepted the politicized misinformation. Because of this, the educational leaders were careful not to roll out new systems too hastily. One leader reflected that inclusive resources in the hands of a biased teacher could cause widespread damage. To be effective, an inclusive curriculum must be accompanied by opportunities for personal reflection (Ezzani et al., 2021).

Limitations

This study was limited to 11 participants from six suburban high schools. Gathering participants to engage in this study proved to be challenging. Varying public opinions on the topic of inclusivity might have made some educators hesitant to participate in this study. The nature of sharing perceptions in a focus group setting, where others might recognize colleagues, also might have prevented some educators from participating. One educator chose not to participate in this study after recognizing another participant.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study used qualitative methods and phenomenology to analyze suburban high school educators' perceptions regarding implementing an inclusive curriculum. The foundation of this study was to explore the lived experiences of educators who attempted to implement an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. Conducting this research as a quantitative study might have resulted in more feedback from a larger sample size. To support a quantitative analysis, the

findings from this study could be applied to a survey and be distributed to educators throughout NYS. The survey participants should include the same three levels of educators.

Additionally, the views shared in this study reflected suburban educator perspectives. Future research might examine the perspectives of suburban stakeholders, including students and parents, pertaining to an inclusive high school curriculum. It would also be beneficial for researchers to explore these perspectives compared to the experiences in rural and urban school communities. Further, conducting this research in the method of a yearlong case study could provide insight into the inner workings of inclusive curriculum implementation within a suburban high school.

Recommendations for Stakeholders

Stakeholders within a school community include legislatures, administrators, faculty, staff, parents, students, and community members. As stated in the findings, although opposition for inclusivity is minimal, it is impactful. To address opposition, it is important for stakeholders, including students, to work together in the best interest of the students.

A recommendation for the NYSED pertains to professional development requirements. Participants in this study valued the significance of a state-issued framework. They also adhered to certification requirements for professional learning. With the addition of ongoing professional development as a principle of the CR-S education framework, the stage is set. NYSED should require that a portion of educator professional development be rooted in topics relating to DEI. Although the educators would desire more of these learning experiences, research shows that if not mandated, many do not participate (Ortloff et al., 2012).

A second recommendation for NYSED is to embed inclusive curricular support and practices into their evaluation processes. NYSED (2015) offers several rubrics for districts to use

for building-leader and classroom-teacher evaluations. Interestingly, there are more rubrics to assess building-leader proficiency in inclusive practices than for teachers. Of the eight approved principal-evaluation rubrics, three support inclusion (NYSED, 2015). There are 11 approved rubrics for teacher evaluation. Of these, only one has direct language to evaluate teachers' incorporation of instruction to engage students of diverse backgrounds (NYSED, 2015). While it is important for educators of all levels to implement inclusive curricular practices, the classroom teachers require this support more than their leaders. It is possible for one to manipulate language in the other rubrics and argue that they evaluate inclusivity. Therefore, if this language is not clear and direct, inclusive efforts risk superficial implementation.

A third recommendation for NYSED is to modify content standards to reflect the importance of inclusivity. In addition to making such modifications to the standards, state assessments should also reflect an inclusive curriculum and assessment, as suggested by the CR-S education framework. The process of implementing an inclusive curriculum requires commitment and consistency from all stakeholders. If the assessments do not match the evolved curriculum, there will be little incentive for true implementation. The teachers in this study reflected that preparing their students for state assessments was a barrier to implementation. When students are engaged in a meaningful curriculum, they will perform well on similar assessments. With these modifications, educators will be better positioned to make impactful adjustments.

District leaders are the executive leaders of a school district (White et al, 2023). While it is important that practices are developed through collaboration with all stakeholders, an inclusive curriculum should be implemented with a key guiding coalition, beginning with the district leaders. As executive leaders, district administrators should lead inclusive collaboration. With

their position, these leaders have a well-rounded knowledge of their school community and culture (White et al., 2023). It would be up to these leaders to elevate the diverse voices represented in their district (Davis et al, 2015) as they work to foster empathy. This includes students. Including student perspectives in the diverse voices sends the message that they are valued members of the learning community (Samuels, 2018). District leaders are also well positioned to implement a collaborative process to support a careful curriculum audit.

