

Student Equity and Inclusive Education Policy in Ontario:

Perspectives of Three High School Principals

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Abstract

Embracing diversity within schools is a complex endeavour. Data on student achievement in Ontario's urban high schools indicate a disconnect between the expectation of equitable and inclusive education as stated in the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2014) vision, *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*, and the social realities of discriminatory barriers in schools. This study employed semi-structured interviews to obtain the perspectives of 3 urban high school principals on the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity—identified as a key goal in *Achieving Excellence*. Findings suggest that the interconnectivity of policies, how principals translate policy messages, and the character traits associated with leadership are factors that muddy the implementation process in urban high schools. It was suggested that policy implementation is not static and occurs in a fluid system consisting of individuals with differing lived experiences, beliefs, and intersectional identities. Emphasizing the delicate state of Ontario's current political climate, participants proposed the dismantling of tokenism and assumptions placed on principals, the incorporation of practical support in professional development, and changing the pathologizing nature of teacher professional judgment as strategies to improve principal policy implementation.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This study explored the perspectives of three urban high school principals in Ontario on the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity as identified in the Ontario Ministry of Education's (OME; 2014a) vision, *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*. This chapter begins with a personal narrative that provides the foundation for the topic of this study while highlighting how my experiences in the Ontario education system shaped my exposure to equity and inclusive policies. Evidently, my narrative provides examples of how my experiences may have influenced and biased portions of this study. The background of the problem explores the historical timeline of equity and inclusion in the OME's (2009/2013) *Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119: Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools' (PPM No. 119)*. Discussion continues on the current challenges facing principals in regard to equitable and inclusive education as discussed in the statement of the problem. The rest of the chapter outlines the purpose of the study, research questions that guide further discussion, and the theoretical framework that supports the use of those questions. The rationale emphasizes the importance of the study while the scope and limitations section details the breadth and barriers of the study. The chapter continues with a section on definitions that provides a contextual foundation of the common and complex terminology used in this study. The chapter concludes with an outline of the remainder of the document.

Position of the Researcher

As a graduate student and educator, the words "equity," "inclusion," and "academic achievement" have always been topics of conversation in academic settings

that were connected to my identity as a Black female. At an early age, I was made aware by teachers, school literature (e.g., the Oompa-Loompas in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), and other media that Black individuals are traditionally uneducated and are from the working class. As well, I attended elementary school during the time period in which *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (Gray, 1992) was the social divider and boys were said to be smarter than girls—especially in math—which was the primary subject that determined future academic success in the eyes of my parents. Even without self-identification as being Black or female, teachers and other parents at the schools I attended would praise me for my ability to attain high grades in comparison to other Black students or could be overheard having conversations about how girls are capable of achieving the same accomplishments as boys.

I spent the past 17 years obtaining an education in Ontario and of those 17 years, 11 were spent in the public education system. While in high school, I was fortunate to perform well academically and had access to an equitable and inclusive education. I attended a school with a supportive principal and teachers who made the effort to ensure that I was acknowledged and made to feel important. Although my experience is portrayed in a positive light, I encountered and witnessed other students who unfortunately could not escape the systemic barriers preventing their access to an equitable and inclusive education. These students were termed by my teachers as “visible minorities”—which I later came to understand as being non-White in complexion, female, from a low socioeconomic status (SES) background, and could be characterized as insignificant. As a Black female whose identity is commonly stigmatized within North America, seeing other students without access to the kind of education I received sparked

my interest in gaining an understanding of equitable and inclusive practices in Ontario.

PPM No. 119 (OME, 2009/2013), the policy document that addresses equity and inclusive education, was published at a precarious time for some students in the Ontario education system who, like me, were in high school. My introduction to the policy was in 2011 in a Grade 12 law class. The topic of discussion was how educational laws and policies could aid in making the education system an inclusive environment for students. Although the name of the specific policy that addressed the topic was not mentioned, my teacher stated that the policy was released in 2009. My exposure to the existence of *PPM No. 119* began to answer a few questions I had regarding the delivery of equitable and inclusive education at my school. The connection between the lessons learned in my law class about inclusive policies, my own experience as a Black female, and the education system were not clear to me until I pursued a Master of Education (MEd.) degree. As a student in the MEd. program, I encountered and built relations with various educational experts and practitioners in the administration and leadership stream. Conversations held formally in lectures and informally in social gatherings resurfaced the topic of equitable and inclusive education in Ontario and made connections to *PPM No. 119* and *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a).

During an informal discussion with a group of classmates on the social and cultural challenges facing administrators, we talked about *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a). Since I obtained my education in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), I challenged my classmates to provide their insights on how *Achieving Excellence* (2014) is applied in urban settings. One of my classmates stated that the intention of *Achieving Excellence* is simply to please parents and make the province appear as if it is the honourable child among its provincial brothers and sisters. Other classmates contributed to the

conversation by stating that the only way principals can tackle all of the paperwork provided is to sway policies into the direction of the legacy they want to create for themselves. At that moment, it was apparent that the perspectives held by the educators in my program influenced the actions they took to implement equitable and inclusive environments in their schools.

As I continued through the MEd. program, I conducted my own meta-reflections to grasp an understanding as to why educators, more specifically principals, were struggling to effectively implement equity and inclusive policies. My academic journey combined with the conversations and knowledge obtained in my graduate courses propelled my interest in researching the three urban high school principals' perspectives on the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity—identified as a key goal in *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a).

Background of the Problem

Ontario is known as the most multicultural province in Canada (OME, 2014a). As the political climate of Ontario evolved over time, multiculturalism developed into a defining characteristic of the education system that has aided in cultivating a Canadian civic and social identity among its citizens (Gereluk, Martin, Maxwell, & Norris, 2016). In efforts to provide a comprehensive representation of equitable and inclusive policies in the Ontario education system, I begin my discussion with an overview of how multiculturalism has evolved in Canada. I then progress into the exploration of how Ontario has established equitable and inclusive policies in response to its multicultural population. Since education is under provincial jurisdiction (Constitution Act, 1867, c.93), the remaining chapters of this study focus solely on *PPM No. 119* (OME, 2009/2013) and *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a).

Canada developed its first official multicultural policy nearly five decades ago in 1971 (Library of Parliament, 2018). Following in its footsteps, the *Canadian Multicultural Act* was developed in 1988 under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's direction (Burnet & Driedger, 2014). As criticism of public policy regarding multiculturalism plagued the early 1990s, the role of government had to shift to incorporate ideologies regarding globalization (Pal, 2014). As diverse populations continued to immigrate into the country, Canada saw a change in social policies concerning multiculturalism, which were intended to make social institutions (such as education) accountable for their actions (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013). The education system historically has been used as "a useful means for implementing policy goals" (Gereluk et al., 2016, p. 6), thus changes in societal attitudes, values, and beliefs are continuously reflected in educational policies. In response to federal initiatives, provinces such as Ontario have taken action to achieving multicultural aims through policy creation.

In 1992, Ontario's *Education Act* (R.S.O 1990, c. E.2) was amended to mandate all school boards to develop antiracism and ethnocultural equity policies. In response to the amendment, the OME (1993) published *Policy/ Program Memorandum No. 119: Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity* and *Antiracism* as a guide to help school boards implement policies that were created (Davidson, 2009). During the time of the *PPM No. 119's* (1993) implementation, the Progressive Conservative Party (Conservatives) led by Mike Harris was reducing education spending across Ontario (Dei, 2003). These actions caused concern over the policy's ability to thrive during education funding cuts (McCaskell, 2005).

As the Conservatives were repealing equity legislation, *PPM No. 119* (1993) was saved from destruction (McCaskell, 2005). The document, which requires school boards to develop anti-racism and ethnocultural equity policies, was strategically hidden from the agenda by “inundating the premier’s office ‘with so much other stuff that they didn’t notice what we left out’” (McCaskell, 2005, p. 221). Fortunately, *PPM No. 119* (1993) and other multiculturalism policies prospered and saw substantial improvements when the Liberal Party (Liberals) succeeded the Conservatives in 2003 (McCaskell, 2005).

As part of their campaign platform, the Liberals promised Ontario citizens that they would improve the state of public education through the *Excellence for All* plan (The Ontario Liberal Party, 2002) and increased allocation of financial grants (Makarenko, 2003). This commitment indirectly included making improvements to *PPM No. 119* (OME, 1993) as academic excellence was the foundation for both initiatives. Although beneficial in bringing awareness about racism and diversity issues in education, *PPM No. 119* (1993) was unsuccessful in completely preventing discrimination of racialized students. As a result, the policy was revamped in 2009 to incorporate amendments to the *Education Act* as well as all sections of discrimination under the Ontario Human Rights Code (OME, 2009/2013). Amendments were made under the OME’s new strategy called *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (*Realizing the Promise of Diversity*; OME, 2009a) which made the distinction to shift the policy lens from an emphasis on race to one that focused on equity and inclusion.

In 2009, Kathleen Wynne, the then Minister of Education, stated:

It is with great pleasure that I rise today to talk about the Ministry of Education’s equity and inclusive education strategy called *Realizing the Promise of Diversity*.

I'm very pleased to do this because I believe that this strategy will make a huge difference to students, to parents, to teachers, to administrators, to support staff, and to school communities all over Ontario. (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2009)

Shortly after her speech, *PPM No. 119* was once again revamped and *PPM No. 119: Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools* (OME, 2009/2013) was developed in efforts to “close student achievement gaps by identifying and eliminating any biases, barriers, and power dynamics that may limit students’ prospects for learning, growing and contributing fully to society” (OME, 2014b, p. 12). *PPM No. 119* (2009/2013) is framed around the notion that the systemic barriers and discriminatory biases that exist in Ontario’s education system have created an environment that prevents students from achieving their full academic potential. In that same year, *The Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation (EIEOS)*; (OME, 2014b) was established as a 4-year guideline to aid school boards in achieving equitable and inclusive education for all students through policy development (OME, 2014b). The three core goals that were the backbone of *PPM No. 119* under the *Realizing the Promise of Diversity* strategy were: high levels of student achievement, reduced gaps in student achievement, and increased public confidence in publicly funded education.

Since its release, the hope for equitable education stated in *PPM No. 119* (OME, 2009/2013) and its outcomes in practice are still not parallel (Solomon, 2003). For example, some school boards have implemented Multicultural Week as a common practice to celebrate diversity, however its aim is often “diluted as just another weekly

theme” (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003, p. 56). In efforts to build upon its successes and enhance its progress, the OME released its new vision (*Achieving Excellence*) in 2014, which focuses on four renewed goals: achieving excellence, ensuring equity, promoting well-being, and enhancing public confidence. Ontario’s *Education Equity Action Plan (EEAP; OME, 2017)*—released in October 2017—builds upon the *EIEOS* (OME, 2014b) and stands as a current 3-year roadmap designed to impose accountability measures on educational stakeholders for achieving the goal of ensuring equity.

A significant change from the *EIEOS* (OME, 2014b) was the creation of the Education Equity Secretariat— an administrative department tasked with ensuring that the *EEAP* (OME, 2017) is executed with accuracy. Other policies developed that work in conjunction with and complement *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) are *PPM No. 8: Identification of and Program Planning for Students with Learning Disabilities* (2014); *PPM No. 128: The Provincial Code of Conduct and the School Board Codes of Conduct* (2012); *PPM No. 144: Bullying Prevention and Intervention* (2012); *PPM No. 145: Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour* (2012); *PPM No. 159: Collaborative Professionalism* (2016); and *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools* (2016). Due to the timing of when this study was conducted, the *Achieving Excellence* and *EEAP* policy documents are the focal points because of their recency and relevancy in Ontario’s publicly funded schools.

The Problem

The area of inquiry for this study was the implementation of equity and inclusion policies. In particular, focus was placed on urban high schools. Educational policy implementation follows a top-down approach (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; MacBeath,

2007; McLaughlin, 1987; Ryan, 2012) where implementation is the execution of developed policy (Delaney, 2002). This hierarchical approach can present a disconnect between the intended goals at the macro-level from the micro-level, resulting in an inequitable environment for students, as evidenced in statistics presented in the next section. It is understood that policy goals from the macro-level are not always implemented as intended at the micro-level (Delaney, 2002); thus, addressing the idiosyncrasies of policy implementation is crucial for the success of *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a).

Principals are key actors in the policy implementation process and are responsible for implementing policies that address school improvement (Hope & Pigford, 2001). These actors help transition policy documents such as *PPM No. 119* (OME, 2009/2013) and *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) from macro-level theory to school level implementation. The student population in urban boards is primarily diverse and can benefit from an equitable learning environment, however inequity continues to preside as the norm (Flessa & Ketelle, 2007; Gooden, 2012). Although principals are key actors, the level of understanding they possess on policy implementation may not always be understood in all situations. In particular, the multidimensional social structures that exist in education influence the inability for implementation to be successful all the time in different contexts (Honig, 2006).

Problem Statement

This study focuses on the disparity of student success between marginalized and non-marginalized groups of high school students in urban settings (Toronto District School Board [TDSB], 2014a). The OME defines student success as providing every student with “the same opportunity to succeed and graduate from high school” (OME,

2012a, para. 1). *Achieving Excellence* states that “Performance gaps between groups of students have...narrowed, and in some cases, closed” (OME, 2014a, p. 2). The document supports this statement by providing examples in the areas of English as a Second Language programs, gender, and special education needs. An area that is not discussed is the performance gap between marginalized and non-marginalized students despite empirical studies conducted by the TDSB (2014a) providing evidence of its existence. This study addressed this area by examining equitable and inclusive policy implementation.

In efforts to provide a comprehensive examination of the reality of the problem this study addressed, this section refers to documents from the TDSB, which is situated in one of the most diverse cities in the province (TDSB, 2018a). Since the TDSB consistently publicizes statistics on its diverse student population, and participants interviewed were employed in cities with similar characteristics to the GTA, it is fitting to use their information in this section.

Every 5 years, the TDSB conducts a system-wide *Student & Parent Census* that obtains statistical data about the students in its board (TDSB, 2014b). At the time of writing, the latest TDSB student and parent census focused on student achievement occurring in 2011-2012, thus findings reported in this section are from that study. The 2011-2012 results provide evidence that students who are White, heterosexual, from higher SES, and identified as gifted, performed well on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) and earned 16 or more course credits by the end of Grade 10. Those who did not perform well were largely students who are non-White, members of the LGBTQ community, identified as having special needs, and from low SES (TDSB, 2014a). The 2006 publication of the census provided similar results. It is important to

note that external factors that were not in the control of high schools or the school boards may have influenced the statistics published by the TDSB.

In 2011, when TDSB was conducting its latest census, Statistics Canada reported that approximately 3,611,400 individuals immigrated into the province (Statistics Canada, 2016). Of that population, 381,700 resided in Toronto, which accounted for 6.9% of Toronto's total population (Statistics Canada, 2016). The increase in immigrants brought forth more students who were identified as racialized individuals and those who were English language learners (Statistics Canada, 2016). Approximately 35,000 students each year do not pass the OSSLT, and the literature on standardized testing practice identify cultural and language bias as underlying causes (Quigley, 2011). These external factors may have contributed to underperformance on the OSSLT prior to the full implementation of an equitable and inclusive education strategy by the high school of those specific students. Findings by Armstrong, Tutters, and Carrier (2013) support the reality that "students who do not conform to dominant White, middle class, heterosexual norms are less likely to achieve academic success" (p. 120). The quantitative data extracted from both publications and my own high school experience provide further insight that marginalized students are continuing to underperform academically in comparison to non-marginalized students.

Although high school graduation rates in urban settings such as Toronto were at 86% as of October 31, 2017, the 10% dropout rate and 4% retention rate (suggests reference to students who have repeated a grade or did not qualify to graduate) is still troubling (TDSB, n.d.). These numbers provide some evidence that not *all* students in Ontario are receiving an equitable and inclusive education, which in turn suggests that

Achieving Excellence (OME, 2014a) may not be receiving adequate implementation in urban high schools. In addition to “contain[ing] the richest diversity in the province” (People for Education, 2008, p. 8), urban settings are in a prime position to reap the intended purpose and benefits of *Achieving Excellence* as they are composed of families that have differing ethnicities and are from both high and low SES. If one aspect of *Achieving Excellence* is underperforming—in this case academic success—then student success as a whole cannot be stated as being achieved.

It is beneficial to note that when comparing board-established policies from the 72 boards in Ontario, only boards situated in urban settings and/or possessing a large marginalized population have extensive equity and inclusion policies—and some have multiple policies. A number of rural boards possess short policies that span approximately two to three pages with vague descriptors that leave room for misinterpretations. As well, some of the policies are outdated and do not contain changes implemented by the OME. For example, the Greater Essex County District School Board’s (GECDSB) equity and inclusion policy and regulation documents, which are made publicly available on its website, was last reviewed in 2017. These documents make reference to the strategy *Realizing the Promise of Diversity* (OME, 2009a), *PPM No. 119* (OME, 2009/2013), and *EIEOS* (OME, 2014b), which have all been amended under the new vision *Achieving Excellence* (GECDSB, 2017). The documents do not mention the changes implemented by the OME. The lack of detailed and updated policies indicates a need to further explore the implementation of equity and inclusive policies in Ontario.

Purpose Statement

This study sought to explore the perspectives held by three urban high school principals on the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity—identified as a key goal in the OME’s (2014a) vision *Achieving Excellence*. Statistics provided by the TDSB on student success indicate that there is a disconnect between the expectation of equitable and inclusive education as stated in *Achieving Excellence* and the social realities of discriminatory barriers in Ontario urban schools. Utilizing a generic qualitative approach (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003), findings from this study may add to current literature on the micro-level factors that influence the implementation process of educational policies. Findings are intended to inform recommendations that may further discourse regarding *Achieving Excellence* for future school policies.

Research Questions

The main question that guided this study was: What are the perspectives of three principals (minimum of 2 consecutive years of administrative experience) on the implementation of equitable and inclusive education policies related to *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) in urban high schools?

Sub-questions included:

- What are the message(s) that principals obtain from *Achieving Excellence*?
- What factors are perceived to contribute to effective implementation of policy at the micro-level of the education system?
- What barriers are perceived to impact the implementation of policies that support *Achieving Excellence* in high schools?
- What supports are perceived to aid in the implementation of policies that support

Achieving Excellence in high schools?

