Article

School District Leaders as Agents of Equity and Public Education Futures

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines education system leaders as agents of equity and future education systems by exploring their perceptions of themselves in the role.
Methodology: The research employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven superintendents throughout North America to obtain their perceptions of themselves as equity advocates and of possible alternative futures of their school districts.
Findings: Six categories of leader agency (i.e., the capacities for intentionality, forethought, action, and reflection; Bandura, 2006) emerged from the narratives.
Recommendations: Educational leadership training, certification criteria, and professional development should integrate futures and critical futures concepts and methods.

Introduction

Despite more than six decades of education reform, public education systems in the United States have failed to provide equitable opportunities for quality education for every student enrolled. Secondly, public schooling has not kept pace with emergent thinking or technologies, especially as education reforms have narrowed the curricula to a few subjects. Studies about education leaders have focused too narrowly on principals and teachers or boards of education. Meanwhile, superintendents have been elevated to be virtually autonomous throughout public school districts. Yet the study of superintendents as potential levers for social change has remained woefully unexamined. This article reports on a study of school system superintendents within the theoretical frameworks of futures studies and educational leadership. This study was unique in focusing on education system leaders' perspectives about equity and the future.

Background

Although state education policies and funding determine the extent to which local school systems deliver education services (Björk et al., 2014b), superintendents exert decision-making power regarding school policies and how resources are allocated. While principals are responsible for the schools they lead, superintendents are responsible for the system of teaching and learning throughout a public school district (Björk et al., 2014a; 2014b). This system includes the primary and secondary schools and the administrative offices that support them. Thus, superintendents inherently have had the potential to influence systemic change through their leadership styles, practices, and visions for school systems (Bennett & Thompson, 2011; Malin & Hackmann, 2018). The objectives of the study were twofold. First, it explored the extent of their commitment to educational equity as they discussed their leadership styles and potential practices. Secondly, the inquiry sought to understand their orientations toward futures thinking

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as the superintendents lead their school systems.

This research was especially timely given the COVID-19 global pandemic necessitated the shutdown of in-person instruction in most public education systems and forced an immediate implementation of virtual learning. The urgency of this moment and the uncertainty of what the public education landscape will look like post-pandemic is fertile ground for futures thinking about the leadership of equitable public education.

Why me?

My journey to conduct this research began with my desire to build bridges for students. As a higher education professional of more than a decade, I ran for my local board of education. The school district oversaw over 200 schools and 125,000+ students. I was elected to a 4-year term and hoped to provide insights on better preparing public school students for the expectations, policies, and programs within higher education.

Three months into my term, the state legislature voted to change the governance structure of the school system. The education statute was amended to concentrate authority at the superintendent's level. The new law modified the purpose of the board of education, "to (1) raise the level of academic achievement [...], and (2) raise the level of engagement of the parents, students, and community as a whole" (School System – Academic Revitalization and Management Effectiveness Initiative, 2013, MD. Educ. Code. § 4-201). The new statute also added appointed members to the board to ensure that it would never achieve the two-thirds majority required to overturn any action by the superintendent. The board was stripped of its oversight responsibilities of the system and the budget.

Serving on a board of education with virtually no authority allowed me to observe the leadership style and practices of the superintendent. I watched the development and dissemination of generic vision statements for the school system that lacked any foresight on behalf of the students matriculating through the system or for any future students. My experiences on the board also revealed how many of the students were subjected to racial, economic, and social discrimination due to the institutional structure of the school system and state/local education policies.

As I completed a 4-year term on the board, parents and students lamented about policy decisions that the new superintendent/CEO made without any input from them. Students protested inequitable policies and demanded more academic support and physical improvements within their schools. I enrolled in a doctoral study of human and organizational systems and was designing my research. Rather than speculate whether superintendents were an appropriate lever for public education systemic change (Meadows, 2008), I conducted this study to explore superintendents' perceptions of themselves as agents of equity and the extent to which they envisioned equitable futures for all students.

Why superintendents?

Much of the literature about educational leadership primarily discusses practices of school leaders – teachers and administrators - in response to specific local school reforms (Hadfield & Ainscow, 2018; Malin & Hackmann, 2018; Wang, 2018). Other studies focus primarily on school principals as primary drivers of education reforms. Studies of district-level leaders, e.g., superintendents, have explored the history of superintendents in U. S. education, specific roles and characteristics, career tracks to the superintendency, and challenges with diversity (Björk et al., 2014a; 2014b; Roegman & Hatch, 2015)). Scholars have also surveyed superintendents' retrospectives of their careers and the need for mentoring and networking new superintendents (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012). While this research is needed, it does not adequately address the influence and scope of district-level leadership (i.e., superintendents, as agents of equity and social change, and their role in transforming future educational landscapes).