Further, district leaders have a strong knowledge of state-issued frameworks and education laws. This knowledge provides district leaders with the capacity to lead collaboration in selecting objective measurement tools for implementation. District leaders have a strong vision for how to support such processes. Knowledge of such processes is not as accessible to building leaders and teachers. In fact, the teacher participants in this study were asking for awareness of their schools' processes. District leaders must clearly, consistently, and frequently communicate district processes to all stakeholders. Additionally, time is a precious commodity in the world of education. District leaders must look for opportunities to reframe schedules, meetings, and conference days to allow for this work. By making such an adjustment, leaders will send the message that this work and its outcomes are a valued priority (Davis, et al., 2015). This increased time will also allow for the immersive learning required for true change. Finally, district leaders must implement accountability practices to follow up on newly written curriculum. Through regular check-ins, formal or informal observations, and reports, district leaders should be aware of the status of newly implemented curricula.

Building-level leaders bridge the connection between district-level leaders and classroom teachers. As the building leaders, principals and assistant principals have significantly influential roles (Davis et al., 2015). They must act as a collaborative member of a collaborative curriculum

implementation process. Building administrators must also lead this charge in their buildings. If these leaders are engaging in the practices outlined in the process, their teachers will have an example to follow. Leaders must also consistently and clearly disseminate expectations for inclusivity. Principals and assistant principals should be mindful of how they structure meetings to support meaningful application. Further, these leaders are better connected to students and families than other educators. As such, they have insight on the diversity in their own buildings to support authentic experiences for students and teachers.

As curriculum and content specialists, teachers play an integral part in this process. Teachers must be open to growing in their learning and profession. Engaging students in culturally relevant pedagogy might require a change in practice for some teachers (Davis et al., 2015). They must be open to curricular modifications that work in a more comprehensive view of historical events, methods, cultures, and people (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022). To support this potential shift, teachers must attend professional development and be open to self-reflection. Increasing student voice and choice in curricular resources is one way to increase the perspectives represented in the curriculum (Samuels, 2018). Because students are ready for this, their engagement will increase, leading to increased academic successes.

This study found that teachers, administrators, and stakeholders would benefit from an implementation process to support an inclusive suburban high school curriculum. As stated by one of the participants, a process could provide direction on successful implementation. Additionally, because each school district is different, and demographics are fluid, application of the process must be ever evolving. Fostering empathy as a first step of an implementation process might be the most important. Valuing the humanity in fellow community members provides a strong foundation for collaboration. With this in place, there is value and opportunity

in the other aspects of the implementation process. Such a system must be clearly communicated, accessible, and understood by all stakeholders in a district. When discussing curricular processes for the betterment of students, students should be included in the conversation (Samuels, 2018). Student voice must be present and active in this process. The next section outlines a recommended collaborative curriculum implementation process. Figure 5.1 provides a visual explanation of the collaborative curriculum implementation process.

Collaborative Curriculum Implementation Process

This recommendation is important because the literature lacks guidance regarding writing or implementing new curriculum. It is time to formalize this process because districts and educators need consistent guidance in this area (Ayscue, 2016). Having a tangible process is important—regardless of the type of curriculum to be implemented. There are several elements to consider in this linear process. The collaborative curriculum implementation process method is designed to have an asset-based approach (NYSED, 2018). The following process highlights factors acknowledged by the participants to be effective tools in implementing an inclusive suburban high school curriculum. There are six areas of focus: (a) foster empathy to create opportunities for authentic conversations among stakeholders; (b) conduct a curriculum audit to disrupt harm and identify opportunities for inclusivity; (c) apply objective measures to avoid bias using tools like a curriculum scorecard or a rubric; (d) provide clarity and consistency through constantly communicating, displaying, and following established practices; (e) provide time for immersion to allow educators an opportunity for personal reflection and applicable training; and (f) uphold accountability by following up on implementation, reviewing, and incentivizing application. Each step of this process works in collaboration with the other steps. It is important to include all steps for authentic implementation.