Theoretical Framework

The perspectives that were used for this study draw on Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer's (2002) cognitive framework of implementation and Honig's (2006) portrayal of three key dimensions featured in policy implementation. Spillane et al.'s (2002) cognitive framework of implementation suggests that when provided with a policy, principals must understand what the policy entails and make decisions regarding how and to what extent they will implement that policy at their respective schools. In this framework, focus is taken away from the behaviour performed by micro-level actors and moved towards the cognitive processes that motivate the actions that will be taken. The values and beliefs held by micro-level actors shape their interpretation of policy messages irrespective of information presented by educational experts. As well, the framework argues that it is possible for the same policy message to receive different interpretations as not all micro-level actors possess the same knowledge and experiences. Honig explains that research on policy implementation has traditionally looked at the impact that the interaction among three dimensions (policy, people, and places) has had on policy implementation; however, the complexity of the process requires a deeper analysis into each dimension. Spillane et al.'s and Honig's work contributed to a better understanding of how high school principals made meaning of the policy messages contained in *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) and how their interpretations framed the context specific actions they chose to employ.

Rationale and Importance of the Study

Schools are social constructions and thus are "underwritten by a set of

assumptions and beliefs that script lives and inscribe practices in particular ways” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011, p. 22). It is through this set of assumptions that discriminatory behaviour is perpetuated between students and educators, with the school standing as a catalyst for propelling the continuance or termination of such behaviours (Gosh & Abdi, 2013). During my high school experience, I witnessed the perpetuation of discriminatory behaviour towards marginalized students in my school. In my opinion, these students had difficulty performing well academically, partially as a result of facing inequitable and exclusive barriers to their education. The notion that not all students in the Ontario education system are receiving an equitable and inclusive education is the foundation on which the importance of this study is grounded.

Since high schools provide an academic foundation that may influence students’ postsecondary (Hein, Smerdon, & Sambolt, 2013), apprenticeship, and professional future (OME, 2014c), it is beneficial for principals to receive the appropriate support to implement policies that ensure all students are included in their respective schools. Policy implementation exists in a fluid system with consistent actor and structural changes, thus issues that arise are commonly never solved (Delaney, 2002). If the root cause that is preventing successful province-wide attainment of the goal of ensuring equity is not addressed, then cyclical disparity in student success between marginalized and non-marginalized students may continue to exist. As important as it is to look at the present situation of equitable and inclusive education, it is even more important that educators and policy-makers look towards the future. Statistics Canada (2017) projects that Canada’s population in 2036 will be comprised of 24.5% to 30.0% of immigrants, of whom 34.7% to 39.9% will be racialized individuals, women, and people with

disabilities. The statistics reported indicate a surge of immigrants who fit the bill of a marginalized group of individuals.

The political environment within Ontario has undergone recent changes, with the Conservatives succeeding the Liberals in the June 2018 Ontario general election. Winning with their promise “To make sure when you pay your taxes, your tax dollars will be respected” (Ontario PC, 2018, para. 3), the education system is an agenda item that has been facing severe changes and budget cuts at an alarmingly fast pace. In the span of 2 months following the election, the Conservatives reversed recent progress made by the Liberals to the sex education curriculum (Alphonso, 2018a), eliminated a \$100-million school repair fund (Alphonso, 2018b), and cancelled the curriculum rewrite of the Indigenous Education Strategy (Crawley, 2018). The Liberals developed the vision *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) and outlined all of the support that the OME would provide in the *EEAP* (OME, 2017). With the uncertainty of where the education system and equity and inclusive policies will lie in the near future, it is imperative that the education system has a better understanding of how principals implement policies now to improve the current situation.

This study provided high school principals with an outlet to communicate the strengths, areas of improvement, and recommendations they had in regard to implementing policies that support the goal of ensuring equity. The synthesis of results was intended to further discourse with school boards, policy-makers, the OME, and Equity and Inclusive Education Implementation Networks on how to better support students with access to equitable and inclusive education through policy implementation. By honouring the voice of micro-level policy actors, it is hoped that implementation

problems and successes can be addressed at earlier stages, providing greater opportunities for school boards to support the goal of ensuring equity as identified in *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a).

Scope and Limitations

Implementing a generic qualitative approach (Caelli et al., 2003), this study sought participation from three high school principals who had a minimum of 2 consecutive years of administrative experience. As a means to narrow the complexity of actors involved in education policy implementation, focus was specifically placed on principals. Participants were employed at various urban schools from Ontario school boards. Although the *EIEOS* (OME, 2014b), *PPM No. 119* (OME, 2009/2013), and *PPM No. 159* (OME, 2016) were consulted during the document collection process, the primary focus of this study was bound to the direct analysis of *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) and the *EEAP* (OME, 2017).

The nature of this study called for a limited time frame for data collection, thus a small sample size was used. Restricting the number of participants limited the opportunity to recruit a diverse selection of urban principals. As well, I obtained a snapshot of the experiences of principals in comparison to a longitudinal study in which perspectives are tracked over an extended period of time. The perspectives provided by the participants during the interview phase were limited to the length and breadth of experience they had as high school principals in urban settings. A larger sample size may have produced an wider variety of principal experience. Furthermore, opinions and views articulated did not encapsulate all Ontario principals' attitudes towards policy implementation, *PPM No. 119* (OME, 2009/2013), and *Achieving Excellence* (OME,

2014a). There were limited restrictions on participation as I aimed to widen accessibility to as many principals as possible. As a single researcher, in comparison to a member of a collaborative study, analysis of the data collected was limited to my interpretations and experiential frame of reference in the education system.

Because the study focused on publicly funded schools in Ontario, generalization is limited. Additionally, the generalizability of the results and future implications are limited to school boards and high schools that possess the same school climate and culture, principal experience, and student diversity as the schools in which the participants were employed.

Definition of Terms

I provide a contextual foundation for terms used throughout this study. Some of the definitions come from *PPM No. 119* (OME, 2009/2013) as these were the definitions and terminology commonly used by professionals in the education system.

Achievement gap refers to the average difference in levels of educational achievement between different demographic sub-groups of students in a given educational context (e.g., school, school district). These sub-groups may reflect differences in gender, race, ethnicity, country of origin, socio-economic circumstances, sexual orientation, or any other social characteristic of the student. Achievement gaps among students can be identified as various stages of a child's or student's life. For example, achievement gaps can be identified at entry to junior kindergarten, at the end of elementary school, and at the end of secondary school (TDSB, 2018b, p. 23).

Diversity refers to the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, gender expression,

language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (OME, 2009/2013, p. 9).

Equity is a condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people. Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences (OME, 2009/2013, p. 9).

Hegemony refers to preponderant influence or authority over others; the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group (“Hegemony,” 2019, paras. 1-2).

Inclusive education refers to education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected (OME, 2009/2013, p. 9).

Marginalized is the term used to describe a group of people who have been made to feel isolated and unimportant (“Marginalize,” 2019). Since the education system is composed of a diverse selection of students, I also incorporated members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) community and those who have a low SES into the definition.

Minority group is defined by Statistics Canada (2011) as individuals who identify themselves as a visible minority and is comprised of one of four designated groups under the *Employment Equity Act*. The *Employment Equity Act* defines visible minorities as “persons, other than Aboriginal persons, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-White in colour.” The other three designated groups are women, Aboriginal people, and people with disabilities. Equity and inclusive policy documents retrieved from a few Ontario

school boards define a minoritized group as “A group of people within a given society that has little or no access to political, cultural, or religious power. This term may refer to a group that is small in number or connote inferior social position” (OME, 2014b, p. 88).

Although both definitions are used in the education system, I decided to use the term *racialized* in this study as it more accurately represents the individuals described in the participants’ interview responses. Racialization is the

process of defining, categorizing, and evaluating people and their activities along racial lines. A socially constructed process is involved that (1) designates certain groups (or activities or spaces) as racially different; (2) subjects them to differential treatment by virtue of a tainted association with negative stereotypes; and (3) disproportionately concentrates racialized minorities in certain domains such as poverty. (Fleras, 2014, pp. 73-74).

As well, I chose to deter from the pathologizing language that empowers the perception that individuals who are othered within society are minorities or less than. *PPM No. 119* (OME, 2009/2013) does not make mention of the terms visible minority or racialized. Instead, the document discusses the incorporation of all students. *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) makes mention of the term visible minorities while the *EEAP* (OME, 2017) uses the term racialized. It is important to note the recent publication of the *EEAP* may play a factor in the conscious use of the term in comparison to previous OME documents.

Urban area is formally defined as having a population of at least 1,000 and a density of 400 or more people per square kilometer (Statistics Canada, 2011). My working definition of an urban setting is a geographic location characterized by a high population density and concentration of buildings, roads, and housing. The residents of

the location may or may not be of low SES.

Outline of Remainder of the Document

The remaining chapters of this study provide a framework that outlines the nature of the research problem and its connection to relevant literature and the research design. Chapter 2 provides a thematic organization that synthesizes relevant literature on the role of micro-level actors and their cognitive awareness in relation to policy implementation. Discussion of the relationship between policy, people, and places describes why policy outcomes vary among actors, schools, and school boards. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology that was used in this study with emphasis on the philosophical foundations supporting the data collection and analysis process. The choice to use a generic qualitative approach is highlighted. In addition, the site and participant selection process is discussed in detail, followed by discussion of the study's trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and methodological assumptions. A restatement of the purpose of this study plays the role of concluding this chapter. Chapter 4 presents the study's findings ,which are organized by the three themes that emerged from the interviews: (a) Just Another Piece of Paper, (b) Whose Equity Are We Talking About, and (c) Difference in Opinion. Chapter 5 discusses the results of the study in relation to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2, the implications for practice and research, as well as the conclusions of the study.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical lens that supports the research conducted on principals' perceptions, equity and inclusion, and policy implementation. This literature review is organized into three major concepts: the role of micro-level actors, cognitive awareness, and barriers to implementation. This chapter begins with an exploration of the actors involved in the implementation of educational policies. Discussion explores literature pertaining to the cognitive framework of implementation and how micro-level actors make meaning of policy messages. The chapter concludes with discussion on the barriers to policy implementation that micro-level actors face in the education system.

The Role of Micro-Level Actors

Policy implementation discourse in education research has provided policy-makers and practitioners with an understanding of the significant role that actors play in the policy process. Current literature speaks to how and why interactions between policy, individuals, and the environment affect implementation (Fowler, 2004; Honig, 2006; McLaughlin, 1987). In particular, the demand for heightened accountability has resulted in a top-down approach to policy implementation (Honig, 2006; Johnson, 2007). Traditionally, the hierarchical structure is composed of two policy perspectives: the macro-level and micro-level (Ball et al., 2012; MacBeath, 2007; McLaughlin 1987; Ryan, 2012). The macro-level provides a bird's-eye view of the entire system while the micro-level analyzes the individual level (McLaughlin, 1987).

Policy implementation "refers to...the 'execution' of the developed policy" (Delaney, 2002, p. 58). The process of executing the policy involves the cooperation and

existence of macro and micro-level actors called implementers (Fowler, 2004). The collective group of implementers can be further broken down into two categories: formal implementers and intermediaries, with formal implementers categorizing personnel at the macro-level of the education system and intermediaries at the micro-level (Fowler, 2004). Ball et al. (2012) explain that policy research has traditionally focused on policy literature and practices and has continued to neglect the fundamental role that actors, such as intermediaries, play in educational policy. At the school level, the intermediaries in question are principals who are required to implement developed policies at their respective schools. Although discussion regarding the role that actors play in policy implementation is well developed, there remains a need to further identify authentic explanations for the contexts in which urban school board principals implement policies.

As a political organization, the education system predisposes the job description of a principal to contain duties that are political in nature (Honig, 2006; Winton & Pollock, 2013). In particular, “Ontario principals operate in complex environments characterized by...numerous, often competing, political goals from the provincial government” (Winton & Pollock, 2013, p. 4). This notion of political obligation for Ontario principals is further supported in section 11 of the *Education Act*, which outlines the duties and responsibilities that all principals must abide by while in their administrative position. Subsection 19 states that principals are required to inform the school council on matters pertaining to:

1. The establishment or amendment of school policies and guidelines that relate to pupil achievement or to the accountability of the education system to parents, including, ...the behaviour of all persons in the school, and 2. The

development of implementation plans for new education initiatives that relate to pupil achievement or to the accountability of the education system to parents.(1990, Reg. 298, s. 11 (1))

The responsibility to implement policies is in part a response to educational reforms that aim to improve the performance of failing schools (Hope & Pigford, 2001).

Policy Implementation

In comparison to previous times, principals are required to implement educational policies that include mandates pertaining to multicultural education, school safety, and equitable and inclusive education (Hope, 2002). As this requirement is becoming more prevalent, the perception and level of understanding possessed by principals on policy implementation is an area that may not always be understood and requires further examination. Considering the diverse student population and multidimensional social structures that exist in education, it is understandable that policies do not obtain full implementation or are not successful in different contexts all the time (Honig, 2006). Statistically, it takes approximately 15 years for only 40% of a policy to be implemented (Ciliska, 2012). The increased pressure to meet academic standards matched by sanctioned accountability measures and a 40% implementation rate presents schools with insufficient time to implement a policy before a new policy is introduced (Hope & Pigford, 2001).

Literature on contemporary implementation practices seeks to understand the contexts that enable implementation as well as success to occur. Honig (2006) attributes the attainment of both implementation and success to be a result of the interaction of three implementation dimensions—policies, people, and places. In particular, analysis focuses on “the demands specific policies place on implementers; the participants in

implementation and their starting beliefs, knowledge, and other orientations toward policy demands; and the places or contexts that help shape what people can and will do” (Honig, 2006, p. 2). Understanding the conditions in which implementation occurs aids stakeholders in identifying the precise microprocesses that contribute to attaining intended outcomes. To further clarify the symbiotic relationship between the three dimensions, Honig’s (2006) visual framework (see Figure 1) depicts the complex nature of implementation where “variation is the rule, rather than the exception” (p. 4).

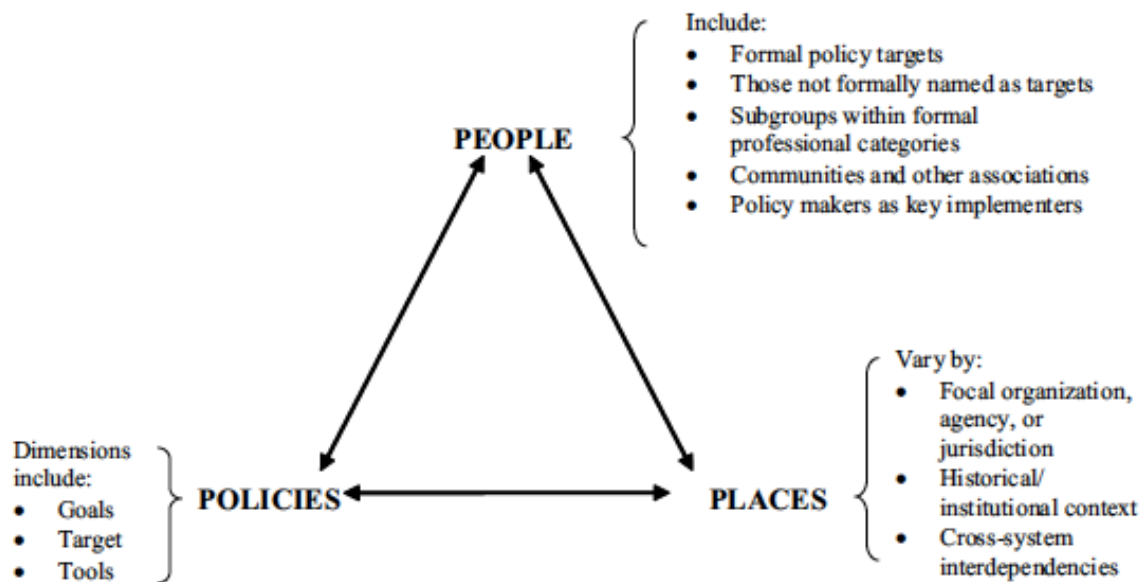


Figure 1. Three dimensions of policy implementation.

Hope and Pigford (2001) discuss three essential steps principals take when implementing a policy: the initiation stage, the implementation stage, and the institutionalization stage. The initiation stage is when strategies for the adoption and acceptance of the policy are developed. Communication and collaboration between principals and teachers occurs with principals establishing the connection of the policy to the school's goals and objectives as well as the tone for implementation, resources, and supports. The implementation stage is characterized by anticipated and unanticipated challenges that are inherent with change to routine. In this stage, the survival of the policy is put to test as a principal's support is crucial to encourage continual teacher practice. The institutionalization stage is achieved when the policy is "firmly entrenched in school processes" (Hope & Pigford, 2001, p. 46). As further action to reach the intended goals of *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) is still required, and inequity still persists in the Ontario education system (OME, 2017), it can be inferred that this stage is still a work in progress.

Honig's (2006) three dimensions and the steps principals employ in their implementation practice situate a principal's inherent qualities as critical for assessing whether a policy will be implemented as well as the capacity in which it is implemented (Hope & Pigford, 2001). For example, McGinn (2005) conducted a study in which 10 principals expressed belief that principals should possess a level of political awareness to reach the aims of educational success, as political acumen is a crucial component to a principal's job. The beliefs possessed by the 10 principals exposed a need to further explore the perceptions held by the principals on policy implementation and the contexts in which they choose to do so.

Urban Schools

Urban school boards possess student populations that are racially, religiously, and culturally diverse (Flessa & Kettle, 2007). The diversity is often linked with socioeconomic disparities where failure to provide an equitable learning environment is the underlying norm (Flessa & Kettle, 2007; Gooden, 2012). For example, in his study on the depiction of urban African-American principals in pop culture, Gooden (2012) acknowledges that literature on educational leadership often omits the perspectives of African Americans, despite the significant representation of African-American principals who work in urban boards. The omission combined with the negative portrayals, situated urban schools and its leadership from a deficit perspective. Gooden explains that schools that were predominately populated by Black and Latino Americans were expected to fail. Traditionally, both racialized and non-racialized individuals assumed that urban locations possess a strong racial or ethnically dominated population (Leonardo & Hunter, 2007). Gooden suggests that the racial composition of a school is the determining factor for why the failure of urban schools is seen as the norm and marginally problematic instead of significantly problematic.