The current research does not direct the education and educational leadership fields towards futures beyond what is foreseeable. This inquiry explores superintendent perspectives (or frames) of newness about the future of public education by integrating concepts within educational leadership for equity, systems thinking, and futures studies. Exploring superintendent perceptions of possible and alternative futures of public education within the context of equity was significant. Superintendent responses signaled potential implications for new training and development within the field of educational leadership, public education system administration, and education policy. In addition, the study sought to enrich educational research by observing the extent to which leaders possessed and employed futures thinking in their practice.

Rationale for the study

After decades of education reforms imposed by political, business, industry, and philanthropic interests, public schools have not kept pace with the swiftness or complexities of social and technological change. Education reforms that changed curricula and standardized testing or increased teacher accountability have been mainly based on the concept of "pastness" (Appadurai, 2013, p. 285). Orientations of the past propagate hegemony, determinism, oppression, and privilege. Present orientations characterize preoccupations with innovation, reforms, strategies, and profits. However, future orientations allow for the convergence of individual and collective imaginations to co-create aspired visions of life emancipated from the oppression and colonization of the past. Without a critical analysis of the meta-histories and cultural power dynamics, public schools have maintained social, economic, and pedagogical inequities. Table 1 illustrates these conceptual and cultural underpinnings within temporal orientations.

Table 1: Temporal orientations: Cultural postures and power stances

Past	Present	Future
Deterministic	Feedback Loop – Positive	Aspirational
Hegemonic	Innovative	Anticipative
Privileged	Resistant to Reform	Imaginative
Mechanistic	Strategic	Inclusive
Oppressive	Consumerism	Transcendent
Reproductive	Unsustainable	Transformative

Sources: Appadurai (2013), Bateson (1972), Freire (1993), Meadows (2008), Slaughter (1998), Wallerstein (2004), and Zinn (2003).

The dominant cultures of the Western industrialized world continue to promulgate hegemonic discourses throughout their societies to maintain hierarchies of power undergirded by economic, political, legal, judicial, health, and education systems. Lawyers have argued in the courts, and elected officials submitted bills to legislative bodies. People marched in the streets to change policies that disenfranchised and discriminated against society's non-dominant classes. In the present, scientists and technologists have innovated gadgets and written codes to increase the rate and volume of production. While some innovations have created new opportunities for some people, economic and social emancipation struggles persist. Agents of social change have only been successful when they have transcended the weight of past conventions and traditions and the recurring loops of present reforms to imagine and engage alternative futures: this required vision, creativity, hope, moral grounding, and multiple perspectives. While a futures-oriented stance does not disavow the past or present, engaging with possible futures enables a broadening of narratives about time and culture by inviting the interrelationships of meta-histories and projecting them into a coexistent moment that is yet to be co-created.

The future contains a myriad of possibilities and opportunities to envision equitable schools that prepare students for local and global life. As Slaughter (1998) asserted, "the future is important to education because it provides principles and practices that were largely absent from present systems and structures, but that hold out numerous options for development and renewal" (p. 373). Within these opportunities lay aspirations of new policies, new funding models, and innovative designs for education systems that support the achievement of all students. Thus, new visions for educating pre-K-12 students must evolve to foster more profound human development and learning (Eisen, 1995; Kegan, 1994) to meet the complexities of future life.

It might seem farfetched to focus on future education systems. However, not doing so will ensure that the fate of this year's first graders will continue to be left to technocrats, demagogues, and schools that were structured to maintain caste systems. Equitable education systems require leadership that employs what Fullan (2016) referred to as "the right drivers," including "capacity building, collaboration, [decolonized] pedagogy, and systemic practices"

(p. 539).

Futures studies and education

Public education systems were embedded in the historical, political, social, and economic systems and have been inextricably linked since the 1800s (Labaree, 2010). However, solutions to remedy the social disparities in education have been narrowly focused on the school level. Employing critical futures research of education would investigate the contexts of larger social systems in which public education is embedded rather than performing an autopsy on individual schools, districts, or governing authorities (Amsler & Facer, 2017). Such a discourse broadens futures studies research to include public education futures, particularly critical futures that probe beneath the underlying power structures of cultural realities that students experience (Slaughter, 1998).

