Voices Elevated and Margins Centered:

A Critical Re-Analysis of Representation in an Urban School District's Equity Audit

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Voices Elevated and Margins Centered: A Critical Re-Analysis of Representation in an Urban School District's Equity Audit

This study critically re-analyzed a focal equity audit conducted in an urban school district in the southwestern United States to examine how institutional research practices shaped the representation of historically marginalized students and families. While equity audits are commonly used to identify disparities in educational access, opportunity, and outcomes, they often rely on institutional logics and analytic practices that can obscure lived experiences and reproduce epistemic exclusion. Grounded in qualitative inquiry, this study drew on Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA) alongside Spivak's theory of marginality to interrogate not only what the focal audit found, but how equity itself was constructed, mediated, and communicated through the research process. To guide this analysis, the author developed and applied a novel conceptual framework, Critical Reframing, organized around five analytic domains. Data sources included original focal audit reports, comparative audit materials, and interviews with the focal audit co-directors. Findings revealed that institutional reporting, sociopolitical conditions, and methodological conditions shaped which experiences became visible, how inequities were framed, and whose voices were treated as legitimate. In response to these findings, the author developed and introduced the Critical Reframing Tool, a practice-oriented analytic resource designed to support more relational, critically reflexive, and community-anchored approaches to equity inquiry in educational research and evaluation. The study contributes to scholarship on equity audits, culturally responsive research, and critical qualitative inquiry by offering a framework for examining how institutional processes shape both the production and interpretation of equity knowledge.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There is an increasingly urgent need to rely on research and evaluation to assess equity within school districts across the United States. Equity audits have emerged as a prominent tool for this purpose, supporting district leaders in identifying disparities in educational access and opportunities, and student outcomes. Large urban districts across the United States have employed equity audits to highlight patterns of racial disproportionality in special education placements, disciplinary referrals, and access to advanced coursework (Skrla et al., 2004). Their findings revealed disparities like disproportionately higher suspension rates for Black students and systematic exclusion of multilingual learners in gifted programs. Such findings can help districts recognize both the barriers that reproduce inequity and the successful structures that can be scaled for improved equity across contexts.

While equity audits can be valuable diagnostic tools, they are often framed as objective, data-driven initiatives intended to support systemic reform (Skrla et al., 2004). However, like most institutional research, equity audits are shaped by underlying institutional purposes, analytic choices, and broader social discourses around equity and accountability. What is illuminated—or rendered silent—is contingent upon the epistemological assumptions guiding the audit's design, implementation, and analysis of the audit (Foucault, 1980). As Arzubiaga et al. (2008) assert, research itself can be considered a situated cultural practice, embedded within particular power structures and histories that shape what counts as valid knowledge. Typical audits operate within compliance-oriented or demographically-focused frameworks. Although such approaches may be useful for identifying descriptive disparities, it privileges easily-measured indicators of equity and inadvertently obscures the complex lived realities and nuanced needs of students from historically marginalized communities (NYSED, 2019; Tuck, 2009).

Institutional decisions, ranging from how participants are recruited to the way narratives are coded and interpreted, can either amplify community knowledge and expose systemic inequities, or silence critiques of the structural conditions that produce educational disparities (Dotson, 2011; Mazzei, 2007).

Moreover, as Dotson (2011) highlights, silencing is not simply an absence of speaking or being heard. Rather, it is a process of epistemic exclusion, in which certain forms of knowledge and experience are systematically devalued, dismissed, or labeled unintelligible within dominant frameworks. Epistemic exclusion works to define what counts as legitimate knowledge and whose voices are considered credible or authoritative, limiting the range of experiences and perspectives that are recognized, understood, and acted upon within the institution's context. Consequently, even well-intentioned audits may be designed in a way that reinforce existing power structures and mask the full texture of the community's knowledge, needs, and resistance to marginalization.

