Gender and Sexually Minoritized System Educational Leaders and the Team-Based Development of Equity Policies: A Framework

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Abstract

Inequities experienced by minoritized groups are one of the greatest challenges facing education systems today. Accordingly, system educational leaders are responsible for developing equity-related policies that have far-reaching impact on school systems, which situates these leaders at the forefront of delivering solutions that improve outcomes for minoritized students. Yet, because of extant oppressive structures that reinforce hegemonic power norms and exacerbate social inequities, educational leaders are often complicit in perpetuating inequities. This is complicated further by the fact that most of them are dominantly located (i.e., White, cisgender, male, heterosexual), which results in a limited frame of reference when making decisions that impact minoritized groups. It is salient, then, to seek more understanding about how equity-related policymaking takes place in the context of system educational leadership teams comprised of both dominantly located and minoritized leaders. More specifically, because contending with inequities experienced by gender and sexually minoritized (GSM) individuals is often viewed as a lower priority relative to other equity-deserving groups, focusing on policymaking through the frame of this specific minoritized group is particularly relevant. This article presents a conceptual framework that establishes coherence between the various facets of team-based, equity-related policymaking, which include team dynamics, the degree to which leaders adopt equity-oriented leadership practices, and the unique contexts in which the policy is crafted. Moreover, the framework highlights how these policymaking factors are influenced by a coalescence of the identities; lived experiences; and dispositions, beliefs, and assumptions of the dominantly located and GSM leaders involved in the policymaking process.

Keywords: Equity, system educational leadership, gender and sexually minoritized leaders, equity-oriented leadership, team dynamics, policymaking

Introduction

The inequities experienced by minoritized groups are one of the greatest challenges facing education systems today (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018; Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021; United Nations, 2020; Ward et al., 2015). Globally, there is a growing disparity in education outcomes between dominantly located and minoritized groups (OECD, 2018; United Nations, 2020). In the context of this work, the term dominantly located describes individuals whose social locations are closely aligned with the societal norms attached to prevailing power holders. This includes those who are White, cisgender (internal sense of gender matches the sex that was assigned at birth), heterosexual, male, English- speaking, and in a socioeconomic position of middle class or higher. A raised moral and ethical consciousness for a more socially just education system has emerged in recent years (Gumus et al., 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2018); however, so too has a more polarized society (Strom et al., 2018) which, together, engender a complex and, at times, enigmatic education landscape. Although there is widespread agreement that educational equity is of great importance, significant inequities in education systems worldwide continue to be reproduced and expanded (Croizet et al., 2019; Shields, 2018; Valencia, 2010).

Educational leaders are at the forefront of delivering solutions that increase equity in education and, as such, play a pivotal role in improving outcomes for minoritized students (Leithwood, 2021). However, education systems are rife with oppressive structures, reinforcing hegemonic power norms, which refer to the dominant social norms associated with prevailing power holders, that ultimately exacerbate social inequities (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015; Shields, 2018). This places educational leaders in a paradoxical position: They are key players in improving equity yet often complicit in perpetuating inequities. This paradox is underscored by the fact that

113

the majority of educational leaders are dominantly located (i.e., White, cisgender, male, heterosexual, middle class, English-speaking), which results in a limited frame of reference when making decisions that impact minoritized groups (Shields, 2018). Relatedly, when faced with equity-related decisions, educational leaders are influenced not only by their practical experiences and theoretical knowledge but also by their values, virtues, dispositions, and assumptions, all of which are framed by their unique contexts (Day et al., 2016). It is salient, then, to consider the experiences of minoritized educational leaders who, by virtue of their lived experiences of oppression and discrimination, bring a divergent frame of reference to developing equity solutions. More specifically, although matters of equity for all minoritized groups are of great importance to the field of educational leadership, there is a dearth of research related to the experiences of gender and sexually minoritized (GSM) educational leaders (deLeon & Brunner, 2013; Fassinger et al., 2010; Payne & Smith, 2018; Tooms, 2007). This gap is undergirded by a concern that while education systems are becoming more attuned to confronting oppressive forces that subjugate individuals who are not dominantly located, the GSM community is often viewed as a lower priority relative to other equity-deserving groups (Payne & Smith, 2018). Considered alongside the rising prevalence of education policies that negatively impact the GSM community (Atterbury, 2023; Wearmouth & Ranger, 2024), there is a timely need to understand more about how GSM-identifying educational leaders make sense of their contributions to equity solutions, particularly in the context of working alongside dominantly located colleagues in a team-based context.

The purpose of this article is to present a conceptual framework that can be used to understand the complex act of equity-related educational policy development when it is undertaken by a team that is composed of both dominantly located and GSM-identifying system education leaders. We chose to focus specifically on the act of policymaking at the system level for two

primary reasons: (a) policy is a significant lever of change in terms of the widespread transformation of education systems (Harris et al., 2021; Honig & Honsa, 2020); and (b) there is a paucity of scholarship related to equity-oriented, system education leadership. The framework was developed through a sense-making exercise among the authors (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), reviewing three core areas of scholarship informed by scoping review methods (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005): equity and equity-oriented leadership, GSM topics in educational leadership, and system leadership in team-based policymaking. This process involved iterative discussions and analysis to synthesize the relevant literature and identify key themes that inform the experiences of GSM system education leaders in equity policy development. The resulting framework intends to establish coherence between the various facets of team-based, equity-related policymaking, which include team dynamics (Zaccaro et al., 2001), the degree to which leaders adopt equity-oriented leadership practices (Braun et al., 2021; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014), and the unique contexts in which the policy is crafted (Hallinger, 2018; Roegman, 2017). Moreover, the framework highlights how these policymaking factors are influenced by a coalescence of the identities; lived experiences; and dispositions, beliefs, and assumptions of the leaders involved in the policymaking process (Day et al., 2016; Gumus et al., 2018; Shields & Hesbol, 2020; Theoharis, 2007). The framework informs policymaking in a practical way by offering system education leaders and other decision-making agents a reflective model that they can utilize when undertaking equity-related policy development. It also provides a cogent representation of the complex conceptual and theoretical notions situated at the nexus of leader positionality, equity-oriented leadership, team-based dynamics, and policymaking.