The discourses of educational futures covered a variety of perspectives throughout the landscape and were framed at systems levels. There is agreement that public education systems needed evolution from nineteenth Century westernized, colonial, industrialized, and output-driven thinking (Betts, 1992; Bussey & Inayatullah, 2008; Gidley, 2012; Milojević, 2005; Slaughter, 1998; Winnitoy, 2015). Milojević (2005) notes,

> The colonization of knowledge by the dominant (western) perspective has thus led to a view of the future that is most often defined by three pillars: (1) The capacity of technology to solve all problems; (2) linear progress as the underlying mythology; and (3) the accumulation and expansion of material goods as the primary goal of civilization. (p. 8).

Deeper analyses of worldviews about schools and who can and should be educated would allow the characterization of systemic problems to be viewed as meta-problems.

In their exploration of counter-hegemonic forms of education, Amsler and Facer (2017) presented alternative pedagogies that promote critical anticipation. In so doing, they identified four modes of practice, including

- Rehabilitative to understand past knowledge and latent possibilities
- Utopian to imagine what could be the best possible state
- Disappointing to understand the limits of knowledge; and
- Creative to actively pursue the realization of alternatives to current realities by transforming fundamental conditions (p. 8).

However, Amsler and Facer (2017) also provided a sobering reality that education discourses that take multiple alternative futures into account are ultimately supplanted by traditional education policies, thereby maintaining the status quo.

The literature on education futures is rich with examples of alternative curricula and pedagogies that introduce diverse cultural epistemologies to include those that traditional education systems have marginalized. Milojević (2005) presented a thorough analysis of education futures through the lens of feminism, indigeneity, and spirituality. These epistemologies included differences in how temporality is understood and used for either holistic development or oppression. Speaking about the engagement of utopias and dystopias while envisioning possible futures, Milojević proposed that if the desire of humankind is equitable and life-sustaining futures,

> Much more fundamental and difficult work is required. This is because there is a need to rebuild on the "faulty foundations," and to sustain that effort through the generations and not expect "solutions" to occur either immediately or in our lifetimes (p. 245).

Furthermore, Bussey and Inayatullah (2008) asserted, "As we move from unstructured hope to empowerment, we do not need more road maps or blueprints but rather visions that create new categories that change the direction of reality" (p. 2). However, these new visions and the work towards possible utopias will not occur without equity-minded and futures-conscious leaders. This research reignites the discourse on using futures in public education by understanding how district leaders engage with their visions of alternative futures.

Although superintendents cannot achieve systemic change individually, they possess a unique vantage point, access to data, and relationships to effectuate change. If there is any chance of developing equitable systems of public education, education leaders must rethink the nature of schools and schooling. As superintendents engaged in educational equity work, they had to convene groups of stakeholders throughout their communities to 1) ensure the broadest perspectives of and experiences with public education are included in the learning, and 2) foster greater collaboration across constituency groups once consensus on preferred futures is reached (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017).

Methodology

The research question for this study was: How do superintendents perceive themselves as agents of equity and future education systems? The objectives of this study were twofold. The first was to explore the extent to which superintendents see themselves as agents of equity and how they demonstrate a commitment to educational equity through their leadership styles and practices. The second was to understand the superintendents' orientations towards futures thinking and their visions for alternative futures of the public education systems they lead.

It was also vital to acknowledge the biases I brought to the research. As a woman of African American ancestry living in the United States, I was aware of the history of educating non-White people here. I attended a private primary school and a public high school and continued through post-secondary and professional studies. However, my careers in policy analysis and higher education, in conjunction with my service on the board of education, allowed me to observe educational leadership at different levels.

Much of the research within the field of education is conducted using open-ended qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Josselson, 2013; Wallace & Wray, 2016). I conducted semi-structured interviews to elicit deep and rich narratives of the leadership practices, experiences, and visions of superintendents. Given the focus on the individual meaning-making of the superintendents' perceptions of themselves as leaders and the systems they lead, I employed a narrative inquiry and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 34). The interview protocol focused on the participants' perspectives of their lived experiences as school district leaders (including accounts of specific situations, challenges, and actions, and their descriptions of how they envision their districts in the future).

Sample size and delimitations
The sample size for the study was seven. Rather than surveying a large population of school system leaders, capturing the narratives of a small sample allowed me to delve into the daily lives of school system leadership. In addition to answering questions about their leadership experiences, the participants reflected on the events, relationships, and personal decisions that shaped their experiences (Josselson, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The study was not intended to elicit any causal relationships, nor were the results generalizable.

Data collection
The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions to allow the superintendents to discuss their experiences as public education system leaders. Then, I engaged the superintendents in an exercise where they were asked to envision their districts in ten years. I guided the superintendents using multi-sensory prompts to elicit rich descriptions (Josselson, 2013) of their alternative visions of their education systems.

