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## How Can Equity-Focused Inquiry Uncover the Causes for the Opportunity Gaps Our Students of Color Experience?

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HOW CAN EQUITY-FOCUSED INQUIRY UNCOVER THE CAUSES FOR THE OPPORTUNITY  
GAPS OUR STUDENTS OF COLOR EXPERIENCE?

by

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## DEDICATION

This study is for the students at my school who inspired me to investigate this problem of practice. I started this journey many years ago with the naïve hope that our school was the exception and that all students were given equal opportunities to succeed. Although we have grown as a school and worked towards equity, I recognize the work that still needs to be done. I dedicate this dissertation to you for inspiring me to be a better educator and advocate for you each day.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine how equity-focused inquiry could uncover gaps in opportunity for our students of color and determine root causes for those gaps. Through Inquiry as Stance and Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the driving frameworks, this study used practitioner inquiry to understand what gaps, if any, were present for students of color within our school. If gaps in opportunity were present, this study also aimed to discover what school level factors were contributing to the gaps. Three cycles of inquiry were used to help answer the following questions: (1) What common gaps in opportunity for students of color found in literature could potentially be present within our school? (2) What gaps in opportunity for students of color, if any, are present within our school? (3) What previously identified or unique school-level factors that impede students of color in our school are causing our instruction/curriculum to not achieve success for all students on state tests?

The cycles of inquiry produced evidence that there were several gaps in opportunity for students of color present within our school including gaps for our African American and Latinx students as well as our English Language Learners (ELLs) and their families. The findings and implications from the inquiry cycles will help teachers, staff, and administration to rethink practices and teacher preparation in order to create a more equitable school for all students.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELL .....	English Language Learner
ESSA.....	Every Student Succeeds Act
MAP .....	Measure of Academic Progress
NCLB.....	No Child Left Behind
NWEA .....	Northwest Education Association
RIT .....	Rasch Unit Score

## CHAPTER 1

### GAPS IN OPPORTUNITY FOR OUR STUDENTS OF COLOR

*“What do we want? What is the thing we are after? ...We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of other American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals?” -W.E.B. Du Bois*

#### **Introduction**

Throughout every school year, I work with many dedicated educators who strive to ensure all of their students’ academic needs are being met. Many will differentiate their instruction or plan intricate and engaging lessons in order to meet their students where they are in their individual learning progressions. Although many teachers spend countless hours focusing on differentiation and plan lessons to meet student needs, the outcomes in state test scores for students of color do not always reflect equitability. Although many educators would not describe state assessments as their favorite part of the year, many recognize the necessity of having an accountability measure for student achievement. Although assessments do not tell educators everything, they do tell us something. As an administrator, I have never found state assessments to be the best measure of student capabilities or teacher efficacy. The purpose of the assessments are to monitor progress and growth throughout the year as well as to determine if students “meet” the criteria needed in order to show mastery of the standards in their current grade (South Carolina Department of Education, 2021). Although state assessments help to hold schools accountable and give feedback on students' understanding, they are only one

indicator and they do not always account for cultural diversity among students. Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) data is designed to monitor growth throughout the year and year-by-year. Students take the MAP test in the fall, winter, and spring of each school year. Student progress can be viewed on the NWEA website or on the school data dashboards. I see the students in our elementary school working hard and making growth consistently based on MAP data, however, every year in the middle of summer when I receive the email with the student's state test scores from the spring I notice a common theme. Although as a school we made growth, there is a disparity between the scores of students of color compared to white students. The students who are white and from families with means tend to score noticeably higher than African American students, Latinx students, English language learners, and students of low socioeconomic status.

The achievement gap is a phrase that is often used to describe this disparity and the differences in state assessment scores. However, the discrepancies in achievement are not due to major differences in student ability level, but due instead to differences in opportunities given to students at school and elsewhere (Milner, 2012). As an administrator, I have sat in team meetings where teachers discuss how to make their classrooms more equitable, using data to help inform instruction and knowledge of students' interests and backgrounds to help drive instruction. I have observed lessons where every student in the room is working on a different activity that meets their specific needs as a learner. I have helped to facilitate and participated in professional development with our teachers where they discuss differentiation strategies. I wonder how there is still a gap despite our teachers working hard every day to differentiate, use research-driven instructional practices, engage students and so much more in order to

avoid this happening. What can be done to close this gap and give every student the tools they need to be successful in school?

It is hard to pinpoint a definitive reason as there are many contributing factors to this gap in achievement, however, it is clear that there are some schools that have managed to overcome it more successfully than others, and there must be a reason as to why. What are we doing, or not doing, as a system to support all students in an equitable manner? This dissertation will help explore systemic factors that contribute to discrepancies in achievement for students of color.

### **Problem of Practice**

The problem of practice explored in this research study was whether the common opportunity gaps seen in schools across multiple contexts are also present within our school. According to the CCSD Data Dashboards (2020), on the MAP reading assessment white students tested in the 63rd percentile on average, whereas African American students tested in the 42nd percentile on average and Latinx students tested in the 39th. On the math MAP assessment, the average percentile for white students was the 49th, while African American students tested in the 34th and Latinx students tested in the 36th (CCSD Data Dashboards, 2020). Similar to many other schools throughout the country, our school has noticed that there are discrepancies in achievement among different demographics of students (Adler-Greene, 2019; CCSD Data Dashboards, 2020; Patrick, 2015). Milner (2012) expressed the belief that these discrepancies are caused by differences in the opportunities students receive. First, I explain standardization in schools and how it contributes to the gaps in student achievement. Next, I will describe

how students of different races experience gaps in opportunity and how they have contributed to the discrepancies in student achievement nationally.

Education reform and discrepancies in achievement have become synonymous (Hess, 2011). Federal reforms such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Ansell, 2011) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Adler-Greene, 2019) have been mandated in an attempt to resolve this widespread issue, but the problem persists throughout the nation (Ansell, 2011). Under ESSA and NCLB, students began to take state standardized assessments (Ansell, 2011). The goal of these assessments was to hold schools accountable for helping every student meet expectations of state standards (Ansell, 2011). Instead, standardization paints the picture that students are not successful rather than looking at the ways institutions have failed them. “In my analysis, standardization, in many ways, is antithetical to diversity because it suggests that all students live and operate in homogeneous environments with equality and equity of opportunity afforded to them” (Milner, 2012, p. 694). Milner (2012) argued that in focusing on the standardized measures, it marginalizes students of diversity and makes the playing field even more uneven. Milner (2012) stated that too much attention is being placed on the notion of the achievement gap, however, where educators and reformers should really be looking is opportunity gaps (p. 693).

All students are not provided with the opportunities they need in order to demonstrate what state agencies often refer to as adequate achievement in school (Garner, 2011). The lack of equal educational opportunities leads to a major discrepancy in achievement for traditionally marginalized groups (Milner, 2012). The lack of similar opportunities can contribute to the differences in achievement that are seen in students of

colors (Milner, 2012). Garner (2011) stated that educational settings, teacher efficacy, students' cultural background, home life, and the school itself all have an impact on student success.

I have always questioned the reason why students at the same school achieve differently on state assessments. Howard (2010) explained that it is easy to identify why students of differing socioeconomic statuses have disparities in achievement levels, but it is not always clear why there are differences in achievement among students of different races. Howard (2010) stated that gaps in socioeconomic status can be attributed to factors such as resources, parental education, employment status and home conditions and tend to be easier to understand, whereas racial disparities can be more complicated and difficult to understand. Opportunity and equity are some of the more evident reasons why not all students are performing at the same level. This research study will examine which gaps in opportunity for students of color are common nationally and determine if those gaps are also present within our school.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to better understand the variation in student achievement in the elementary school in which I am an assistant principal, I have selected Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and Inquiry as Stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1994) as the two theoretical frameworks for this study. Given the persistence of inequitable outcomes for students of color in both my school and across the country, Critical Race Theory can provide an appropriate perspective from which to view this problem of practice (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Also recognizing the systemic nature of the problem and the benefits of collaboration, I recruited and supported a team of teachers to engage

in this work with me through Collaborative Inquiry (Weinbaum, et al., 2004) , a process informed by the *Inquiry as Stance* perspective developed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1994). In this section, I first describe each theory separately and then briefly summarize how I have integrated them into a theoretical framework that is well suited to address the problem of practice and guide my investigation.

Critical Race Theory relates to the problem of practice because it examines why students of color are not always being given the tools to perform at the same level as their peers (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In order to understand the causes of the achievement and opportunity gaps in education, the role of racism must be examined as students of color are the main people affected by the lack of equity (Ladson-Billings, 1995). One cannot talk about discrepancies in achievement without considering the role of race (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The reason for this is due to the fact that historically, different races have shown different levels of achievement according to state test scores (Milner, 2012). Howard (2010) explained that CRT “provides scholars with unique ways to ask important questions about what racism had to do with education” (p. 99).

In addition to using CRT as a guide for data collection and analysis, I also actively engaged fellow stakeholders in my school and community in uncovering previously unknown or unaddressed factors that have contributed to the problem. Collaborative inquiry is a strategy used for strengthening teaching and learning through deconstructing knowledge of current pedagogy and then analyzing, reflecting, and forming hypotheses to help improve practices (Cunningham, 2011). For this work, collaboration with stakeholders and community members was used to foster the rapport



and relationships that was needed to access more sophisticated yet difficult to acquire data.

Using the CRT framework allowed for the gathering of new forms of data, a comparison of this new data with commonly used data, and reanalysis of the data that can shed light on the problem from a less hegemonic perspective and thus opening up new avenues for effective intervention in the future (Howard, 2010).

Inquiry as Stance, a theory of professional knowledge generation proposed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1994), was also used to guide this research study. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1994) explained the theory of inquiry as a stance that assumes teachers are knowledgeable in their fields and theorize practice. Teachers also use their professional experience to generate knowledge, analyze research related to their field, and know the goal of education is to enhance student's lives (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1994). Inquiry as stance is also based on the assumption that teachers know their practice is fluid and ever-changing, and therefore contributions from all stakeholders are necessary to enhance student's lives. This inquiry-driven process was used in order to gain stakeholder insight into the problem of practice. "Inquiry enables educators to make better informed, evidence-based decisions about issues that are directly related to improving the learning for the students in their schools" (Donohoo, 2014). By using inquiry, I was able to better determine the reasons stakeholders believe students do not all meet the same levels of achievement. This was a valuable tool in determining the gaps in opportunity that are contributing to the achievement differential.

Using the theories of inquiry as stance and critical race theory, I will work collaboratively with a group of peers to understand the problem of practice from an

appropriate perspective in an effort to identify new strategies that can address the problem of practice in the future. Critical race theory will help to understand the lack of opportunities given to students of color and traditionally marginalized students while inquiry as stance will allow us to understand if those opportunity gaps affect our student population.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to identify if inequitable gaps in opportunity for students of color are present in our school. In addition, if there are gaps in opportunity present this study also aims to determine school level factors that may be contributing to those gaps. Using a practitioner inquiry framework that identifies a four-step cycle of inquiry, I engaged in three cycles. These cycles focused on 1) a review of the literature to identify common opportunity gaps, 2) collaborative examination of our school in terms of these gaps, 3) a second review of the literature focused on potential strategies for resolving the gaps, and 4) a final collaborative inquiry into selecting and developing those strategies. In order to gather data about what opportunity gaps are common nationally, I conducted an extensive literature review. The literature review provided better insight into what research had been conducted regarding the opportunity gap and what has been discovered about this problem of practice. After reviewing the literature, we were able to understand what opportunity gaps are common and determine which we would like to analyze regarding our institution. I will use collaborative inquiry to generate data from our context about 1) how students of color are experiencing education, 2) what the most likely issues are that contribute to their reduced achievement, and 3) how they might be resolved. To do this, I engaged in several cycles of inquiry

(Cunningham, 2011). Through this process, I collected data from the community, parents, teachers, researchers, and students. This action research investigated the causes of discrepancies in achievement among diverse groups of students. The following questions served as a guide for these cycles of inquiry:

1. What common gaps in opportunity for students of color found in literature could potentially be present within our school?

More specifically, inquiry cycle one examined the literature related to common opportunity gaps as identified in the research literature. Using this literature-based knowledge and school level data, inquiry cycle two focused on the question:

2. What gaps in opportunity for students of color, if any, are present within our school?

And inquiry cycle three focused on the question,

3. What previously identified or unique school-level factors that impede students of color in our school are causing our instruction/curriculum to not achieve success for all students on state tests?

These research questions were chosen because they will allow me to investigate the root causes of the variations in academic achievement and why educators are still seeing discrepancies in student success. The investigation will include examining opportunities and equity within our school and whether or not it contributes to the gaps in achievement. Through this investigation, I am now able to better explain the reasons why some of our most vulnerable students are not able to meet the same level of achievement and propose new and hopefully more effective strategies for reducing these gaps for current and future students.