To introduce the framework, we first provide an analysis of the literature that underpins its design. Then, we describe the framework's components and make clear how it brings together

areas that have been historically disconnected in the scholarly landscape. Finally, we conclude the article with an overview of how the framework can inform system leadership practices and future educational research.

Literature Review

Defining Equity

Broadly, when education is viewed through an equity lens, there is an acknowledgement that minoritized students experience systemic oppression both in and out of school. This demands a socially just and fair education system that addresses differences in needs and circumstances. Beyond this generalization, the debate on defining equity can be bifurcated on two fronts: equity as a matter of opportunity or outcome (Galloway et al., 2015).

The OECD, along with other scholars and organizations (see United Nations, 2020; Szolowicz, 2020; US Department of Education, 2023), situated equity as a matter of access and opportunity in which all students, regardless of their social or economic backgrounds, are more likely to have equal access to education. In other words, equally talented students have the same chance for success in school despite any disparities in their backgrounds (Bøyum, 2014). When equity is viewed as a matter of opportunity, however, no attention is paid to the level of achievement that students are experiencing and, as such, ongoing inequity in outcomes is widely accepted (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). As a middle ground between equity of opportunity and outcome, some consider the notion that all students should receive an adequate education to be a worthwhile aim (see Anderson, 2007; Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). Instead of focusing exclusively on ensuring equal access, proponents of adequacy suggest that all students should be educated to the degree that allows them to be independent in adulthood and contribute productively to society (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). Critics of this orientation of equity argued that it does not address

the vast inequities that exist beyond this minimum threshold, and, as such, inequitable outcomes for minoritized students persist (Anderson, 2007; Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). Brighouse and colleagues (2018) tempered this by suggesting that regardless of whether there is a disparity between those above the threshold, raising the achievement of those at the bottom to an adequate level would make the overall distribution of outcomes more equal.

Many scholars agreed that a focus on equitable educational outcomes is more likely to raise the achievement of minoritized students than equitable access, opportunity, or adequacy (Braun et al., 2021; Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021; Galloway et al., 2015; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). Some argued, however, that pursuing equitable outcomes for all students is an impossible endeavour due to vast differences in talent, effort, skills, aspirations, and abilities (Koski & Reich, 2007) as well as the systems of oppression and inequality that are entrenched in modern society (Ward et al., 2015). Acknowledging this, Galloway and colleagues (2015) called for a focus on the fairness of outcomes rather than equal outcomes. They cautioned, however, against conflating fairness with sameness and instead framed fairness of outcomes as eliminating disparities between groups of students of varying backgrounds. Sahlberg and Cobbold (2021) offered an adaptation to this focus in their suggestion that equity is achieved when all individual students receive an education that allows them to contribute to society productively while students in different social groups (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) achieve similar educational outcomes. While it is clear that there is little consensus on a definition of educational equity, the literature reveals a number of empirically-supported leadership practices that reduce educational inequities.

Equity-oriented Leadership Practices

In a review of 63 empirical studies, Leithwood (2021) sought to identify leadership practices and dispositions likely to improve equitable outcomes for minoritized students. Broadly, he concluded that the integrated leadership model proposed by Leithwood and colleagues (2020) was suitable for improving equity when the associated practices are utilized with an equity orientation (Leithwood, 2021). These practices were conceptualized under the domains of setting directions, building relationships and developing people, developing organizational structures, and improving the instructional program (Leithwood et al., 2020). Additionally, Leithwood (2021) suggested three focus areas that are specific to the purpose of reducing inequities, which include creating authentic partnerships with communities, implementing culturally responsive curricula, and supporting teachers in the utilization of "ambitious forms of instruction for traditionally underserved students" (p. 33). Considered alongside the work of other scholars (see Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Braun et al., 2021; Campbell, 2021; Gumus et al., 2021; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Riehl, 2000; Shields & Hesbol, 2020; Theoharis, 2007), a common set of practices utilized by equity-oriented leaders emerged: (a) setting an equity vision; (b) building capacity; (c) cultivating a culture of inquiry; and (d) building trustful relationships with communities.

Setting an Equity Vision. Equity-oriented educational leaders espouse a commitment to the learning of all students (Leithwood, 2021), seek to build a collective understanding of the root causes of inequity (Braun et al., 2021), and exhibit moral courage to challenge the status quo, and in doing so, disrupt embedded practices that perpetuate disparities for minoritized students (Shields, 2018).