Transcription, coding, and data analysis
The data analysis consisted of three levels of coding: open coding, categorical-content coding, and coding of metaphors within and across the narratives. Phrases quoted from the participants were underlined during the second and third rounds of transcript reviews. After multiple readings and reflection to understand the deep and rich meanings of the quotes, I analyzed the phases in the spreadsheet against concepts found in the literature.

Lastly, I conducted a causal layered analysis (CLA) of some of the day-to-day situations they described. The

goal was to analyze the narratives more deeply to understand their perceptions of the systemic and social causes of the challenges that they outlined at the litany level. The CLA further explored their worldviews and the stories and metaphors that undergirded their thoughts about education, students, and communities.

Confidentiality and information security
Participant information was kept confidential. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to identify them throughout the discussion of the findings. The signed informed consent forms, transcripts, and interview notes for each participant were stored in a password-protected cloud-based drive, as well as on an external hard drive.

Findings

The following section begins with brief introductions to the superintendents. They include the interactions, conflicts, challenges, and decisions they have experienced as superintendents committed to achieving equity throughout their school systems. Detailed descriptions of emergent categories from the superintendents' narratives highlight their leadership styles and practices as a means of cultivating equity and inclusiveness within their districts. of that emerged from the narratives. The superintendents' perspectives of desired futures for their school districts were explored using alternative future scenarios, which included implications for the surrounding communities. For this study, I modified the Inayatullah and Milojević (2015) version of the change progression method to elicit broad visions of possible futures. The superintendents described what they envisioned would happen to their public-school districts through the lens of the following four alternative future scenarios:

- No change
- Incremental change[1]
- Radical change
- Integration[2]

To further explore the social and cultural contexts in which the superintendents were leading, a causal layered analysis (CLA) was conducted of some of the day-to-day situations they described. In the final analysis, the superintendents' metaphors were examined to provide word pictures within their narratives. The CLA and metaphors provided greater insight into the inner worlds (and the myths that inform them) of the superintendents. In their discussion of narrative foresight, Inayatullah and Milojević (2015) explained the importance of metaphors as a means of passing down historical contexts to present and future generations. The metaphors that superintendents used provided insight into their cultural backgrounds and the leadership lessons that shaped their management styles.

The superintendents
Seven superintendents met with me via Zoom (due to COVID-19) from their district offices, cars, and houses. Five school districts are located in the Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, and Northeast regions of the United States. Two are located in a remote part of Canada. Of the seven superintendents, five identify as African American, one is a North American Indigenous nation member, and one was born in Europe. Four identify as female and three as male. See Table 2 for demographic information.

Table 2: Superintendent Demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Race	Current Appointment (Yrs.)	Total Students	Location
Zak	M	45	Black	2	10,000	Midwest US
Abigail	F	58	White	4	5,000	Canada
Barbara	F	49	Black	8	1,200	Southern US
Rene	F	52	Black	3	3,400	Northeast US
Irvin	M	56	Indigenous North American	8	3,600	Southwest US
Nathan	M	57	Black	10	19,000	Canada
Emily	F	53	Black	4	79,000	Mid Atlantic US

Emergent categories

Six categories emerged from the narratives. The validity of each category is based on multiple reviews of the transcripts, the relevant literature, and the analysis of strength in addressing the research question.

1. Superintendents perceive their agency
2. Affirmation of leadership capacities
3. District improvement through equity practices
4. Leading to ensure equity for marginalized students
5. Disrupting systemic inequities
6. Limited visions of future district

Category one: Superintendents perceive their agency

In discussing whether superintendents could be agents of equity in future education systems, it was necessary to establish their perceptions of themselves from an individual and positional perspective. They revealed an awareness of the superintendents' capacities to influence change through hiring, policy change, convening and decision-making.

Five superintendents explained that although they did not enter the education field to lead a district, once they obtained leadership positions at the school level they realized how limited they were in their ability to address challenges which were at the system level. They concluded that the only way to create equity throughout the school system was to lead it.

Category two: Affirmation of leadership capacities

The superintendents explained how they received affirmations of their capacity to lead early in their leadership experiences. They were encouraged to apply for the superintendency by district leaders to whom they reported or with whom they worked. The leadership within the superintendent family histories also bolstered their confidence to lead. They recalled stories of parents and grandparents who were community leaders and heard messages about the importance of education to live in a democratic society. Finally, many superintendents reflected on their own learning trajectories and saw working in and leading a public school district to "pay it forward" to the surrounding communities.

Category three: District improvement through equity practices

Guided by their own experiences as students in public schools, the superintendents sought to provide similar and better educational experiences to the students in their districts. While public debates about public education have focused heavily on the lack of financial resources, the superintendents highlighted cultural aspects of public education as the most impactful. They recalled experiences in educational environments where they were nurtured in their academic development, affirmed their identities, were allowed to be creative and were encouraged to consider what future contributions they could make as members of society. Likewise, these are the educational environments the superintendents have been working to build.