## **Researcher Positionality**

I am currently an assistant principal in the district where the research study will take place. I am a white female who grew up in an upper-middle-class family with two parents who both completed graduate school. I went to a public school growing up that is currently 75% white, 15% African-American, 7% multi-racial, and 4% Latinx and has a 37% poverty rate ([www.reportcard.education.ohio.gov](http://www.reportcard.education.ohio.gov), 2019). In all honesty, I did not think much about race until my undergraduate studies. The schools I went to growing up were somewhat diverse, but I never considered my whiteness and privilege until I was in college. Where I began to really unpack my whiteness was when I moved to South Carolina and began working in a primarily African American Title 1 school. This is where I began to understand the impact race and racism has on my students and the oppression they had faced. I became interested in what school level factors can help impact the success for students of color when I began teaching in South Carolina and I now know the system is failing the students within our school.

The school I work at is a Title 1 elementary school and all students at the school receive free lunch and breakfast. The school's current enrollment is 640 students. The school is composed of Latinx, African American, and white students. Of the Latinx students, a third are immigrant students and two-thirds receive English Language Learner services.

One impact of being the research practitioner as an insider is that I continued to complete the remainder of my workload in an administrative role at the school and in the

district while conducting the research (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Because of this, the research needs to be doable within the context of my job (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

As an educator I have always worked in Title 1 schools, however, the schools have had extremely different opportunities and achievement levels. I have worked closely with other administrators in the district and collaborated with other teachers as well as analyzed data from all schools in the district, especially those with similar demographics to ours. These opportunities have had a great impact on achievement within our elementary schools. This makes this particular research valuable to me because it is critical to determine the contributing causes to gaps in achievement and see how differing opportunities correlate with differing achievement in schools.

### **Research Design**

This dissertation in practice employed strategies associated with practitioner inquiry (Weinbaum, 2004) in order to investigate the problem of practice associated with unexamined opportunity gaps for students of color at my school. Practitioner inquiry is a systematic and collaborative method in which classroom teachers and administrators can look deep into their practice and the outcomes it creates in order to better understand the problem of practice and its root causes rather than only designing an intervention to solve it (Dana et. al, 2019). Given the focus of this study on uncovering the opportunity gaps for students of color in my school, critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998) will also guide our efforts to see the problem from a perspective unencumbered by the predominantly white and privileged narrative. Currently, we see our white students achieving at a higher level than our African American and Latinx students (CCSD Data

Dashboards, 2020). We have recognized this problem for a while now but to this point, we have not found effective ways to resolve it. Therefore, it is important to approach this problem with appropriate strategies and perspectives in order to uncover new opportunities to resolve it.

In the past, the school has tried initiatives such as new curricula, tiered intervention, partnering with a local college for professional development and joining their Talent Development Academy, redesigning teacher evaluation tools, and working to hire highly qualified teachers to deliver effective classroom instruction. Despite previous efforts to ensure equitable educational experiences for all students, our school is still seeing significant differences in achievement between white students and students of color. Practitioner inquiry will allow me to determine not only the root causes of gaps in achievement and opportunity but whether or not those gaps are present within our school. If the problem has never been addressed or is a new problem, a practitioner-researcher may recognize they do not possess enough understanding of the problem and so they might choose to design an investigation that generates knowledge about the problematic aspect of their practice. I did not have a thorough enough understanding of what gaps in opportunity were present within our school, and practitioner inquiry was the best methodology to help gain an understanding. Practitioner inquiry aligns with the research questions and study because it will allow us to better understand the present gaps and the root causes of those gaps. The practitioner inquiry will involve inquiry cycles that the inquiry group will utilize. These cycles will focus on 1) a review of the literature to identify common opportunity gaps, 2) collaborative examination of our school in terms of these gaps, 3) a second review of the literature focused on potential strategies for

resolving the gaps, and 4) a final collaborative inquiry into selecting and developing those strategies.

An intervention was not proposed during the study due to the nature of practitioner inquiry. The inquiry group analyzed data to determine why the problem was present rather than how to solve the problem of practice. Through the inquiry process, gaps in opportunity were identified and an intervention to solve that gap was proposed for future studies (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Using collaborative inquiry, a team analyzed qualitative and quantitative data in order to determine if common gaps in opportunity for students of color are evident at our school. Weinbaum et. al (2004) defined collaborative inquiry as a group of colleagues gathering and examining important questions about teaching over time. The research questions will help to guide the collaborative inquiry and I will facilitate discussions with the inquiry group.

The setting of the study was at a Title 1 school. The school is composed of 640 students. 50% of the students are white, 26% of the students are African American and 24% of the students are Latinx. All students at the school receive free lunch and breakfast each day. This research study will use practitioner inquiry and analyze data from a national and state level to determine what common gaps in opportunity are present in schools. This study will employ Critical Race Theory and how it relates to the participants in the study. Then, using practitioner inquiry the study will examine data from the school. The team will specifically look at data from the 3-5 grade students and their state and MAP assessment scores. In the following section I will describe the significance of this study and its relevance to my position.

## **Significance of Study**

This study is significant specifically to the stakeholders at our school and within our district. This is an investigation based study that will help to determine what factors are impeding our students of color from achieving similarly to the white students at the school, why this problem is recurring and how to address contributing factors within the school. As the practitioner-researcher, this study is significant because it directly impacts me as an administrator within the school and our faculty. Understanding the root cause of the gaps in achievement and what opportunities are missing for our students of color is critical. By determining the factors that are contributing to the discrepancies in achievement, we can work towards giving equitable opportunities to our students of color.

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) stated that practitioner inquiry can benefit practitioner-researchers when a problem of practice is not understood well enough to put an intervention in place. Rather than trying to solve the problem, this study was used to determine the root causes of the problem of practice. Collaborative inquiry was used to better understand the problem of practice (Weinbaum et. al, 2004).

This study will not be generalizable because it relates directly to our student population and the opportunities within our school. However, it may be transferrable in that the literature reviewed and gaps in opportunity discovered may be similar to those at other elementary schools. At the end of this study, our stakeholders were able to better understand the gaps in opportunity our students of color experience, why they are recurring and how to address them within our school moving forward. Although the intention is to inform stakeholders within our school, the knowledge gained can be used



to inform schools with similar demographics about the gaps in opportunity their students may be facing as well.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Any study related to race involves several complexities that must be noted. The first limitation of this study is that I, as the practitioner researcher, am a white female. The fact that I am white means I have been given certain privileges within my life and have not experienced the same disadvantages of some of the students of color within the study and therefore my perspective was different than what theirs may be. The focus group for the inquiry study has members of various races, and this means their implicit biases and perspectives will also be different. Another limitation is that there are many factors blended with race that can contribute to discrepancies in achievement, such as socioeconomic status. Within the literature review these factors were addressed as they relate to race, but students of color were the focus of this study. A third limitation is that this study and the data were retrieved over several years, one of which was 2020 where students were learning virtually for the majority of the year. They also did not take their Spring MAP assessment in 2020 or the SC Ready test. Their time away from school could also contribute to the discrepancies in achievement in the following years.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

What follows is an overview of the study and the data that was collected within the study. The summary will include longitudinal data for students grades 3-5 who have attended the school since kindergarten, grade level data and data obtained from the literature review and inquiry cycles. This study is designed to determine how equity-focused inquiry might uncover the causes and solutions for the opportunity gaps our

students of color experience. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the study. This chapter describes the problem of practice and an overview of the study.

Chapter 2 is a literature review of relevant research to the study. In this chapter, an in depth discussion of research related to Critical Race Theory, inquiry as stance and gaps in opportunity for students of color are explored. Research related to what other schools have done to address gaps in opportunity will also be explored.

Chapter 3 explains the research design and methods of the study. The reasoning behind the selected method is supported. A connection between the problem of practice and the selected methodology is discussed. Here the context of the study, participants, and method of data collection and analysis can be found.

Chapter 4 details the research study and the findings from the study. Data is presented in this chapter along with a detailed analysis of the data. The final chapter reflects on the study in its entirety and present potential next steps.

## KEY WORDS/GLOSSARY

**Critical Race Theory** – the view that institutions are inherently racist, and that race is a socially constructed concept that allows white people to continue furthering their interests at the expense of people of color (Curry, 2020)

**MAP** – Measure of Academic Progress (Northwest Evaluation Association, n.d.)

**RIT** – Rasch Unit score (Northwest Evaluation Association, n.d.)

**SC Ready** – South Carolina state assessment in English language arts and math (South Carolina Department of Education, 2021)

**Student achievement** – the measure of the amount of student content a student has learned in a given time period (Northwest Evaluation Association, n.d.)

## CHAPTER 2

### A REVIEW OF LITERATURE BASED IN CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND INQUIRY AS STANCE

*“I came to theory because I was hurting - the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend - to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.” - bell hooks*

#### **Introduction**

Educators throughout the country work tirelessly to provide the best instruction possible to their students. Many aim to perfect their pedagogy through professional development, workshops, reviewing data, researching best practices and various other means. Despite their best efforts, however, many educators still see discrepancies in achievement among their students on end of year assessments. While many students will show progress and growth throughout the year, the achievement levels among different demographics are vastly different. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) explained that equal opportunity for all students is an important component of social justice. Equal opportunity for all students is not always given within schools. Milner (2012) explained that the lack of equality in opportunity can lead to gaps in achievement among differing demographics of students. Rather than focusing on students and their capabilities, schools should be focusing on pedagogy and opportunities provided to all students. Examining the system and the gaps provided to traditionally marginalized groups of students will help to determine why discrepancies in achievement occur.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to identify if inequitable gaps in opportunity for students of color are present in our school. In addition, if there are gaps in opportunity present this study also aims to determine school level factors that may be contributing to those gaps. The problem of practice that is explored in this research study is whether the common opportunity gaps for students of color seen in schools are also present within our school. Many educators recognize that there are discrepancies in achievement among different demographics of students. This research study will determine if the cause of these discrepancies can be attributed to gaps in opportunity provided to traditionally marginalized groups, specifically students of color. This study will help to highlight that discrepancies in achievement can be contributed to the system, not the student. This research study will examine which gaps in opportunity are common nationally for students of color and determine if those gaps are also present within our school.

### **Research Questions**

Using the practitioner inquiry framework proposed by Dana et. al (2019) that identifies a four-step cycle of inquiry, I will engage in three cycles. These cycles will focus on 1) a review of the literature to identify common opportunity gaps, 2) collaborative examination of our school in terms of these gaps, 3) a second review of the literature focused on potential strategies for resolving the gaps, and 4) a final collaborative inquiry into selecting and developing those strategies. The following questions served as a guide for these cycles of inquiry:

1. What common gaps in opportunity for students of color found in literature could potentially be present within our school?
2. What gaps in opportunity for students of color, if any, are present within our school?
3. What previously identified or unique school-level factors that impede students of color in our school are causing our instruction/curriculum to not achieve success for all students on state tests?

### **Importance of the Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a basis of knowledge about the problem of practice and proposed intervention for the reader as well as to justify the purpose of this study (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). There are many reasons why a literature review is critical for research studies. First, it allows the researcher to become more familiar with the problem of practice and narrow the focus for their own research study. Lichtman (2013) explained that a literature review is a critical assessment of a particular topic, not simply a compilation of research studies about that topic. Literature reviews are also important because they allow us to see what areas related to this problem of practice still need to be investigated. We need to conduct literature reviews to find gaps and determine our research questions. In addition, literature reviews help us to understand theories surrounding a topic and create a theoretical framework to help be the foundation for our research study (Lichtman, 2013, p. 174).

### **Approach to the Literature Review**

Before I began my doctoral program, I knew that my dissertation needed to relate to a problem of practice that affected our school. I wanted a problem of practice relevant

to our students and community so that I would be able to utilize the information provided through the research study to improve my practice and help our school to serve students more effectively. In a grade level chair meeting, we did a “data dig” based on our fall Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) scores and saw similar results to what we had seen in the past. white, affluent students performed higher than our students of color and students of low socioeconomic status. Although we were hoping that through our engaging lessons, positive morale, and differentiation we would see the gap in scores closing, this was not the case. I knew at that moment my research would need to be dedicated to determining the cause of these discrepancies year after year.

Originally I began working on an action research study and tried to find an intervention that would effectively help to close the gaps in achievement we were seeing in our student’s test scores. However, as I began to research and to propose various interventions, I realized that the discrepancies in achievement could never be completely eliminated with a 4-6 week study. A problem of practice that widespread could not be solved with a simple intervention. In order to begin closing these gaps, I needed to understand the root cause of the problem. This is where practitioner inquiry became a much more fitting type of research study for this problem of practice. Practitioner inquiry will allow for stakeholders within the school to determine the root cause of the problem of practice and if the opportunity gap is present within our school.

In this literature review, the resources were compiled in a variety of ways. Some literature was discovered through courses that have been taken during the research practitioner’s doctorate program and found to be related to the problem of practice. Others were discovered through EBSCOhost, ERIC, search engines and the local public

library database. Sources include peer reviewed journals, doctoral dissertations, books, personal communications, articles, textbooks, videos, and websites. These resources will provide a variety of perspectives and research related to the opportunity gap. They will help to determine what common gaps in opportunity exist and guide the cycles of inquiry that were conducted through this study.