Flessa and Kettle (2007) describe the two opposing ends that are used to analyze the functionality of urban schools: (a) the characteristics of urban schools are a product of social inequities or (b) they are the outcomes of actions conducted by micro-level actors. The latter characteristic concerns policy-makers and warrants an analysis on policy implementation practices. Typically, urban schools subjected to inequity are problem solved by boards “[hiring] turnaround principals...and [shutting] down failing schools” (Gooden, 2012, p. 72). The disciplinary leadership approach of turnaround principals has been proven to be a disservice to students, thus political solutions are needed that place

accountability for achieving reform initiatives on both macro- and micro-level actors, with a heightened focus on micro-level practices. Exploring the implementation of equity and inclusive policies in urban schools supports literature advocating for an analysis of institutional intervention that is rooted in the translation and implementation of policy messages in comparison to pathologizing depiction of failure due to racialized behaviour (Gooden, 2012; Leonardo & Hunter, 2007).

Positional Power

Fowler (2004) addresses the notion that without the support of principals during the implementation process, it is likely that implementation as a whole will fail. Fowler's statement brings clarity to the existence of a contingency relationship between successful implementation and principals' actions. Similarly, Hope (2002) states that "it is unlikely that a policy will be implemented if the principal opposes or halfheartedly supports it, [therefore] success requires the principal to be an advocate for and act on behalf of the policy" (p. 41). The increased politically influenced responsibilities that principals undertake to achieve reform goals results in increased accountability which consequently increases a principals' level of authority or positional power (Malen & Cochran, 2015). Advocating for social justice in the education system presents principals with unique challenges that call for the exercise of distinct actions (Ryan & Higginbottom, 2016). Challenges faced are unique in nature in part because of institutional sanctions that bear consequences for actions taken by principals (Ryan & Higginbottom, 2016). Ryan and Higginbottom (2016) suggest that success in policy implementation rests on principals understanding how power is exercised in their positions and in the education system. Power, according to Foucault, "is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise

this power” (as cited in Crampton & Elden, 2007, p. 344). The power Foucault refers to is a relatively new concept in educational leadership known as micropolitics and is centred on how individuals use power to influence intended behaviour(s).

At the school level, the stakeholders principals collaborate with to implement the intended policies include students, parents, community members, board members, and teachers (OME, 2014b). Teachers are of particular interest because of their inherent hierarchical interaction with principals, which presents opportunities for power submission (Weinstein, Raczynski, & Peña, 2018). It is understood that the outcomes of the positional power principals exercise on teachers is important as it influences social justice teaching practices (Kose, 2009). The relationship between a principal and teacher presents inherent tensions—also defined as counterpower (Castells, 2011)—that focus on asserting the legitimacy in decision-making within the classroom, in the school, and the implementation of regulating policies (Malen & Cochran, 2015). In the process of implementing social justice policies within the school, this counterpower can stand to hinder principals in their work (Kose, 2009), thus positional power can take dominance in dictating what does and does not get accomplished and by whom (Castells, 2011).

Malen and Cochran (2015) explain that principals and teachers approach counterpower through methods that affirm principals’ positional power. Affirmation is presented in the form of control on matters such as teacher performance appraisals, establishing a school’s agenda and the translation of reform initiatives, and the sharing of information through professional development. In understanding how principals can exercise their positional power, it is beneficial to acknowledge the contexts where positional power does not have dominance. For example, principals anticipate teacher resistance to occur with change, thus they may choose to implement “initiatives that

involve only minor changes in instructional practices or organizational routines, modify initiatives to make them more palatable to teachers, or keep initiatives vague and flexible enough to preempt or minimize conflict” (Malen & Cochran, 2015, p. 16). The reversal of teacher influenced positional power sheds light on some of the barriers principals can face when advocating for social justice work and ways in which their actions can either promote social justice or indirectly perpetuate inequity.

Privilege

A term commonly associated with power is privilege—especially when discussing the correlation between leadership practices and race. The topic of privilege can be a point of contention when discussing the demographic identities of urban boards’ student populations and the identities of the schools’ leadership. The composition of school leadership in North America is predominately White and possess power (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011), thus it is beneficial to situate White privilege as topic of interest when exploring the implementation of equity and inclusive policies by principals. Theoharis and Haddix (2011) explain Whiteness as a “socially constructed understanding of race that is defined by what is non-White...[and is] not merely about skin color or complexion, but it is a racial discourse and even a performance” (p. 1334). Gooden (2012) suggests that principals need to understand racism on a multidimensional level—societal, individual, and institutional—and situate White privilege in accordance to the education system and ways in which it advantages Whites. In doing so, principals will be able to identify their racial beliefs (Gooden, 2012), how they exert power in relation to their race and others, and how their privilege or lack thereof influences the implementation of equity and inclusion policies.

Tokenism

Kanter (1977) defines tokenism as the process of asserting individuals with non-dominant characteristics as symbols for the purpose of representing all other individuals with the same characteristics. Kanter describes three consequences of token status: visibility, contrast, and assimilation. Assimilation occurs when individuals from a dominant group skew the characteristics of tokens to fit with their own preconceived stereotypes about the tokens. Tokens then conform to the stereotypes assigned as a way to be accepted by the dominants. The result of this action is what Kanter terms as role encapsulation, where tokens are forced into specific work roles based on their characteristics.

Actors in the education system can perpetuate assimilation when assumptions are placed on educators, as explained in Kelly's (2007) study on Black teachers in White schools. The study explored the existence of racial tokens in schools and their experiences as numerical and racial minorities. As well, it highlighted that racial tokens may experience civil equality and not social equality. Civil equality was explained as "equal opportunity and access to resources" while social equality was "equality of treatment, in addition to equal opportunity and access to resources" (p. 238). Participants were role entrapped as "diversity hires or unofficial deans of multiculturalism, with the task of enlightening White students, parents, and colleagues" (p. 249). Kelly (2007) explains that:

both Eric and Everett face the dilemma of fitting in. On the one hand, they are expected to fulfill the duties and role of a teacher. On the other, racial characteristics often distort their teacher image due to preexisting stereotypes

about Black males, in particular, and Black people, in general. (p. 249)

Eric and Everett's experience revealed that they did not choose to be labeled as a stereotypical Black male in their workplaces—this role was forced on them. The study suggests that tokenism plays a dominant role in the perception of educators and may influence their actions in schools.

Cognitive Awareness

The actions conducted by micro-level actors have an effect on the outcome of policy implementation in education (Spillane et al., 2002). It is understood that:

Policy messages are not inert, static ideas that are transmitted unaltered into local actors' minds to be accepted, rejected, or modified to fit local needs and conditions. Rather, the agents must first notice, then frame, interpret, and construct meaning for policy messages. (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 392)

Spillane et al. (2002) present a cognitive framework of implementation as a model to characterize the minimally explored role that sense-making plays in implementing educational policies. The framework is founded on the understanding that “What a policy means for implementing agents is constituted in the interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), their situation, and the policy signals” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 388). The framework is presented in three stages: individual cognition, situated cognition, and role of representations. Individual cognition and role representations are of importance as they explore micro-level actors as sense-makers and how their ideas are represented in the presence of policy stimuli.

Micro-level cognition is a seasoned concept within educational research. Historically, research has applied a cognitive framework when analyzing policy

implementation, however scholars argue that the framework and understanding of how actors interpret policy is still largely unexplored in the implementation process (Spillane et al., 2002; Walshaw & Anthony, 2007). In understanding the important role that micro-level actors play, it is also important to understand how their behaviours shape the implementation of policies. Spillane et al. (2002) argue that “policy [continually] evolves as it is implemented” (p. 419), largely as a result of ongoing interpretation and human sense-making. Discourse on the components of rational choice theory, which dominated the analysis of implementation for decades, has transitioned towards the understanding of micro-level actors’ translation of policy messages and how it infers their practice (Walshaw & Anthony, 2007). This goes beyond focusing on the behaviours performed by micro-level actors and explores the reasons behind why they perform those behaviours.

Traditional Understanding

Traditionally, research has made the assumption that micro-level actors inherently understand the messages contained in a policy and that the inability to understand the message is derived from a policy’s ambiguity (Howlett, Ramesh, & Wu, 2015; Spillane et al., 2002; Walshaw & Anthony, 2007). Implementation has and continues to be defined as a problem-solving process where the contextual activities that enable praxis to occur are often unrecognized (Ball et al., 2012). There is a general gap in policy developers’ understanding of the complex nature of implementation, with some disregarding the process as an area of concern (Hope & Pigford, 2001). As well, the literature has spoken to implementation failure from the perspective of micro-level actors not possessing the capacity and resources, or simply lacking the desire to implement policy (Howlett et al., 2015). By upholding traditional views, the literature fails to acknowledge the existence of

the sense-making process conducted by micro-level actors which contributes significantly to the outcome of a policy's implementation (Spillane et al., 2002).

Prior Knowledge

In the face of a new policy, Spillane et al. (2002) explain that micro-level actors relate new information with the prior beliefs, knowledge, and values they possess. As micro-level actors do not experience the world and their surroundings in a vacuum, they “assimilate new experiences and information through their existing knowledge structures” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 393). The level of comprehension given to a policy message is strictly connected to the quantity, quality, and relevance of the knowledge and experience possessed by micro-level actors (Spillane et al., 2002). Not all micro-level actors possess the same knowledge and experiences, thus there are some who may relate stronger to a policy than others. Those who lack applicable expertise have the tendency to rely on “superficial similarity” where they assume that “two situations are similar in important principled ways because they are similar in salient superficial ways” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 397).

The use of superficial similarity can be problematic for implementation, as micro-level actors lacking expertise in the subject matter of a policy may rely on prior similar experience and knowledge rather than what is intended. Difficulty arises in the reality that there is an assumption made by the micro-level actor that the prior knowledge is similar to the message contained in the policy. This assumption leaves room for error and misinterpretation which can result in the improper implementation of that policy. Hope and Pigford (2001) explain that superficial implementation can occur when the beliefs of educators conflict with the policy message. Spillane et al. (2002) argue that it is not the

process of providing information that will make a micro-level actor conceive an understanding of a message, but that the influence of their prior knowledge is the dominant source of interpretation. This implies that it is important to acknowledge what principals know and understand about equitable and inclusive education in the process of obtaining their perception on implementing policies that support the goal of ensuring equity.

Values and Beliefs

There is an assumption that micro-level actors have a full understanding of the intentions and requirements of a policy (Howlett et al., 2015; Walshaw & Anthony, 2007), however the concept of complex human sense-making is not incorporated into this assumption (Spillane et al., 2002). There is a growing body of literature that discusses values held by micro-level actors, and it is understood that the values and beliefs are important because they influence how a policy message is defined (Ball et al., 2012; Fowler, 2004). However, the relationship between micro-level actors' values and their sense-making is still not well understood (Spillane et al., 2002). When analyzing the factors that influence the actions of micro-level actors in face of a policy, Spillane et al. (2002) explain that values and beliefs carry more weight than new information provided by external experts.

The values and beliefs held by micro-level actors may taint their response to policies that require a change in behaviour (Spillane et al., 2002). Micro-level actors uphold past behaviours that were unsuccessful or that carried a negative demeanor (Spillane et al., 2002). As *PPM No. 119* (OME, 2009/2013) was first released in 2009, there may be the tendency for some actors to resort to familiar ways and neglect

amendments made to the policy as well as the *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) document released in 2014. By doing so, key and relevant information may be overlooked, ultimately resulting in the hindrance of progress or change for achieving the policy's goal(s).

Same Message, Different Interpretations

In 2014, micro-level actors in Ontario were exposed to the *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) document, which contained specific messages that would aid in achieving the policy's goals. Contributions by Spillane et al. (2002) indicate that as micro-level actors made meaning of the document, the same messages may have received different interpretations.

According to Coburn (2005), new information, such as policies and mandates, are categorized and decoded according to the cognitive structures established by those responsible for its implementation; she explains that "Action is based on how people notice or select information from the environment, make meaning of that information, and then act on those interpretations, developing culture, social structure, and routines over time" (p. 478). Individuals live differing realities, thus it is understandable that a degree of variance exists in their established cognitive structures. For example, in a study conducted by Coburn (2005) on reading instruction reform in California, two urban elementary principals expressed different interpretations of the reading policies which consequently inferred their implementation practices at each respective school. As well, in discussing message translation, Spillane et al. (2002) provide a hypothetical scenario where two teachers observe a classroom; one teacher views the room as an "engaging inquiry science experience" while the other perceives it to be "chaotic" (p. 397). Both

teachers received the same information but interpreted the message differently.

Hill (2001) explains that the language used in policies often have specialized meanings that are crafted for macro-level understanding. The lack of familiarity places reliance on micro-level interpretation to guide implementation. The combination of interpretive language and differing cognitive structures presents sufficient opportunity for policy messages to be subjectively construed. It can be argued that misunderstandings about implementation should not be linked to rejection of a policy or lack of effort (Spillane et al., 2002). As theory continues to infer the practice of policy implementation, there is a need to dismantle the assumption within the literature that micro-level actors are resistant to implementing new policies simply because implementation from a micro-level perspective does not align with that of a macro-level perspective.

Barriers to Implementation

In the process of implementing a policy, micro-level actors face barriers that inhibit their ability to implement (Hope, 2002; Viennet & Pont, 2017). The literature speaks to access and allocation of resources, resistance to change, and will and capacity as barriers faced by micro-level actors in the education system (Fowler, 2004; Hope, 2002; Theoharis, 2007). Discussion of barriers to implementation provides greater insight into the external and internal factors that may play a role in high school principals' actions and perspectives on implementing policies that support the goal of ensuring equity.

Supports

The access to and possession of resources is a crucial component of the policy implementation process (Fowler, 2004). The praxis of a new policy requires the use of

equipment, personnel, time, and money to achieve optimal implementation (Fowler, 2004). When a policy that does not match the resource level of a school or school board is adopted, systemic dilemmas are prone to arise (Fowler, 2004). Fowler (2004) explains that “If the mismatch [between policy requirements and a resource level] is very large, the implementation fails from the outset” (p. 280). For example, Theoharis (2007) shares an interview narrative from a principal who expressed frustration over a lack of resources hindering his social justice work. The principal explained that the amount of funding allocated to his school was insufficient for implementing equitable education strategies, as equity is expensive. The expense of equity was derived from the notion that “Teaching kids who don’t have resources at home costs more money than teaching middle-class kids” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 241).

As a means to aid in the development and implementation of local equitable and inclusive policies, in 2017, the OME outlined the resource supports that would be provided to school boards in *Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan (EEAP)* (OME, 2017). In the document, the OME did not explicitly state the monetary amount it would provide to school boards. Instead, the document presented four overarching action items that are to be met to help reach the goals of *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a). The four items are: (a) school and classroom practices, (b) leadership, governance and human rights practices, (c) data collection, integration and reporting, and (d) Organizational culture change. Each action item is followed by specific performance measures the OME will initiate over the 3-year time span (2017-2020). For example, to improve school and classroom practices, from 2017-2019, the OME will strengthen inclusive and culturally responsive teaching and assessment. They will do this through the provision of resources,

professional development supports, as well as hold school boards and EQAO accountable for inclusive assessment designs. The list of resources and supports outlined in the *EEAP* validates the reality that out of all the resources needed to implement a policy, time is a resource that actors in educational policy research sometimes overlook as being crucial.

Fowler (2004) equates time and materials as possessing the same importance and argues that “performing new behaviors is more time-consuming than acting in routine ways” (p. 284). The *EEAP* (OME, 2017) provides directives that micro-level actors have to perform to achieve the OME’s strategy. Since a policy is “a social change mechanism intended to modify people’s behaviors in order to achieve certain desired goals” (Riveros & Viczko, 2015, p. 535), policies that support the goal of ensuring equity inevitably require micro-level actors to perform new behaviours which require the use of time.

Professional development. Professional development is commonly known to provide principals with opportunities to strengthen pre-existing skills and obtain new knowledge on educational matters that impact the day-to-day functions of schools (Reeves, 2010; Zepeda, Parylo, & Bengtson, 2014). As educational reform demands that require new knowledge are increasing, professional development for micro-level actors (principals) is needed to assist in meeting school performance standards (Knapp, 2003; Mathibe, 2007). Although professional development is viewed and used as a resource support, the intended outcomes from policymaker and stakeholder’s perspectives and actual results are not always consistent (Knapp, 2003). Knapp (2003) outlines nine items to examine when considering the effectiveness of professional development initiatives and their intended outcomes. Of the nine items, four are of significance to this study: (a) evidence base, (b) structures, (c) incentives and norms, and (d) accountability. Each is

briefly explained in turn. Evidence base is concerned with the returns yielded from investing in professional development. Structures explore the venues and forms that constitute the arrangement of professional development. This item also asks the question of which components should be presented formally and which should arise informally, as well as the supports needed for both approaches. Incentives and norms address the ways in which participation can be motivated through the nurturing of norms and cultural supports. Accountability explores the ways in which stakeholders should be held accountable for content delivered and retained in professional development.

The complex nature of principalship commonly results in “principal burnout and increased leader attrition” (Zepeda et al., 2014, pp. 297-298), thus professional development is used as a tool to improve principal preparation. The presentation of professional development as a deficit model (Mathibe, 2007; Zepeda et al., 2014) stresses theoretical knowledge as the focus for closing the gap in principals’ practices. Zepeda et al. (2014) explain that university principal preparation programs are an ineffective method for delivering professional learning as they are “too theoretical and too managerially focused” (p. 297). Principals are expected to be successful in their roles from the moment they obtain principalship but are often not provided with the necessary support to achieve this goal on a continual basis (Zepeda et al., 2014). Grounded in cognitive psychology, professional development is argued to increase in effectiveness when “theory, practical application, feedback and cognitive peer coaching with follow-up” are combined (Zepeda, 2014, p. 299). Furthermore, “Research suggests the need to account for the aspiring principals’ individual cognitive frameworks of school leadership and management in providing professional development” (Zepeda et al., 2014, p. 299).