Category four: Leading to ensure equity for marginalized students

Several superintendents were engaged in leadership for equity programs with other district leaders from regions throughout North America. As they immersed themselves in curricula to better understand equity and inclusion, they were also tasked with creating equity teams in their respective districts to share the lessons and develop equity plans. Many superintendents have initiated courageous conversations (Singelton, 2015) and uncovered how "normal" school policies, procedures, and curriculum materials have marginalized and disenfranchised many students since common public schools were initiated in the early 19th Century.

Category five: Disrupting systemic inequities

The superintendents used many strategies to disrupt inequitable structures, policies, and procedures. They served as advocates for additional funding from their states and local jurisdictions. They also challenged curriculum committees who continued to sanction texts that contained racist epitaphs, which used stereotypes to describe low-income, non-English speaking communities and people of color, or texts where the histories of the students were erased or relegated to a paragraph.

In response to the pandemic, the superintendents used the interruption to current system practices as an opportunity to further disrupt the traditional policies and procedures that perpetuated inequalities among the students. With students and most employees at home, the superintendents had a unique opening in their time and space to reflect on their districts and to begin envisioning how their systems could be different post-pandemic.

Category six: Limited visions of future district

Asking superintendents to envision their public school districts ten years in the future elicited additional data beyond their narratives. Physical observations included changes in their countenances, breathing patterns, and emotions. A few were visibly overwhelmed and tearful. Others became philosophical and spiritual.

All seven talked about how by 2030, their districts would be inviting to all students. Five of the seven spoke about regaining the trust of families and communities by employing educators who feel comfortable teaching and learning with their students. The superintendents talked about how students would see their cultures reflected in a curriculum that would simultaneously increase their academic knowledge, reaffirm their identities, and prepare them for higher education and employment. Some also characterized success by meeting or exceeding state testing standards. However, the superintendents' visions were not much of a departure from the present designs of public education that they lead.

Causal layered analysis

I conducted a causal layered analysis (CLA) to examine further the social contexts and critical issues that the superintendents described. In his description of CLA, Inayatullah (1998) explained, "Each dimension has different assumptions about the nature of reality, truth, the universe, the future and about the role of the subject" (p. 816). The four layers of CLA include: 1) the litany or critical issues, 2) the systemic/social causes, 3) the worldviews or underlying beliefs, and 4) myths/metaphors where subconscious stories reside (Inayatullah, 2020). Each layer exposed more about what influenced the superintendent's commitment to public education and how they overcome barriers to the equity practices that they have tried to implement.

Vertically, the CLA can be viewed as a case study of how each superintendent deconstructs critical issues within their district and then uses their visions of alternative futures to inform how they can reconstruct their districts in the present. Table 4 shows a CLA for each of the superintendents.

Table 4: CLA of Superintendents Perceptions

	Zak	Abigail	Barbara	Rene	Irving	Nathan	Emily
Litany - Critical Issues	Students' low performance	Increasing achievement with indigenous students	Lack of economic development; low scores on state tests	Public belief that public schools lack quality; charter school movement	Lack of economic development; system leader turnover	8 % of students low performance; inequitable distribution of outcomes	Lack of critical mass to scale excellence
Social Causes	Racial inequities; low expectations	Colonization; national policies; cultural erasure	School Privatization movement	Diminution of education profession among; charter school movement	Topography of district; lack of economic opportunity	Punitive policies; affluence; poverty is not seen	State disinvestment in community; crime
Worldview- Public Education	Education is the great equalizer	Nurturing place for growth, inclusion & creativity	Level playing field; Brave new space	Where students get their piece of the pie	Student success; Return to help the community	Do this for the least of these; whole child; whole family	Draw on ancestral achievements to save future generations
Myth/ Metaphor	Slow vehicles vs. Lot of vehicles receiving proper maintenance can go far	Hold up struggling tree with a stick vs. Nurture the whole tree & get rid of the fence	District success in the classroom vs. Everyone doing the dishes; students leave with a pocket full of tools	Students can't see their way out vs. Heroes are all around	Third World status vs. Successes snowball in schools and the community	The lottery (gamble based on postal code) vs. the best weapon against poverty and inequities	The swamp of calcified central bureaucracy vs. the family as the driver for what schools do.