This chapter begins with a thorough description of the problem of practice and literature related to the problem of practice, including the historical context and root cause analysis of factors influencing the discrepancies in achievement. It then transition into a discussion on the theoretical framework presented as a basis for the study. Next, an explanation of the cycles of inquiry that were used in this research study are explained. Finally, there is a discussion of common opportunity gaps that are addressed within the study.

### **Background on the Problem of Practice**

I believe that the discrepancies in achievement are due to differences in opportunities given to students at school and elsewhere. The problem of practice is how gaps in opportunity affect student achievement in school. Although many initiatives have been created in order to, theoretically, create equity in education, there are still discrepancies in achievement among different demographics of students. Common opportunity gaps include race, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. This section will discuss the problem of practice and the topics related to the problem of practice, which include academic achievement, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and the opportunity gap.



In education, the achievement gap is a term used to describe the disparities in academic performance between groups of students. Ansell (2011) stated that, “The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates, among other success measures” (p.1). There has been a major push by educators to shift the terminology describing this phenomena from achievement gap to opportunity gap. Mooney (2018) stated that using the phrase achievement gap shifts the blames onto the students rather than the system. “We think the causes of these differences are unequal and inadequate educational opportunities, not inherent differences in capability or character” (Mooney, 2018, p. 1). Achievement gap refers to output, whereas the opportunity gap refers to input. In my opinion, input has the greatest impact on academic achievement, and if not all students receive the same opportunities or input, then they are not given the tools to show the same levels of achievement. The growing discussion about the causes of the discrepancies in achievement among different demographics has spread across the nation and is examined in a variety of ways. Educators and policymakers recognize that there is a need to help eliminate this gap, and they begin by looking at the contributing factors. The question as to what is causing the difference in test scores among groups is on the minds of many stakeholders in education.

According to the South Carolina Department of Education elementary state test scores, there is a major discrepancy between the average reading and mathematics score of different demographics of students. The most recent SC Ready assessment given was conducted in the Spring of 2019. The test was not given in Spring of 2020 due to South Carolina School being closed for the COVID 19 pandemic. Students were assessed again

in Spring of 2021; however, scores were not yet available when conducting the literature review.

When examining the demographic groups tested on the SC Ready English Language Arts (ELA) assessment, Asian/Pacific Islander students scored highest in grades 3-5, with white students following, then two or more races, Latinx and African American students. Pupils in poverty scored significantly lower than students not living in poverty in all three grades. English Language Learners also scored significantly lower than non-English Language learners in all three grades. These discrepancies are further examined throughout the remainder of the research (South Carolina Department of Education, 2020).

### **No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)**

When discussing discrepancies in achievement it is imperative to examine education reform acts, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), that have impacted it throughout the past few decades. NCLB was implemented in 2002 that provided extra funding for Title 1 schools (school's with a certain percentage of students living below the poverty line). Under NCLB, schools were held more accountable for student outcomes and required schools to test students in grades 3-8 and in high school on reading achievement (Klein, 2015). States were able to create their own assessments to test reading proficiency and were originally given a deadline of all students reading at a "proficient level" by the 2013-2014 school year . No states had achieved 100% proficiency by the deadline (Klein, 2015). According to Ansell (2011) NCLB required educators to separate student test scores by student characteristics

to compare groups. This not only raised concerns about gaps in achievement but made the disparities between different races even more evident based on the scores seen when comparing data from state assessments (Ansell, 2011).

After the NCLB, the Obama administration implemented Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. This act built open and reformed NCLB. The ESSA states that, "The purpose of this title is to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps." (ESSA). The ESSA continued to require students to take an annual standardized test, but the accountability shifted from federal accountability to state accountability (ESSA). States submit an annual plan for accountability to the U.S. Department of Education. Another major change was that schools were all required to teach academic standards in order to prepare students for college and career readiness (ESSA).

Although these reform acts aim to eliminate discrepancies in achievement, many educators believe that the implementation of these acts has actually led to a greater disparity between groups of students (Milner, 2012).

### **The Opportunity Gap**

Arguably one of the most influential factors related to achievement is opportunity. Many researchers have encouraged educators and reformers to focus on the gaps in opportunity rather than achievement. Milner (2012) stated that standardization of policies after acts such as NCLB and ESSA oppose diversity. "Standardization suggests that all students live and operate in homogeneous environments with equity and equality of opportunity afforded to them" (Milner, 2012, p. 694). It is important to hold educators

and schools accountable for giving students a quality education, however, no two students are the same and instruction needs to meet the needs of all learners.

Rather than building on the background knowledge of students' culture and ethnicity, some schools focus on educating all students similarly (Cross, 2007). Milner (2012) also explained that the learning experiences students receive will affect student achievement. Instead of recognizing that the gap may be caused by the fact that all students are not receiving equal or equitable opportunities in their educational experiences, the students underachievement has been blamed for the differences in student success (Cross, 2007). In his study on the opportunity gap, Milner (2012) explained that color blindness, cultural conflicts, myth of mediocrity, low expectations and context neutral mindsets all affect opportunities afforded to diverse students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that used in the study included Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and Inquiry as Stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Due to the discrepancies in test scores each year among students of different races, Critical Race Theory can provide insight into how race plays a role in the opportunity gap. Inquiry as Stance will provide the framework for collaborative inquiry and the inquiry cycles conducted in order to gain a better understanding of how common gaps in opportunity for students of color affect our school.

## **Critical Race Theory**

When discussing gaps in achievement among different groups of students, race and racism inevitably come into play. It is impossible to examine achievement without also examining race because many of the discrepancies in achievement are between students of different races and ethnicities. Howard (2010) stated that, “educators can ill afford to subscribe to the notion that mere coincidence explains the perpetual school failure of students of color. At some point, the question must be posed: What’s race got to do with it?” (p. 99). Critical Race Theory (CRT) examined the role of race in education (Zion, 2011). It examines and critiques racial inequalities in order to answer the question of how race relates to education. CRT examines the historical and current role that race plays in education and tries to answer that question (Zion, 2011). CRT relates to this research study because it involves the discussion of the impact race can play in the achievement of students.

According to Howard (2010) there are 4 major ways in which critical race theorists review racism in education. First, they look at school curriculum and how it is interconnected to race, class, and gender. Second, they describe why objectivity and neutrality contribute to racism in education. Third, they use counter storytelling as a tool to examine racial oppression. Counter-storytelling is a method used in order to challenge stereotypes and racism displayed in curriculum (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Finally, they incorporate information from women’s studies and ethnic studies to understand other forms of discrimination and how it affects education (Howard, 2010). Through these four ways of examination, theorists can help begin to explain students of color are not performing similarly to their peers. Inequality, discrimination, race and racism are all

influencers in achievement disparities (Identifying Factors that Contribute to Achievement Gaps, n.d.). Critical Race Theory helps to illuminate the problem of practice because in order to examine gaps in achievement, race, racism, and racial inequities must also be examined.

The tenets of Critical Race Theory are essential to understand when trying to create change in education. The first tenet is that race is a social construct (Ladson Billings, 1998). “However, is it less commonly acknowledged that elements of institutions less visible to White people are racist” (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2020, p. 10). This tenet helps us to understand how racism is inherent in educational policies that are developed and how they impact students of color.

The second tenet applied in this study is that acknowledging and listening to the lived experiences of those affected by racism is critical to understanding the racial inequities within education. It is important to validate experiences of those impacted by racism to understand the challenges they have faced (Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2020). Ladson Billings (1998) explained that hearing the voices of students of color is essential for understanding the impacts of racism on equity in education.

Finally, CRT aligns with commitments to social justice and the inequities identified in this study (Ladson Billings, 1998). Ladson Billings (1998) acknowledged the need for support towards students of color to address inequities in education.

## **Inquiry as Stance**

Along with examining Critical Race Theory and how race, racism and racial inequities affect student achievement, the theory of Inquiry as Stance was used in order to determine previously unknown or unaddressed factors contributing to gaps in achievement at our school. Inquiry as Stance was developed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) and is a theory of professional knowledge generation. “We regard inquiry as stance as a grounded theory of action that positions the role of practitioners and practitioner knowledge as central to the goal of transforming teaching, learning, leading, and schooling” (Inquiry as Stance, 2009, p. 119). Inquiry as Stance is a theory in which educators work to transform and improve the education system. Using their experience, educators collaborate in inquiry cycles in order to better understand problems of practice. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), it is essential to place educators as the center of inquiry into problems of practice because they are the stakeholders who understand student needs and flaws within the system the most thoroughly. Inquiry as stance combines the theories of how to change things and what needs to change in order to use the expertise of practitioners to determine if the system needs reform and how it can be achieved. Inquiry as stance will help to determine why the problem of practice is occurring within our schools.

Critical Race Theory will help practitioners to understand the gaps in opportunity for students of color that occur within schools. Once practitioners understand common gaps in opportunity, they can begin using inquiry as stance to examine if those gaps occur at our school. Using CRT and Inquiry as Stance provided insight into the problem of practice and how it affects our student population.

## **Common Opportunity Gaps**

People are born into arbitrary circumstances. Certain circumstances, such as race, poverty, and ethnicity, contribute to academic performance and the disparities in achievement seen between different demographics of students. Using the term opportunity gap helps to explain that it is the conditions rather than the students that cause discrepancies in achievement. I believe an inequitable system is responsible for the disparities in achievement seen on state test scores. In this section, common gaps in opportunity are discussed, including the history of these gaps and how they create inequities for students born into these circumstances.

### **Race**

The Critical Race Theory (CRT) explained that race affects discrepancies in achievement. Taylor (2006) criticized the discrepancies in achievement, stating that the data aggregations of these gaps are racial. He argues that the data lumps together groups of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, causing the data to have confusing overlaps. CRT claims that this is a measure of racism rather than race (Taylor, 2006). The grouped differences in test scores reflects how diverse groups are treated in society.

There is a significant discrepancy in the performance of African American, Latinx and American Indian student outcomes on state assessments compared to white and Asian students (Cowan Pitre, 2014). “At the 12th grade level, only 16% of African American students demonstrated proficiency in reading while 47% of their white peers performed at a proficient level. “Colorblindness”, educator demographics, redlining,



limited access to high quality schools and socioeconomic status of students of color are all gaps in opportunity that African American and Latinx students see in schools.

## **Resegregation**

Resegregation of schools has led to inequities for students of color. Residential racial segregation based on income began during the depression (Rothstein, 2019). The New Deal added in the creation of the first set of public housing. Public housing was segregated and began to separate neighborhoods into predominantly African American or white. The Public Works Administration moved many low-income, integrated neighborhoods and created segregated ones instead (Rothstein, 2019). Rothstein (2019) stated that this act and these changes still contribute to segregated neighborhoods in the present day.

Segregation continued despite efforts through the Civil Rights Era. *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* was a landmark case that was intended to integrate public schools and provide equal opportunity for students of color (Carol, 2017). After the Civil Rights movement, there was progress made towards students of color having access to the same schools and teachers as white students (Cowan Pitre, 2014). However, after the Civil Rights Era, there was a decline in this opportunity once again and resegregation began to reoccur. There was limited access to well-funded and well-run schools for students of color. Rothstein (2019) stated that if neighborhoods continue to stay segregated, it is inevitable that school will also be segregated. Rothstein (2019) noted:

In low-income, racially segregated communities, children are in poorer health, are under greater stress from parents' economic insecurity, and have less access to

high-quality early childhood, after-school, and summer programs. When children with these and other challenges are concentrated in a single school, their problems can overwhelm teachers, and educational outcomes suffer. The “African American-white achievement gap,” a focus of education reformers, is substantially attributable to residential segregation. (p. 39)

Residential racial boundaries are unconstitutional, but since they are not legally enforced and continue due to systemic inequities, they are hard to break. Even when families attempt to break the cycle of poverty and move to neighborhoods with better access to affluent and well-supported schools, the effects of redlining can stop them from accessing these resources.

### **Redlining**

Oppression of groups of color has been another factor that contributes to differences in test scores. Racial inequalities have been an ongoing problem in the United States (Taylor, 2006). The idea that Europeans were “superior” to people of color that emerged early in United States history contributed to slavery, relocation of ethnic groups and inequities in every aspect of life (Taylor, 2006). From 1934-1968, The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) introduced a policy known as “redlining” which denied mortgages to people based on racial or ethnic background despite their good credit (FHA Mortgage Insurance Requirements Utilize Redlining, n.d.). Furthermore, mortgages were denied to anyone, including white people, who wanted to invest in personal properties or businesses that were located in close proximity to neighborhoods with people of color. The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) created maps with areas

of cities coded in colors. The color of the area determined if people were going to be given loans, and redlined areas were denied loans due to race and ethnicities of people living there. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed in order to attempt to avoid discrimination based on race when applying for mortgages, but it did little to erase the damage already done by redlining (Gutierrez, Demby, & Frame, 2018).