Building Capacity. Equity-oriented leaders acknowledge that new skills, knowledge, and attitudes are essential to reduce inequities and, as such, prioritize capacity building for leaders,

teachers, and other educational agents. They identify gaps between current and desired equity-oriented practices and beliefs and foster a shared commitment to filling them (Leithwood, 2021) by using inquiry-focused, job-embedded professional development (Braun et al., 2021). In terms of beliefs, it is widely acknowledged that challenging deficit thinking is an integral piece of pursuing an equity agenda (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Campbell, 2021; Gumus et al., 2021; Shields & Hesbol, 2020; Weiler & Hinnant-Crawford, 2021). Deficit thinking places responsibility for a lack of success on a student's family, background, or innate characteristics, thereby absolving educators from any culpability (García & Guerra, 2004; Sharma, 2018; Valencia, 2010). As such, when individuals or groups of students do not perform in a normative manner, educators pathologize them and issue prescriptive initiatives or programs that serve to address the perceived deficits (Shields, 2018; Valencia, 2010). Equity-oriented leaders foster an anti-deficit thinking mindset, which involves a strength-based approach in which educators seek to leverage the skills and experiences of all students to support their success while also critically challenging the ways in which the hegemonic norms of the system are creating barriers (Shields, 2018).

Creating a Culture of Inquiry. Because the root causes of inequity are often deeply embedded in organizational practices, it is important that equity-oriented leaders utilize data to bring issues of equity to the surface (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). By highlighting measures that indicate disparities between minoritized and dominantly located students, a sense of urgency and ownership becomes possible (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014; Lash & Sanchez, 2022; Skrla, 2004). To translate data into action, Lash and Sanchez (2022) suggested that leaders prioritize the creation of professional learning communities that have an equity orientation and a praxis approach. This is echoed by Ainscow and Sandill (2010), who highlighted the importance of educators "gathering, generating, and interpreting information within a school in order to create an inquiring stance" (p.

404), which can be used to create a dissonance in thinking that "provides a challenge to existing assumptions about teaching and learning" (p. 404). Relatedly, Ishimaru and Galloway (2014) argued that leaders with limited practice in fostering inquiry cultures are more likely to make decisions based on personal opinions and assumptions rather than acting based on evidence.

Building Trustful Relationships with Communities. Establishing trustful and authentic relationships with all communities served by a school is a key practice of equity-oriented educational leaders (Gumus et al., 2021; Harris & Jones, 2019; Khalifa, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). In fact, Leithwood (2021) concluded that this leadership practice had more supportive evidence than any of the other practices he incorporated into his equity-oriented leadership framework. Similarly, in a study conducted by Shields and Hesbol (2020), they found that equity-oriented leaders "established mutually respective relationships with students, staff, families, and the community as a non-negotiable, prior to working with the teaching staff on implementing equitable and socially-just instructional strategies" (p. 16). This finding emphasizes the importance of relationship building and suggests that it is the foundation on which all other equity-oriented endeavours are built. The label of "community organizing" is used in the equitable leadership discourse in reference to the practices of an educational leader who fosters these deep connections with underserved communities. In doing so, these communities are empowered to have a stronger influence on school decision-making (Khalifa, 2012; Khalifa et al, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2021), as well on the formulation of education policies at the school, regional, and national levels (Sahlberg & Cobbold, 2021). Harris and Jones (2019) further highlighted the importance of community organizing in their assertion that because many minoritized parents and caregivers have experienced their own schooling in a negative way, educational leaders need to be more intentional and culturally sensitive in fostering relationships.

Having established several perspectives on defining equity generally and outlining broad leadership practices that reduce inequities, we turn now to an analysis of literature that deals specifically with gender and sexually-minoritized perspectives as this equity-seeking group is the subject of the framework.

Gender and Sexually-Minoritized Perspectives on Educational Leadership

Although matters of equity for all minoritized groups are of great importance to the field of educational leadership, there is a hierarchy of priority for different categories of marginalization within the broader frame of minoritized groups. For example, in a study conducted by O'Malley and Capper (2015), which explored principal preparation for social justice-oriented leadership, over 90% of participants reported that the identity categories of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and culture received a high or moderate emphasis in preparation programs compared to 48% for sexual orientation. Payne and Smith (2018) echoed this finding in their conclusion that equity-oriented educational leaders often view the GSM community as a lower concern relative to other equity-deserving groups. In terms of the scholarship in this area, Kahn and Gorski (2016) argued that most research on GSM issues in educational contexts is focused on the student experience, though they acknowledged that scholarly work on the experiences of 2SLGBTQIIA+ teachers was emerging. Beyond classroom teachers, many scholars have suggested that there is a dearth of research related to the experiences of GSM educational leaders (deLeon & Brunner, 2013; Fassinger et al., 2010; Payne & Smith, 2018; Tooms, 2007). Considering this scholarship gap alongside four key factors in the educational landscape, a strong claim for exploring the nexus of educational inequities experienced by the GSM community and educational leadership emerges. These factors include: (a) the critical role leaders play in challenging heteronormative and gender-normative policies and practices in education (Kahn & Gorski, 2016); (b) the perceived reluctance

or hostility of many school administrators as it relates to inclusivity for GSM students and staff (Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003; Payne & Smith, 2018); (c) the emerging tenuous political climate concerning GSM issues in education and, more broadly, society (Toledo & Maher, 2021); and (d) the widespread findings that GSM students and teachers experience discrimination, harassment, and a lack of belonging at school (see Dimberg et al., 2021; Duarte, 2020; Munro et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2016). To explore GSM perspectives further, we organize the review under three topics: (a) gender normativity, (b) hegemonic masculinity, and (c) heteronormativity.