Alternative methods for delivery suggested in the literature include experiential learning, mentoring, and online professional development.

Experiential learning. From a macro policymaking perspective, Knapp (2003) states that policy-maker influenced professional development occurs outside the practice of policy implementation, even if the nucleus of implementation occurs inside schools. Knapp's (2003) contribution highlights the lack of experiential professional development which may match practices employed by principals. A study conducted by Zepeda et al. (2014) on the application of adult learning principles on existing principal professional development practices in four schools identified self-directed and project-based learning, action learning, and experiential learning as essential components for engaging in continuous learning.

Mentoring. Mentoring for principals—in particular, novice principals—is advantageous in establishing a professional learning community where principals are supported by peers and individuals facing similar job duties (Zepeda et al., 2014). The mentoring process, combined with the use of a portfolio, enables principals to record goals, create action plans, and reflect on their leadership (Zepeda et al., 2014). Principals' reflection is valuable, as Mathibe (2007) states: "People become ready to learn when they recognise a deficiency in their own performance level" (p. 524).

Online professional development. In alignment with the move of technological advancements, the existing literature identifies online workshops as alternative formats for principal professional development (Zepeda et al., 2014), however these workshops continue to position theory as an advantageous method of delivery. Online workshops may include an interactive learning process where educational leaders engage in

computer simulations and tutoring systems. Although these workshops continue to position theory as an advantageous method of delivery, Zepeda et al. (2014) argue that technology-based professional development should be considered as a viable delivery method for learning, particularly in light of the increased use of the Internet in education.

Effective professional development is important for urban principals. Houle (2006) explains that principals situated in urban boards face added difficulty in meeting performance standards because of:

Changing families and communities and the resulting stress placed on children, issues outside of school competing with the school for available learning time for students, and the use of instructional practices that do not respond to the increasing knowledge necessary for success in the context of our ever-changing society have been identified as factors that affect the work of urban principals. (p. 144)

In exploring the field of policy implementation which calls for unstandardized practices (Ball et al., 2012; Honig, 2006), exploration of the effectiveness of theoretical knowledge as a dominating approach in professional development is needed.

Resistance to Change

Resistance to change has the ability to impede the implementation process of a policy when the contents of a policy require a shift in the daily routine established within a school (Fowler, 2004; Hope & Pigford, 2001). When a new policy is introduced, the structure of job related priorities established by principals may be altered (Hope, 2002). This change creates an environment that stifles the redirection of attention and efforts that the new policy requires, as principals have already allocated their commitment and

resources to other school related policies (Hope, 2002). When faced with the requirement to implement a new policy, principals implicitly have two options, to either embrace the new policy and accommodate for change or resist its implementation altogether. In his article on implementing educational policies, Hope (2002) provides clarification that although a principal can choose to resist change and implementation, delay cannot occur indefinitely for a policy that is enacted by law. Since avoiding implementation bears legal consequences (Education Act, 1990, Reg. 298, s. 11 (1)), complete resistance to change is not a probable choice for principals, but it can slow the process of implementation. As well, actions taken by principals in the face of a new policy convey a message to teachers indicating whether they are encouraged to adopt or resist the policy (Coburn, 2005; Hope, 2002).

Delaney (2002) explains that “Educational institutions tend to be tradition-oriented and resistant to change; since polices are future-oriented and blueprints for change, it is not surprising that they almost automatically generate negative reaction” (p. 61). Delaney’s statement is supported by a study conducted by Theoharis (2007) that captured the negative reaction a principal expressed receiving when he tried to implement change in a school:

When I arrived at the school, the prevailing sentiment was, ‘It’s worked this way for 32 years and you’re coming in here and changing us? You want us to have academic rigor, you want us to make decisions, you want us to take responsibility for kids not learning, we’ve never had to do that before. (p. 239)

Although the people who control educational institutions are tradition-oriented, Capra (2002) provides a contradicting viewpoint: “people do not resist change; they resist

having change imposed on them” (p. 101). Comprehension of the concept of policy imposition within schools may shed light on understanding why some principals may face resistance when implementing policies that support the goal of ensuring equity.

Will and capacity. As the literature continues to transition from the analysis of the macro perspective of policy implementation to the micro perspective, two factors that influence the implementation of educational policies have been incorporated into discourse. The two factors as identified by McLaughlin (1987) are will and capacity. Will is the motivation and attitudes held by micro-level actors that influence their response to a policy’s goals while capacity is the ability or power to perform the actions needed to achieve a policy’s goals (McLaughlin, 1987).

Will is an essential component for successful implementation, however Fowler (2004) provides clarification that as a sole component, it is not sufficient as both will and capacity are needed for success. For example, a principal possessing the will to implement a policy may be hindered from doing so from a lack of capacity. In a similar vein, a principal may possess the capacity and necessary resources to implement, however the absence of will hinders implementing the policy. Fowler (2004) suggests a correlated relationship exists between will and capacity where both characteristics coexist and are present in the decision-making process of micro-level actors. The absence of both will and capacity results in improper implementation of a policy, and “among those policies that are not implemented, a watered-down version is often put in place. Sometimes nothing changes at all” (Fowler, 2004, p. 277).

McLaughlin (1987) states that the implementation stage of the policy process draws focus away from institutional goals and repositions them towards micro-level will

and capacity. It is her understanding that “Individuals responsible for carrying out a policy act not only from institutional incentives, but also from professional and personal motivation” (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 174). The remainder of this section further examines the factor of will to highlight its importance to successful policy implementation independent of capacity.

Will. Research by McLaughlin (1987) suggests that there are external and internal factors that influence the will possessed by micro-level actors. Fowler (2004) suggests that in order for micro-level actors to implement a policy they must be willing to do so and have supporting justifications. The notion of justifications implies an incentivized call to action. When micro-level actors have to produce reasons to implement equitable and inclusive policies, it is implied that they may not be completely moved by moral reasons to implement, but may require an external incentive. Outside of the directives contained in a policy lie social-political, environmental, and authoritative factors of external influence (McLaughlin, 1987). Although external factors play a role in influencing will, they possess a limited amount of influence on the implementation outcome of a policy at the micro-level of the education system, as internal factors create a greater impact (McLaughlin, 1987). It is understood that “Implementers are unlikely to support policies that they perceive as contrary to their own self-interest” (Fowler, 2004, p. 293). When the goals of a policy clash with the self-interest of a micro-level actor, the will possessed to implement the policy may be diminished, especially when in the face of possible changes to job security, working conditions, or status in the workplace (Fowler, 2004). A study conducted by Theoharis (2007) on the perceptions held by principals as social justice leaders discusses the reality that some principals lack the will to implement

equitable and inclusive policies from fear of negative feedback from parents, teachers, and administrators. When teachers and parents are in disagreement with the changes imposed by a policy, Theoharis (2007) reports that the principals he interviewed felt ostracized. The principals specifically identified that “resistance [was] coming directly from the demands of the principalship, the momentum of the status quo, obstructive staff attitudes and beliefs, and insular and privileged parental expectations” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 238).

The amount of will a micro-level actor possesses to implement a policy reflects the value they place on that specific policy (McLaughlin, 1987). In the process of understanding the perceptions held by principals, McLaughlin, Theoharis, and Fowler’s contributions to literature illustrate a need for further research on the value that principals place on equity and inclusive policies as it will dictate the extent to which they are motivated to put the policy to practice.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This research explored the perspectives of three urban high school principals on the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity, as identified in *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a). This chapter outlines the methodological approaches I employed in the data collection and analysis process. Sections within this chapter are organized into a detailed framework describing the research plan in its entirety. The discussion begins with a description of the generic qualitative approach used. The chapter continues by outlining the site and participant selection process. In discussing data collection and analysis, I present the plan used to collect documents from provincial and school levels of policymaking in the education system and highlight semi-structured interviews as another source of data collection. I further describe how trustworthiness was maintained by establishing credibility and confirmability in addition to outlining the ethical considerations of this study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the methodological assumptions made and a summary of the purpose statement that illustrates the connection between the research problem and design, and the methodology that was utilized.

Research Design

Originating from an anthropological, sociological, and philosophical background, qualitative research is a favoured methodology of use in the field of education (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Qualitative research as explained by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) provides opportunities for studying the ways in which humans interpret the lived experiences of their natural reality to make meaning of it. As my interest in equity and inclusive policies was sparked by my experiences and my classmates' recounts, initially it seemed fitting for the foundation of this study to be centred upon a narrative research design. However, I chose to use a generic qualitative approach (Caelli et al., 2003) as it

provided me with the opportunity to obtain the same aims of a narrative research design, while also incorporating aspects of other methodologies.

Using the overarching umbrella of an interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 2015), a generic qualitative approach was used to gain a greater understanding on high school principals' perceptions of the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity. A generic qualitative approach is said to "exhibit some or all of the characteristics of qualitative endeavor but rather than focusing the study through the lens of a known methodology they seek to...claim no particular methodological viewpoint at all" (Caelli et al., pp. 3-4). By conducting semi-structured interviews, a generic qualitative approach enabled me to capture the perspectives that three principals possessed without being confined to utilizing one methodological viewpoint such as narrative inquiry.

I used a transformative worldview to guide the data collection and analysis as a means to highlight the social justice nature of the study. A transformative worldview "speak[s] to important social issues of the day, issues such as empowerment, inequity, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation" (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 9). In particular, this worldview enabled me to frame the study's research questions and overall purpose to better understand the inequalities that exist in education while addressing the need for change. As well, I collected and analyzed provincial and board level policy documents.

Site and Participant Selection

Since the education system is composed of a diverse selection of individuals (Ghosh & Abdi, 2013) and qualitative research aims to present multiple perspectives from information rich sites (Creswell, 2015), a snowball sampling strategy with influences of stratified sampling was used in this study. Snowball sampling aims to

“locate information-rich key informants” that aided in the recruitment of participants (Patton, 2002, p. 237). The roots of stratified sampling identified participants who met a set of predetermined requirements. The requirements included participants who were Ontario College of Teachers certified and had experience in the position of a principal at an urban high school, with a minimum of 2 years in administration—which only included vice-principals. Two years in comparison to a greater or lesser amount was chosen because the length provided the study with participants that had substantial experience in implementing equity and inclusive policies in Ontario.

The process for obtaining participants occurred in a sequential order of steps which resulted in a sample size of three participants. To begin, ethical clearance was obtained from the Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB). Upon receiving REB clearance (file #17-340), an email seeking recruitment assistance was sent to the Ontario Principals’ Council and the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario. Only the Ontario Principals’ Council replied with interest. A follow-up email containing the purpose, details, and responsibilities of the study was sent to the council and the information was posted on their weekly online newsletter. The call for recruitment yielded some interested principals, however it was unsuccessful as some school boards required a research application for clearance. Although applications were submitted, clearance was denied on the grounds of ensuring anonymity. After 2 months of unfruitful results and the school year coming to an end, participant recruitment solely focused on personal contacts. During my academic journey at Brock University, I established professional relations with educators and principals who worked in high schools. I contacted one of my peers and a few university professors to assist in recruiting participants. Attached to the emails

were details of the nature of the study and the responsibilities that a participant assumed if they chose to be a participant. Using the documents and requirements provided, my contacts identified potential candidates for recruitment for this study. After conversing with the candidates who replied with interest, three principals were recruited—one male and two females (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Characteristic	Participant*		
	Jacob	Makayla	Amelia
Gender	Male	Female	Female
Self-identified race	White	White	Black
Years as a vice-principal	3	9	4
Years as a principal	10	2	4
Years in education	23	26	25
Number of schools employed	4	6	4

*Pseudonyms.

In efforts to not stray from the overall focus of an urban setting, participants were not categorized based on the school board in which they were employed but provided a general voice for urban high school principals in Ontario.

The implementation of *Achieving Excellence* is mandated to all publicly funded Ontario schools (OME, 2014a), thus there was no need to concentrate selection on a specific school board or school. The implementation of snowball sampling was suitable for the nature of this study, considering my position as a researcher. As a graduate student who had not worked in a public school, the use of a personal contact for participant recruitment provided me with greater access to participants in the education system that I did not have the luxury of accessing.

Data Collection

I began the data collection process by obtaining a deeper understanding of key policy documents developed to ensure equity and inclusive education in Ontario schools. Documents collected included those developed by the OME such as *PPM No. 119* (OME, 2009/2013), *PPM No. 159: Collaborative Professionalism* (OME, 2016), *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a), and *EEAP* (OME, 2017). Once participants were selected, publicly available equity specific documents created by the participants' respective school boards were then collected. The documents provided insight into the direction and legal mandates that influenced participants' actions in policy implementation. As well, tangible examples that supported the perspectives provided in the interviews were found in the documents obtained.

Pilot Interview

Prior to beginning the data collection process, I had the opportunity to conduct an

in-person pilot interview with Frank, a retired Ontario principal. Pilot interviews are useful for refining the interview content and assessing the effectiveness of interviewing as a research instrument for the study at hand (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). While conducting the pilot interview, it became apparent that four of my interview questions had overlapping themes. The data obtained from the pilot interview allowed me to refine my questions to better align with the dimensions of Honig's (2006) policy implementation framework. As well, I adjusted the wording of the questions to be brief and comprehensive to better meet the intended purpose of this study.

Interview Process

Since documents do not represent principals' perspectives of equity and inclusive policy implementation, semi-structured interviews were used to supplement document collection. Policy implementation, as described by Koenig (1986), is "the Great Achilles heel of the policy process" (as cited in Delaney, 2002, p. 57). Thus, conducting interviews was an advantageous method of data collection in obtaining several years' worth of experience in a short duration while also building a trusting relationship. Interviews "provide useful information when you cannot directly observe participants, and they permit participants to describe detailed personal information" (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). Participants were invited to take part in initial semi-structured interviews which lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in mutually convenient locations for the participants and me, with two participant interviews conducted in person and one over the phone. I used an open-ended interview protocol form (see Appendix A) to ensure that the participants' voices rather than my own voice guided the interview process. Questions were categorized into four categories—personal characteristics,

policy, people, and places—which enabled me to engage in rich conversations with the participants. With consent obtained, I audio recorded the interviews and took written notes. The open-ended format of questions enabled me to ask probing questions that elicited clarification for a deeper understanding of participants’ responses without imposing my perspectives as a researcher (Creswell, 2015). As well, I had the flexibility to respond to all questions and concerns that were raised.

I transcribed verbatim approximately 47 typed pages of interview data which were stored in an encrypted and password protected file. Transcriptions were organized using the pseudonyms provided to participants. Following transcription, participants were asked to partake in a follow-up interview to member check the accuracy of the data I had collected. The follow-up interviews were conducted approximately one week after each initial interview and took place via email and phone conversations, allowing me to clarify the terminology and examples provided.

Data Analysis

The framework used to guide the data analysis process was the seven phases of data analysis as described by Marshall and Rossman (2006). The seven phases included: (a) organizing the data, (b) immersion in the data, (c) generating categories and themes, (d) coding the data, (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos, (f) searching for alternative understandings, and (g) writing the report (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Using five of the seven phases, I conducted a comprehensive thematic analysis of the data collected. This section specifically focuses on the phases a, b, d, e, f, and g.

Organizing the Data

This study utilized a sample of three participants with rich data that had to be

organized prior to analysis. To begin, documents collected from participants' school boards and the OME were categorized in a hierarchical fashion with provincial documents being at the top and school level being at the bottom. Next, I organized the digital audio files obtained during the interview phase into alphabetical order using the pseudonyms given to the participants.

Immersion in the Data

A qualitative study produces a large volume of data, thus multiple read-throughs were crucial (Saldaña, 2009). After organization, I conducted a minimum of three proofreads of each transcription to ensure I obtained a thorough understanding of the information presented.

Coding the Data

Using the transcriptions, I proceeded to implement an inductive approach to analysis. Saldaña (2009) explains that “a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). In this phase, I used an electronic coding system that was designed by Dr. Rahul Kumar from the Faculty of Education at Brock University. I began by reading each transcript and inputted relevant words, phrases, and quotations into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet which was categorized by the interview questions.

I employed a combination of In Vivo Coding, Initial Coding, and Values Coding. There was an amalgamation of all three coding methods as a means to provide a holistic analytical approach. I reviewed the transcripts using each thematic coding process separately. First, I used In Vivo Coding to seek out specific terminology used by

participants. In Vivo Coding is the process in which interview transcripts are examined to attune the researcher to participant language, worldviews, and perspectives (Saldaña, 2009). By using the terminology spoken by participants in comparison to strictly my own terminology, I extracted relevant relationships among the transcripts in an authentic manner. Second, I reviewed the transcripts using Initial Coding. Initial Coding played a role in dissecting the data from the board level documents and interviews for similarities and differences (Saldaña, 2009). Finally, Values Coding aided in highlighting the beliefs, attitudes, and values held by the participants I interviewed (Saldaña, 2009). The attitudes and values held by participants were the meat and potatoes of this study, thus Values Coding was a crucial component of the data analysis process. Twelve codes resulted from the three phases of thematic coding. The codes were amalgamated into eight themes, then condensed into three themes that addressed the main research question (see Table 2). I aimed to honour each participant's voice throughout all stages, thus all three methods were beneficial. The methods worked harmoniously to provide a complete picture of the perspectives that participants held on the implementation of equity and inclusive policies that support the goal of ensuring equity.

Table 2

Thematic Coding Process

12 Codes	Themes	
	8 Themes	3 Themes
Board level resources		
Professional development	Theoretical/practical support	
Support		Just another piece of paper
School improvement plan	Accountability	
Multiple policies	Policy interconnectivity	
Know your students	Messages	
Student success	Student success	Whose equity are we talking about
Equity	Equity versus equality	
Equality		
Unionized environment	Barriers	
Bias	Power	Difference in opinion
Tokenism		

Offering Interpretations Through Analytic Memos

I brought an array of knowledge from my graduate coursework which helped to form the interpretations I made. In this phase I deciphered the small phrases and terms produced in the first three phases. Similar to how participants relayed their experiences, I compiled the memos produced in the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to tell a story of the findings made. An important aspect to this phase was determining the usefulness of the themes I extracted. From the eight subthemes generated, three were of significance.