Redlining relates to the issues of achievement in schools because the primary way that American's pay for public schools is through property taxes. When there are more valuable homes in an area, the schools are better funded meaning more resources, better teachers, more enrichment opportunities, and the greater chance of academic achievement (Gutierrez, Demby, & Frame, 2018). Redlining began a cycle of people of color being given limited access to equitable education, and this cycle has continued to result in inequities for people of color.

### **Socioeconomic Status**

Socioeconomic status plays a powerful role in the opportunities given to students in United States schools and academic achievement. Socioeconomic status also relates closely to race. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) 6,845,107 families are living below the poverty level. Of the families that identified as African American, 17.4% lived below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Families that identified as two or more races accounted for 12.3% and 14.9% of families that identified as Latinx or Hispanic live below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Because such a high percentage of students of color live below the poverty level, socioeconomic status and race are highly correlated and both greatly impact academic achievement.

One major discrepancy in achievement seen in district and state data is a discrepancy between students in low-income households as compared to those who are not (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). Lacour and Tissington (2011) stated that students living in poverty ranked in the 19th percentile on average, whereas students in middle-upper income families ranked in the 66th percentile on average. They also state that regardless of race, ethnicity or gender, students of low-income families score well below grade level (Shah, 2016).

This gap in achievement between students of different socioeconomic status is due to a variety of factors. First, “children from impoverished backgrounds are more likely to have parents with low-wage jobs or no employment at all, increasing the likelihood of moving from place to place, and influencing the quality of continuous schooling they receive” (Howard, 2010, p. 3). This also impacts the students emotional well-being and their basic needs. Functioning in school without things such as basic healthcare, consistent meals, enough sleep, clean clothes, and other necessities is very challenging (Shah, 2016).

Studies have also indicated that students who are from families that receive welfare are much more likely to face challenges at school. Lacour and Tissington (2011) explained that long term recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children show significantly lower academic achievement than children from families who receive short term aid. Socioeconomic status can also affect high school graduation rates, test scores, the quality of the school and district students are able to attend as access to resources within those schools (Lacour & Tissington, 2011).

## **English Language Learners (ELLs)**

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2020), ELLs in schools are growing at a rapid rate. “The percentage of public school students in the United States who were English language learners (ELLs) was higher in fall 2017 (10.1 percent, or 5.0 million students) than in fall 2000 (8.1 percent, or 3.8 million students)” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020, p. 1). ELL students whose home language was Spanish represented 75% of the ELL students in the United States in 2017. Spanish-speaking ELL students represented approximately 8% of all public school students in grades K-12 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). In South Carolina, there is a major discrepancy in achievement between ELL students and white students in public schools. According to the 2019 SC Ready assessment for grades 3-5, there were significantly less ELL students who met or exceeded grade level proficiency in both English Language Arts and mathematics.

ELL students perform below grade level on almost every aspect of academic measure (Won Gyoung, 2017). “Although data suggest ELLs have not received adequate language and academic instruction to meet their unique needs, they are invariably blamed for their academic underachievement and learning difficulties” (Won Gyoung, 2017, p. 3). ELL students may be placed in intervention programs, ELL programs or retained, however, ELL students still are not achieving at the same level as their peers (Callahan, 2006). Won Gyoung (2017) stated that the discrepancies in achievement are caused by numerous factors, including high-stakes educational practices, lack of support for both students and parents, low expectations, and limited access to resources.

**Table 2.1** South Carolina ELLs and Non-ELLs that Meet or Exceed Grade Level Proficiency

Grade	English Language Learners		Non-English Language Learners	
	ELA	Math	ELA	Math
Grade 3	38%	53%	59%	58%
Grade 4	41%	45%	52%	51%
Grade 5	43%	43%	43%	46%
Average	40.6%	47%	51.3%	51.6%

Note: The data was collected from “2019 SC READY Scores - Statewide by Grade Level and Demographic” by the South Carolina Department of Education, 2020, ed.sc.gov.

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Table 2.1 represents the discrepancy between achievement for ELL and non-ELL students in South Carolina, especially in 3rd and 4th grade and in ELA.

### **Educator Impact on Achievement**

#### **Educator Demographics**

“Individuals make systems. Whiteness and racism operate in similar ways: individual white people choose not to disrupt inequity because they do not believe that they personally contribute to racism, inequity, or discrimination” (Milner, 2017).

Another gap in opportunity for students of color is educators. Educators are (arguably) one of the most influential factors in student achievement. The NCEP reported that in the

2017-2018 school year 79% of teachers were white, 7% were African American, 9% were Latinx and 5% were other races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The demographics of teachers does not reflect the demographics of students in public schools. While a large percentage of students are African American or Latinx, very few educators are African American and Latinx in comparison.

### **Teacher Effectiveness**

Educators in schools located in low-income areas also have a challenging time with teacher retention and access to highly qualified educators as well. Cowan Pitre (2014) explained that access to quality schools also meant limited access to quality teachers and curriculum. “Nationally, unqualified teachers are disproportionately assigned to teach low-income ethnic minority children” (Cowan Pitre, 2014, p. 213). Teacher certification, background knowledge, level of education and experience all contribute to the qualifications of an educator. Many low-income schools with a high percentage of students of color have under qualified educators. “The issue of access to a high quality teacher is important because research has consistently identified teacher quality as the most important school based factor in student achievement” (Cowan Pitre, 2014, p. 213). Not having access to schools with high quality teachers is a gap in opportunity for students of color.

### **Teacher Attitude**

Deficit thinking also contributes to inequities in opportunity for students of color. Teacher attitude towards students is directly linked to academic achievement (Cowan Pitre, 2014, p. 213). Deficit thinking refers to gaps in achievement rather than the factors

that led to the discrepancies in achievement (Ford, Moore & Scott, 2011). Sometimes teachers tend to believe that students who come from low-poverty homes are not going to work hard or have support at home, and therefore they will not be able to achieve proficient levels in school. Cowan Pitre (2014) explained the importance of schools looking at what they can control rather than the “deficits” students have from outside sources or factors beyond their control. Believing students have the capacity to achieve if given equal opportunity can have a major impact in academic achievement. Teacher attitude and equitable pedagogy can be impacted by the “colorblind” mentality as well.

### **Colorblindness**

Another area of race and racism that CRT examines is the adoption of “colorblindness” and the avoidance of discussing and acknowledging race. Although many educators believe this makes their teaching equal, it does not make it equitable. “Educators ignore race or adopt colorblind approaches, while failing to realize that the greater avoidance of the topic denies students an essential part of their being, and only increases the likelihood of race becoming an explosive topic” (Howard, 2010). Many educators and people have said they are “colorblind” or do not see race, and in their minds they believe this makes them anti-racist. Di’Angelo and Sensoy (2010) argued that these mentalities are delusional and only contribute to the challenges facing students and their cultural identities. Telling students race does not matter makes it matter even more. CRT states that stakeholders in education need to become comfortable with being uncomfortable with topics such as race and begin facilitating conversations with students that focus on the role of race. Zion & Blanchett (2011) explained that educators need to begin to analyze the role of race in school.



Colorblindness promotes a false sense of equal opportunity for all students. A colorblind mindset shows unawareness for the mistreatment of students of color and does not recognize the inequities that they receive not only at school, but throughout their lives. The color blind mentality can partially be attributed to educator demographics. A lack of representation of students of color in the education field impacts student opportunity and achievement.

### **Conclusion**

Although education reform policies and school districts have made strides towards eradicating the disparities between groups of students, there is still a noticeable discrepancy in achievement. Common opportunity gaps found in the literature include race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, English Language Learners, and educators. What gaps in opportunity are contributing to these discrepancies in achievement? Through inquiry as stance, stakeholders within our school examined this problem of practice and whether opportunity gaps are present in our school.

## CHAPTER 3

### INQUIRY BASED INVESTIGATION OF OUR SYSTEM

*“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” - James Baldwin*

#### **Overview of Study**

Students across the state and within each district go to many different types of schools and have varying experiences within their education. No two schools or students are exactly alike, and therefore no two students will experience the same education. However, at the end of each school year students are asked to take assessments to measure their academic achievement and progress. When scores are analyzed from these assessments, there is a noticeable discrepancy in scores not only from one school to another, but within schools themselves. Although all students within a school should be receiving similar instruction, student test scores do not reflect this. If all students are truly receiving an equal education, shouldn't they all be performing similarly?

Although some may consider state assessments necessary in order to hold schools and educators accountable, as an administrator I have never believed that they are the best metric of student success. Standardized assessments do not consider the cultural differences or diversity of our students. Whenever I analyze state test scores or the NWEA Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments, I see growth and progress, however, there is a noticeable difference in the achievement and growth of different demographics of students.

Although as a school we make growth, there are disparities among the scores of students based on ethnicity, races, and socio-economic status.

It is hard to pinpoint a definitive reason as there are many contributing factors to these discrepancies in achievement, however, it is clear that there are some schools who have managed to overcome it more successfully than others, and there must be a reason as to why. What is working for our traditionally marginalized students, such as our students of color, students who have grown up in poverty, and English Language Learners (ELLs) and what is not? What pedagogies will ensure our traditionally marginalized students will be successful? Why, with so many initiatives to create equity in education, are we still not able to educate all students in a way that sets them up for success and demonstrates equity throughout all schools? The problem of practice being examined in this study is the gaps in opportunity given to different demographics of students. The purpose of this study is to identify if inequitable gaps in opportunity for students of color are present in our school. In addition, if there are gaps in opportunity present this study also aims to determine school level factors that may be contributing to those gaps. Garner (2011) stated that not all students are given equitable opportunities in school and therefore they do not all demonstrate similar academic achievement. This study will analyze common gaps in opportunity and utilize practitioner inquiry to examine if those gaps are present within our school.

In the chapter that follows, I provide a detailed description of the design of this project. The description includes details about how this project was enacted and analyzed. First, a description of the context, participants and my positionality is given in order to help establish the reasoning behind the investigation and my decision making throughout the study. Next, an overview of the methodological design and support for using practitioner inquiry to study the

gaps in opportunity that may be present in our school is provided. Finally, I provide a detailed description of how the investigation was conducted and how data was analyzed following the inquiry cycles.

### **Context, Participants and Researcher Positionality**

The setting of the study is at Title 1 School. The school is composed of 640 students. Fifty percent of the students are white, 26% of the students are African American and 24% of the students are Latinx.

The participants on the inquiry team were teachers and administrators from the school in which I work. The members volunteered to be on the inquiry team, but I was sure to include people on the team who are representative of the demographics of students we have at our school to the best of my ability. Although I tried to ensure there were inquiry team members that represented all demographics of students within our school, we admittedly do not have a staff that is completely reflective of all the demographics of students within our school, so options for diverse inquiry team members was limited. The team consisted of 10 people to ensure we were able to gather multiple perspectives during the inquiry.

I am currently the assistant principal at the school where the study was conducted, and I was a teacher at the school before becoming the assistant principal. I am a white female who grew up in an upper-middle-class family with two parents who both completed graduate school. Due to my privilege in my upbringing and being white, I did not face the same challenges as my peers who were African American or Latinx. I understand Critical Race Theory through educational opportunities, however, as a white female I have never been nor will ever be impacted by racism and discrimination in the same way as my peers who are African American or Latinx. Also, while I saw racism taking place, I was not oppressed by policies rooted in

racism. Therefore, my lens for this study is being created by the experiences of others and my research rather than personal experience. I went to a public school growing up that is currently 75% white, 15% African-American, 7% multi-racial, and 4% Latinx and has a 37% poverty rate ([www.reportcard.education.ohio.gov](http://www.reportcard.education.ohio.gov), 2019).

My role as the researcher was two-fold. First, I collected and analyzed data relating to the opportunity gap and students' achievement at a national and state level through a literature review. This served as the first inquiry cycle. Next, using qualitative and quantitative research methods, data was collected from students in grades 3-5. The data was analyzed by the inquiry team to determine if gaps in opportunity for students of color were occurring within our school. This was an appropriate sample because the data from the student state and MAP assessments were able to show patterns in achievement for different demographics of students and help the inquiry team to determine the gaps that are present. The reason for using 3-5 graders instead of the entire school is because they take multiple assessments each year, and therefore data could be compared. The average size of each grade at the school is currently 80 students.

The attrition that may occur with the sample is that students may transfer to another school or new students may enroll in the school. Students move in and out of the area for various reasons, but due to the size of the sample it will not have a major impact on the validity of the study.

Quality was addressed in this data collection plan through a variety of means. A detailed description of interviews and discussions in the inquiry cycle gave validity to the data collection (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2015; Tracy, 2010). The results of the research will help to generate new knowledge associated with opportunity gaps. They are relevant to the local setting since the data was gathered based on our school. They are also sound and

appropriate and benefit the researcher since the researcher works in the school where data was analyzed. This data was also able help to achieve action-oriented steps for the future to help our school eliminate the gaps in opportunity for students of color. According to Herr and Anderson (2015), these five things ensured the study held validity and rigor.

In the section that follows, there will be a thorough description of the research design for this study.