Gender Normativity in Educational Leadership

The reinforcement of a gender performance that reflects social norms and the discrimination of those whose performance is divergent from these norms is well documented in education. Kahn and Gorski (2016) cited several events that laid the foundation for the normative and dichotomous gender roles that persist in education today. This included the fact that teaching was, at first, a profession for men only as societal norms in the 17th and 18th centuries demanded that women remain at home. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the departure of men from teaching to obtain more lucrative careers, single women without children, and eventually all women, were permitted to become teachers and began to dominate the profession. As the practice of teaching became more feminized, men began seeking more masculinized domains (i.e., power, prestige, profitability) and, as such, moved into school administration (Kahn & Gorski, 2016). With male dominance in school leadership becoming more entrenched, the norm that men are in a position of leading while women hold the role of following was consistently reinforced (Gill & Arnold, 2015). These administrators were historically responsible for policing and monitoring the degree to which the appearance and behaviours of teachers reflected the gender norms associated with their biological sex as determined by their societal contexts (Kahn & Gorski, 2016; Rottmann,

2006). This resulted in hegemonic role behaviour becoming paramount to a teacher's ability to secure and maintain employment and, as Kahn and Gorski (2016) argued, in many cases, became more important than teaching ability.

Hegemonic Masculinity in Educational Leadership

Hegemonic masculinity situates the dominant socially constructed version of masculinity (i.e., hyper-masculine, authoritative, unemotional, and heterosexual) over other expressions of masculinity as well as femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In the context of educational leadership, it has been argued that historical and current structures of oppression serve to reinforce hegemonic masculinity and, thus, male dominance in the field (Gill & Arnold, 2015; Mackinnon, 2021). Wang and colleagues (2022) contended further that leaders who do not exhibit prototypical masculine characteristics are "believed to be incongruent with leadership roles and are subject to extra scrutiny, marginalization, and discrimination" (p. 559). This is reinforced persuasively by McClellan and colleagues (2008) in their argument that "society expects – problematically so – women to behave like other people in positions of power without appearing too masculine. And men are expected to behave like men" (p. 2). The ubiquitous nature of masculinized educational leadership is not surprising when considered alongside the evolution of prevailing leadership theories such as transactional leadership theory, transformational leadership theory and, to some extent, instructional leadership theory (Bates, 2010; Lakomski & Evers, 2020). These theories each situate a single individual at the centre of educational leadership who, in most cases, is viewed in a masculine way (Gill & Arnold, 2015).

Heteronormativity in Educational Leadership

Heteronormativity is defined as a hierarchical social system that presumes a gender and sexual binary in which heterosexual identities are privileged to the extent that they are normalized

and naturalized. As such, a set of cultural norms are engendered which enforce beliefs and practices that perpetuate heterosexuality as the normal orientation while subjugating and sanctioning any orientation that deviates (Courtney, 2014; Duarte, 2020; Herz & Johansson, 2015; Toomey et al., 2012). In the context of education, the institutionalization of heteronormativity has occurred through many of the same systems that were discussed previously in relation to gender normativity. In fact, many scholars study both phenomena together because of their concomitant nature (see deLeon & Brunner, 2013; Kahn & Gorski, 2016; Payne & Smith, 2018; Rottmann, 2006, Toomey et al., 2012). This is articulated by Kahn and Gorski (2016), who argued that "gender-normativity and heteronormativity often are policed through some of the same or overlapping norming mechanisms, making either difficult to discuss with appreciable sophistication without considering the other" (p. 16). With specific regard to sexual orientation, given that teachers and educational leaders were (and are) held to moral standards determined by society, the historical characterization of non-heterosexuality as disordered, unnatural, deviant, and criminal has resulted in the oppression and, in many cases, punishment of those who do not conform to heteronormative appearances and behaviours (Courtney, 2014; Kahn & Gorski, 2016; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). Heteronormativity pervades current education systems in many ways, which include the expectation that educators embody a sexually neutral and gender-normative self (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021) even though the open discussion of marriages and families by heterosexual educators is widely accepted (Connell, 2015; deLeon & Brunner, 2013). Furthermore, curriculum and associated resources are widely devoid of non-heterosexual representation, which reinforces the normative nature of heterosexual relationships in students from a young age (Duarte, 2020; Payne & Smith, 2018). Regarding educational leadership, Lugg (2003) argued that in addition to expectations of upholding masculinist principles, educational

leaders are also expected to model heterosexuality themselves while policing the sexuality of others. This ultimately puts non-heterosexual leaders in a paradoxical position that requires them to retreat into a protective and assimilative silence (deLeon & Brunner, 2013; Lugg, 2003; Lugg & Koschoreck, 2003; Lugg & Tooms, 2010). This silence engenders deep-seated internalized homophobia, which further perpetuates heteronormativity as non-heterosexual teachers and leaders are reluctant to act as role models for GSM students or to advocate for change out of fear of professional repercussions (Duarte, 2020).

Based on the reviewed literature, it is reasonable to suggest that the leadership identities, lived experiences, and dispositions, beliefs, and assumptions of GSM-identifying educational leaders vary from those of their dominantly located colleagues. As such, it is worthwhile to explore how these leaders may function in a team setting. To do so, we consider team dynamics through the lenses of effectiveness, leadership, and learning.

Team Dynamics

As the field of educational leadership evolves from the traditional model of single-authority leadership to a more shared and distributed frame, understanding how effective leadership teams function becomes increasingly important. Though there is limited research on team dynamics specifically in the context of system education, insights can be drawn from broader scholarship on organizational behavior. Cohen and Bailey (1997) define a team as a "collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems" (p. 241). Similarly, McCarter and White (2016) characterize a team as a "collective group" that shares common interests and has "energy around delving into a given set of topics" (p. 95). Applied to system education leadership, a leadership team can be viewed as an interdependent

ecosystem, united under a shared goal of ensuring high-quality education for all students. This interdependence is especially significant in contexts where system leadership team members each manage distinct portfolios (e.g., human resources, student services, teaching and learning) but must collaborate for system-wide success. This cross-cutting nature of leadership is particularly crucial for equity-focused agendas, which permeate all areas of the educational landscape.