All of the superintendents shared how the daily crises that were published in the news media did not capture the hard work they observed throughout their districts. At the systemic level, we examined how historical social structures and policies impact school districts. In overcoming barriers to marginalized students, superintendents had to be willing to disrupt hegemonic systems or "used futures," (Inayatullah, 2008). They also had to enlist buy-in from their boards of education, executive teams, and principles to guard against resistors to change. The superintendents have accepted their roles as equity advocates primarily because of their internal belief systems about public education, diverse students, and leadership. Finally, the myths and metaphors amplified their narratives about public education in the present. They began to enlist their imaginations, which allowed the superintendents to envision possible futures for their districts.

Superintendents use of metaphors
This research design viewed the narratives through the lens of futures studies, which includes the examination of metaphors as a means of exploring meaning at subconsciousness levels of lived experiences and preformed beliefs. Although they are embedded within a story, metaphors amplify meanings within the narratives derived from beliefs, worldviews, and acculturation. "It invites the question as to how many other ways of thinking might there be" (Judge, 2016, p. 116). Table 5 illustrates an example of a metaphor each of the superintendents used in their narrative with an interpreted meaning of the systemic implications of these ideas deeply embedded in their consciousness.

Table 5: Systemic Implications of Superintendent Metaphors

Name	Metaphor	Systemic Implications
Zak	Some kids get there on a bus, some on a plane, car, or boat. Educators or the supports system for the vehicles. Those on a jet, let them fly. My student on a bus, I am going to be right there with them. Gas up. Check your tire. I'm going to support you along the way.	No matter where students are in there learning, the educator's job is to service their academic and personal development.
Abigail	…we do the single tree where what are your roots? The trunk is your influences; the branches and the leaves become your dreams, ambitions, and your aspirations. Your roots might be your cultural background, your parents; you were trained in music, or you love poetry or whatever it might be for your roots.	Education systems should nurture the development of the whole child.
Barbara	Children leave with a pocket full of tools.	Students should graduate from the district with the skills and talents to choose their next phase of life.
Rene	I put the word DRAFT on new policies. Just that watermark on a document makes a huge difference.	To build trust, communicate with stakeholders that new policies are not final without broad input and buy in.
Irving	We can be a lighthouse to other school districts so they can replicate the success that we experienced in achievement.	Share best practices with other school districts and improve education throughout the state.
Nathan	The lottery can't be here.	The commitment to guarantee a quality education for all students.
Emily	To root out and to plant, weeding, and turn on its root.	Identify and dismantle policies and practices that disenfranchise students and replace with equitable policies and practices.

The superintendents in this study are seasoned leaders who are products of public education. As educators, they recognized that the issues they wanted to solve were at the systems level and sought leadership roles to expand their influence. As superintendents, they sought input from their boards of education, executive teams, administrators, teachers, students, and families to understand the issues from a broad spectrum of viewpoints. The superintendents knew they had to foster trust and buy-in as they initiated new policies, procedures, practices, and curricula as they

attempted to address systemic inequities within their school systems. In the following section, I will discuss the study's implications and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The superintendents in this study considered themselves as agents of social change. They believe in the authority of the position and drew upon the examples of leadership they observed throughout their lives (Seashore et al., 2004). Their narratives revealed daily commitments, work, and challenges in creating equity throughout their school districts. They confidently use their authority, skills, and knowledge of the education enterprise to lead and inspire school and administrative staff to see each student as a whole child. They used their understanding of the institution of public schooling to effectuate social change. By training staff, principals, and teachers, superintendents were able to influence ways of thinking, knowing, and doing throughout the district. However, they were challenged by internal resistors of their equity policies, programs, and curricular changes.

During COVID-19, many superintendents took advantage of the changes to online instruction—and stay-at-home orders— to strengthen relationships between students and families. They called on principals and teachers to reach out to homebound students and inquire about their wellbeing. By shifting the concern from curriculum implementation to a focus on the wellbeing of students and their families, the superintendents reported that teachers learned so much more about students than they ever knew in the classroom. Thus, teachers experienced an increased awareness of students' life worlds beyond school. The superintendent responses to COVID-19 showed movement away from the past and present discourses regarding policies and curricula and assessment of teaching and learning toward the beginnings of collective and reciprocal learning (Freire, 1993; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). They also employed legal expertise, when necessary, to help them disrupt or dismantle taken-for-granted school structures and policies that inhibited more significant equity (Horsford, 2011; Roegman & Hatch, 2015). Therefore, the superintendents displayed their ability to build capacity for creating equity throughout their districts (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012). Herein lies a leverage point (Meadows, 2008) to employ futures thinking and critical futures analysis.