Searching for Alternative Understandings

In this phase, I critically challenged my justifications and cross-referenced the data with current literature to ensure all arguments for and against my explanation were accounted for.

Writing the Report

The final phase of the data analysis involved the careful selection of words and phrases that summarized the data collected. During this process, I incorporated a balance between data description and interpretation for the purpose of not asserting my truth about the participant's experiences. Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain that "Writing *your* truth about others' lives is an assertion of power and can violate earlier assertions about working ethically and sensitively with participants" (p. 164). As well, I consciously considered how my positionality as a graduate student, researcher, and Black female may have influenced the interpretations I made and the presentation of findings in the report writing process.

Trustworthiness

When using naturalistic inquires, determining the trustworthiness of a study aids in establishing its worth and significance (Shenton, 2004). For the purpose of this study, I

established credibility and confirmability during the data collection and analysis process as a means to ensure trustworthiness.

Establishing Credibility

The process of ensuring credibility of a study has been argued to be one of the most important aspects in ensuring its trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004). I established credibility through the process of member checking. The use of member checking aided in answering the three main questions: (a) Do the conclusions make sense? (b) Do the conclusions adequately describe research participants' perspectives? and (c) Do conclusions authentically represent the phenomena under study? that Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) explain to be crucial when analyzing research results. Member checking confirmed the accuracy of my findings and ensured that the lived experience of each participant were accurately represented and accounted for.

The use of document collection in conjunction with semi-structured interviews highlighted and extracted the strengths of both processes in comparison to reliance on one process. By employing two methods of data collection, I compensated for any methodological limitations that could have manifested. As well, publicly available provincial and board level policy documents complemented the responses obtained from participants by validating the praxis of implementing policies that support ensuring equity in urban high schools.

Confirmability

Since the basis of this study captured the perspectives held by participants through the use of interviews, it can be argued that researcher bias may have had an effect on overall findings and inferences. Patton (2015) expresses that real objectivity cannot be achieved when conducting qualitative research as human perception is a key component

for collecting data and interpreting results. Confirmability ensures that researcher bias is not reflected in the data. I strengthened the confirmability in this study by stating my predispositions regarding the research topic as a means to separate my personal beliefs and contributions from the data that was collected.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are an imperative aspect of conducting research that researchers have to anticipate prior to beginning a study (Creswell, 2015). The ethical considerations that were considered consisted of informed consent, confidentiality, and protection of privacy. As this study involved human participants, ethical clearance was provided by the REB at Brock University.

Informed Consent

In the process of obtaining informed consent from participants, the purpose and aims of the study, required duties of participants, and benefits of participation were clearly articulated in both written and oral formats. Acknowledgement was made via a signature and verbal agreement. Prior to beginning the data collection process, I emailed informed consent letters to principals who had voiced interest in participating. By signing the informed consent form, participants agreed to have their rights protected and voluntarily participate (Creswell, 2015). Throughout the duration of the study, participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the entire or portions of the study or could opt-out of answering specific questions. The final step of the informed consent process consisted of emailing each participant an electronic copy of their transcribed interview for member checking purposes. Approximately one week after receiving the email, participants clarified the accuracy of my transcriptions prior

to its use.

Confidentiality

The anonymity of participants was not possible, thus reliance was placed on maintaining confidentiality. Initial interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder and participants' identities were made confidential through the use of pseudonyms I had chosen. Personal identifiers such as the participants' names, number of years employed in different educational roles, and the name of the research site and school board in which they were employed were collected. Personal identifiers were kept on an electronic master list. Once the data collection process was complete, only the number of years a participant had been employed in various educational roles was retained. Identifying how long a participant had been a principal was important to understanding the breadth and depth of experience and knowledge that that participant had in implementing policies that support the goal of ensuring equity. This study explored the perspectives that principals possess and literature on policy implementation provides rationale that prior experience and knowledge influence the behaviours that principals choose to employ (Spillane et al., 2002). Since pseudonyms were used, the personal identifiers retained do not reveal the participants' true identities.

All electronic and hardcopy information, not limited to written transcriptions, digital audio files from the initial interviews, and signed consent forms were encrypted and stored in a password-protected hard drive in a locked room. All data will remain stored on the hard drive and in a secured file folder for an approximate duration of one year to ensure all affiliated parties have access to the results of this study. After the one year has passed, paper copies will be disposed of through secured shredding bins located at Brock University and all electronic files will be deleted.

Pseudonyms

The risks associated with protecting participants' privacy were diminished through the confidentiality measures and member checking process discussed in the sections above. Participants' identities were made confidential through the use of pseudonyms that were assigned to participants after conducting each interview. In a similar vein, the name of the research sites and their affiliated school board remained confidential when discussing findings. As *Achieving Excellence* is applicable to all publicly funded Ontario high schools (OME, 2014a), connection of participant responses to a specific school or school board is impossible as no distinct and traceable characteristics were provided.

Benefits

Participation in this study provided participants with the opportunity to express opinions on the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity in the participants' school and school board. As well, participants provided information that contributed to the knowledge base on policy implementation in general and equity and inclusive education policies in Ontario.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

As a Black female, I am biased towards the importance of equity and inclusive policies because my family and some individuals I care about deeply, belong to the group of individuals who significantly benefit from their implementation. My academic experience in the Ontario education system shaped my perception and knowledge of equity and inclusion policies. Receiving extra funding for its specialized business, technology, and special education programs, the high school I attended appeared to have ample access to resources that supported a wide array of equity and inclusive education

initiatives. Prior to beginning data collection, I assumed that mandated policies published by the OME were implemented in each school with full financial support and resource allocation. My belief was that the implementation techniques employed by principals influenced the outcomes of the intended policy at their respective school.

The second assumption I held was in regard to the professional qualities of principals. I assumed that in order to work with a diverse population of teachers and students, principals, in some capacity, must emulate the qualities of a social justice leader. This assumption was based on the positive narratives expressed by the professors and educators I encountered in the Master of Education program who did portray social justice qualities in their experiences as principals. Before I began data collection and analysis, I was aware of the biases and assumptions I held and strived to ensure they did not influence my interpretations and conclusions (Creswell, 2015).

Methodological Assumptions

Despite the careful design of this study, two methodological assumptions were apparent as no study is perfect (Patton, 2015). The first assumption I made as a researcher was that all the participants would have an equivalent amount of theoretical knowledge and professional development in policy implementation. Analysis of the interview transcriptions indicated that some participants had more practical experience with equity and inclusion policies than other participants—this was in part due to the length of time spent at an urban school and the number of years employed as a principal. However, possessing extensive experience in policy implementation did not make one participant more valuable than another.

The second assumption I made was in regard to the generalizability of results.

Since this study interviewed three urban high school principals, generalizability to other school boards or geographic locations may be limited. The characteristics, experiences, and access to resources of the participants who chose to take part in this study may be different from those who chose not to participate. By providing an in-depth description of the implications of the data collection and analysis process, I hope that significant comparisons can be made to other current and future research studies.

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of three urban high school principals on the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity—identified as a key goal in the document *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a). Utilizing a generic qualitative approach, this study may aid in better understanding how principals make meaning of equity and inclusive education policies. This chapter provided an overview of the in-depth research design with a qualitative methodology that highlighted the characteristics of snowball sampling and semi-structured interviews as articulated by Creswell (2015). The use of snowball sampling for selecting research participants aided in representing each participants' authentic voice. Throughout this study, steps were taken to ensure the results were transferable and credible. The next chapter discusses the findings from the data analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of three urban high school principals on the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity. This chapter presents the findings from the generic qualitative inquiry that was used to analyze data collected. The chapter begins with a brief description of the participants' profiles to situate their personal characteristics in relation to the findings. Next, the complex nature of implementing multiple policies as identified by the participants and their experiences juggling the theoretical support and practical support of policy implementation at their schools is explored. Quotations and detailed examples from the interviews are embedded into this chapter to reflect the participants' experiences and beliefs. The chapter concludes by examining the socially constructed norms that influenced participants' actions in implementing policies that support the goal of ensuring equity in a unionized environment.

The main question used to guide the research was: What are the perspectives of three principals (minimum 2 consecutive years of administrative experience) on the implementation of equitable and inclusive education policies related to *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) in urban high schools? The study's research sub-questions included:

- What are the message(s) that principals obtain from *Achieving Excellence* ?
- What factors are perceived to contribute to effective implementation of policy at the micro-level of the education system?
- What barriers are perceived to impact the implementation of policies that support *Achieving Excellence* in high schools?

- What supports are perceived to aid in the implementation of policies that support *Achieving Excellence* in high schools?

The principals were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews that captured their personal stories and opinions on equity and inclusive policy implementation. Two participants' interviews were conducted in-person and one was via telephone. The questions asked during each interview were structured using an interview protocol form (see Appendix A) to ensure that the participants' voices guided the interview process. In addition to the interviews, publicly available provincial and board-level policy documents were collected. Following the interviews, Marshall and Rossman's (2006) seven phases of data analysis framework was used to deconstruct and colour-code the audio-recorded transcripts. Significant themes were identified that contributed to understanding the micro-level factors that influence the implementation of educational policies. Of the eight themes that emerged, three were significant in addressing the research: (a) Just Another Piece of Paper, (b) Whose Equity Are We Talking About, and (c) Difference in Opinion. I named the themes using the terminology provided by the participants to reflect their authentic perspectives.

Participant Profiles

Participants were selected from urban school boards in Ontario and were assigned pseudonyms. I acknowledge all gender identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, however participants identified themselves using the genders of male and female, thus comparisons made in this chapter are restricted to the terminology provided.

Jacob

Jacob, who identified as a White male, was a seasoned principal who began his

educational career approximately 23 years ago. Having worked in one board, he had 10 years of experience as a principal and 3 years as a vice-principal. Jacob recently completed his Master of Education degree and credited the degree for the adoption of his equity lens.

Makayla

Prior to becoming a principal, Makayla spent 9 years as a vice-principal. With a little over 2 years of experience as a principal, she strived to integrate the knowledge obtained from her Master of Education degree into equity and inclusive initiatives at her school. Makayla self-identified as a White female and had 26 years of experience in one board in the education system.

Amelia

Amelia was a centrally assigned principal whose identity as a Black female played a key role in her position in an urban school board. She had 4 years of experience as a principal and vice-principal. She was actively involved in promoting equity and inclusion at community events. Amelia had been employed in four different schools in one board and obtained a Master of Education degree during her 25 years working in the education system.

Just Another Piece of Paper

With over 16 years of combined administrative experience as a high school principal, Jacob, Makayla, and Amelia expressed comprehension of *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) and its application in high schools. Jacob and Makayla had the document present during their interviews and all participants made reference to obtaining a Master of Education degree where provincial equity and inclusion documents were

discussed. Each participant's experience was distinct, thus it was important to obtain a foundational understanding on their experiences with provincial and board level policies prior to understanding their perspectives on implementation. Participants identified three key themes—the interconnectivity of policies; theoretical support compared to practical support; and the accountability measures established by the OME—as contributing factors that shaped their implementation approach of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity.

Policies That Interconnect

Part of an Ontario principal's job requirements is to have knowledge of provincial and school board educational policies as assigned by the OME (2009b). When asked to describe their experiences with policy implementation, participants expressed their difficulty in implementing multiple policies that counteract each other when used simultaneously. Makayla proposed that principals are “reinventing the praxis on the fly because nobody has ever taught [principals] or wrestled with, how do [principals] implement like the Safe Schools policy, the Dress Code policy, [and] the Equity policy.” While describing her experience, she suggested that in isolation, mandated policies can be effectively implemented and enforced, however when interconnected, they can counteract each other. In situations calling for interconnectivity, Makayla implied that principals often had to use discernment to fulfill the requirements of all policies involved. She explained that policies, in particular equity and inclusion policies, do not exist in isolation at the school level.

Makayla shared a thought-provoking experience where she faced the dilemma of implementing two policies. During the month of Ramadan, Muslim students abstain from

food or water during daylight hours (Cable News Network, 2018). During that time, they still attend their classes, including physical education, in accordance with their required curriculum. In the physical education class, all students are expected to participate in a 12-minute run. One year, Makayla was approached by an upset teacher because a student refused to participate in the 12-minute run because he was fasting. The teacher refused to consider religious accommodation as grounds for non-participation, stating that the 12-minute run “is an expectation. [The student] knew about [the 12-minute run] a long time ago, [the student] could have planned ahead.” During the verbal exchange between the teacher and the student, the student became aggravated and swore at the teacher. Makayla explained that the student swore because he was in a state of weakness. In this situation, two board level policies clashed: the Student Behaviour and Discipline policy versus the Equity and Inclusive Education policy. It can be assumed that by disciplining the student with suspension, the Equity and Inclusive Education policy is dismissed, however not disciplining the student on the grounds of religious accommodation dismisses the Student Behaviour and Discipline policy. Makayla analyzed the context and asked the teacher:

What’s the context in which he swore, like is that because [the school] has a rebellious teenager who’s just sassy, or [does the school] have a teenager who was so dehydrated that when you pressured him, he couldn’t think clearly and just reacted?

Makayla’s recount indicated that the implementation of equity and inclusive policies that support the goal of ensuring equity cannot be viewed in isolation from other policies. The interconnectivity of polices provided a competitive ground for discretionary implementation.

In an administrative meeting, Makayla was informed that equity should trump all

policies, however the criteria of choosing equity as a principle over other policies was not provided. She asserted that she, as well as other colleagues, continued to struggle with that information because there currently is no common practice of implementation when principals are situated in an environment that calls for “skill and flexibility, [and] adaptability in the moment.” The decontextualization of equity and inclusive policies may disservice students, as was the case in Makayla’s experience above. The uniqueness of each school leadership, principal values and beliefs, equity lens, resources, teaching staff, and student body population suggests that implementation strategies and outcomes may vary from school to school. For example, when Jacob worked at a suburban school, the student and teacher demographics partly influenced the traction that equity and inclusive policies obtained. The implementation strategies and outcomes employed at the suburban school differed from the urban school and were school specific. Notably, Jacob’s understanding of equity, inclusion, and policy implementation may have been more evident at the urban school due to the timing of when he obtained his Master of Education degree.

Theoretical Support Versus Practical Support

The OME provides resources and supports to aid education stakeholders in implementing policies that accomplish the intended goals of *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a, 2017). To understand the level of awareness and perceived effectiveness of the supports provided, participants were asked interview questions that were guided by the research question: What supports are perceived to aid in the implementation of policies that support *Achieving Excellence* in high schools? When reflecting on their experiences, participants made a distinction between the theoretical support and practical support received from their respective school boards. In the section below, findings are separated

into two sections—theoretical support and practical support—as reported by the participants.

Theoretical support. All participants possessed an equity lens rooted in academic literature, in part due to the completion of a master’s degree in education. They also participated in professional development workshops and activities provided by their respective school boards that contributed to their understanding of equity and inclusion, provincial and board level policy documents, and administrative policy implementation from a scholarly perspective. Since school boards are identified by *Achieving Excellence* and Ontario’s *Education Equity Action Plan* as key resource providers (OME, 2014a, 2017), I asked participants to describe the supports their boards provided to assist in policy implementation and the improvements that can be made for implementation at the high school level. Each participant stated that their respective school boards provided them with ample supports which included written resources, guest speakers at monthly meetings, professional development opportunities, and connections with community allies. Makayla explained that at staff meetings, her school tried to have a “continuous intravenous drip of awareness” on equity and inclusion matters that catered to its diverse population of students. She referred to the awareness of Indigenous cultural practices that led to the school embracing a land acknowledgment and encouraging students to smudge.

When asked how participants felt about the supports provided, they were satisfied with the resources available but identified the need to improve the supports from a textbook style delivery towards a hands-on approach. Jacob explained that the supports provided by his board brought strong awareness towards equity and inclusion. Guest speakers were invited to select monthly board meetings and provided enriching

information that strengthened his theoretical understanding of policy implementation. He noted that not all principals were actively engaged in either the guest speaker and/or the topic of discussion at the meetings. He attended a meeting where he was “looking at a room of about 150 people, [and] some people [were] on their iPads, some people [were] on their laptops, [some were] talking, [some were] not listening. [...Equity and inclusion] just [did not] spark their interest.” Similarly, Amelia identified professional development workshops as a problematic support as they were often ballroom style with principals attending because they had to and not because they were invested in the topic. She referred to the professional learning of equity and inclusion as textbook style where principals were provided with a textbook and instructed to learn it. It was assumed that the textbook Amelia referred to was *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a). The description provided is analogous to the common delivery format of graduate coursework that the participants may have experienced in their master’s degree. Jacob and Amelia identified superintendents as key catalysts for providing theoretical resources to support principals in embedding equity and inclusive documents into student improvement plans.

Makayla did not comment on the delivery of professional development workshops but stated that “[school boards] have lots of awareness and not as much capacity to wrestle with the application of those policies.” Although the awareness was helpful, Makayla suggested that there comes a point where topics such as a student success have to become more than just “a big philosophical bubble in the air that at some point in time has to get legs and traction and land with practicality.” In making this comment, she suggested that a transition from theoretical support towards practical support is needed to assist principals on how to effectively implement equity and inclusive policies.

Practical support. Jacob stated that Ontario principals have a degree of autonomy to implement policies that support the goal of ensuring equity. The autonomy enabled principals to use their discretion in decision-making, however the lack of practical support left participants struggling with discerning effective implementation strategies for unique situations. Participants expressed that the theoretical supports and written resources they had access to from their board were sufficient up until they were placed in unique and complex situations; as Makayla described, “it’s like, oh gosh, what does it actually look like to implement [this equity and inclusion policy]?” When describing the improvements that could be made to the supports provided by her board, Amelia stated that there needed to be more resources. She said that “there’s an assumption that [urban board] principals know what they’re doing” yet several educators in that year landed in trouble because of misinterpreting equity. Even with extensive experience in an administrative role, Amelia purposefully surrounds herself with critical friends and university professors as supports to deconstruct her implementation approach to the varying situations she encounters in schools. From early on, she realized that theory in itself is insufficient if its praxis is not supported. Makayla referred to the hierarchal structure of policy development and stated that individuals who are sometimes in the ivory tower and may have never interacted with a teenager create educational documents with the assumption that because a policy has been written it is being implemented. Amelia and Makayla insisted that comprehension of policy implementation that is deeper than theoretical knowledge is not fully expressed by all principals all the time in their respective boards.