Team Effectiveness

Marks et al. (2001) argued that team success depends not only on the collective talents of its members but also on the processes through which team members interact to achieve organizational goals. Barnett and McCormick (2012) expanded on this by identifying four key processes that contribute to team effectiveness: cognitive, motivational, affective, and coordinative.

Cognitive Processes. Cognitive processes include the development of shared mental models, where team members understand, explain, and predict the environment in similar ways (Barnett & McCormick, 2012). While scholars differ on the specific definition of mental models, Decuyper and colleagues (2010) emphasized that mental models serve as a group-level system for encoding, storing, and retrieving information across team members to work more efficiently. Senge (1990) offered a broader view, characterizing mental models as involving a shared understanding of the current reality, a collective vision for the future, and a common approach to navigating the gap between them.

Motivational Processes. Team cohesion and collective efficacy are essential motivational factors that sustain a team's efforts (Barnett & McCormick, 2012). Cohesion can be task-oriented—where members work together to achieve shared goals—or social, based on the strength of interpersonal relationships within the team (Zaccaro et al., 2001). Task cohesion refers to the

collective effort to accomplish goals that would be unachievable individually, while social cohesion emphasizes the bonds that keep members engaged with the team. As Barnett and McCormick (2012) found, a strong sense of cohesion helps drive team motivation by fostering commitment to the team's success.

Affective Processes. Affective processes involve the team climate, trust, and respect among members (Barnett & McCormick, 2012). Interpersonal trust plays a critical role in reducing conflict, increasing commitment, and facilitating constructive interactions among members. Decuyper and colleagues (2010) and McCarter and White (2016) suggested that a positive team climate creates a space for open dialogue, allowing members to share different perspectives and critique ideas, which ultimately enhances performance. Zaccaro and colleagues (2001) also highlighted how affective processes relate to the overall emotional tone of the group, either emerging from collective dynamics or reflecting the emotional states of individual members.

Coordinative Processes. Coordinative processes refer to the technical aspects of team functioning, such as timing, sequencing, communication, and monitoring interdependent actions (Marks et al., 2001). Marks and colleagues (2001) distinguished between progress monitoring, systems monitoring, and team monitoring, each of which play a role in ensuring that teams stay on track toward their goals. Progress monitoring involves tracking the achievement of goals and adjusting plans as needed, while systems monitoring ensures that resources are appropriately allocated and that the environment remains conducive to goal attainment. Team monitoring refers to how members support each other in fulfilling their responsibilities, whether through coaching, feedback, or direct assistance.

Team Leadership

Leadership processes within teams interact dynamically across the four processes of effectiveness and contribute to the overall success of the team (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Zaccaro et al., 2001). Broadly, team leadership involves setting directions, managing operations, and building the internal capacity of teams to solve problems independently (Barnett & McCormick, 2012). Leadership processes in educational teams often align with distributed leadership models (Harris, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2020; Spillane, 2005), where leadership responsibilities are shared among team members. Hackman and Wageman (2005) suggested three types of coaching that leaders can use to distribute responsibilities: motivational, educational, and consultative coaching. Decuyper and colleagues (2010) emphasized that such mentorship, combined with reflexive practices and a willingness to learn alongside the team, enhances problem-solving and communication, creating a higher-functioning team.

Zaccaro and colleagues (2001) highlighted the role of leadership in navigating the complexities of organizational problems, particularly in education. As teams operate in socially complex and contextually driven domains, leaders (such as superintendents) must guide their teams in identifying and implementing solutions. Leaders not only establish goals but also provide direction, evaluate solutions, and plan their implementation, thus shaping the team's ability to achieve its objectives.

Team Learning

High-functioning teams not only accomplish tasks but also learn and grow collectively (Decuyper et al., 2010). Organizational learning within teams involves two main phases: (a) searching for information beyond team boundaries; and (b) incorporating or rejecting the newfound information (Honig, 2003). New information can enter a team through individual

members, designated boundary spanners (e.g., instructional coaches), or external mandates (e.g., ministry guidelines). Once the information is introduced, teams engage in interpretation, storage, and retrieval, using new insights to inform future decisions (Honig, 2003). In education, such learning is crucial for leadership teams as they navigate evolving challenges and contexts, particularly when crafting equity-focused policies.

Because the output of conceptual framework is equity-related policies that intend to improve outcomes for minoritized students, we turn now to an analysis of literature related to policymaking in educational contexts.

Educational Policymaking

Honig (2006) highlighted the significance of educational policy, arguing that it serves as a "significant lever of change in an institution intended to serve all children and youth" and that it affects "multiple dimensions of social welfare" (p. 1). Despite this, Leithwood and colleagues (1995) claimed that many policies fail to achieve their intended change, while Harris and Jones (2019) emphasized that the quality of policy implementation often matters more than the policy itself. System education leaders play a pivotal role in the development and enactment of local policies, as well as in translating higher-level policies—such as those from school boards or ministries—into actionable strategies within schools (Aguayo et al., 2023; Harris & Jones, 2019; Honig, 2013). This dual role enables system leaders to exert an indirect but significant impact on student outcomes (Aguayo et al., 2023; Harris & Jones, 2019; Honig, 2013).