Recognizing that inquiry itself is never neutral but situated within cultural and historical practices embedded within broader power structures (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Foucault, 1980), there is a critical need to interrogate the frameworks that guide institutional equity research. Without such interrogation, equity audits risk reinforcing the inequities they intend to address (Artiles, 2019; Spivak, 2022). To more fully understand and address systemic inequities, it is necessary to explore how reframing data through culturally responsive and critical lenses may yield richer interpretations that bring to light the reality in the intersecting experiences of cultural, linguistic, and ability-based marginalization.

One promising approach involves the analysis of institutional data using culturally responsive research (CRR) frameworks (Paris & Winn, 2014) and theories of marginality

(Spivak, 1988). Such approaches intentionally center historically marginalized voices, interrogate institutional silences, and disrupt dominant equity narratives. As Spivak (2022) has recently emphasized, researchers should remain attentive to the politics of voice, silence, and analytic stance. Analyzing institutional data through critical frameworks not only may reveal hidden dimensions of inequity but also challenge dominant narratives that shape educational policy and reform (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Furthermore, Artiles (2019) cautions that research must be rooted in historical epistemologies and moral commitments to avoid reproducing the very inequities it seeks to dismantle.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to critically analyze an existing equity audit conducted within a southwestern U.S. urban school district. Its analysis employed a critically-informed qualitative approach to examine how research initiatives shaped the visibility and representation of historically marginalized student groups and their families in school district contexts. More specifically, the study aimed to uncover methods, analytic decisions, and institutional barriers that obscured the voices of culturally, linguistically, and ability-diverse students whose experiences are often obscured or minimized by traditional equity audit methodologies (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023; Skrla et al, 2004). Furthermore, this study applied a critical lens informed by frameworks of culturally and linguistically responsive research (CLRR; Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Bal & Trainor, 2016) and Spivak's (1988) theory of marginality to interrogate the underlying assumptions, analytical choices, and dominant discourses that informed the focal audit. This approach revealed the ways in which institutional practices and methods both highlighted and obscured particular student experiences. By contrasting traditional audit methods with a critically-informed analysis, this study illuminated the complexities involved in representing

marginalized populations in educational equity research and contributes to the development of more culturally responsive and critically informed tools for conducting such audits in the future.

Additionally, this study sought to identify actionable recommendations for district leaders and policymakers on how to engage in more culturally responsive research methodologies in future equity audits. These recommendations were grounded in critical theoretical perspectives, emphasizing the importance of collaborative engagement, intersectionality, and reflexivity in educational research and policy development (Arens et al., 2012; Bal & Trainor, 2016; Smith & Bahr, 2013). Ultimately, this study aspired to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on equitable education practices by centering the experiences and insights of marginalized communities to support systemic changes towards greater educational justice and inclusion (Bal & Trainor, 2016; Jackson & Mazzei, 2023).

Significance of the Study

This study is positioned at the intersection of equity-focused educational research, critical qualitative inquiry, and culturally and linguistically responsive research (CLRR). At the time of this study's proposal, schools and districts across the United States were increasingly adopting equity audits to address longstanding disparities in student achievement, discipline, and educational access. As such, it was both timely and necessary to interrogate the assumptions embedded within these audits. However, during the course of this study, a federal change in administration introduced a shift in national education priorities, including a reduced emphasis on equity-focused initiatives and increased scrutiny of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts. These shifts were reflected unevenly across states, with some state leaders adopting policies that discouraged or restricted equity-focused research and practice in an effort to align with evolving federal priorities. In the context of this study, these broader sociopolitical

dynamics contributed to changes in data accessibility, institutional decision-making, and the positioning of equity work within the focal audit's district.

While equity audits are often framed as neutral and data-driven, they reflect methodological and ideological choices that can either obscure or amplify the voices of historically marginalized and underserved communities (Hood et al., 2022; Skrla et al., 2004). These choices do not occur in a vacuum, but are shaped by institutional priorities, constraints, and broader policy contexts. For instance, the urban school district in which the focal audit was conducted had a linguistically diverse student population, with nearly 30% of their student body classified as English Learners, yet focus groups were conducted only in English. This raises questions about how decisions regarding data collection and representation were made, and whether community input meaningfully informed those processes. Taken together, these conditions underscore the need to move beyond surface-level analyses of audit findings and instead examine how equity is constructed, negotiated, and constrained within institutional research practices.