The essence of Makayla and Amelia’s argument was that a principal possessing

an equity lens, as obtained in their master's courses, required more than a regurgitation of literature and should entail the ability to know when and how to apply the literature. To clarify the disparity in theoretical support versus practical support faced by principals, Makayla used the analogy of a carpenter as follows:

[as a] carpenter...I [have] a whole bunch of tools, hammers, nails, skilsaws, jackhammers whatever. Just because the tools are there doesn't mean that I know when to pick the right tool or how to implement it. Most of my work [in education] is not even about the tool. It's about having wisdom to know in the moment how to balance many many competing policies.

The analogy provided defends the notion that without the school boards' support in practical experience, equity and inclusive policies are just another piece of paper until their practical use has been understood in everyday situations.

Accountability Measures

As part of the OME's new vision, the *EEAP* (OME, 2017) was created to accomplish the goals of the *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) document and reflect amendments to the *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (*EIEOS*; OME, 2014b). A key amendment that was underdeveloped in the *EIEOS* was the implementation of thorough accountability measures. To accomplish this, the Education Equity Secretariat was established to assist in implementing the *EEAP* (OME, 2017) and "ensure accountability at all levels of school boards for equity, inclusion and human rights" (OME, 2017, p. 17). In particular, accountability for equity and human rights was planned to be enhanced for vice-principals, principals, and supervisory officers with a focus on including equity goals in

performance plans. The outcome/performance measures section of the *EEAP* states that Principal Performance Appraisal regulations will be revised during years one and two (2017/18-2018/19). During years three and beyond (2019/20+), “plans outlining human rights and equity-related policies, programs and practices are included in board multi-year strategic plans, BIPSAs and SIPSAs. [As well] explicit equity goals are included in Board Leadership Development Strategies” (OME, 2017, p. 28). The *EEAP* took an extra measure in identifying the specific individuals who would be responsible for ensuring action items were completed. These individuals included the Education Equity Secretariat and the Ministry of Educations and its branches (OME, 2017).

The steps outlined in the *EEAP* (OME, 2017) indicated that accountability in the Ontario education system was an area that needed improvement where actors such as principals needed to be held to a high standard for demonstrating how they implemented policies that support the goal of ensuring equity. When asked to discuss how the implementation process could be improved in high schools in the participants’ boards, Jacob and Makayla identified accountability as an area that required improvement while Amelia commented on principal placement (which is discussed in later sections). Despite having opposing views on the effectiveness of accountability in their school boards, Jacob and Makayla’s recounts questioned the direction of current accountability measures placed on principals.

In his 10 years of principalship, Jacob experienced a key struggle that resulted in the creation of the Education Equity Secretariat—a lack of accountability. Jacob recalled a statement made by a professor when he took a graduate level education course: “policy is as good as the interest of the principal or the admin in actually following through with

them.” This statement has proven true in Jacob’s career as he has witnessed that not 100% of principals actually follow through with the implementation of equity and inclusive policies created by their school board. For him, the equity and inclusive policies established by his board are like his Bible, but the same enthusiasm and vision is not uniformly embraced by other principals. With a heightened focus on the accountability placed on principals, Jacob contended that the current accountability measures in his board motivate some principals to place the words multiculturalism, equity, and inclusion in their school improvement plans without executing a plan of action. He addressed the issue not as principals being unaware of how to implement policies, but rather not being held accountable for doing so.

According to Jacob, the implementation approach highlighted by the *EEAP* (OME, 2017) became superficial and consisted of a checkbox method of approval. He has access to consultants and superintendents to assist him with how he wants to implement a policy, but he has to contact the appropriate individuals for assistance—they do not continuously offer the assistance. The consultants and superintendents provide him with the initial explanation of the documents created by his board and then the individuals go away and return when called upon. Although the *EEAP* was released in 2017, Jacob has yet to see the establishment of an infallible accountability system where macro-level individuals are checking in on both provincial and board level policy implementation for equity and inclusive policies. Currently, implementation is depicted by Jacob as a process where “[the education system does] a lot of talking” consisting of “great motherhood statements.” Makayla admitted that she was aware a document was released in 2017 but did not know what the document was until she looked it up in preparation for this

study's interview.

Contrary to Jacob's opinion, Makayla believed that individuals in education should not "deposit all of the weight of...implementation on principals." She explained that the danger in placing accountability solely on principals was that it absolved other education actors from the responsibility of ensuring successful policy implementation. It was assumed that the other actors Makayla referred to were the policy-makers, the school board, and educators who in part assist with the implementation of equity and inclusive policies. Although the assumed actors were identified in the *EEAP* (OME, 2017) as already being held accountable, Makayla did not see the accountability enforced in her board. Instead, she saw principals placed in a "shame and blame depot" and explained that "If we can shame and blame principals...it will not get to the root of equity at all." She also stated that equity research often portrays principals in a negative light and "[should] not blame and shame one group if it's a systemic thing."

When comparing the two viewpoints and experiences presented above, it appeared that Jacob and Makayla addressed the factor they used in determining whether equity and inclusive policies are seen as just another piece of paper. At one end of the spectrum it was argued that there was a lack of accountability and principals needed to be held to a higher standard for implementing policies that supported the goal of ensuring equity. At the other end, by placing accountability measures strictly on principals, principals were then not intrinsically motivated to implement equity and inclusive policies. Jacob described unmotivated principals as "bobbleheads out there just playing the game" who would agree with statements made during meetings with their superintendent and include implementation techniques into their school improvements plans only to dot their i's and cross their t's. It was particularly interesting that when

discussing accountability measures with the participants, Jacob and Makayla had the same duties in a similar environment yet had different views on the approach that should be taken in regard to policy implementation accountability.

Findings from the interviews enabled the reflection on the following questions that surfaced while transcribing the audio recordings: Do the accountability measures established in the 3-year *EEAP* (OME, 2017) account for the unique situations that may rise in schools, such as the Muslim boy swearing at a teacher during Ramadan? Can the accountability measures established be used to ensure successful implementation, or are they cookie-cutter methods used in system transitioning from the standardized ways of implementation? Will the accountability measures created be tailored to fit the needs of each school and its student population or are they established simply to meet the OME standards and make Ontario look like the honourable sibling amongst its provincial brothers and sisters?

Whose Equity Are We Talking About?

Once an understanding on the relationship participants had with provincial and board level policies was obtained, I challenged participants to dig deeper on their perspectives of implementation by asking opinion based questions. In doing so, participants were able to relay the key messages they obtained from *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) and identified the importance of authentically knowing the students at their respective schools. Both factors played a role in determining the multifaceted response to the question of whose equity are we talking about, that the participants often have to determine in their schools prior to implementing equity and inclusive policies.

Key Messages

Participants had different opinions on the key messages they obtained from *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a). Of the several potential messages contained in the document, the following three were key: (a) getting to know students, (b) ensuring students achieve their full potential through high standards, and (c) understanding equity versus equality.

Getting to know students. Jacob's journey to establishing an equity lens involved his conscious action of getting to know the students at his school. By attending professional development opportunities, he obtained the message of getting to know the students at his school on a level that surpasses superficial characteristics. Jacob shared that he aimed to know how his students wanted to learn, how they learned, and how to make the curriculum come alive for them. He explained, "I'm not talking about just getting to know, oh you play soccer, oh you know whatever issue you have going on at home...I'm talking about also your practices in the classroom." Makayla and Amelia did not directly identify getting to know one's students as a key message, but did so indirectly in their responses. For example, Makayla shared the importance of understanding the lived experiences of her students. She recalled a time where a female experienced harassment from a group of students and she had to make a judgment call:

So, I took her story, heard her story because it was such a profound reaction. In the moment I believed her and executed the Safe Schools policy and the Progressive Discipline policy and punished those [students] with suspensions and that kind of thing. And I'm really sad I did that because not a single one of those [students] has done well ever since...And I began to think about it, and no, what I

did was I reacted to a profound reaction from a White person who claimed that [the students] had surrounded her. So now I'm implementing the Safe Schools policy, which is about an anti-bullying policy because everything she told me smelled like bullying and aggression. And so of course that has to be handled because we have an anti-bullying policy, right? So I leveraged that policy without substantial consideration of the equity policy. Then I found out from [community members and educators hired to support new Canadians] that I'd probably severely harmed [the students] by not paying sufficient attention to their reality, which was that they hadn't done anything. What they thought was joking and bonding [from a cultural perspective] was received by another person as aggression. So, I regret treating that situation from one policy only.

Amelia identified the message of employing culturally relevant pedagogy and educators possessing cultural competence for their students.

Students achieve their full potential. Students achieving their full potential was one of the key messages Makayla obtained from *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a). Her opinion of the document was that it contained umbrella statements stating that the Ontario education system should be excellent for all students. She defined the path to success to include renewed strategies such as the mental health and math strategy. Similarly, Amelia extracted the message of students reaching their full potential through high standards, but with a special focus on marginalized students. She proposed that from a bird's-eye view of *Achieving Excellence*, a school or board could appear as if they were accomplishing the goals of the document, however a closer look indicated that those who were achieving excellence came from privilege and power, while those who were

marginalized were not achieving the same standards. Thus, there was a false perception of how well the school was doing. When asked to define student success, Amelia explained that “students are successful when they’ve had access to opportunities and they have access to outcomes equally.” As well, she noted that “what success is for particular groups of students is very different depending on who you are, where you come from, and what you believe about students.” Both statements represented Amelia’s opinion and it was assumed that she viewed the definition of student success to be rooted in individual beliefs and identity. Thus, the latter statement suggested that the definition of student success differed from person to person.

Equity versus equality. Jacob was criticized by teachers in his school for discussing equity rather than equality. He explained that:

I got yelled at for talking about equity because [the teachers] felt that the equality is actually what is needed in education. All kids need to be treated the same. They believe that all teachers should be colourblind and that was yelled at me.

After analyzing the *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) document, Jacob understood the difference and importance of equity. Makayla defined student success to mean that “every student comes with a unique set of skills, interests, backgrounds. So whatever it takes that student to their full potential is student success.” She paid homage to a previous superintendent’s tagline that was her guiding principle. She referred to her definition as a belief within a philosophy that shaped the actions the school took to promote student success to students, teachers, and parents. Similarly, Amelia outlined equity as a key message because she believed that every school should be equitable. She expressed that in the past, individuals within her board found themselves in problematic situations

because they interpreted equity to be something it was not. The analogy she used to describe her understanding of equity from *Achieving Excellence* was as follows: “People think that equity is if I give you half a pie and you have half a pie we’re good to go, not understanding that I might be allergic to pie.” The analogy indicated a misunderstanding between equity and equality among educators in her board. Amelia used her understanding to explain to teachers that equity as defined in *Achieving Excellence* was more than having a cultural festival or allowing students with independent education plans to attend regular classes for a day. She expressed that equity needed to become deeper and *Achieving Excellence* was designed to initiate that process while enabling educators to admit that they may not understand what equity means.

Know Your Students

Given their understanding of the key messages from *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a), I was interested in understanding how principals translated this knowledge into action. When asked to identify who they considered marginalized in their schools, participants shared detailed experiences based on their understandings. As a principal in an urban board, Jacob worked with students who came from areas and lifestyles that his teaching staff did not fully understand. His teaching staff was composed of middle to upper-middle class White individuals who came from privilege. Jacob admitted that when he previously worked at a suburban school, he never opened the *EIEOS* (OME, 2014b) because the students reflected a privileged lifestyle and thus, he thought they did not need to be supported in the same manner as students who were marginalized. It was only when he began working at a school where the student population was diverse that he realized the need and importance of equity and inclusion.

I asked Jacob to identify who he thought was marginalized in his school and without hesitation he identified marginalized students to be Indigenous, Black, Latino, and English language learners. An element he stated to be common among these groups of individuals was poverty, and he cited “class” as the dominant characteristic of marginalized students. Although a common reality for most of his students, Jacob stated that poverty was particularly difficult to identify in high schools because students could hide their poverty more easily than in elementary school. He emphasized that poverty presented itself in levels, poverty White, poverty Black, poverty Indigenous, et cetera. At times he and his teachers had a hard time connecting with students because they had not lived the same realities. Jacob shared this experience:

We just had a couple of people take some kids to a [provincial sporting competition]. They go to [an Ontario city] and stay over for 2-3 nights and the teachers are taking these kids out for dinner. And they go to let’s say the Keg. And they quickly realized after the first couple of nights, the kids were ordering exactly what the teachers were ordering. Not having a clue at what they were getting cuz [*sic*] they’ve never been to a restaurant. But they presented quote end quote middle-class normal. ... But they didn’t know what medium rare was, how to cook a steak, they’ve never ordered at a restaurant. The closest they’ve ever been to a restaurant is like McDonalds or something fast food. And the teachers came back and said to me, “Oh my gosh.”

Most teachers at Jacob’s school were willing to adopt an equity lens and implement equity and inclusive policies, but some resisted the process. Jacob expressed frustration that some teachers were choosing not to change their practices because they

believed, “it worked for [them] for the first 20 years, why [wouldn’t] it work for [them] now?”

The shift that some teachers have verbalized to Jacob and Makayla was to make their schools great again—repeating the White supremacist ideologies that are currently evident in North America. Jacob and Amelia’s recommendation for combating the disconnect between educators and students was to hire a more diverse group of leadership and teaching staff. Amelia advocated for principals to travel to other high schools that were different than the lifestyle they lived and the visible characteristics they possessed as a means to get to know their students. She shared this opinion:

I think principals in secondary need the opportunity to travel up to spaces that are not like they are. So I mean because I grew up in suburbia and I went through one school system—being the only Black child usually in my classes—but then work in schools that were very inner city, I have a lens that is pretty broad because of my own growing up. And then where I work. But I think many people get stuck where they are. And I think in secondary schools you need to mix up the principals.

Amelia identified students who were marginalized to include Black students—especially males, students who identified as Latinx, Indigenous, gender fluid, and students who had special education needs. Initially, Makayla stated that to a certain degree everyone was marginalized when mental health and socioeconomic status (SES) were brought into consideration. In her view, simply because a person appeared to be successful by societal standards did not mean they should not be supported. She implied that the face of marginalization did not have a concrete definition as it may change

depending on the situation that a person was facing. She continued to support her explanation by stating that from a visual perspective, students who were marginalized included those from different ethnic groups, different first languages, different abilities or dis/abilities, and those who struggled with their mental health. She gave the example of a student who looked privileged on the outside because they looked like a stereotypical Canadian student but their lived reality included growing up with a physical disability, struggling with their mental health, and living in a broken home resulting in the assignment of a Children's Aid Society worker.

At her school, Makayla found that teachers had a difficult time identifying which individuals needed to be supported in an equitable manner. Compartmentalization into a specific version of marginalization still occurred, which she explained to be problematic when teachers picked and chose who needed to be treated equitably. Over the past years, the student population in Makayla's board changed. What used to be a White affluent neighbourhood transitioned into the heterogenous working class as a result of immigration and decline in the city's gentrification. Makayla explained that:

The clientele that lived in this neighbourhood would be generally... White, affluent, [and] powerful. And so the people that went [to this board] were White, powerful, affluent, [and] homogeneous. And this city has changed. ... This city itself is changing into a city of innovation, culture, [and] research. ... House prices are escalating down here. Working class people now are moving to a local area in this city. We have subsidized housing ... new Canadians. So now we have more people across a local area in this city who are visibly different, religiously different, language different, [and] socioeconomic different.

The transition also brought different religious beliefs, cultures, and SESs. Although the student population changed, some of the teaching staff still viewed and/or expected the neighbourhood to be White and affluent. When placed in situations where conflict resolution was needed between students of different races, Makayla had been left asking herself and others to examine whose equity they were talking about prior to implementing action.

Difference in Opinion

Principals in Ontario urban boards are provided with board-level resources and supports to implement equity and inclusive policies (OME, 2017). A few supports provided by the OME as outlined in the *EEAP* (OME, 2017) include increased electronic and traditional resources in library collections, enhanced funding to support equity initiatives in School Improvements plans for Student Achievement and Well-Being, and regular equity, inclusion, and human rights training that aligned with the Ontario Human Rights Code (OME, 2017). To successfully deliver and implement the supports, collaboration among stakeholders such as parents, students, teachers, and administrators is necessary (OME, 2017). As a graduate student, experience collaborating with individuals of varying ethnicities, academic and social backgrounds, and age groups led to differences in opinions over educational matters. Participants' experiences suggested that the differences mentioned above can become complex when they exist in a unionized environment, are established among stakeholders with conflicting power relations, and when tokenism and/or assumptions are implied onto micro-level actors.

Unionized Environment

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) governs the

working conditions for high school teachers in Ontario's publicly funded boards (OSSTF, 2019). Although Ontario principals are not unionized, they work in a unionized environment and thus must work to support union related policies and legislation such as *PPM No. 159: Collaborative Professionalism (PPM No. 159; OME, 2016)*. *PPM No. 159* is centred on collaborative professionalism which the OME has identified as being key to fulfilling *Achieving Excellence*. The OME (2016) defines collaborative professionalism as

the legal obligations of the participants in Ontario's education system to conform with or implement their roles, powers and responsibilities as may be set out in the *Education Act* and regulations and PPMs made under the Act, and in other relevant legislation, including regulatory college Standards of Practice, as well as the need to honour commitments in the provisions of collective agreements and related memoranda of understanding among parties to such agreements. (p. 2)

During each interview, I asked participants to comment on the barriers, if any, they faced from students, teachers, administrators, and/or parents when implementing policies that supported the goal of ensuring equity. All participants voiced experiencing push-back from teachers in part because of the grey areas in both parties' understanding of the practical execution of professional judgment within the education system.

Participants felt that they did not have sufficient power to challenge the actions of a teacher that were hindering the progress of equity and inclusion in their schools. When an attempt was made, participants concerns were dismissed by the teachers on the ground of exercising their professional judgment—a right supported by their union. For example, Jacob recounted an experience of teacher push-back:

I'm doing a [teacher performance appraisal] and the teacher thinks it's okay to read [a commonly used book in the English curriculum] and drop the n-bomb 40 times in a classroom because it's in the book, with two Black boys in the classroom without giving the kids prior knowledge. [I asked the teacher], why are you teaching that book? And their answer is quote end quote, it's a classic. Which is fine it is a classic, why is it a classic? Could not give me an answer.