Regarding the implementation of these potentially impactful public policies, Honig (2003) argued that system leaders often focus on compliance, accountability, and centralized decision-making, with little room for meaningful, collaborative leadership (Honig, 2003). This was captured this in her assertion that central office administrators often help schools implement decisions made

at the district level rather than supporting schools in making their own decisions. Similarly, Wong et al. (2020) described the phenomenon of "controlled autonomy," in which system leaders provide school leaders with the illusion of decentralized decision-making while retaining ultimate control over what actually happens in practice. To counter this trend, Honig (2013) argued for policies that give system leaders the room to lead for performance rather than mere compliance. Brown and Duignan (2021) added that a lack of preparation for system leaders before entering the policy arena is a major barrier to effective policymaking. To address these challenges, the literature points to four key factors in developing effective policy: attention to context, collaborative development, the use of research and evidence, and stakeholder engagement.

Attention to Context

Context is a critical factor in the success of any policy, especially in the complex landscape of education. Harris and Jones (2019) argued that "the effectiveness of any policy cannot be independent of context and culture but rather is profoundly shaped and moulded by it" (p. 196). This is particularly true in the case of social policies, such as those focused on equity, which often address what Head and Alford (2015) described as "wicked problems"—issues that are complex, unpredictable, and value-laden (p. 712). In such situations, system education leaders must navigate a pluralistic policy context often driven by the political narratives of those in power (Brown, 2014b).

An example of this can be seen in Saskatchewan, where school superintendents were recently directed to implement policies requiring parental consent for student pronoun changes. This directive, met with resistance from GSM advocacy groups, placed system leaders in a no-win situation with little consensus on how to proceed (Langager, 2023). Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) underscored the importance of context in policymaking, noting that broad-reaching policies

cannot be assumed to apply equally in all circumstances. System leaders must develop local policies that account for these contextual factors while allowing frontline leaders to interpret and implement them in ways that are meaningful within their own unique environments.

Collaborative Development

Policymaking in the education sector, especially when addressing social issues, cannot be perfected or universally standardized. Brown (2014a) argued that expertise in policy development is often context-specific and temporal, making collaborative processes essential. Policy development is strengthened when it includes diverse perspectives and values, which reflect the lived experiences and beliefs of the stakeholders affected by policy outcomes (Aguayo et al., 2023). Head and Alford (2015) extended this argument, suggesting that divergent viewpoints should be shared to define problems and explore appropriate responses in a collaborative, systems-thinking environment.

Collaborative policymaking is particularly relevant in educational contexts, where decisions impact a broad range of stakeholders, including educators, students, and communities. By engaging these stakeholders, system leaders can better identify potential challenges and craft policies that are responsive to the complexities of the educational landscape. Such collaborative processes are more likely to yield policies that have higher utility and are better suited to addressing the needs of diverse populations.

Use of Research and Evidence

The use of research and evidence in policymaking has been widely discussed in the literature (see Brown, 2014a, 2014b; Honig, 2003; Ion et al., 2019). Oakley (2000) argued that policymakers have a moral imperative to base their decisions on the best available evidence (as cited in Brown, 2014a). Brown (2014a) highlighted the growing number of government initiatives

that mandate explicit connections between education policy and research evidence, such as the Canadian province of Alberta's recent overhaul of its strategic planning process to incorporate a stronger link between data and decision-making (Alberta Education, 2024).

Despite the well-established importance of utilizing research and evidence in the policymaking arena, Ion and colleagues (2019) contended that the practical mobilization of research is often limited due to a mismatch between the needs of policymakers and the research produced. They call for greater "boundary crossing" between researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders to ensure that research is relevant and useful for decision-making (p. 3). Honig (2003) emphasized the need for balance, warning against both over-reliance on past information, which may lead to outdated policies, and the inundation of policymakers with too much new research, which can overwhelm their decision-making processes. Effective policymaking requires careful consideration of the appropriate mix of new and existing evidence to inform decisions.

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement is a critical element of effective policymaking (Cohen et al., 2018; Canadian Public Health Association, 2010). Cohen et al. (2018) argued that policy should emerge from debate among a wide array of voices, rather than being dictated solely by elite decision-makers. Orr and Rogers (2011), as cited in Cohen et al. (2018), identified four forms of stakeholder engagement that are particularly relevant to educational policymaking:

- Co-production: Involves collaboration among stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and community members, on specific projects.
- Democratic governance: Refers to formal decision-making structures, such as school boards and parent councils.

- Community organizing: Occurs when stakeholders with common concerns work together to demand action and hold leaders accountable.

- Social movements: Expands on community organizing by advocating for systemic change based on deeply held ideological commitments.

Taken together, these forms of engagement highlight the importance of involving diverse perspectives in policy development. Engaging stakeholders helps ensure that policies are responsive to the needs of all affected parties and increases the likelihood of successful implementation. Leithwood (2021), in his review of educational equity studies, concluded that building trusting relationships and engaging meaningfully with stakeholders is key to successful reform efforts.

In the next section, we present an overview of the conceptual framework, which draws together the major theoretical and conceptual threads that emerged in the literature review.

Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 1, the center of the framework is represented by a funnel, which indicates the interplay between the three primary nodes of leadership influencing the development of educational policies that intend to improve outcomes for minoritized students. These nodes include team dynamics (Zaccaro et al., 2001), the degree to which leaders adopt equity-oriented leadership practices (Braun et al., 2021; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014), and the unique contexts in which the policy is crafted (Hallinger, 2018; Roegman, 2017).