By mobilizing Spivak's (1988) concept of marginality and frameworks for culturally responsive research (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Bal & Trainor, 2016), this study's critical analysis was designed to examine which voices were represented, how they were represented, and to what effect. This approach enabled a deeper interrogation of how representation operates withing institutional research and how dominant narratives about equity may be reinscribed through ostensibly "neutral" practices. As Hood and colleagues (2022) argue, culturally responsive evaluation must be rooted in the communities it serves, rather than imposed from external positions of authority. The significance of this study lies in its capacity to shift the conversations about educational equity from technical compliance to critical engagement, highlighting how the

very tools used to diagnose inequity can, if left unexamined, reproduce the structures they aim to dismantle. Furthermore, the findings offer practical insights for school district leaders, researchers, and technical assistance providers seeking to make their practices more inclusive, reflexive, and justice-oriented (Thorius, 2023).

Importantly, this study also holds implications for how institutions partner with communities in the design and implementation of future equity audits. By centering culturally and linguistically diverse perspectives and drawing on frameworks rooted in community-based ideologies, the findings point toward more relational and reciprocal models of inquiry that move beyond extractive data collection practices (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Hood et al., 2022; Paris & Winn, 2014). Such models support equity-expansive approaches to research and evaluations (Thorius, 2023) that challenge deficit-based orientations and affirm the value of community-rooted knowledge. In doing so, they emphasize the importance of co-constructing knowledge, authentically engaging interest holders, and building long-term trust between school districts and the communities they serve.

Research Questions

Building upon this study's purpose and significance, the following research questions were designed to engage both in theoretical and practical dimensions of educational equity work, offering insights into how research tools themselves function as mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion, and how they might be transformed:

1. How did the focal audit design and analytic decisions shape which student, family, and staff experiences were made visible?

2. In what ways did institutional priorities, access limitations, and sociopolitical conditions influence how equity was defined, analyzed, and communicated in the focal audit and its dissemination to its district community?
3. How does a critical re-analysis of the focal audit, using the Critical Reframing framework, offer alternative interpretations of equity and suggest more culturally and linguistically responsive approaches for future district equity audits?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Culturally Responsive Research (CRR) is situated within a broader tradition of educational scholarship that recognizes that knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by political and historical power relations (Milner, 2007). CRR scholars emphasize the need to move away from assumptions of objectivity and neutrality. Instead, they ask that we move toward relational, dialogic, and participatory methodologies that respect multiple ways of knowing held by diverse culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Arzubiaga et al., 2008). This shift aligns with a robust body of scholarship that positions pedagogy and research as acts of resistance, rehumanization, and cultural sustainability.

Foundational work by scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1995) laid the groundwork for what is now recognized as culturally sustaining, community-anchored approaches to education. Her concept of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) has been consistently cited for nearly three decades and continues to shape how educators and researchers approach teaching, learning, and equity. CRP centers academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, while challenging deficit-based models that position students of color as problems to be fixed. Moreover, CRP and related frameworks lay the foundation for asset-based models that recognize the brilliance, creativity, and lived knowledge that students bring into their classrooms. In broader contexts, these frameworks also inform the design of institutional research, the interpretation of student outcomes, and the ways in which educational success is defined.

Paris and Alim (2014) extended this tradition by introducing Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), which shifts from simply affirming students' identities, to actively sustaining and evolving their cultural and linguistic practices in the face of dominant, white and monoglossic pressures. Furthermore, it views schools as potential sites of linguistic and cultural

reclamation, particularly for communities whose ways of knowing have been historically excluded and devalued in educational contexts. Similarly, Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) emphasized a cultural-historical approach to learning; an approach that elevates the everyday knowledge and ways of learning developed in students' homes and communities. These frameworks remind us that schooling and research are not neutral endeavors, but they are political acts that carry ethical commitments.