Equity is not sufficient for the future

In 2014, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) collaborated with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to update leadership standards to consider the contemporary realities that educational leaders navigate more accurately. After several revisions, the new professional standards were released in October 2015. The newer standards used more student-focused language and included an additional standard for "Equity and Cultural Responsiveness" (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). Likewise, Lanoue and Zepeda (2018) highlighted six critical leadership domains that characterized a superintendent's leadership effectiveness but did not include a standard for equity. Furthermore, neither reference mentioned futures thinking or strategic foresight as a standard of practice for education leaders.

While including equity and cultural responsiveness is essential for creating more inclusive learning environments, these would only respond to historical hegemonic structures and policies at best. The superintendents in this study illustrated many of the current characteristics as they explained their leadership practices (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). However, continuing practices that do not explore and engage future life, resources, societies, and governments ensure continued preparation for life within the status quo. Only futures thinking and the practices that futurists employ can pull public school systems forward by transcending present controversies and historical hegemonies (Inayatullah, 2008).

CLA discourse across the participants

In addition to reviewing the causal layered analyses vertically for each superintendent, I conducted a horizontal analysis as if the superintendents were engaged in a discourse about educational leadership and equity. Public school superintendents navigate enormous challenges within their school districts. Table 7 illustrates an integrated CLA of

litanies, systemic/social causes, worldviews, myths, and metaphors across all participants.

Table 7: CLA Across All Superintendents

Litany	Funding, curriculum, technology, staff, board relations, system/school policies, and school choice rhetoric
Systemic/ Social Causes	American idealism, slavery, assimilation, cultural erasure, segregation, discriminatory policies in housing, disinvestment, capitalism, racism, COVID-19
Worldviews	Public education is the "great equalizer" instead of the great sorter Meet students where they enter the system, not punish them for where/how they enter it Teach the whole child includes the family, language, ableness, experiences, safety Raising expectations beyond social barriers
Myth/Metaphor	Children will determine the future of the world Public education will sustain our democracy Superintendent - From Head Administrator to Freedom Fighter - Leading out of racism and inequities (not all in my lifetime but I do my part)

The litany level only engages problems within school systems that are at the surface or in local news headlines. Meanwhile, the system responses to these problems have primarily encompassed reforms that involved "fixing" the students or their families. System reforms have not accounted for the histories of colonization, racism, classism, cultural erasure, systemic inequities within schools, districts located in isolated landscapes, state and local disinvestment, and political movements to promote school privatization or charter schools. However, in each of their narratives, the superintendents referenced one or more of the above historical and political conditions as they described their districts' challenges. These conditions were amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their beliefs in public education systems, educators, families, and students, in addition to their own stories of matriculating through public education systems, reinforced their worldviews about the value and benefits of public education. Lastly, the metaphors that they used to anchor their visions of their school districts, ten years in the future, not only revealed their dogged commitment to systemic changes and improvement rooted in their visions for public education futures.

Limited visions of the future
When they were invited to envision possible futures of their districts, the superintendents articulated resolutions (or improvements) to the day-to-day, critical issues that they described early in their narratives. However, no innovative designs of public education emerged from their imaginations. Despite reporting how they had disrupted specific inequitable policies or processes, they did not fully dismantle the hegemonic systems in which their district was situated. They also did not share new visions of public schools or teaching and learning processes. They did not offer new funding models for public schools, which no longer relied on property owners and perpetuated economic inequities. Even as the superintendents discussed their commitment to ensure language acquisition for English language learners, only one discussed the possibility of all graduates being multilingual.

These system leaders reported that they were overwhelmed by present circumstances, the feedback loops of the previous educational reforms, resistors to equity initiatives, and external pressures for accountability from politicians and parents. A 20- minute visioning exercise was hardly enough time to consider futures beyond a notion. In response to what they needed in the present, the superintendents mentioned their desire for shifts in thinking among their staff and teachers about students and families. Their awareness indicated a willingness to engage with futures tools, such as CLA, with more public education stakeholders.

Leading from the future
Education leaders need the time and space to envision education futures. Training would enable education leaders to engage with alternative futures, as they deconstruct the underlying social contexts that dominate the systems in which they operate. Leaders need to understand how the critical issues they face are scripted by worldviews, myths, and metaphors retained by the dominant culture (Bussey, 2006; Inayatullah, 2008;). Then, they can re-script and create new narratives about public education. Discourses about public education futures can be a starting point to co-create new education systems that are equitable and inclusive. Figure 1 illustrates the process of using perceived futures to inform present behaviors, decisions, and practices.
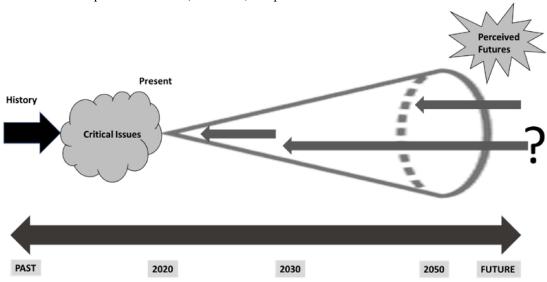
Fig. 1: Using Futures to Inform the Present