McCarter and White (2016) characterized a team as a "collective group" (p. 95), which is an "aggregation of people that share some common interests and have energy around delving into a given set of topics" (p. 95). Taken together and applied to this framework, a system leadership team functions as an interdependent ecosystem under a shared and unified objective to craft high-

quality policies that intend to improve outcomes for minoritized students. The dynamics of the team, represented in the first node, can be understood through three frames: effectiveness, team leadership, and the way the team learns. The effectiveness of the team is contingent upon the collective skills and talents of its members as well as the process that the team use to interact with each other when engaging in policymaking (Marks et al., 2001; McCormick, 2012). The effectiveness is also closely tied to the extant leadership practices (e.g., setting directions, managing team operations, building capacity) that drive the work of the team (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Zaccaro et al., 2001). Specifically, and in relation to educational inequities, the degree to which the team utilizes equity-oriented leadership practices, represented in the second node, influences the policymaking process. For example, if the team is collectively committed to using policy as a lever to build the capacities of educational agents as they relate to fostering more equitable learning environments (e.g., by challenging deficit thinking), they are more likely to be successful in improving outcomes for minoritized students (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2021; Shields & Hesbol, 2020). This act of team-based policymaking is underpinned by organizational learning (Ducuyper et al., 2010), which is concerned with searching for information outside of the team and the use (or not) of that information by incorporating it into the actions and decision-making of the team (Honig, 2003).

The dynamics of the team and the equity-oriented leadership practices its members utilize are inherently informed by the unique contexts in which policymaking takes place (Gurr et al., 2018; Hallinger, 2018; Lee & Hallinger, 2012; Leithwood, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020; Molla & Gale, 2019; Roegman, 2017), which is represented in the third node. Leadership teams reconcile their equity work with contextual demands by adapting their practices (Leithwood, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020) or by allowing the contextual forces to directly influence, or at times

restrict, their equity-related decision making (Lee & Hallinger, 2012; Hallinger, 2018). Conversely, they might maintain their vision for equity policymaking while finding ways to work toward it despite any opposing contextual demands (Galloway et al., 2015; Roegman, 2017). Coviello and DeMatthews (2021) argued that teams who intentionally use equity-oriented leadership practices are more likely to employ this approach and, as such, spend significant time identifying areas of anticipated or active resistance to equity-focused initiatives. This informs team decisions about how to strategically frame changes such that they can proactively mitigate the resistance (Coviello and DeMatthews, 2021).

The interplay of the three nodes does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is influenced by the unique leadership identities; lived experiences; and dispositions, beliefs, and assumptions of each leader involved in the policymaking process (Day et al., 2016; Gumus et al., 2018; Shields & Hesbol, 2020; Theoharis, 2007). In terms of how these unique leader attributes are formed, there is a divergence between GSM-identifying leaders and their dominantly located colleagues because of the insidious nature of gender normativity (Gill & Arnold, 2015; Kahn & Gorski, 2016), heteronormativity (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021), and hegemonic masculinity (Wang et al., 2022) in the field of educational leadership. This is represented by the barrier between the two groups, which includes arrows that direct the flow of power, and thus symbolize the intentional or unintentional role that dominantly located leaders play in reinforcing these norms.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework
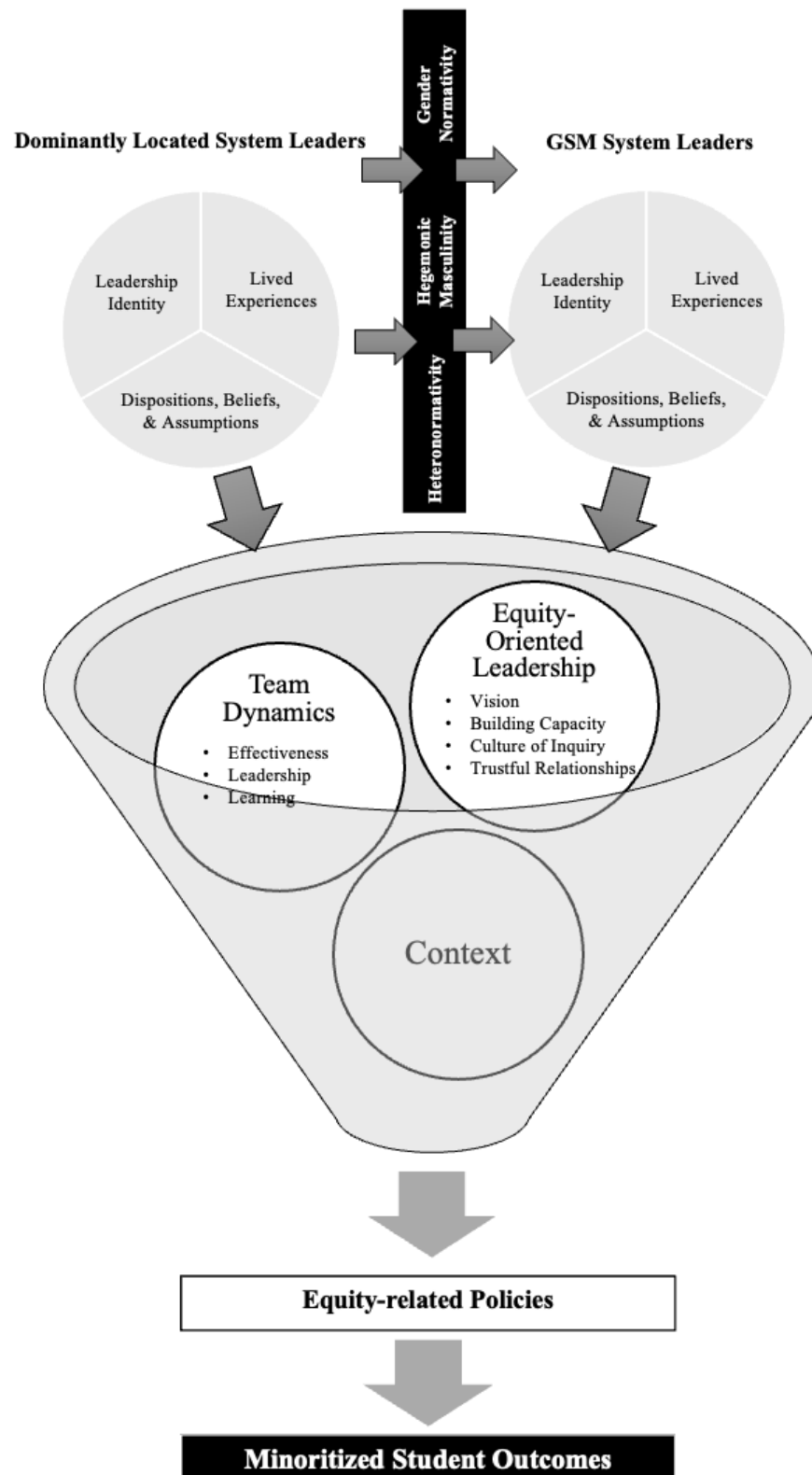
This overall influence of both groups flows into the funnel from each side and blends with the three nodes, causing the dimensions of the equity policymaking process outlined in the framework to become inseparable. This coalescence ultimately impacts the equity-related policies that emerge and, in turn, the educational outcomes of minoritized students.