Jacob further explained that:

[Teachers are] choosing their own professionalism, so professional judgment. At the front matter of the curriculum in English let's say, it says teacher selected books. So, [teachers] have decided in their professional judgment that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a good book. I can't challenge that. I can question it. So that's my problem.

Similar to Jacob, Makayla talked about the push-back she received from teachers when she tried to make incremental changes to the culture of her school. At the time of implementing the changes, Makayla questioned whether her actions were incremental and needed to be accelerated, but was quickly reminded that "I'm in a unionized environment and the union here is strong so every time I have approached these things, then I get it through the back door that [I'm] judging teachers."

When Amelia tried to make changes to the day-to-day physical and functional structure of a school, she had to remember that "when [a principal is] implementing policies or talking about engaging in a new way of leadership, people will look at [the principal] like to heck with you." Amelia proposed that the education system needed to improve working relations with teacher unions as teachers believed they did not need to

implement certain policies or accept principal changes because the union would protect them. She continued by stating that unions were established because they were embedded in social justice initiatives, thus unions should be refocused to promote social justice as opposed to the focus of protecting teachers from school board sanctions. The common theme among responses was that working in a unionized environment can stand as a hindrance because it gives teachers power to exercise judgments and actions which may perpetuate inequity in the education system.

The Power of Power

All participants observed that principals played the biggest role in policy implementation because of the positional power they possessed. When asked to describe their experience in implementing policies that supported the goal of ensuring equity, each participant discussed the push-back they faced and how they overcame the obstacles by exerting power that influenced implementation. Jacob approached policy implementation by ensuring all educators at his school viewed their ultimate boss as the OME. He challenged educators on their classroom practices, how they collectively treated students, and the physical environment of the school in accordance to *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a). At one point in his principalship, Jacob asked himself why the school had pictures of White politicians and dignitaries plastered on most walls. He recalled looking around the school and seeing a strong representation of White power that gave students the subliminal message of “that’s them and that’s us.” With conviction, he removed the pictures as he deemed them to be institutional and did not support the goal of ensuring equity. Jacob initially faced push-back as a result of his actions, however his ability to exert positional power enabled him to continue with his implementation techniques.

Similar to Jacob, Makayla exerted positional power through conversations that led to positive decision-making. In her interview, Makayla shared how she approached the situation of a teacher who was upset about a student spitting on the floor and being expected to punish the student right away:

So I [tried] to find ways to slow down the reaction cycle and use language to say what else might have [the teacher] noted when [the teacher] saw spitting on the floor? Who else was present? What other voices might we want to not miss? So I [used] a lot of cognitive coaching strategies and open-ended questioning and restorative justice questions. Like when we try and collect information to be really, really neutral about it...some teachers want me to say you have to suspend that [student] because she swore at me. ...So that's where the resistance is because they want their pound of flesh.

Instead of rushing to enforce negative forms of power through punishment, she exerted power in a positive approach. Although different in context and execution, Jacob and Makayla exerted power in order to implement policies that supported the goal of ensuring equity.

Amelia expressed facing some resistance in establishing change within schools because her race influenced the reception of the power by other educators. For example, displeased with the changes she was making at a school, a teacher had previously filed several school complaints to flood Amelia with administrative paperwork and distract her from progressing with her equity work. The power she possessed to implement changes in accordance with school board policies was not seen in high regard by that specific individual. Amelia noted that she had wrestled with the fact that she will always be

looked at as the “equity principal” and not as a principal hired for school improvement because of the way she looks. She recounted instances where educators initially did not listen to her recommendations but then sought her help when they were in predicaments. They dismissed her ability to perform or exert power because of visible characteristics and would state “it was my pride, I should have called on you earlier...I just sometimes think because you’re so young and you know.”

The narratives shared by the participants suggested that racialized principals may be identified to possess a different amount of power than non-racialized principals. Participants made it apparent that there was a covert spectrum of power that was socially attributed to principals that was dependent on race. All participants were tasked with the same responsibilities and were held accountable to the same standards by the OME in regard to *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a). However, each participant’s ability to exert power to implement equity and inclusive policies received different reactions from educators with the main differing factor being perceived as their race. Participants were purposefully not asked to identify their races to refrain from assuming bias when interpreting their responses. Even though the race of the participants interviewed in-person was visible and could be assumed, each participant self-disclosed their race and felt it important to incorporate it into their narratives as it had influenced their actions, what they said, and how others responded to them.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and other social empowerment movements, individuals who are racialized or othered are rising up against the traditional form of power to voice their opinions and this shift can be seen mimicked in the education system. Participants identified that the parents and the surrounding community

of the school boards in which they worked also possessed power that they mobilized to further education initiatives and create change. For example, when the schools in Amelia's board acted in ways that hurt students, the community mobilized their power to change the actions of the board.

It is important to note that my racial appearance, as discussed in the opening narrative in Chapter 1, did provide some hesitancy during interviews. I witnessed some participants' body language and tone change with hesitance when discussing experiences and matters that pertained to Black students. My assumption was that the reaction was subconsciously because I am visibly Black. The actions may have been done in effort to not offend me or use politically incorrect language. The reactions could equally have been a result of discussing sensitive matters and recalling personal experiences which evoked emotional responses. Both possibilities provided insight to the emotional complexity of implementing equity and inclusive policies in a unionized environment with several stakeholders of differing opinions.

Tokenism and/or Bias

The practice of imposing tokenism and/or bias on a policy implementer was explained as a barrier for implementing equity policies for some of the participants. In particular, Amelia expressed disappointment in how administrators are treated as a result of tokenism and/or bias. The existence of tokenism and/or bias may be a noticeable reality for some principals in part because of the diverse population of individuals that reside in urban boards. When reflecting on their collective years of experience in education, participants voiced the biases they heard from stakeholders about the identity of who should implement specific policies and whether they were fit to do so. Jacob

expressed the biased belief that because a principal looks or identifies as being White, they do not know what equity is because they come from privilege and power. He witnessed this bias supported in principal professional development workshops showcasing Peggy McIntosh's (1989) "Invisible Knapsack" article and other analogies used by organizers to raise awareness on equity, diversity, and inclusion. In the same breath, because a principal looks or identifies as being racialized, they definitely know what equity is because they do not come from privilege and power. He witnessed this bias supported in principal professional development workshops showcasing videos of racialized students being treated differently than non-racialized students. Jacob expressed the biases in a positive light as it increased his awareness on equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Makayla identified the same biases from professional development workshops as expressed by Jacob and made reference to the same resources. She added that administrator White privilege was the driving force in the equity workshops. Although she acknowledged its importance, she stated that there are several non-visible layers of marginalization that exist that were not accounted for in the workshops. She explained:

There's all these different common metrics that are used in our in-services for establishing White privilege for example. And I'm not denying that, I'm just not sure that it's the only factor I need to consider. Because I work with students all the time and I see many, many layers of marginalization that might not be visible.

Her response indicated a one-sided approach to equity, diversity, and inclusion. The distinction was that racialized principals were better equipped to approach equity policies because they understood equity.

Amelia identified the same biases as Jacob and Makayla through her experience as a racialized individual. When compared to her colleagues with the same job title in the same board, Amelia was consistently viewed as the equity principal and not a principal working on school improvement or student achievement. She identified her race as the dominant factor that led to the bias placed on her that perpetuated the myth that certain principals should implement equity and inclusion policies. Amelia did not directly attribute professional development workshops as the root for creating the bias but acknowledged the existence of the bias and their strong influence on the leadership of equity policy implementation. To slow down the perpetuation process, she suggested the rotation of high school principals every few months among schools that present different characteristics from their social identity. By doing so, principals would have the opportunity to deepen their equity lens.

Amelia and Jacob were convinced that in order to understand what equity is, stakeholders in the education system had to break down the structures that stand against equity. One of the structures suggested by both participants was the impositions of tokenism and/or bias. Amelia explained:

The problem with secondary schools is that [the education system] kinda [*sic*] categorizes them as like good schools, bad schools, and oh my gosh don't go there schools. We need to break down what leadership looks like. So commonly Black principals are situated in Black schools...like if we keep saying that certain leaders are going to be groomed for certain schools, well then that is inequity in itself.

Amelia's belief was that tokenizing principals in urban boards nurtured an

environment where the act of equity policy implementation became conditional on select principals because they looked like subject matter experts. Her frustrations were in the expectation for a racialized individual to speak on behalf of all the other racialized individuals when equity and inclusive policy implementation should be done by all principals of all races. According to Amelia, “[certain principals] cannot always be the expert on a, b, c, and d.” Collectively, “[The education system has] to get to a point where other individuals who do not look [racialized]...are still talking about a, b, c, and d because it’s important to everyone.”

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the perspectives of three urban high school principals on the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity—identified in the *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) document. This chapter provides a summary of the study and a discussion of the results in relation to current literature. Implications for practice and research are explored with connections drawn between the research questions, themes that emerged from data analysis, and the theoretical framework for the study. Following the implications, the chapter concludes with closing remarks.

Summary of Study

Ontario has made considerable progress in developing provincial mandates that promote the implementation of policies addressing equity and inclusion in its PK-12 schools (OME, 2014a). At the provincial level, the *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario* (*Achieving Excellence*; OME, 2014a) document and Ontario's *Education Equity Action Plan* (*EEAP*; OME, 2017) guide this initiative, with board-specific documents following suit at the school level. Of the various types of school boards the province serves, urban school boards possess a diverse student population that is subject to continuous marginalization because of pre-existing systemic barriers (Flessa & Kettle, 2007; Gooden, 2012). These boards need the implementation of equity and inclusive practices and research suggests that the practices are significantly influenced by principals (Honig, 2006; Winton & Pollock, 2013). This generic qualitative study explored principal perceptions of policy implementation. In particular, it focused on urban high school principals and the implementation of policies that support the goal of ensuring equity—identified as a key goal in *Achieving Excellence*. Snowball sampling was used to recruit three principals who possessed a minimum of 2 years in an

administrative position. All participants had a master's degree in education, which influenced their knowledge and understanding of equity and inclusion. These principals participated in semi-structured interviews; two in person and one by telephone. Interview questions (see Appendix A) invited participants to reflect on topics that explored their perception of policy messages, equity, student success, and implementation supports and barriers. Data collected through the interviews and provincial and board level documents were analyzed to determine themes. The analysis of the data collected revealed three key themes—Just Another Piece of Paper; Whose Equity Are We Talking About?; and Difference in Opinion—that addressed the study's research questions.

Discussion

This section highlights the three overarching themes of this study and situates them in relation to the research questions developed and existing literature. The main question that guided this study was: What are the perspectives of three principals (minimum of 2 consecutive years of administrative experience) on the implementation of equitable and inclusive education policies related to *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) in urban high schools? This question was used to unpack and problematize the disparity of student success between marginalized and non-marginalized groups of high school students in urban settings. Statistics publicized by the TDSB in 2018, outlined in Chapter 1, support the notion that not all students in Ontario are receiving an equitable and inclusive education. There is a disconnect between the expectation of equitable and inclusive education stated in the vision *Achieving Excellence* and the social realities of discriminatory barriers in Ontario schools which suggests that *Achieving Excellence* may not be receiving adequate implementation in urban high schools. To supplement the guiding question and provide greater insight into the research problem, four sub-

questions were used:

1. What are the message(s) that principals obtain from *Achieving Excellence*?
2. What factors are perceived to contribute to effective implementation of policy at the micro-level of the education system?
3. What barriers are perceived to impact the implementation of policies that support *Achieving Excellence* in high schools?
4. What supports are perceived to aid in the implementation of policies that support *Achieving Excellence* in high schools?

In discussing the findings of the study each sub-question will connect the interviews and document data to Spillane et al.'s (2002) theoretical framework and Honig's (2006) three dimensions of policies, people, and places.

Key Messages

Question 1 was intended to provide an understanding of the policy messages that principals obtained from *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) and how this understanding influenced their practices. The findings suggest that participants did not obtain identical policy messages, and of those that were similar, the understanding was context specific. For example, all three participants identified getting to know their students as a key message. When describing groups they considered marginalized, participants identified different groups reflected in their schools. Literature has traditionally assumed that micro-level actors inherently understand the messages contained in a policy and that principals' inability to understand is derived from a policy's ambiguity (Howlett et al., 2015; Spillane et al., 2002; Walshaw & Anthony, 2007). Contemporary research suggests that micro-level interpretations are socially constructed based on one's environment, which changes over time (Coburn, 2005;

Spillane et al., 2002). Findings confirmed this and highlighted that principals may not consistently extract intended policy messages with accuracy. For example, when describing the key messages in *Achieving Excellence*, Jacob failed to identify students with physical dis/abilities and/or special education needs as being marginalized. Amelia also failed to identify students with physical dis/abilities. Makayla failed to identify students who are members of the LGBTQ + community. Because participants were employed by urban boards with a diverse student population (Flessa & Kettle, 2007), it was highly likely that the omitted groups existed in their respective schools.

The omission of a marginalized group did not present immediate consequences, but placed in a different scenario, predicaments with effective implementation may occur. Hope and Pigford (2001) discuss three essential stages principals enter when implementing a policy: The initiation stage is when “strategies are developed that will persuade people to accept and adopt the innovation” (p. 45). At the school level, teachers are introduced to the policy and made aware of its importance. In the process of acknowledging a policy’s importance, principals may unintentionally omit select target groups from the conversation. The omission can become problematic when teachers misinterpret the implicit or explicit messages to mean that certain groups do not need access to an equitable and inclusive education because they have not been identified as marginalized. Principals’ consciousness of the use of non-discriminatory language is important as the language used or not used can convey specific messages to teachers (Kose, 2009) about the characteristics of who a policy applies to.

The study also found that the inconsistent encoding and decoding process of policy goals at the micro-level yielded different messages than intended from the macro-level. The OME (2012b) defines student success as providing every student with “the

same opportunity to succeed and graduate from high school” (OME, 2012a, para. 1); however, I did not find this definition in the board level policy documents reviewed. Instead, the definition was implied throughout the documents. Makayla suggested that the definition of student success depends on the beliefs and identity of the definer and can change depending on who the term is applied to. This aligns with research indicating that new policy information is decoded according to cognitive structures established by those responsible for its implementation (Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002). As well, it challenged whether the term marginalized outlined in equity and inclusive policies should be more clearly defined in implementation practice. Makayla proposed that the visible appearance of marginalization does not have a concrete look. Marginalization is associated with individuals who are socially othered, however an individual who appears to be White and privileged can be marginalized from a mental health perspective.

The role that intersecting marginalization plays in education and policy implementation can be addressed through policy and practice. Participant interviews revealed that explicitly addressing a term in policy may create prescriptive directives that negate the subjective nature of implementation practice. Makayla expressed awareness and understanding of the terms provided in the *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) document, but the impact of the term in practice changed based on the context in which it was used. Intersecting marginalization may be addressed through principals’ practice, but as participants’ experience with obtaining an equity lens reveal, the foundational understanding of equity related terms as a concept were initially grounded in theoretical understanding. Findings suggest that a combination of both approaches may be a valuable approach for addressing the influence intersecting marginalization in principals’

implementation practices. The disparity in student success between marginalized and non-marginalized students was the central problem of this study. The findings give insight that equity and inclusive policy messages, in addition to the terms student success and marginalization, may not be as transparent at the micro-level as assumed at the macro-level.

Micropolitical Factors

The purpose of Question 2 was to identify the factors that participants perceived to contribute to effective policy implementation. The study found links between participants' ability to implement equity and inclusive policies that supported the goal of ensuring equity and the micropolitical factors that existed in their schools. Power is an integral component of implementation discourse (Malen & Cochran, 2015; Ryan & Higginbottom, 2016) and this study identified principals' positional power as the leverage that made them key policy actors. Knowledge of the micropolitical factors that exist in education, which Amelia referred to as "playing the game," helped participants exert positional power and discretionary judgment to problem solve inequitable dilemmas. Literature commonly associates power with human characteristics (Crampton & Elden, 2007; Weinstein et al., 2018), however its influence does not exist solely in the micro-level networks described by Foucault (Crampton & Elden, 2007). The strength of its influence can be affected by the policy goals and the environment where the power is being exerted. Interview data indicates that the capacity in which the strength of power is affected is based on the stage of implementation (Hope & Pigford, 2001) a policy is in as well as which dimension—policies, people, or place (Honig, 2006)—is contributing central influence.

The three dimensions of policy implementation are presented by Honig (2006) as possessing an equal distribution of influence in policy outcomes. However, the findings assert that the symbiotic relationship between the dimensions can skew to position one dimension in dominance over the other two dimensions. In some cases, there is possibility of this dominance reaching the extent of overpowering the existence of the other dimensions. For example, Amelia noted that her social identity as a racialized principal was interpreted by other educators (people) as an inadequate qualifier for her ability to implement equity and inclusive policies. She expressed that educators did not listen to her initial recommendations for change and stated that they focused on her outward appearance instead of her qualifications. The perceived power she possessed for implementation was diluted, resulting in her race standing as a barrier between her and her teaching staff. The implementation of equity and inclusive policies are mandated by the OME (policies) and Amelia was situated in an urban board (place) that greatly benefits from its implementation. Amelia's identity and the educator's beliefs had significantly impacted the lack of consideration for the policies or place dimension by educators. Although policies and place were present and influenced implementation, the people dimension initially had a greater influence in the perceived power of Amelia's implementation practices. Placed in a different scenario, the people dimension may not play a dominant role for Amelia. A greater understanding on the fluid distribution of the three dimensions and how their fluidity impact positional power, may help to address effective practices for implementation approaches to counterpower.

Barriers

The purpose of Question 3 was to source the barriers principals face during the

implementation process. Literature reviewed in this study acknowledges that barriers are an inconvenient hardship associated with evoking change (Hope & Pigford, 2001) when implementing policies (Hope, 2002). Barriers identified by participants were presented as systemic barriers that were unrelated to their environment or context related factors. Instead, the barriers were voiced to be applicable to the profession of a principal. The barriers included: teacher resistance to change, union supported teacher professional judgment, and educator implied tokenism.