Integrating futures in educational leadership
Now is the perfect time for education leaders to develop futures consciousness. As Inayatullah (2020) asserted, "Each person and each organization has a story which they tell themselves that can hinder or hurt the possibility of realizing the new futures, the desired future" (p. 4). By sharing their narratives, the superintendents were able to foreground their underlying worldviews and metaphors and reconceptualize their time horizons beyond the immediate present. Futures studies and critical futures studies are grounded in theoretical frameworks and methodologies that allow for the expansion of agency and emancipation by engaging with "imagination, aspiration and anticipation" (Appadurai, 2013). As superintendents become aware of how they can lead into the future, they have the potential to co-create future education systems that are equitable.

Recommendations For Future Research

This study intended to explore the possible merits of integrating futures and critical futures concepts and tools with the study of education system leaders in North America. Further investigation of futures consciousness among education system leaders is essential to creating alternative education futures. Ahvenharju, Minkkinen, and Lalot (2018) explained five areas of futures consciousness: (1) time perspective, (2) agency beliefs, (3) openness to alternatives, (4) systems perception, and (5) concern for others. In 2020, these researchers developed a tool to assess futures consciousness. Now that a scale has been validated and "indicates good psychometric properties" (Lalot et al., 2020, p. 874), it would be of beneficial use to employ this tool with education system leaders and aspirants.

The integration of futures thinking in educational leadership also has implications for educational leadership, as well as teacher training programs. Certification programs should include futures concepts and methodologies in the curriculum for principals, district administrators, and superintendents. Moreover, training for boards of education

should include futures consciousness and analysis methods such as CLA. Schools of education should partner with programs like Bishop and Strong's Teach the Future to integrate age-appropriate futures concepts in elementary and secondary education.

Since this study has shown the need for integration of futures concepts in education leadership training, an analysis of education leadership curricula and certification requirements is recommended. The results of such analyses would inform education system credentialing agencies and political officials on the necessity of futures thinking among education leaders. This activity would also broaden the discourse to meta-system levels.

Lastly, it would be interesting to revisit the superintendents in this study to inquire whether their participation in this study had any implications on their leadership practices and decision-making. To what extent did engaging with possible futures inform their current practices? A longitudinal study of school districts led by leaders engaged with futures and critical futures concepts and methods could provide additional empirical evidence of the efficacy of futures and critical futures research within educational leadership.

Conclusion

Education system leaders must change the organizational culture of every public school and district office. Fullan (2006) continued his admonition that, to achieve sustainable change, "We need a system laced with leaders who are trained to think in bigger terms and to act in ways that affect larger parts of the system as a whole" (p.121). Futures thinking is not only imperative for superintendents, but futures orientation should also be integral to education systems on the whole.

In their focus on distributed leadership within education systems, there is room to explore the role of the system leader as a lever for sustainable change more broadly (Fullan, 2006; 2016). The education leadership theories featured throughout the reform era have not yielded transformation or social justice in public education. Furthermore, Quantz et al. (2017) asserted that "Simply claiming that one is in favor of transformation and social justice is no assurance that a theory will lead us in that direction" (p. 388).

On a personal note, the politics surrounding the board of education, to which I was elected, hindered me from effectively representing the constituents who voted for me. Throughout my 4-year term, I could only watch as students suffered, and the system lost funding under the leadership of a superintendent with no foresight or commitment to equity. I could hardly do anything beyond lending a compassionate ear with only one voice and one vote.

This research has helped me to evolve from harboring disdain for a superintendent to designing an inquiry about the position. Listening to school system superintendents' narratives has helped me heal from that ordeal. Now, I am determined to collaborate with school system leaders to break centuries of hegemony within public education.

Neither scholars of educational leadership nor futures and critical futures studies practitioners can afford to wait to apply futures concepts and methodologies to public education systems. Fortunately, FS and CFS scholars are privileged by their adeptness at inter-and trans-disciplinarity to investigate possible futures across a broad scope of global social conditions. However, education scholars would do well to consider system leadership for social change by employing futures thinking and engaging in rigorous critiques of underlying hegemonies as they emerge from the pandemic to continued calls for emancipated futures.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1- Marginal change in the Inayatullah and Milojević (2015) version of the change model was modified to Incremental change for this study.

2- Adaptative change in the Inayatullah and Milojević (2015) version of the change model was modified to Integration, meaning an integrated approach to education system change.

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