Framework Application for Research

Future research could focus on applying this framework to better understand how equity policies are developed, especially when system leadership teams include both dominantly located leaders and those from GSM communities. As research on GSM leaders remains limited, more studies are needed that explore the specific contributions these leaders bring to the development of policies that impact minoritized students.

One avenue for further inquiry involves examining how leadership teams navigate the intersection of their members' identities, lived experiences, and beliefs during the policymaking process. Building on the work of Day et al. (2016) and Gumus et al. (2018), researchers could investigate how leadership teams use their perspectives to create policies that address equity issues while also challenging prevailing norms of gender-normativity, heteronormativity, and hegemonic masculinity (Kahn & Gorski, 2016; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). Understanding how these leadership teams negotiate power dynamics and work through tensions between dominantly located leaders and GSM-identifying leaders would provide valuable insights into creating and implementing equity policies.

Additionally, researchers could focus on team dynamics in policymaking, particularly around cognitive, affective, motivational, and coordinative processes (Barnett & McCormick, 2012; Decuyper et al., 2010). Studies could investigate how the interdependent relationships within system leadership teams shape the ways in which they engage with equity-related challenges,

develop shared mental models (Senge, 1990), and foster trust (McCarter & White, 2016), deepening our understanding of how effective team processes contribute to meaningful policymaking and successful outcomes for minoritized students.

Finally, research and evidence use in educational policymaking is an area that continues to warrant further investigation. As noted by Brown (2014a) and Honig (2003), policymaking often suffers from a disconnect between academic research and practical needs. Future research could explore how leadership teams can better integrate evidence into their decision-making, potentially by building stronger boundary-crossing relationships between researchers and practitioners (Ion et al., 2019). Such research might focus on providing actionable insights into how evidence-informed policymaking can ensure that the policies developed are both well-informed and practically relevant.

Framework Application for Practice

For system leadership teams engaged in developing equity policies, several key considerations should be considered to positively impact the educational outcomes of minoritized student populations. First, leadership teams must attend to the unique contexts in which they operate. As Harris and Jones (2019) argued, policies cannot be separated from the cultural and contextual realities of the environments in which they are implemented. Teams need to be mindful of the specific challenges and opportunities presented by their local context, ensuring that policies are adaptable and responsive to the needs of their student populations. This includes recognizing the political and social pressures that may shape the policy landscape and finding ways to craft solutions that consider the needs of minoritized groups while managing external constraints.

Additionally, the diversity of perspectives within a leadership team can be a powerful asset in crafting equitable policies. Leadership teams would do well to prioritize inclusive and

participatory processes that engage multiple voices, including teachers, students, parents, and community stakeholders. By fostering collaborative policymaking environments, teams can ensure that their policies reflect a wide range of experiences and are more likely to address the root causes of inequity. Additionally, diverse leadership teams can bring unique perspectives to the table, underscoring how important it is that team members from minoritized backgrounds, such as GSM leaders, are fully included in the decision-making process and their insights valued (Aguayo et al., 2023).

System leaders should also be attentive to the role of trust and interpersonal relationships within their teams. As McCarter and White (2016) and Decuyper et al. (2010) have shown, a positive team climate, characterized by mutual respect and trust, can significantly enhance the performance and cohesion of leadership teams. By creating spaces for open dialogue and critical reflection, leadership teams can better navigate the tensions that arise in the policy development process and work towards shared goals that prioritize equity.

Finally, it behooves system leadership teams to establish structures that allow for the continuous incorporation of relevant research and data into their decision-making processes, while heeding Honig's (2003) admonition about balancing the search for new evidence with the effective use of existing data. Leadership teams need to be discerning in their research use, ensuring they are not overwhelmed by information and instead integrate evidence most pertinent to their context and goals.

Conclusion

This article offers a conceptual framework to guide system leadership teams in developing equity-oriented educational policies. By focusing on team dynamics, equity-driven leadership practices, and contextual influences, the framework offers practical tools for addressing

139

educational inequities. It highlights the importance of considering the diverse identities and experiences of leaders, especially those from GSM communities, and how these influence policymaking processes. Policymaking at the system level is inherently complex, requiring attention to context, collaboration, evidence, and stakeholder engagement. By fostering inclusivity, system leaders can create more equitable learning environments and improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

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