Figure 5.1

The Collaborative Curriculum Implementation Process

Foster Empathy

First, because mindsets are hard to overcome, districts should provide an outlet to foster empathy among stakeholders. These interactions should include regular, safe, and reflective conversations. Supporting individual student potential for all students must motivate these interactions. It is important for stakeholders to see the humanity in fellow community members, including those with whom they disagree. One district leader found encouragement in this

process. He reflected on the end of a challenging conversation with a stakeholder. This leader hoped that even in their disagreement, the community members would feel respected.

Curriculum Audit

Next, districts must audit their existing curricula. Several participants discussed efforts in the benefits of engaging in curriculum audits. In this process, students, parents, and educators collaborated to identify and replace harmful language and content. Additionally, a curriculum audit should include efforts to expand inclusion. Educators should weave in student identity and student-centered practices throughout the curriculum. Inclusivity must become a frequent and normal aspect of curriculum. In some schools, students from minoritized populations feel like the center of attention during lessons relating to their own backgrounds (Chapman, 2013). If inclusive curriculum measures became the norm in suburban schools, it would remove the novelty of learning about another's experience. This would minimize students, who are part of vulnerable populations, from feeling like they are the representatives of the subpopulation. Inclusivity would be part of the standard. Such practices foster welcoming and affirming environments and engage students in high expectations and rigorous instruction, as directed by the CR-S education framework. Curricula in all content areas should be inclusive of individual learners.

Objective Measures

Third, some district leaders shared that they used a curriculum scorecard to review and approve new curricula. Some contributors of the CR-S education framework published a curriculum scorecard for ELA in 2019 (Steinhardt.nyu.edu, 2019). The application of curriculum to a scorecard provides a resource for an unbiased review of the material. The format of a

scorecard follows a rubric template. Through collaboration, districts must use their unique demographics to design a meaningful rubric.

Clarity and Consistency

The fourth factor of the collaborative curriculum implementation process requires leaders to disseminate implementation guidelines clearly and consistently. Educators of all levels must become familiar with their district's curriculum writing process. For consistency, this communication must come from the leaders. Teachers should apply their ideas for curriculum writing to a district-established process.

Time for Immersion

For these efforts to be applicable and effective, educators require time for immersive experiences. This aspect supports the CR-S education framework's fourth principle, ongoing professional development. In this aspect, experiences might include personal evolution through reflective practices and activities. Educators also require guidance on how to apply new skills to support a meaningful implementation of inclusivity. As stated in the research, some teachers are not interested in summer hours, nor should they be required to engage in training outside of contractual hours. Districts might consider increasing allowable professional hours during the school year. Using professional days, educators may engage in tailored learning. Another opportunity to allow for time and immersion is through a restructuring of faculty and department meetings and conference days. In using the whole-group meeting format, leaders must strive to differentiate the engagement of educators based on their level of needed support. One way to do this is to invite early adopters to help design and facilitate support.

Accountability

The final aspect of this process covers accountability. Leaders need to follow up with implementation efforts for several reasons. This level of support removes the siloed experiences described by several of the participants. Through accountability measures, educators could receive direction for growth and improvement, as necessary. Measures of accountability through data collection would provide insight to student outcomes resulting from implementation. Some opportunities for accountability could also come in the form of incentivizing meaningful application of inclusive curriculum practices.

Summary

Nearly 70 years after the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, educators are faced with navigating national controversy (Johnson, 2018). Although, as Johnson pointed out, the aftermath of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* never truly faded; look at the 2017 events in Charlottesville (Peters & Besley, 2017). Deep-seated sentiments that view those from minoritized populations as inferior live on (Johnson, 2018; Peters & Besley, 2017). Amid these realizations, the NYSED (2018) released the CR-S education framework. The four principles of the CR-S education framework are: (a) welcoming and affirming environment, (b) inclusive curriculum and assessment, (c) high expectations and rigorous instruction, and (d) ongoing professional development. Unfortunately, the rollout of this framework was interrupted by a global pandemic, followed by increased social unrest (NYSED, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021a).