Teacher resistance to change. Contrary to literature that focuses on principal implementation of policy, resistance in this study focused primarily on teacher actions. Coburn (2005) and Hope (2002) are explicit in identifying principal actions as a catalyst that supports teachers' adoption or rejection of a new policy. However, findings indicated that in spite of a principals' encouragement of policy adoption via their speech and actions, teachers can still intentionally and unintentionally choose to resist the change. The cognitive framework of implementation outlined by Spillane et al. (2002) is applicable to all micro-level actors in education, thus similar to principals, teachers possess the tendency to refer to past experiences, knowledge, values, and beliefs. Past experiences and values may explain why teachers may reject new information presented by principals, regardless of the positive impact the information may provide. Discussion with participants on how teachers exercised resistance yielded the understanding that actions taken by teachers occurred coincidentally when participants initiated change in their schools to achieve an equitable and inclusive environment. For example, when Jacob decided to remove pictures that represented White power from the walls of his schools, he described his approach as a thought he acted upon that did not require

consultation with his teaching staff. Consequently, the change in wall décor was imposed upon the teachers and resulted in push-back. This finding reinforces the argument made by Capra (2002) that individuals do not resist change, but rather resist the imposition of change.

Traditionally, micro-level actors are identified as lacking the desire to implement (Howlett et al., 2015) and/or the ability to do so because they do not understand policy messages (Spillane et al., 2002; Walshaw & Anthony, 2007). In efforts to maintain hierarchical order as well as possessing positional power, principals may often choose implementation strategies that result in imposition. In particular, strategies chosen may be used when performance outcomes do not align with the intended goals of the policy or timeline of principals' school improvement plan. Clarity within implementation discourse is needed to explain how principals can implement policies that support the goal of ensuring equity at the school level and initiate change in an unimposing manner.

It is important to note that participants' will to implement policy was expressed purely through internal incentives, stemming from the self-actualization of their job title, with further motivation from the equity lens gained in their post-secondary education. Research on implementation barriers suggest that internal and external incentives shape micro-level actors' will to implement (Fowler, 2004; McLaughlin, 1987). In this study, external incentives were not identified as guiding participants' practice. As all participants self-identified as possessing an equity lens, their motivation was depicted as exercising the praxis of theory in the school. Participants' actions, motivated by internal incentives, proved contrary to the understanding that principals will not implement policies that threaten their status in the workplace (Fowler, 2004). Even in the absence of

external incentives, participants were comfortable with disturbing the status quo in the workplace for the betterment of student equity and inclusion.

Teacher professional judgment. Autonomy in the classroom as well as the school is granted to teachers through unionized collective agreements (OSSTF, 2019). One way principals can exercise power is through their job title and teachers through their professional judgment. While the findings identified in the previous section shared the strength of positional power in policy implementation, its effectiveness can be challenged when teachers are exercising their professional judgment. Discourse on implementation barriers scarcely positions a unionized environment or teacher professional judgement as playing a role in slowing the implementation process. Instead, focus is placed on the complexity of principals achieving the political goals of multiple policies (Winton & Pollock, 2013). In situations calling for immediate action, as evidenced in participant narratives, understanding of appropriate exercise of professional judgment that does not perpetuate inequity is critical.

Educator implied tokenism. Principals require a level of awareness on how their race may be negatively stereotyped by educators, as these stereotypes may hinder their perceived ability to implement policies in their schools. Implicit bias was a strong element within the findings that identified if participants were subject matter experts on equity and inclusion based on their race. In particular, the races of comparison identified were White and racialized individuals. Literature discusses race relations in the context of understanding the multidimensional definition of racism and racial discourse (Gooden, 2012), with scarce acknowledgment of tokenism and implicit bias as unconscious predeterminants for implementation outcomes. This lack of acknowledgement is

problematic considering the demographic makeup and diversity of urban boards that are not afforded the ability to avoid systemic barriers on the basis of privilege (Flessa & Ketelle, 2007; Gooden, 2012), and benefit from effective policy implementation.

Ontario principals are required by the *Education Act* to implement provincial policies. The language used in the *Education Act* is intentionally non-discriminatory and applies to principals regardless of their identities. The findings suggest that the translation of the overarching message of implementation has been tainted by some educators to position racialized principals to be more capable of specifically implementing equity and inclusive policies and non-racialized principals to be more capable of implementation as whole. Amelia experienced the projection of the latter translation when her efforts to implement policies as a principal were dismissed in part because of her identity. Honig's (2006) portrayal of the three dimensions of policy implementation describes the people dimension to include actors formally and informally addressed in policy designs. The dimension's focal point is placed on acknowledging the legitimate influence that informal actors possess and contribute towards policy outcomes. The dimension does not take into consideration the racial or intersectional identity of the implementor. Isolating policy implementation from the identity of the implementor limits discussion on effective practices that may advance opportunities for dismantling barriers such as implicit bias and tokenism.

Tokenism asserts individuals with non-dominant characteristics as symbols for the purpose of representing all other individuals with the same characteristics (Kanter, 1977). One of the consequences of practicing tokenism—assimilation—results in role encapsulation, where tokens are forced into specific work roles based on their

characteristics (Kanter, 1977). Participants who self-identified as White described their experiences from the position of a principal responsible for implementing provincial and school-board level policies. A participant who self-identified as racialized described her experience to include colleagues' perception of her position as the equity principal. She implied that the perception was in response to her race and not her qualifications. Jacob's narrative confirmed the existence of the implicit bias and role encapsulation when he stated that professional development workshops identified racialized individuals as understanding inequity while non-racialized individuals do not. These findings demonstrate that implicit bias and tokenism—in particular role encapsulation—are exercised in education and stand as a barrier for ensuring equity and inclusive policies are implemented by all principals and not a select few.

Supports

Support was the backbone in participants' narratives that situated the personnel and institutional feasibility for implementation. Question 4 aligned with this element and aimed to situate the effectiveness of current support measures. Both theoretical and practical support were voiced as holding significance for authentically understanding the principles of equity and inclusion and implementation practices in varying environments. However, the saturation of the theoretical support provided often masked the need for and provision of practical support. The underlying area identified to provide support was principal professional development. Research on principal professional development present this learning tool from a deficit perspective where theory is used to close gaps in principals' practices (Mathibe, 2007; Zepeda et al., 2014). In presenting the argument for practical support, it is beneficial to unpack the frustration participants held with

theoretical support. The OME's (2014a) vision *Achieving Excellence* was presented in 2014, thus written resources in accordance with the vision have been made available to principals for approximately four years. During that time period, workshops, in-services, and guest speakers have been utilized to provide an understanding on the language used in the documents for everyday use. However, participants found that language interpretation alone could not help them exercise equity and inclusion in all situations. For Makalya, it could not help to differentiate whether a student should be suspended for swearing at a teacher or if a teacher should be reprimanded for not acknowledging religious accommodation. For Jacob, it could not help him prevent a teacher from perpetuating inequity who used collective agreement professional judgement as their defense for using racial slurs in the classroom. The situations faced by Makayla and Jacob were unique in nature and called for more knowledge that surpassed the theoretical level of understanding they possessed.

Research on implementation practices explains that actors make meaning of a policy from the “interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), their situation, and the policy signals” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 388). Of the three elements described—cognitive structure, situation, and policy signals—findings from this study stressed that cognitive structures and context specific situations were not fully developed through professional development. Situations encountered by participants may not have aligned with scenarios presented in professional development. As well, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes are bound to past experiences which may not align with policy outcomes or the needs of current practices. Literature highlights that implementation becomes problematic when principal

discretionary judgement relies on superficial similarity to past experiences (Hope & Pigford, 2011) and the past experiences conflict with the policy message. This is of significance considering that *PPM No. 119* was created in 2009 and *Achieving Excellence* in 2014. The areas of improvement of the past which have been amended in contemporary documents may continue to exist in principals' cognitive structures unless they are provided with the opportunity to acquire new intentionally appropriate experiences.

These findings are interesting considering the need outlined in the section above to remove tokenism and implicit bias associated with actors who implement policies that support the goal of ensuring equity. These findings also align with Knapp's (2003) nine items for analyzing professional development initiatives. In particular, the third item entitled structures, suggests exploring the questions, "What formal structures, venues, and forms for professional development should policymakers or leaders arrange?" and "What should be left to emerge more informally?" (Knapp, 2003, p. 110). Professional development or learning commonly occurs during a principals' daily work, in formalized settings such as workshops, and "various informal settings (reading journals, spontaneous conversations with colleagues)" (Knapp, 2003, p. 115). When critiquing the supports made available to educators and voicing how they could be improved, participants identified practical support available in informal formats as an area that needs attention. Understanding inequity on a multidimensional level that is supplemented by school based experiences provides opportunities for conversation that purposefully acknowledges the design of professional development to target appropriate inadequacies in principal knowledge, interpretation, and practice.

Implications for Practice

Significant implications for principals' policy implementation practice emerged from the data findings. The implications identified are intended to give insight into a small number of principals' perceptions of policy implementation in urban high schools, thus generalizability is not intended. The study found that board-level resource supports played a defining role in promoting awareness of equity and inclusion, however the lack of practical support was insufficient for overcoming all implementation barriers. This finding is consistent with research on professional development that questions the effectiveness of developing programs from research that focuses on educator and researcher opinions in comparison to evidence based practice (Guskey, 2003). Board-level resources that support principal implementation practices should consider focusing on incorporating increased practical support in professional development. This approach can occur in a two-step process. First, workshops or in-services can present principals with past or hypothetical scenarios focused on student diversity, multiple policies, and available resources and analyze how to approach the scenarios in different contexts. The analysis can guide principals on effective implementation strategies that support ensuring equity in face of challenging political and unionized environments. These workshops would benefit from a constructivist focused approach that recognizes that individuals construct meaning through experience (Kinnucan-Welsch, 2007), and encourages learning through construction rather than transfer of knowledges (Pitsoe & Maila, 2012).

Second, professional development should transition from dominant textbook-style workshops towards experiential learning. The study highlighted a strong theoretical and written resource approach to professional development, that called for boards to find

feasible ways of providing practical support. The participants suggested that boards could provide principals with mandated opportunities to rotate their principalship to schools with differing student populations and environments. The rotation would reinforce the attainment of a deeper equity lens that exposes principals to different lived experiences, thus providing an authentic understanding of who the *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) document refers to when discussing all students. Principals rationalize the decisions that infer their practice from the values, beliefs, and prior experiences contained in their cognitive frameworks (Ball et al., 2012; Spillane et al., 2002). Possessing experience interacting with and understanding equity and inclusive policy implementation in the context of diverse populations could provide principals with applicable experiences to refer to when making decisions, thus potentially improving efficacy, discretionary decision making, and reducing a “trial and error” approach. As policy implementation is fluid, and fluctuating situations call for changing practices (Spillane et al., 2002), the mobilization of principals’ past experiences should naturally be varied and reflect leadership in different environments. Similarly, as a social construct, professional development benefits from evolving practices (Pitsoe & Maila, 2012).

Teacher unions. Increased cooperation with the OSSTF may bridge the gap in understanding what it means to exercise equitable and inclusive professional judgment. The study indicated that similar to principals, teachers do not always know what equity and inclusion is in practice. Teachers should be mandated to participate in equity and inclusion professional development. It is understood that principals influence the quality of teacher professional development (Youngs & King, 2002)—more substantially in social justice work (Kose, 2009). An aligned understanding among principals and

teachers can reduce the decontextualization of implementing equity and inclusive policies in urban high schools.

Implications for Theory

Current research explores the capacity in which the interaction among policy, people, and places influence implementation outcomes with suggestions that each dimension contributes an equal amount of influence (Honig, 2006). It is understood that the three dimensions should not be understood in separation, however this study revealed that the dimensions are not always equal and hold an uneven distribution of weight in varying contexts. The fluid nature of policy implementation and its idiosyncrasies, suggests that the influencing power of each dimension changes in response to changes in the context of implementation.

Still functioning with the managed system view (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011) mindset, the education system conducts its daily operations through a hierarchical structure where principals have authority over teachers and students. Policy implementation discourse attributes power, in particular, positional power as influencing a principal's ability to implement (Malen & Cochran, 2015). The study provided insight on the existence of a covert spectrum of power that was socially attributed to principals and was dependent on race. In certain instances, the impact of tokenism and assumptions diluted or empowered the perceived positional power that participants possessed. The study did not ask participants to declare their race, however each participant self-identified and attributed their racial identity as influencing the power they had to implement equity and inclusive policies as a principal. The lived experiences and intersectional identities of principals impact how and to what degree they will and can

implement a policy (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2011; Honig, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002), however the impact that principals' identities, particularly visible characteristics, play on positional power for implementation is minimally explored.

Literature on policy implementation at the micro-level should explore how the intersectional identities of principals play a role in implementation, in particular, in the interaction of Honig's (2006) three dimensions—policies, people, and places. By analyzing the influence of intersectional identities on policy implementation, possible inferences may be made for implementation accountability. A standard margin of error associated with intersectional identity can complement variance in implementation outcomes, enabling accountability measures to accurately account for implementation without pairing schools in comparison to other schools with different resources and leadership.

Implications for Research

A larger sample size consisting of diverse administrative experience would deepen the understanding on principals' perceptions of policy implementation. In considering the role that intersectional identities play in policy implementation, it may be of value to use purposeful sampling to recruit a larger sample size that reflects identities from different social categories such as age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion etc. Purposeful sampling enables the selection of specific "individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p. 206).

Given that one interview was conducted with each participant, the study captured a snapshot of the participants' current perspectives. Future research would benefit from exploring a longitudinal study that analyzes how principals' perceptions on policy

implementation evolve over time. Longitudinal studies aid in addressing varying outcomes of a study and explaining why the changes may occur (Creswell, 2015; Singer & Willett, 2003). Educational studies focusing on rural and urban boards as well as elementary and high schools are commonly conducted independent of the other with each possessing distinct elements that support the need for isolation. Comparative studies of principals in urban and rural school boards or elementary and high schools may shed light on the contextual disparity on how principals use standardized resource supports and provincial policy documents to implement equity and inclusive policies. This may aid in establishing appropriate provincial and board-level supports. A study of this nature would further explore claims made by participants that the implementation of key messages extracted from *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) are motherhood and cookie cutter in theory, but unpredictably complex in practice depending on who you are and where you come from.

The same study can be conducted with teachers in relation to how principals' perceptions and implementation practices at their respective schools influence their equity and inclusive practices. Research has explored how principals' leadership styles influence schools culture and teacher practice (Kose, 2009; Youngs & King, 2002) separate from policy implementation. Understanding teachers' perspectives may better inform on how principals translate policy messages for implementation and how that informs their leadership practice. Additionally, there is a possibility that principal perceptions and practices on equity and inclusive policy implementation may vary depending on their social identity. Therefore, further research should explore the areas of race, gender identity, and intersectionality and how they influence the policy

implementation.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the main themes that resulted from the data and situated them in relation to existing literature that addressed the study's main research question. The disconnect between the expectation of equitable and inclusive education as stated in *Achieving Excellence* (OME, 2014a) and the social realities of discriminatory barriers in schools was the driving force that called for exploring principals' perspectives on policy implementation. Findings indicated that principals extract several messages from *Achieving Excellence* and often the same message receives different interpretations, which impacts implementation outcomes. The data further illuminated that positional power plays a key role in determining principals' ability to implement a policy. As well, it was suggested that the tokenism and implicit bias placed on racialized principals stand as barriers dictating which principals are best equipped to lead for equity and inclusion.

The implications of findings presented opportunities for improving the relationships between principals, teachers, and unions and the resources provided by school boards. Acknowledgement of practical support as an essential component of principals' professional development challenges current methodologies prescribed in literature to yield effective implementation outcomes. The process of achieving the intended outcomes of *Achieving Excellence* (2014) is still developing and faces significant social, cultural, and political challenges. However, it is hoped that this study will initiate critical discussion on the importance of incorporating the principal as an indispensable intermediary to bridge the equity implementation gap. Through purposeful dialogue, the complexity of micro-level implementation in everyday situations may be

better understood.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Introduction: Personal Characteristics

- How long were you a teacher?
- Were you a vice-principal, if so for how long?
- How many years have you been a principal?
- How long have you been a principal at [insert school name]? centrally located
- How many schools have you worked at?
- Have you worked in other school boards?

Policy

Goal

- In your opinion, what are the key messages relayed in *Achieving Excellence*?
- The Ontario Ministry of Education's vision titled *Achieving Excellence* is intended to influence student success in all students. How do you describe student success?

Target

- How are teachers, students, and/or parents at [insert school name] made aware of what student success is?
- The policies school boards create to support *Achieving Excellence* target marginalized students. Who do you consider to be marginalized in your school?
- In what way does [insert school name] demonstrate an equitable and inclusive environment for students?

Tools

- What supports are principals provided with to assist with policy implementation?
- How do you feel about the supports that are provided?
- What role has your school board played in your process of implementing policies?
- Can you describe, if any, barriers principals face when implementing policies that support "Ensuring Equity"?
- What policies has your school board created to support "Ensuring Equity"?

People

- In your opinion what role do principals play in the implementation process?
- Can you describe your experience with implementing policies that support "Ensuring Equity"?
- How can the implementation process of policies that support "Ensuring Equity" be improved in secondary schools in your school board?
- The legislative background in which *Achieving Excellence* is founded has been in existence since the 1990s. Reflecting back, do you think there has been an increased or decreased importance to implementing policies that support "Ensuring Equity"? Why, or why not?

Places

- What role has the [insert city/town] community played in the implementation practices you employ?
- Can you describe any adjustments you had to make in your school in order to implement policies that support “Ensuring Equity”?
- Have you experienced any direct or indirect resistance from administrators, teachers, students, and/or parents when implementing policies that support “Ensuring Equity”? If so, why do you think this occurred?

Conclusion: Additional Information

- Thank you for all the valuable information you have provided, is there anything else we did not cover that you would like to add to our conversation?

Probing Questions That May be Asked

- Could you tell me more about that?
- How did you feel?
- If comfortable, can you provide an example?
- In what ways is it/is it not?
- Why or why not?
- What else (if anything) could be done?
- Can you clarify...?