### **Research Design and Investigation**

This dissertation in practice was completed using a qualitative approach to action research through the use of methods associated with practitioner inquiry in order to answer the research questions aligned to the problem of practice. Practitioner inquiry will allow me to determine not only the root causes of gaps in opportunity, but whether or not those gaps are present within our school (Dana et. al, 2019). Practitioner inquiry is a research method which can help us to better understand the problem of practice and it's root causes rather than designing an intervention to solve it (Dana et. al, 2019).

Practitioner inquiry served as a research approach that allowed researchers to understand a problem in its entirety. In order to understand what solutions may work to solve the problem, the problem itself must be thoroughly understood (Dana et. al, 2019). I did not have a thorough enough understanding of what gaps in opportunity for students of color were present within our school, and practitioner inquiry was the best methodology to help gain an understanding.

Practitioner inquiry aligns with the research questions and study because it allowed me to better understand the present gaps and the root causes of those gaps. An intervention was not proposed due to the nature of practitioner inquiry. The inquiry team analyzed data to determine

why the problem is present rather than how to solve the problem of practice. Through the inquiry process, however, gaps in opportunity were identified and an intervention to solve the gaps was proposed (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). After a thorough literature review, common gaps in opportunity for students of color were identified. Then, using collaborative inquiry, the team analyzed qualitative and quantitative data in order to determine if those common gaps in opportunity were evident at our school. Weinbaum et. al (2004) defined collaborative inquiry as a group of colleagues gathering and examine important questions about teaching over time. The research questions helped to guide the collaborative inquiry and I facilitated discussions with the inquiry team.

### **Data Collection Measures, Instruments and Tools**

The methodology used for this research study was practitioner inquiry, but before the inquiry team could analyze data and collaborate, the data was collected through qualitative and quantitative methods. The data collected through an inquiry group, literature review and school based data analysis. The data was then be analyzed by the researcher. The nature of a practitioner inquiry approach is that the data collection is ongoing, and a constant comparative approach was used throughout the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The first piece of data collected was through the literature review. This data is based on research from experts in the field pertaining to how opportunity gaps have been addressed and how they have impacted other schools. This data measures how gaps in opportunity for students of color have been addressed in order to inform the inquiry team on how to address them within our school. It also helped to inform the decision about why culturally responsive teaching or culturally relevant teaching methodology was chosen. The data for the literature review was collected through research. ERIC, Ebscohost and various other databases were used

in order to collect data. The data was collected during the literature review as well as after inquiry cycle 1 and 2 based on the data collected in the inquiry cycles.

### **Longitudinal and Current Student Achievement Data**

#### **NWEA Measure of Academic Progress (MAP).**

The MAP data was collected prior to the inquiry cycles. MAP assessments were given 3 times a year and used as a growth measure. The assessment is given in math and reading. The assessment measures student growth along the learning continuum of skills based on grade level standards (Northwest Evaluation Association, N.D.). The scores in the areas of math and reading were examined for 3-5 grade students. The data was collected in a spreadsheet and retrieved from the NWEA MAP website. The MAP data helped to measure who is achieving who is not achieving. The MAP data allowed the researcher and inquiry team to see subcategories and how students performed in each one.

The MAP data helped to show where the opportunity gaps are occurring. The data also showed where the gaps are occurring within the system. Longitudinal data was analyzed (students in grades 3-5) as well as grade level data. The data was collected by the researcher and organized to present to the inquiry group. The data was accessed through the NWEA website. The spreadsheet did not give any identifying features about the students besides their grade, gender, and race. Student scores from grade 3-5 on each year's fall, winter and spring scores was included in the spreadsheet and graphs were created based on spreadsheet data.



## SC Ready

SC Ready is a state assessment in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics that is designed to determine if students have learned and mastered the South Carolina state standards for their grade level (South Carolina Department of Education, 2021). This data has some limits as the assessment was not taken in 2020 due to school being virtual for Covid 19. SC Ready data was collected and then organized in a spreadsheet. The data was retrieved from the South Carolina Department of Education website as well as the school district's data dashboards (2021). The SC Ready data helped to show who is achieving who is not achieving. This helped to indicate where the opportunity gaps are occurring. This data also indicates where the gaps are occurring within the system. Longitudinal data was analyzed (students in grades 3-5) as well as grade level data. The data was collected by the researcher and organized to present to the inquiry group. The data was accessed through the South Carolina Department of Education website as well as the school's data dashboard created by the district. The spreadsheet did not give any identifying features about the students besides their grade, gender, and race. Student scores from grade 3-5 on each year's SC ready assessments were collected.

Another data tool was the inquiry group. The group used the research questions to guide the data analysis. The data analysis helped the team to determine what gaps in opportunity for students of color are present at our school. This data was recorded with a device and notes were transcribed based on the conversations in the inquiry group. The data showed what factors impede students of color in our school, why the problems are recurring and helped to guide how to address the contributing factors within the school in the future. The data was collected through conversations with the inquiry team. It was recorded and notes were taken. The

inquiry cycles occurred after the data collection of MAP and SC Ready scores, but before the final review of literature. The inquiry group generated further data by discussing the research questions and data associated with each question.

Quality was being addressed in this data collection plan through a variety of means. A detailed description of interviews and discussions in the inquiry cycle gave validity to the data collection (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2015; Tracy, 2010). The results of the research will help to generate appropriate knowledge associated with opportunity gaps.

Herr and Anderson (2015) stated that research is usually initiated because of a problem of practice within a school, however, these problems of practice stem from larger systemic issues. This research study is related to a subject which can cause controversy and which many people have differing opinions. Bias can be a factor that contributes to the outcome of research (Herr & Anderson, 2015). I articulated my biases as the researcher, and they were critically examined when presenting the data. My positionality was described, and I ensured the research and outcomes are generalizable (Herr & Anderson, 2015). For all of the inquiry team members, no real names are used in order to ensure privacy. Descriptions on positionality and demographics are used, but no identities are revealed.

The MAP data, SC Ready scores, literature from experts and inquiry groups provide data to support the answers to the research questions and problem of practices. These data sources helped to investigate how equity-focused inquiry can uncover the causes and solutions for the opportunity gaps our students of color experience.

## **Research Procedure**

### **Inquiry Cycle 1**

The first inquiry cycle began with a thorough review of literature in order to determine what common gaps in opportunity occur for students of color. The literature review allowed the researcher to understand common gaps in opportunity that have already been identified and relate research to our findings later in the study. In the literature review, resources were discovered through EBSCOhost, ERIC, search engines and the local public library database. Sources included peer reviewed journals, doctoral dissertations, books, personal communications, articles, textbooks, videos, and websites. These resources provide a variety of perspectives and research related to the opportunity gap and help support findings in inquiry cycles 2 and 3.

### **Inquiry Cycle 2**

The second inquiry cycle took the data derived from inquiry cycle one and used it to answer the research question: What gaps in opportunity for students of color, if any, are present within our school? This is where the inquiry team met to look at MAP data and SC Ready data for 3-5 grade students. The inquiry group session was held in the conference room at our school and recorded using a Mac laptop. After the sessions, a transcript was created in order to analyze data. The length of the session was approximately an hour and 15 minutes. In this cycle, the inquiry team looked at specific areas within our school (grades, teachers, etc.) to see where the problem of practice seems to be recurring.

In the second inquiry cycle and inquiry group meeting, the following protocol based on the NSRF Looking at Data protocol (2014) took place:

1. Facilitator will remind group of norms

2. Setup - facilitator will explain the purpose of examining the data
3. Present - show data and give a brief summary
4. Examine - the focus group will independently examine the data
5. “See”-ask the focus group members to tell what they see in the data with no interpretation
6. Debrief and next steps

### **Inquiry Cycle 3**

After answering the question: What previously identified or unique school-level factors that impede students of color in our school are causing our instruction/curriculum to not achieve success for all students on state tests? After inquiry cycle 2 and analyzing the data, we moved to inquiry cycle 3. Inquiry cycle 3 followed a similar format to inquiry cycle 2. The inquiry group met to discuss the following question: What parts of our broader educational system are perpetuating the gaps in opportunity for students of color in our school?

The inquiry group sessions was conducted in the conference room at our school and recorded using a Mac laptop. After the sessions, a transcript was created in order to analyze data. The length of the session was approximately one hour long. In this cycle, we also looked at specific areas within our school (grades, teachers, etc.) and see where the problem of practice seems to be recurring.

In the third inquiry cycle and inquiry group meeting, protocol based on the NSRF Looking at Data protocol (2014) took place:

1. Facilitator will remind group of norms

2. Setup - facilitator will explain the purpose of examining the data
3. Present - show data and give a brief summary
4. Examine - the focus group will independently examine the data
5. “Think” - focus group members can describe what they think the data means and begin to interpret the data
6. “Wonder” - the focus group will discuss what implications the data have on our school and students
7. Debrief and next steps

### **Data Analysis**

Throughout this study, I analyzed data simultaneously with the data collection. This allowed me to make decisions that narrowed the study, plan new data collection sessions, explore literature, and have an overall more focused analysis of the data than if it were to all be analyzed after it was all collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Data Analysis 1**

The first set of data analysis was conducted after the literature review. I used coding to organize the data as it was analyzed and collected. I coded the data based on what opportunity gaps it was relevant to and which demographic of students it related to. I also inventoried my data that I collected so it was easy to access and utilize when needed.

### **Data Analysis 2**

The second phase to the data analysis occurred after the discussions with the inquiry team. The data from the discussion was organized into categories based on the different opportunity gaps identified by the inquiry group. Once analyzed, the data from inquiry cycle

two provided the information needed to create discussion questions and begin data collection and analysis for inquiry cycle two. The data was analyzed the inquiry group discussions. The data was coded based on similarities and differences in the responses. The data was summarized and utilized to determine what research would be conducted in inquiry cycle three.

### **Data Analysis 3**

The data collected through research in the final inquiry cycle was coded into different categories based on the ways to address the varying opportunity gaps. This data can be used to inform the school of potential solutions to consider in the future to address the problem of practice.

### **Conclusion**

This practitioner inquiry study addresses the common gaps in opportunity for students of color, whether they are present within our school and how the gaps have been addressed by similar institutions. The research questions explored in this study help to address the problem of practice and determine the root cause of discrepancies in achievement as well as what gaps in opportunity for students of color we need to address in our school. Chapter 4 discusses the data gathered during the three inquiry cycles. Inquiry cycle 1 revealed common gaps in opportunity for students of color, including race, culture, home language and the correlation between race and poverty. Inquiry cycle 2 revealed the gaps in opportunity within our school and inquiry cycle 3 analyzed what school level factors were contributing to those gaps.

## CHAPTER 4

### HOW ARE WE CONTRIBUTING TO THE OPPORTUNITY GAP?

*“There is no achievement gap at birth.”— Lisa Delpit*

The purpose of this study is to identify if inequitable gaps in opportunity for students of color are present in our school. In addition, if there are gaps in opportunity present this study also aims to determine school level factors that may be contributing to those gaps. The problem of practice that is explored in this research study is whether the common opportunity gaps seen in schools across multiple contexts are also present within our school. This study used practitioner inquiry in order to determine if common opportunity gaps are present within our school and to inquire as to why those gaps may exist. The data collected in this study was collected through three inquiry cycles. The first was a thorough review of literature to determine common opportunity gaps that exist in schools. The second inquiry cycle used a focus group to examine school level data and determine if opportunity gaps were present within our school based on the data. The third inquiry cycle also utilized a focus group and aimed to discuss why those gaps may be occurring.

This study was based in Critical Race Theory and Practitioner Inquiry. Critical Race Theory was used in the data analysis and used to explain why systemic issues are one of the causes for the opportunity gap our students of color experience in school. CRT explains that racism is a social construct embedded into policies, including those in education, and racism therefore impacts students of color in schools (Ladson-Billings,

1995). The theory of Inquiry as Stance was also used to analyze data. Inquiry as stance aims to use the expertise of those involved in the inquiry to help determine root causes of a problem of practice ( Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

The following research questions were explored in this study:

1. What common gaps in opportunity can be found in literature and potentially be present within our school?
2. What gaps in opportunity, if any, are present within our school?
3. What previously identified or unique school-level factors that impede students of color in our school are causing our instruction/curriculum to not achieve success for all students on state tests?

The findings from the literature review are outlined in chapter 2 and are referenced throughout this chapter. This chapter will outline the findings and analysis of the findings discovered through the second and third inquiry cycles. First, the opportunity gaps determined to be present within our school are discussed. This discussion will outline the findings from data analysis of the 3-5 grade students' SC Ready and MAP data for 2019 and 2021. The data from 2020 was not analyzed in the focus group because the students did not take the assessments due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Data from years prior to 2019 were not analyzed because students do not begin taking MAP and SC Ready until 3rd grade. Next, results from the 3rd inquiry cycle are presented. These results include the identified causes of the opportunity gaps that are present within our school. Finally, a summary of the results are presented.