Importantly, equity research informed by these theoretical lineages has contributed to the development and implementation of instructional models that support all learners by affirming their full humanity. For instance, Hammond (2015) underscored how relationships, trust, and cultural affirmation are neurologically essential for cognitive engagement, particularly for students from historically marginalized communities. Building on this, other scholars have demonstrated that deep learning is inseparable from emotional and cultural connectedness, and that identity-affirming environments can help buffer the effects of trauma and toxic stress (Cantor et al., 2019; McCrickerd, 2016). Even frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), while often considered distinct from culturally responsive education, confirm the importance of inclusive, biologically-attuned, and adaptable teaching models that promote equity for all learners (Rose et al., 2002). Taken together, this body of work offers values that are central in this study's efforts to reframe equity audits through a lens that honors voice, visibility, and belonging.

Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment

Building from these culturally responsive research (CRR) and pedagogical foundations, Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA) was developed to extend culturally responsive commitments into the field of program evaluation (Hood, et at., 2015). CREA centers

cultural context and historical inequities in evaluation research and emphasizes the active involvement of the communities being studied in the design and implementation of the evaluation, and the use of its findings. Furthermore, CREA pushes back against universalist notions of validity, neutrality, and objectivity by arguing that such ideals, when unchecked, often reproduce dominant power structures and marginalize non-dominant perspectives (Hood et al., 2015; Frechtling et al., 2010). It positions evaluation as a cultural and ethical act rather than just a technical process.

At its core, CREA resists extractive and imperial forms of knowledge production and instead promotes relational, contextualized, and accountability-driven approaches to research (Neubauer et al., 2023). Extractive practices in research and evaluation occur when researchers or institutions collect data from communities, particularly marginalized ones, without reciprocating benefits, transparency, or shared ownership of the findings. These practices often prioritize the needs of dominant groups and institutions over community well-being, treating participants as data sources rather than co-constructors of knowledge. For instance, Gullo (2018) critiques equity audits that focus solely on technical indicators, like test scores and disproportionality rates, without engaging the lived experiences of students and families. Similarly, Sul and Dominguez (2024) describe how Latine participants in trauma research reported feeling that their narratives were only used selectively or edited to fit institutional narratives, contributing to a sense of being "mined" for stories rather than being heard for their whole personhood.

In contrast to extractive practices, CREA also emphasizes relational approaches to evaluation research, where the process is rooted in trust, cultural humility, and ongoing dialogue with communities (Hood et al., 2015; Hopson, 2009). Relational approaches prioritize building

and sustaining relationships, not only as an ethical obligation, but as a methodological necessity to recognize that meaningful insights often emerge through reciprocal, accountable, and mutually respectful processes. Neubauer et al. (2023), for example, advocate for research and evaluation strategies that begin with listening sessions, co-design of instruments, and iterative feedback loops that return findings to participants in ways that honor their perspectives. These practices align with Arzubiaga et al.'s (2008) principles of culturally situated research, which emphasize that research must be grounded in the social, linguistic, and historical contexts of the communities they engage.

Despite these strengths, there is a limited but growing body of empirical literature that explicitly compares CREA-informed evaluations with traditional or compliance-oriented audit models. While many scholars have critiqued traditional audits for being overly technical, narrow in scope, and disconnected from community voice (Gullo, 2018; Thorius, 2023), few studies have directly examined how CREA principles alter the analytic process or dissemination of equity evaluations. This gap underscores the importance of studies such as this one, which critically analyze existing institutional data for implementation of culturally responsive and justice-oriented practices.

Emerging scholarship suggests that culturally responsive evaluation frameworks can shift the evaluation process from technical compliance to one centered on community agency and epistemic inclusion. For instance, Neubauer et al. (2023), describe how CREA, when merged with LatCrit theory (Valdes, 2005), enabled a coalition of Latina evaluators to transform evaluation practices in public health and education. Rather than using evaluation solely to measure institutional deficits, they reconceptualized it as a vehicle for building community power, validating lived experience, and cultivating collective agency. Drawing from their own

positionalities as Latinas in a disproportionately white and male-dominated profession, the authors highlighted how LatCrit's focus on racialized experience, intersectionality, and structural critique gave them language and legitimacy to interrogate exclusion with evaluation spaces. For example, their participation in CREA's early conferences and the American Evaluation Association (AEA) helped organize spaces for public dialogue and visibility for Latine evaluators, such as the 2012 AEA panel titled "Where Are the Latinos At?" which prompted coordinated strategies to challenge erasure and underrepresentation (Neubauer et al., 2023).