NYSED (2021a) also released a publication making matters of DEI an area of focus for public schools. NYSED's (2021b) concerns about social injustices impacting students emphasizes the need to foster inclusion where diversity has not always been commonplace. With diversity rapidly increasing in American suburbs (Frey, 2011, 2022), the publication of the CR-S

education framework is timely. Yet, political pressure from those who see diversity as a deficit creates a barrier for authentic implementation (Gay, 2013; Lindsey et al., 2019). In this climate, suburban educators find themselves on the stage of a political debate (Hill-Jackson et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Adding further difficulties for educators is the disproportionality in demographics between NYSED educators and their students (NYSED, 2019). Only approximately 20% of NYSED's educators have diverse social identities, compared to approximately 50% of public school students having diverse social identities (NYSED, 2019). This means that it is up to predominately White educators to implement measures that will engage their diverse students. It is important to note that while NYSED does not record all areas of diversity, this term encompasses individuals with social identities that vary in gender, gender identification, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, native language, and ability.

In related studies, researchers found that educators faced several barriers in engaging their students in inclusive curricula (Girard et al., 2020; Ortloff et al., 2012; Page, 2017; Sherman-Morris et al., 2012; Warren-Grice, 2017; White et al., 2023; Zagona et al, 2017). One such barrier stemmed from educators' own implicit biases (Ayscue, 2016; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Holme et al., 2014; Tyler, 2016). Researchers also found that some attempts to foster inclusivity in schools led to superficial outcomes (Diem et al., 2016; Ortloff et al., 2012; Trujillo et al., 2021). This is important because researchers also have discovered that students with diverse social identities fare differently in school than their peers (Bottiani et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017; Marrun et al., 2021; McKinney de Roytson & Madkins, 2019; Parkhouse et al., 2021). Several studies noted positive outcomes for students with diverse backgrounds resulting from inclusive curricular measures (Dee & Penner, 2017; Hartwell & Kaplan, 2017; McKinney de Roytson & Madkins, 2021).

The literature does not exhibit consistent application of measures in suburban schools in inclusive curriculum development. Also lacking in the research are inclusive curriculum development measures applied to accountability systems. An added difficulty for implementation stems from the political divisiveness among stakeholders (Frey, 2022b; Hill-Jackson et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021a; White et al., 2023). Further, the literature does not identify how suburban educators perceive inclusive curricular efforts in their districts (Tyler et al., 2016).

This study examined educators' perspectives on implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. The research was guided by the four principles of NYSED's (2018) CR-S education framework. Eleven participants from six school districts participated in three different focus groups for this phenomenological study. The triangulation of the focus groups were district-level administrators, building-level administrators, and classroom teachers. This study endeavored to identify the practices and systems in place for teachers and administrators in implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. Additionally, this study researched potential barriers and opportunities for teachers and administrators to implement an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools.

Three key findings emerged from this study: (a) suburban school districts are lacking structure in curriculum writing and implementation, (b) educators perceive that suburban high school students are ready to engage in an inclusive curriculum, and (c) opposition toward inclusivity is minimal but impactful.

The results of this study have implications for the NYSED pertaining to in-service hours, evaluations, standards, and assessments. This study attempted to uncover the systems in place to support teachers and administrators in implementing an inclusive curriculum. Instead of finding consistent systems in place, the study found that this is an area in need of development. With

modifications in place at the state level, educators will receive the message that NYSED prioritizes inclusive curriculum implementation efforts.

Further, this study has implications for school districts and their stakeholders. The study also set out to identify the barriers and opportunities for teachers and administrators in implementing an inclusive curriculum. The analysis of the barriers and opportunities led to the creation of the collaborative curriculum implementation process. With the application of this six-part process, schools are directed to: (a) foster empathy among stakeholders, (b) audit their existing curricula, (c) apply new curricula to objective measurement tools, (d) disseminate systems with clarity and consistency, (e) provide educators with time for immersive reflection and professional learning experiences, and (f) incentivize application with accountability measures.

Through application of the collaborative curriculum implementation process, districts will foster welcoming and affirming environments, engage students in inclusive curriculum and assessment, hold their students to high expectations through rigorous instruction, and have a process to support ongoing professional development and support. The collaborative curriculum implementation process was designed using educators' perspectives on implementing an inclusive curriculum in suburban high schools. The principles of this process will support a more consistent roll out of the CR-S education framework across NYS.

Amid a climate of polarization, application of these recommendations will likely meet turbulence. Empathy should guide leaders who implement these measures. Through this virtue, leaders will be equipped to apply cultural humility and engage stakeholders with all viewpoints (George et al., 2015) for the betterment of their unique students.

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