## **Data Presentation and Interpretation**

### **Inquiry Cycle 1: What common gaps in opportunity can be found in literature could potentially be present within our school?**

Inquiry cycle 1 was an in depth review of literature to determine common opportunity gaps that could potentially be present within our school. Through a thorough review of literature, common opportunity gaps were determined. Common opportunity gaps found in the literature include race, ethnicity, English Language Learners, and educators. All of these factors have historically had an impact on a student's ability to achieve. Even before the in depth analysis of data that occurred in inquiry cycles 2 and 3, I perceived the opportunity gaps of race, ethnicity, ELL students, and educator demographics were all present within our school. Other opportunity gaps, including socioeconomic status, gender and students with disabilities, are also ones I believe are evident within the school. However, for the purpose of this study and to narrow our focus to a smaller population of students, these were not explored in this investigation.

As described in the literature, race is a common opportunity gap and one I perceived to be present within our school. Taylor (2006) described the impact of race on a student's education. Carter (2008) noted that, through a Critical Race lens, schools do not always identify race as a structural barrier and, instead, institutions contribute discrepancies in achievement to lack of effort, home life and other outside factors. Our school district has historically presented data that reflects this gap in opportunity, so through my perspective I believed this would be an identified opportunity gap in our school as well.

Educators and educator demographics was another opportunity gap identified within the literature review. One of our school goals for 2020 was to focus on cultural competency. During staff meetings and professional development, staff members were encouraged to identify implicit biases and other factors that may be affecting our student's ability to achieve. During these experiences and through conversations with staff, it was clear that some were passionate about this work, while others found it unnecessary and it made them uncomfortable. Because of this, I believed our staff would be an opportunity gap for students of color, consistent with the literature. In the Spring of 2021, our district surveyed students in grades 3-5 as well as teachers about several school level factors. The data from the surveys was released in July of 2021. One of the categories of questions asked to teachers was entitled "Cultural Awareness and Action" and asked teachers questions about cultural competency within our school. The first question on the survey: *how confident are you that adults at your school can have honest conversations with each other about race?* Only 35% of staff members responded favorably. On the second question: *how comfortable are you discussing race-related topics with your colleagues?* only 62% of staff responded favorably and on the third question: *how well does your school help staff speak out against racism?* only 64% responded favorably (Panorama Education Surveys, 2021). The results of this survey show that staff members and their perspectives create opportunity gaps for students of color.

Based on historic data presented by the school district and when I taught in the classroom, I knew that ELL students would be another demographic experiencing an opportunity gap. As described in the literature, many ELL students experience gaps in

opportunity, and I perceived our school to be no different than other schools across the country. Many of our ELL students are migrant students who have recently moved to the United States and have limited knowledge of English. Although we have ELL services for students who need additional language support, very little professional learning opportunities have been given to classroom teachers who need to support ELL students in general education.

Gaps in opportunity for ELL students, for students of color and for students based on educators were all gaps I perceived to exist in our school before inquiry cycles 2 and 3. These perceived gaps align with the gaps identified in the literature and were confirmed through inquiry cycles 2 and 3.

**Inquiry Cycle 2: What gaps in opportunity, if any, are present within our school?**

Inquiry cycle 2 involved a thorough review of data from SC Ready and MAP. The inquiry group included 10 faculty members from the school. Two instructional coaches, the principal, the parent advocate and six classroom teachers from the school were members of the inquiry group. The classroom teachers that were chosen are the grade level chairs from each grade-level team. Two of them were male and the remainder were female. The principal and instructional coaches were chosen because they are members of the school leadership team. The inquiry group had one African American member and the remainder were white. All members of the inquiry group have taught for at least eight years and worked at the school for at least four years. Figure 4.1 shows the demographics of the inquiry team in detail.

**Table 4.1** Inquiry team demographics.

Staff Member	Role	Years of Experience	Gender	Race	Years at school
Member 1	Instructional coach K-2	14	Female	White	14
Member 2	Instructional coach 3-5	11	Female	White	7
Member 3	Principal	23	Female	White	5
Member 4	5 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher	12	Male	African American	9
Member 5	4 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher	10	Female	White	4
Member 6	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade teacher	8	Female	White	8
Member 7	Parent advocate	8	Male	White	4
Member 8	1 <sup>st</sup> grade teacher	8	Female	White	4
Member 9	Kindergarten teacher	20	Female	White	4
Member 10	Child development teacher	18	Female	White	5

In the second inquiry cycle and inquiry group meeting, the following protocol based on the NSRF Looking at Data protocol (2014) took place:

1. I reminded the inquiry team that all of the information disclosed would be kept anonymous and names would not be disclosed. I also reminded the inquiry team that none of the information discussed should be discussed with anyone outside of the inquiry team. I also stated that for this inquiry cycle, only facts would be present, not implications.
2. During this step I stated the research question and that this discussion would relate identifying statistics from the SC Ready and MAP data.
3. I gave a brief overview of the data I would be giving the team.
4. The inquiry team independently examined the data.
5. I asked the inquiry team members to tell what they see in the data with no interpretation.

6. We debriefed and I explained that at the next inquiry group meeting, I would ask the inquiry group to analyze the data and discuss implications.

The inquiry group was given the following sets of data: 2019 SC Ready scores in mathematics and ELA for grades 3-5 broken down by demographic, 2021 MAP scores in reading and mathematics for grades 3-5 broken down by demographic. Due to the pandemic, SC Ready scores for 2019 were unavailable. The data collection took place in the summer of 2021 and therefore the SC Ready data for 2020 had not been released to the schools yet. Inquiry cycle 1 solely focused on reviewing the data and identifying what gaps were present. Since the study aimed to specifically address gaps in opportunity for students of color, the following demographic areas were analyzed: African American or African American, white, Latinx, English Language Learners, and non-English Language Learners. According to the school reports card, those were the only demographic areas related to students of color present within our school.

Tables 4.2 and 4.3 show a summary of the scores represented in the data. The inquiry group was given a more in depth summary of student scores to analyze. The inquiry group chose the mean score as the main data point to analyze as it gave the most clear comparison of student achievement. On SC Ready, students in 3rd grade can score anywhere between 100-825 points in ELA and mathematics. In 4th grade, students can score anywhere between 100-850 points and in 5th grade students can score anywhere between 100-875 points. On the MAP assessments, students can score between 140-300 in any grade. The test is adaptive, and students take the same test each year.

**Table 4.2** Students’ Mean Score on 2019 SC Ready and 2021 MAP ELA Assessments

Demographic	2019 SC Ready			2021 MAP		
	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade
All Students	434.3	463.0	509.1	197.0	202.5	210.1
Latinx	409.7	456.6	498.4	188.5	192.6	204.7
African American	413.1	396.6	486.3	191.8	201.2	207.8
White	477.1	517	535.8	202.6	209.6	215.7
ELL	411.1	424.1	473.2	188	192	204
Non-ELL	445.1	476.1	510.1	197.2	203.2	211.8

Note: The data was collected from “2019 SC READY Scores - Statewide by Grade Level and Demographic” by the South Carolina Department of Education, 2020, [ed.sc.gov](http://ed.sc.gov).

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**Table 4.3** Students’ Mean Score on 2019 SC Ready and 2021 MAP Math Assessments

Demographic	2019 SC Ready			2021 MAP		
	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade
All Students	429.8	436.6	456.3	200.7	204.8	213.0
Latinx	410.1	439.9	463.7	196.1	198.9	208.0
African American	406.9	396.3	453.0	193.1	201.3	208.2
White	469.9	468.9	476.8	205.4	210.3	220.5
ELL	424.5	415.8	451.0	196.0	198	208.0
Non-ELL	432.3	443.6	467.3	199.3	205.8	214.3

Note: The data was collected from “2019 SC READY Scores - Statewide by Grade Level and Demographic” by the South Carolina Department of Education, 2020, [ed.sc.gov](http://ed.sc.gov).

Copyright 2021 South Carolina Department of Education and “Student Growth Summary Report” by MAP NWEA, 2021, [teach.mapnwea.org](http://teach.mapnwea.org).

I explained that the purpose of examining the data was to answer the following question: What gaps in opportunity for students of color, if any, are present within our school? After reviewing the data, several gaps in opportunity were identified. I explained that the purpose of examining the data was to answer the following question: What gaps in opportunity for students of color, if any, are present within our school? After reviewing the data, several gaps in opportunity were identified.

**African American students.** The inquiry group identified African American students as a group experiencing a gap in opportunity. In mathematics and ELA on the SC Ready assessment, African American students scored significantly lower than the

grade level as a whole. Additionally, on the SC Ready ELA test African American students scored lower than their Latinx and white peers in all grades with the exception of 3rd grade ELA, where African American students scored an average of 4 points higher than their Latinx peers. On the SC Ready mathematics test, African American students scored lower than their White and Latinx peers in every grade. On the MAP assessment in both mathematics and ELA, African American students scored lower than their white peers in all grade levels but scored within 5 points of average of their Latinx peers. This was consistent with the 2020 and 2019 data for MAP as well, where white peers scored higher than African American students on all assessments (NWEA MAP, 2019; NWEA Map, 2020). The largest discrepancy seen between African American and white students was on the 4th grade SC Ready ELA test, where there was a 121 point difference between scores.

**Latinx students.** The second opportunity gap identified by the inquiry group was Latinx students. Approximately 24% of the students at the school are Latinx. Latinx students scored significantly lower than their grade level peers on all assessments. Latinx students are scored significantly lower than their white peers on all assessments. The largest discrepancy was on the SC Ready assessment in mathematics and ELA. In ELA, Latinx students scored an average of 55 points lower than their white peers. In Mathematics, Latinx students scored an average of 34 points lower than their white peers. On the MAP assessments, Latinx students scored lower than their white peers in all areas, however, the discrepancy was smaller than on the SC Ready assessments. This was consistent with the 2020 and 2019 data for MAP as well, where white peers scored higher than Latinx students on all assessments (NWEA MAP, 2019; NWEA Map, 2020). The



largest discrepancy seen between Latinx and white students was on the 3rd grade SC Ready ELA test, where there was a 61-point difference between scores.

**ELL students.** In the 2020-2021 school year, 19% of students at the school were identified as ELL students (CCSD Data Dashboard, 2020). ELL students, despite making up one fifth of the student population, have the largest discrepancies in achievement compared to their grade level peers. ELL students scored an average of 8 points lower on their MAP assessments than non-ELL students. On the SC Ready ELA assessment, ELL students scored an average of 40 points lower than non-ELL students and on mathematics ELL students scored an average of 17 points lower than non-ELL students. The SC Ready ELA scores showed the largest discrepancy between ELL and non-ELL students.

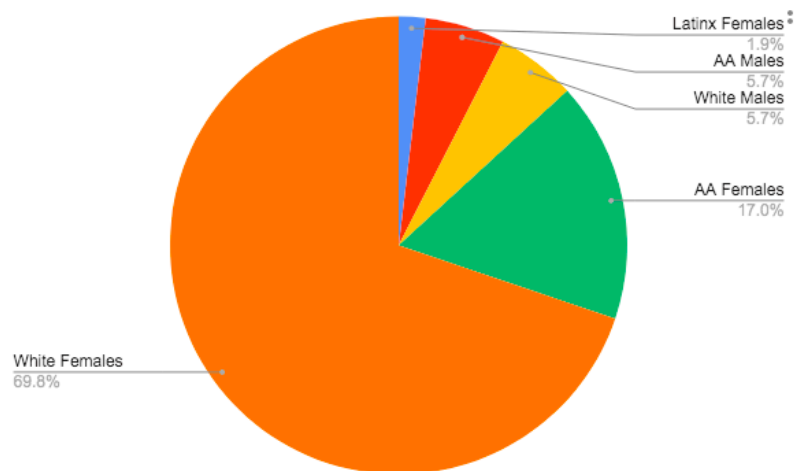
After inquiry cycle 2, the inquiry group concluded that African American, Latinx and ELL students are all experiencing an opportunity gap within the school, answering the question *what gaps in opportunity, if any, are present within our school?* After determining that opportunity gaps are present within the school and identifying those gaps, the inquiry group met a second time in order to begin the final inquiry cycle for the study.

**Inquiry Cycle 3: What previously identified or unique school-level factors that impede students of color in our school are causing our instruction/curriculum to not achieve success for all students on state tests?**

It is nearly impossible to determine a definitive reason why there are such large discrepancies in achievement among different demographics of students within the school. The inquiry group was encouraged to speak candidly about the school level factors they believe are contributing to these discrepancies.

The inquiry group discussed the data and determined school-level factors that impede students of color. All members of the inquiry team agreed that there are many different factors that could be influencing student achievement, however, major themes based on the data were discussed and there were three major factors identified. They were a lack of critical pedagogy skills and diversity in the staff, lack of diversity in the curriculum, and a lack of support for ELL students and their families. Additionally, although the inquiry team did not identify this as one of the factors, through their responses it was evident that a fourth major factor was placing the responsibility on the students and their families rather than the system. The inquiry team did not articulate this as a factor, but as the researcher, I drew this conclusion based on the discussions made throughout the inquiry team meetings.