Moreover, their later efforts included the creation of evaluator training programs centered on Latine sociocultural contexts, coalition-building efforts through AEA's Multiethnic Interest Group, and the development of community-informed evaluation tools. These initiatives demonstrate how CREA-informed approaches, when paired with LatCrit's emphasis on justice and voice, were able to transform evaluation from an extractive process into one that is rooted in relationality, cultural context, and political commitment. Such outcomes—centering community knowledge, supporting collective action, and influencing evaluator pipelines— are rarely produced by traditional compliance-driven evaluations. Neubauer et al.'s (2023) work illustrates how culturally responsive evaluation can function not just as a method, but as a movement; a movement that fundamentally shifts who evaluation is for and what it is meant to do.

Similarly, Bal and Trainor (2016) developed a Culturally Responsive Research (CRR) Rubric to assess whether special education studies authentically engaged with participants' cultural contexts and meaning systems. Their work was motivated by concerns that the dominant emphasis on evidence-based practices—largely defined through experimental designs like randomized control trials—has narrowed what counts as legitimate research in special education. Drawing on Bowker and Star's (2000) concept of the convergence principle, they argue that this

framing alters the landscape of research such that only certain ways of knowing are recognized. For example, treating complex educational experiences as if they can be universally explained by "culture free" variables. This has legitimized methodologies presumed to be objective and generalizable, while marginalizing work that centers culture, context, and participant-researcher interaction.

Bal and Trainor (2016) further contend that this narrowing obscures the institutionalized systems of exclusion and marginalization that shape educational experiences, such as racism, ableism, and linguistic oppression. The dominant evidence paradigm fails to account for how social identities, histories, and structural barriers interact with intervention outcomes. As a result, despite decades of experimental research, persistent inequities in academic and postschool outcomes for students with disabilities have not been resolved. So, the CRR rubric was developed as a corrective tool; a cultural artifact designed to push special education research toward paradigmatic expansion. While the rubric can inform qualitative, descriptive, or single-case studies, its primary aim is to remediate experimental intervention research by embedding principles of cultural responsiveness. Furthermore, although Bal and Trainor did not explicitly link their CRR rubric to CREA, their work actively prioritizes the same ethical implications and serves as a model for how culturally responsive frameworks can be applied not only in pedagogy but also in research, evaluation, and policy analysis. Additionally, their rubric aligns with the core values of CREA and serves as a practical example of how culturally responsive frameworks can challenge dominant paradigms and foster more socially attuned evaluation and research practices. These examples reflect promising steps toward reimagining evaluation and research as facilitators of epistemic justice, but more empirical work is needed that directly compares the

findings, recommendations, and impacts of CREA-centered evaluations with those using conventional methodologies.

Still, gaps remain. As Hood (2001) argued, evaluations cannot be neutral when operating in racialized systems, and culturally responsive approaches must attend to history, identity, and the politics of knowledge. Yet, few evaluations have measured how CREA-aligned methods alters equity framing in comparison to traditional approaches, underscoring the need for studies like this one—studies that apply culturally responsive evaluation frameworks to existing institutional tools and examine how analytic stance and community voice share the findings and their implications. This approach is particularly important in the context of equity audits, where data about marginalized communities are often collected and interpreted without their meaningful involvement, reinforcing patterns of epistemic exclusion (Dotson, 2011; Thorius, 2023).