**Lack of diversity in the staff and lack of critical pedagogy skills.** The school where the study was conducted has a rather diverse student population; however, the educators within the school do not reflect the diversity of the students. Figure 4.1 represents the educator’s demographic of the school used in the study.



**Figure 4.1** Educator demographics of the school.

The majority of staff members within the school are white females. The data that was collected were the 3-5 grade state and district assessments. Of the 14 classroom teachers in grades 3-5, 11 of the 14 are white females. Even the inquiry team lacked diversity due to the fact that most of the grade level leaders were white females. The inquiry team immediately recognized and identified the lack of diversity within the staff as a major factor impacting the achievement of students of color. Inquiry team member 2 stated, “Even when you look at the group assembled here of the school leaders, it does not reflect our student population.” The principal added, “This can also be seen in our PTA and School Improvement Councils. The teachers and parents representing the school are almost all white females. We need to work harder to encourage more diversity on these committees as well as within the staff.”

Because the majority of teachers within the school are white, they also lack critical pedagogy skills required to support students of color. According to CRT, inequities experienced by students of color are not issues that white educators are familiar with (Milner, 2007). Since they are unable to relate to the struggles of African American and Latinx students, white teachers may inadvertently provide better opportunities to white students rather than equitable opportunities to all students (Milner, 2007). Although many schools strive for culturally relevant pedagogy, a lack of diversity within the staff is a barrier our school faces in achieving it completely (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Inquiry team member 5 stated, “Before working at this school I student taught at a suburban, upper class elementary school in New York. I had never experienced teaching students of color and did not know how to navigate a lot of the conversations surrounding race that were brought up in my class and in the community.”

The inquiry team discussed that efforts to become more culturally competent as a school have been made throughout the past few years and especially in 2021. However, regardless of best efforts to manage racial issues within classrooms, white educators still do not have the life experience or through enough training to do so effectively. One of the members of the inquiry group was an African American male, who explained that while going through school he found that even the most loving and caring white teachers still could not relate to his experiences. The teacher recalled feelings of misunderstanding throughout his education and acknowledged that many of our students of color likely feel the same way. He also stated that when discussing the Civil Rights Movement, many of the white students within his class seem to believe that the movement eradicated the issue of racism within the country, whereas his African American and Latinx students recognize that it is still prevalent and affects them daily.

The white members of the inquiry team all agreed that they could not identify with many of the struggles our African American and Latinx students have had to face. Inquiry team member 7 stated that one time he was meeting with a small group of 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys (2 white and 3 African American) who asked him if he supported African American Lives Matter. Member 7 did support African American Lives Matter, however, he immediately felt as though he was going to say the wrong thing or offend a student if he told them this, so he just brushed off the question. He said he felt guilty later for not showing support for the African American community, but he was worried that the district would penalize him or see this as discussing politics and it could affect his job. He recognized that he, as well as many staff members, felt uncomfortable talking about race. Inquiry team member 4, the only African American male teacher in the

school, very candidly stated that he believed this was part of the issue. The inquiry group's identification of the lack of diversity and critical pedagogy skills reflects literature's guidance on CRT regarding the racial imbalance of staff members and students.

**Lack of diversity in the curriculum.** White students and students of color have very different relationships with school curricula (Ddamulira, 2018). Inquiry team member 4, an African American male who teaches 5th grade, brought up when he teaches about the constitution. He said that when he teaches about the constitution, he is sure to explain to his students that, in his experience, although the constitution theoretically is supposed to grant rights to all U.S. citizens, not everyone is treated equally and truly given those rights. He recalls thinking about this when he went through school and, although his teacher said the Constitution grants and guarantees rights for all, he never felt that way. One of the white women on the inquiry team stated she never thought about this when she was teaching 5th grade and it never occurred to her that, for some people, "liberty and justice for all" is not the case. This is an example of how the curricula taught in elementary schools fail students of color.

Peterson (2014) explained that consideration of CRT should be included in selection of materials on how students learn, pedagogy and curriculum. One of the subjects when curricula is the least diverse is history, where there is a lack of representation of African American and Latinx history and does not reflect their experiences. History in American schools is taught through a Eurocentric lens and oftentimes students are taught incorrect history, including the "fact" that Christopher Columbus "discovered America" (Hernandez, 2020). Though many adults now know

this to be untrue, the curriculum still teaches this to young children. The inquiry group recognized the need for curricula to be rewritten to reflect diversity. Ddamulira (2018) stated that while some states are making efforts to update standards to be more culturally competent, textbooks and other resources provided to schools contain watered down versions of history. Many of the textbooks are also written by white people who have not experienced the same lives as traditionally marginalized groups (Ddamulira, 2018). The inquiry group recognized the need for curriculum reform in order for students of color to be successful in school.

**Lack of support for ELL students and their families.** Based on the data, the inquiry group identified that support for ELL students and their families as a major opportunity gap. Communication gaps were discussed as a possible cause for the opportunity gap. These gaps occur between teachers and students, teachers, and parents as well as the school and parents. The inquiry group discussed that although the school tried to send all information home to parents in both English and Spanish, instructions for assignments, newsletter, emails, and other communication are not always translated. The group explained that lack of time and resources for translating documents contributes to the lack of support provided. Inquiry team member 1 said, “I feel guilty when I receive a phone call or email from a parent who speaks mostly Spanish, and I cannot help them with what they need.” Only one staff member at the school can speak Spanish, resulting in many meetings not being translated or being translated by a child’s family member rather than a certified translator. At school events, sometimes a translator was not able to be present and therefore families may feel out of place. The inquiry group recognized that parents were frustrated by this, and it made them feel as though they were not

welcome within the school. “I think that if the parents of our ELL population felt we were making more of an effort to have translators or someone to assist them at events, they would feel much more encouraged to attend,” inquiry team member 2 stated. The group also recognized that many of our ELL students are non-English speaking as well and have just moved to the United States from their native countries. There is little support on the school level for helping families transition to a new culture and new environment. “Perhaps the district could provide courses or information sessions for new families who are non-English speaking and just moving into the district. After school programs for ELL students would also be beneficial to help students with homework and work on other skills,” explained inquiry group member 2.

The inquiry group also stated that there is a lack of training provided for classroom teachers to support ELL students. In fact, of the ten members of the inquiry team, only two recalled ever having a formal training or professional development related to support for ELL students. All ten members of the inquiry team also stated that none of them received instruction on how to support ELL students in their undergraduate studies either.

The inquiry team members also stated that many teachers may not have taken the opportunity to better understand all of their ELL student’s cultures. “When I first began working at the school I had never taught an ELL student before. Now that I have worked here for many years I feel much more comfortable, but at first it would have been helpful to understand how to support them better,” shared inquiry team member 9. Understanding student’s cultures can significantly improve engagement and a sense of belonging, however, all members of the inquiry group stated that they believe teachers within the

school have not made the effort to better understand all of their students' home lives.

The inquiry group also recognized that there was not a set curriculum for the ELL program. The ELL model in our district is strictly pull-out with accommodations given to classroom teachers at the beginning of the year. There is only one full-time ELL teacher in the building and one part-time ELL teacher. In addition, there is a Spanish teacher, but she is not able to teach all students each semester due to a large student population. The district has an ELL department, but the teachers are not given a set curriculum to use to support students. Furthermore, the ELL teachers have such a heavy caseload that they do not have the opportunity to collaborate with classroom teachers and support ELL students while they are in the general education setting. Lack of support for ELL students and their families is a major opportunity gap within our school.

**Blaming the students, not the system.** Through analysis of the transcripts from the inquiry group discussions, it is clear that there is still blame being placed on the students rather than the system, even by staff members who are considered leaders within the school. Teachers have implicit bias surrounding their capabilities without considering the myriad of factors contributing to their achievement. This deficit thinking negatively impacts students (Milner, 2012). Several comments were made during the discussion that attributes the discrepancies in achievement to something the students or parents have “done wrong” rather than recognizing systemic racism and classism as contributors towards existing opportunity gaps. This was particularly true when discussing the African American and Latinx families. One teacher stated, “some African American families don’t seem to reinforce the importance of learning at home or care about their child’s education.” Another added, “some family’s expectations in African American



homes aren't as high as in other family's homes." A third said, "many of our African American students are being raised by grandparents instead of their real parents. Their grandparents don't always understand the technology and assignments and can't help them."

Rather than recognizing that not all students have the same opportunities in life and that, because of this, they may not be able to use all of their potential to achieve, some of the teachers in the inquiry group were blaming their circumstances as the reason they are not achieving. These statements imply it is the fault of African American students and families that they are not achieving.

Statements were also made about Latinx families, placing blame on circumstances rather than the system. An instructional coach stated:

A lot of Latinx parents can't read English themselves, so how could they possibly help their children? Also, many Latinx families may not want to be involved in the school because in their countries it's not encouraged.

Rather than reflecting on what pieces of the system are failing African American and Latinx students, many of the members of the inquiry group made similar statements. Blame placed on students is part of the reason the opportunity gap is occurring.

### **Summary**

After reviewing data from state and district assessments in the second inquiry cycle, it is clear that an opportunity gap does, in fact, exist within our school for our students of color. The gap is prevalent for our African American, Latinx and ELL students. The white students within the school achieved far better results on state and district assessments, indicating that they are receiving opportunities other demographics

of students are not. The analysis of data reveals that there are school level factors influencing our students of color and their opportunity to achieve.

After indicating the opportunity gaps, the inquiry group found that several school level factors were influencing opportunities for our students of color to achieve. CRT explains that all humans are inherently racist and have implicit biases fueled by racism, causing white teachers with a lack of critical pedagogy skills to, oftentimes inadvertently, have inequitable practices within their classrooms. A lack of diversity within the curriculum is another gap in opportunity for students of color. Not having their true history or lives reflected in what they learn influences their achievement. The inquiry team also recognized a lack of support for ELL students and their families. An inability to connect with students' cultures and home language causes challenges for ELL students and their opportunity to achieve. Finally, the narrative that factors outside of school, such as race, lifestyles, poverty and home language are the causes of discrepancies in achievement rather than school level factors is detrimental to students of color.

The final chapter of this dissertation reflects on the findings from chapter 4, discusses practitioner inquiry as the research design, explains limitations of the study, examines implications of this study through the theoretical framework and discusses implementation of the new knowledge gained on future practice.

## CHAPTER 5

### ARE WE COURAGEOUS ENOUGH TO DISRUPT THE SYSTEM?

*“Pedagogy, regardless of its name, is useless without teachers dedicated to challenging systemic oppression with intersectional social justice.” - Bettina Love*

In order for students to achieve to their fullest potential, equitable opportunities need to be present for all students -- something that is currently lacking within our system. In order for these equitable opportunities to be given to all students, schools need to look critically at student achievement to determine what current gaps in opportunity are occurring within their school and ask the difficult question: *what are we doing or not doing for our students that is causing these gaps?* Without recognizing that the issues are school and system based issues, not student issues, the same gaps in opportunity will continue to occur. Schools need to take ownership of the gaps they are creating for students and work to make the changes necessary to begin creating a new narrative for our students of color.

Through the lenses of Inquiry as Stance and Critical Race Theory, this study explored common gaps in opportunity for students of color and whether those gaps were present within our school. An inquiry group composed of teachers from the school and school leadership were involved in three cycles of inquiry to help determine if common gaps in opportunity were present within the school and, if so, what were the reasons that these gaps were occurring. The following questions served as a guide for the study:

1. What common gaps in opportunity for students of color found in literature could potentially be present within our school?
2. What gaps in opportunity for students of color, if any, are present within our school?
3. What previously identified or unique school-level factors that impede students of color in our school are causing our instruction/curriculum to not achieve success for all students on state tests?

This study was able to not only identify that our students of color were in fact experiencing opportunity gaps, but it also allowed the inquiry group to explore the root causes for these gaps and address inequalities that have been present within the system for many years. This problem of practice is prevalent in most, if not all, schools across the country, and this study merely scratched the surface of a much broader issue. The results of this research study will help to inform the school and practitioner researchers pedagogical choices moving forward. Based on the key findings from chapter 4, this chapter will explore practitioner inquiry as a research method, the opportunity gaps identified at our school, what school level factors are contributing to them, and describe the implementation plan I will enact for my continuing practice.

### **Key Findings**

When beginning this research study, the literature review was initially written with Critical Race Theory as the theoretical framework, but with a different methodology in mind. I intended to explore the opportunity gap within our school and implement an intervention to help solve the problem of practice. I quickly realized two things. The first was that I did not understand enough about the problem of practice, especially within

our school to conduct an implementation study. In order to create an action plan to change the opportunity gaps within our school, I needed to better understand what they were and why they were occurring. The second thing I realized was that the problem of practice was so broad and so deep that a 4-6 week intervention would do little to influence the opportunity gaps, especially for all of the students experiencing these discriminatory practices. I also began by focusing on all opportunity gaps that could potentially be present, but soon realized that the problem was excessively vast to complete with fidelity in a single study. I decided that I needed to narrow the investigation to one subgroup and focus more intently on the opportunity gaps they experience, and this is how the decision to focus on students of color was made.

After reflecting on both of these things, I decided that practitioner inquiry would be a much better methodology to use for this study than action research. Practitioner inquiry would allow me to understand more about the opportunity gaps within our school and why they were occurring. Knowledge is power, and the knowledge obtained from this study will help me to rethink my practices and our goals as a school to serve all students more equitably.

### **Equity and the Problem of Practice**

The tenets of Critical Race Theory align with the findings of this study. Critical race theory is committed to social justice, and this study was based in understanding inequities for students of color and working towards challenging those inequities. According to the first tenet discussed in chapter 2, race is a social construct and the impact of racism in education is not always recognized by white educators. Educators have a major impact on opportunity gaps. Through the inquiry process, it was evident

that one of the major barriers causing our students to have gaps in opportunity is blaming the students and their families rather than the system. Opportunity gaps for students of color were evident in the literature as well and identified as a common gap in schools across the country. The literature and theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory supported that race impacts educator's biases and pedagogy (Milner, 2017). Instead of reflecting upon school level factors, the teachers in the inquiry group immediately implied that outside factors were causing the opportunity gaps within the school. This implies that rather than considering it an opportunity gap, many teachers within the school still consider it an achievement gap. There was a blatant implicit bias influencing student opportunity, which will be taken into account in my action plan. I now understand that the mindset of the staff is one of the factors affecting the opportunities given to all students within our schools. This affects our school and the stakeholders within the school because if the opportunity gap is ever going to begin to close for our students of color, staff must be willing to do the work needed to shift their mindsets away from blaming students for the gaps rather than their own pedagogy and classroom practices.

Through the inquiry group, I also found that there were areas where the school and district lack equity, namely in the diversity of the staff, diversity of the curriculum, lack of critical pedagogy skills and lack of understanding about how to support ELL students. The literature supports these findings and similar causes for opportunity gaps were identified. The literature and inquiry group both recognized that a cause of the opportunity gaps for our students of color was the lack of diversity in the staff. The student population within the school is very diverse; however, the staff is primarily

composed of white females. Figlio (2017) described the importance of teachers reflecting the student population and how this benefits not only academic achievement, but attendance and discipline referrals as well. Having teachers of the same race can be inspiring for students and give them a sense of belonging within a school (Figlio, 2017). It can also affect teacher's biases of students and their expectations for students. Additionally, the staff lacks critical pedagogy skills due to their lack of diversity.

In addition to needing more diversity within the staff, there also needs to be more diversity within the curricula. Washington (2018) noted that state standards, especially in history, are thin and Eurocentric. "Eurocentrism is harmful first and foremost because it is false. However, diversity in curricula is about more than just teaching a full view of history; it is proven to empower students of color" (Washington, 2018). The inquiry team also noted that textbooks are written by primarily white authors or feature primarily white characters. Primarily white teachers also wrote the district curriculum guides for ELA and chose the mentor text suggestions for the curriculum guides. When a character in a text is not white, many times the character and their family are suppressed or struggling. The inquiry team noted that there are very few texts in the curriculum or district guides where African American or Latinx families are portrayed in a positive light and celebrated. In my action plan, diversity in the curriculum will be addressed in order to provide equity for students of color.

Finally, the staff within the school has limited understanding about how to support ELL students. The literature notes that while the Latinx ELL population is growing within public schools, the support for ELL students has not increased (Won Gyoung, 2017). While many teachers have worked at the school for over five years and

had dozens of ELL Latinx students in their classes, the inquiry team admits to having little formal training on how to best support ELL students within the classroom. Additionally, many families of ELL students do not participate in school activities or parent events due to the lack of resources to support them in these settings. There is limited access to translators for events after school and this limits the ability for parents who are not native English speakers to attend and participate. In the action plan, support for ELL students and their families will be critical in closing the opportunity gap for students of color.

### **Transferability of Findings to Additional Contexts**

The findings from this study are transferable to a variety of educational settings. Educational research needs to be relevant and able to be replicated by the practitioner researcher or by others interested in exploring the problem of practice (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Efron & Ravid, 2013). Practitioner inquiry allows the researcher practitioner to thoroughly understand the problem of practice in order to determine the best way to implement change. Practitioner inquiry allowed me to understand the gaps that we need to address and the reasons that they are occurring.

As the assistant principal of the school where the study was conducted, the findings can be used to inform the leadership team about areas where we can work to improve our equity. Educators throughout the district and elsewhere would benefit from conducting a similar study within their school or system to determine if gaps exist and, if so, factors that are contributing to the gaps. Although I enjoy my role as an assistant principal, eventually I would like to be the principal of my own school. Putting practices



into place similar to those that I will lay out in my action plan will be critical in working towards equity and closing opportunity gaps for future students.

### **Reflection on Practitioner Inquiry**

Once I made the shift from intervention to investigation, it changed my entire perspective of the problem of practice and the study. I wanted the opportunity to focus my exploration into the opportunity gap and look at our school critically. Although I would love to think that our school is the exception and that gaps do not exist because of the passion and hard work of the staff, I knew that I would inevitably find gaps and uncover school-based factors contributing to those gaps. I knew I could not address the problem of practice until I understood it more thoroughly, and therefore practitioner inquiry was the perfect design for the study.

Quality was addressed through the practitioner inquiry study in several ways. First, the topic was meaningful to the practitioner researcher and additional stakeholders (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The research is also relevant to social justice and equity. By uncovering the opportunity gaps and root causes, all stakeholders can work towards changing the system and impact students in a positive way moving forward. New knowledge was generated through this research to be used in the future. The findings are transferable and will drive future professional development (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

### **Reflection on Limitations**

Although the research conducted in this study gave insight into the problem of practice and allowed for the practitioner researcher to draw valuable conclusions, it is not without its limitations. First, research for the study began in 2018 and continued for the next three years. During that time, school was shut down for the pandemic from March

2020-August 2020. In August, a small percentage of students returned to school in person but the majority remained working online. By February 2021, 85% of our students were back to learning in person full time. The pandemic had a major impact on student learning. It also impacted the available data. The students did not take the SC Ready test in 2020 and the scores for the 2021 SC Ready test were scheduled to be released prior to data collection, but release of results were postponed due to the testing window being extended. This meant that the most recent SC Ready data was from when the current 5th graders were in 3rd grade. Although the pattern of opportunity gaps has remained consistent for students of color for at least the past decade, more recent data would have improved the validity of the study.

The second limitation was that parents, students and community members were not interviewed or surveyed to understand their perspectives of opportunity gaps. Stakeholders besides staff members could have been included to determine where they believe the gaps in opportunity exist. Parents and students have shared experiences and different perspectives than staff members. In an effort to have a focus group who was passionate about the work we were doing, I decided for this study not to include those diverse stakeholder perspectives. Having a broader study could have gleaned additional insights to the problem of practice.

Third, there were many other opportunity gaps that could have been and that need to be explored, such as socioeconomic status and gender, however, in order to investigate the problem of practice more in depth only one opportunity gap was chosen, which was race. In order to truly understand the systemic inequities within the school, all opportunity gaps will need to be explored in the future.

Finally, a major limitation of the study is that I am a white female and many of the staff members in the inquiry group were also white females. Because of this, our perspectives about the problem of practice are very different from the perspectives a African American or Latinx staff members. Our experiences were privileged ones and therefore we cannot always relate to the experiences of our marginalized students.

### **Where Do We Go from Here? A Plan of Action**

Now that it is clear our students of color are experiencing opportunity gaps within our school, and I have explored the school level factors contributing to the opportunity gaps, reflection and future planning are the next steps (Herr & Anderson, 2015). According to Efron and Ravid (2013), a new cycle of research may occur based on the knowledge gained from this study. The action plan was created with our school in mind, however, it could be beneficial to any school where students of color experience gaps in opportunity. There are four steps in the action plan to begin closing the opportunity gap for students of color. First, staff need to understand the problem of practice, it's causes and commit to changing. Second, leadership needs to commit to only hiring and retaining teachers willing to commit to the initiative. Third, diversity training in the areas of cultural competency, equity based practices, support for ELLs and critical pedagogy will need to take place and be ongoing. Finally, rewriting and restructuring the curricula to be transformed into culturally competent practices in all instructional areas will also need to take place and be ongoing.

The first step in creating change for our students of color is reflecting on our current system and practices as a staff, recognizing the need for change and committing

to doing the work needed in order for that change to occur. The change, in this case, would be creating a cultural competency initiative. Change is not easy, and staff buy in is critical in order for it to be done. In order for true change to occur, the stakeholders must understand that change is necessary. Evans (2001) stated that “this is a task of daunting proportions that must often start by challenging people’s views of themselves, their performance, and their clients” (p. 58). Within a school, there are those staff members who are able to recognize their weaknesses and want to improve them and those who do not want to face the reality that they may need to change in order to better serve the students. When people are told change is needed a natural anxiety tends to occur (Evans, 2001). In order to unfreeze this anxiety needs to be curved. In the unfreezing stage one must convince all stakeholders that change is necessary. Presenting the data found throughout the study will help staff and stakeholders to understand why change is necessary. This part of the action plan began in the fall of 2021. Administrators have developed a cultural competency team and begun an initiative to help educators at the school better understand the impact of racism on our students.

As a leader within the school, the second part of the action plan once staff understands the need for change is to ensure everyone is on board and commits to the initiative. It is easy to recognize those who are on board with new initiatives and those who are pushing against it. It is imperative to explain to staff that cultural competency is something the school will be committed to, and that if staff is not willing to do the work needed to make the change then this school may not be the best fit for them. In addition, when hiring new staff asking critical questions surrounding cultural competency will be crucial. We want to be sure that new staff is already committed to equity and will bring

that to the school. The leadership team will also take steps towards hiring a more diverse staff. The first way we will do this is to be sure that our commitment to intersectionality is known and celebrated. Ensure that candidates applying to jobs within the county know we are a school that celebrates diversity and will support all staff members. When selecting candidates to interview, we will make inclusive hiring practices a priority. This part of the action plan has begun to be implemented as well. During teacher interviews the team asks purposeful questions to help us understand candidates commitment to cultural competency.

Another way we will do this is by partnering with historically African American colleges and universities and multilingual higher education institutes to build relationships with future educators in their programs. We will also partner with alternative teacher preparation programs and other institutions to build relationships to recruit high quality, diverse candidates.

Once we have a staff that is committed to becoming culturally competent and includes a diverse group of educators, the next piece of the action plan will be to have diversity training in the areas of cultural competency, equity based practices, support for ELLs and critical pedagogy. Professional development to support our initiatives will be ongoing. One of the major professional development pieces that will need to take place is how to support ELL students and their families. We will collaborate with the ELL department from the district to create meaningful learning opportunities for teachers surrounding ELL students. We will also create planning time for grade levels to work with the ELL teacher at our school and collaborate on best practices for students within the classroom. Grade level classroom teachers and ELL teachers will be sure to provide

appropriate accommodations for ELL students within the class. Support for ELL families will also be provided. Using Title 1 funds to hire additional bilingual staff or hire translators to attend parenting events will help to increase ELL parent involvement. Translators will be made available at conferences and smaller school events as well. Parenting events specifically for ELL families to support them and make their voices heard will also be implemented. Professional development for equity based practices within the classroom will also be made a priority. Training in the areas of cultural competency, including diversity, antiracism, implicit bias, white privilege, white fragility, critical pedagogy skills, inclusive classroom practices, Critical Race Theory, culturally responsive classrooms, and race and social justice will all be made a priority. Teachers also will receive training in discussing diversity and race within the classroom.

Finally, school administration and teacher leaders will look critically at the curricula and create a long-range plan that involves culturally competent pedagogy. Instead of simply “adding in” diverse texts or talking about African American history in February, as a school we need to create our own curriculum that reflects our African American, Latinx and all other cultures equally. The two subject areas where this will be implemented initially are in social studies and ELA. In social studies and history, creating a curriculum that tells the real history of African American, Latinx, Native American and all other cultures rather than the Eurocentric curriculum currently taught is imperative. In ELA, including diverse texts that reflect all races and cultures into the everyday curriculum and eliminating culturally insensitive texts will be powerful steps towards culturally competent pedagogy. Implementing culturally relevant pedagogy in the STEM fields is also critical to affecting long-range educational and professional

outcomes for students of color where they are consistently under-represented (D'Amico et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Several impactful pieces of data came from this study. First, our African American, Latinx and ELL students are not receiving equitable opportunities within our school. The lack of equity is causing discrepancies in achievement. Secondly, there are school level factors that are causing these gaps in opportunity. These include lack of critical pedagogy skills, little staff diversity, the current curricula, insufficient support for ELL students and placing the blame on the students instead of our own practices. The findings from this practitioner inquiry have great significance to me as the assistant principal of the school. I was impacted by the results of the inquiry. Although I knew there were discrepancies, analyzing the data and seeing just how grand they were was very eye-opening to me and made me realize the work that needed to be done moving forward. As a leader within the school, I owe it to our students to break down barriers impacting the ability to change and create equitable opportunities for students of color within the school.

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