Meaningful involvement extends beyond participation in data collection. As Thorius (2023) emphasizes, it includes co-construction of research questions, collaborative analysis of data, and shared decision-making in the development of recommendations. Similarly, Dotson (2011) argues that addressing epistemic exclusion requires researchers to not only invite participants to speak but to ensure the institutional frameworks can actually recognize and value the knowledge offered. This means shifting from extractive practices to relational ones; practices where interest holders are embedded throughout the research process, from instrument design to dissemination. This kind of relational orientation challenges researchers to consider not only who is involved but how they are involved—through shared power, transparency, and ongoing dialogue. In practice, this might include engaging community members in framing research questions, co-interpreting data themes, validating findings, and collaboratively planning for next

steps or implementation strategies (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Neubauer et al., 2023). Without such elements, "participation" risks becoming procedural rather than transformative.

Marginality

While Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA) and Culturally Responsive Research (CRR) frameworks emphasize the importance of community voice and cultural contexts, they do not always address how institutional systems shape, and often constrain, whose knowledge is heard, how it is legitimized, and under what conditions voice becomes illegible. To better understand these dynamics in the context of equity research and evaluation, this proposal draws on theoretical insights from scholars who have examined how power operates in the production and use of knowledge, particularly in institutions of education. More specifically, this proposal turns to poststructural and decolonial theories to lay a broader theoretical foundation for concepts of marginality, epistemic injustice, and the politics of voice to critically examine how power and silence operate in institutional research.

Spivak's (1988) theory of marginality is central to this proposed study and analysis. Her foundational question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" critiqued Western academic and policy discourse. Yet, it was not a literal inquiry about voice but a provocation that highlights how systems of power often obscure, appropriate, or erase the voices of those they claim to center. The term *subaltern*, drawn from postcolonial studies, refers to those who are structurally excluded from dominant forms of representation. In Spivak's view, institutions may invite participation from marginalized groups, but the frameworks and logics they use to analyze that participation often distort or erase the very experiences they aim to represent. This is particularly relevant in equity audits, where interest holder feedback may be collected but is often filtered through standardized data categories, narrow definitions of voice, or institutional reporting

requirements that constrain how equity problems are defined and addressed (Gullo, 2018; Thorius, 2023).

Spivak also warns against assuming that critique alone is sufficient. She mobilizes her concept of the impossible no, encouraging one to take a position "in the middle, but not on either side" of structures (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023). In other words, she points out the difficulty of resisting systems that one must also rely on to survive the "teaching machine" (Spivak, 2009). This tension is mirrored in education settings, where equity audits may both surface inequities and reinforce institutional structures that manage and contain critique. Arguably, institutions often create space for marginality, but only within terms that are manageable (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023), or what Spivak would call *catachresis*; the use of inadequate stand-ins for voices that cannot be fully represented. In the context of equity audits, this might look like highlighting a quote from a student of color about feeling excluded while failing to examine the broader structural conditions that produce that exclusion.

A related critique is offered through the concept of epistemic exclusion, which refers to the ways institutions dismiss or ignore knowledge that does not align with dominant norms (Dotson, 2011). Importantly, epistemic exclusion is not always visible, but it can take the form of selective listening or procedural limitations. Dotson (2011) describes her concept with the use of the terms *testimonial quieting*—when individuals refrain from speaking because they anticipate not being heard—and *testimonial smothering*—when they shape their words to fit what the institution will accept. Both dynamics are especially relevant when analyzing data from student or family focus groups, where participants might moderate their language in response to power dynamics or assumed expectations. This is expanded by Fricker's (2007) use of the term epistemic injustice, which refers to the harm done when people are wronged in their capacity as

knowers. She further distinguishes between testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice, where one discounts credibility due to identity bias and the other produces illegibility due to dominant discourse, respectively. This is exemplified when a student describes emotional harm from school disciplinary practices, but if discipline is only characterized by frequency or type, the deeper cultural or relational dimensions of that harm may be left unexamined.

These insights have also been extended into the field of education research. Mazzei (2013) challenges assumptions that participant voice can be directly accessed or transparently captured through qualitative data. Drawing on poststructural and posthumanist theory, she argues that voice is not simply expressed, rather that it is shaped by the research context, institutional discourse, and the positionality of both researcher and participant. Her concept of listening differently encourages researchers to attend to what is not said, to moments of tension or contradiction, and to the silences that signal deeper structural constraints. This is especially important in analyzing data from focus groups and interviews, as it may have already used an institutional lens to interpret what participants were willing to share.

As a whole, these theories do not offer simple solutions for inclusion but rather question the institutional logics that govern who can speak, what can be said, and how that speech is received. In the context of equity research and evaluation, they call attention to the possibility that equity tools, like audits, may reproduce the very silences they seek to disrupt. By drawing on this body of work, the proposed study does not aim to assume voice is absent but instead seeks to explore how voice was made legible and what was invited, excluded, or interpreted through the focal audit's methods. Furthermore, it seeks to identify implications for how a different analytical stance might surface different insights about power, belonging, and exclusion.

Equity Audits

The theoretical insights discussed above offer a critical lens through which to analyze not just the outcomes of educational research and evaluations, but also the institutional processes that shape what knowledge is elevated, silenced, or reframed. These dynamics are especially visible in the design and use of equity audits; common evaluation and assessment tools used by school districts to assess disparities and guide reform. Before introducing the conceptual framework that guides this proposal, it is important to examine how equity audits function as institutional artifacts, and why they must be critically analyzed through the lenses of epistemic injustice and marginality.

Equity audits are a widely used tool in school districts to identify disparities across key indicators, such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, program access, and disciplinary action (Skrla et al, 2004). While these measures can be useful for surfacing patterns of disproportionality, they often fail to capture the lived experiences, cultural knowledge, or relational dynamics that shape how students and families experience inequities (Gullo, 2018; Hood et al., 2015). When equity audits rely exclusively on quantitative indicators, they risk reinforcing epistemic injustice, or the systemic devaluation of certain groups' knowledge, perspectives, and credibility (Fricker, 2007). These concerns are especially relevant in the context of school districts where community input is collected through focus groups, surveys or interviews, while limiting the way those data are interpreted or represented. As scholars caution, this is particularly relevant when collecting such data from marginalized communities, as they often experience testimonial quieting or epistemic exclusion when their input is filtered through dominant norms or dismissed as unintelligible (Dotson, 2011). As a result, equity audits may inadvertently reproduce the very inequities they aim to address, especially when they fail to

adapt their tools to local cultural contexts or interrogate assumptions embedded in their frameworks.

Contrastingly, studies rooted in culturally responsive and sustaining frameworks provide evidence that more contextually-grounded and community-anchored approaches can shift not only what is measured, but how findings are interpreted and used (Bal & Trainor, 2016; Thorius, 2023). These frameworks emphasize the need to embed historical knowledge, local epistemologies, and community voice at every stage of the research process (Artiles, 2019; Hood et al., 2015). In this study, the district's equity audit was not taken at face value but instead served as the primary site of analysis; it offered a case through which to examine how equity was conceptualized, enacted, and represented through institutional tools. This critique of conventional audit practices extends to the use of quantitative data, which are often treated as objective evidence of equity but reflect deeper institutional values and assumptions.

In many U.S. states, equity audits rely heavily on district-reported quantitative indicators such as standardized test scores, disciplinary referrals, and program participation rates. These data are often framed as objective measures of equity; however, they are shaped by institutional logics that reflect dominant ideologies about merit, behavior, and accountability (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Gillborn, 2005). Far from being neutral, such indicators may mask structural inequalities by recoding them as individual deficits or performance gaps (Artiles, 2019). In this study, quantitative data in the focal audit was not treated as unmediated reflections of reality, but as discursive artifacts, or representations shaped by specific decisions about what is counted, how it is categorized, and whose experiences are legitimized within institutional contexts (Dotson, 2011, Foucault, 1980). Including analysis of these data allowed for a critical interrogation of the mismatch between the metrics used in traditional audits and the lived

realities of culturally, linguistically, and ability-diverse communities. This stance further aligns with the Critical Reframing framework's emphasis on epistemic orientation and representational practices.

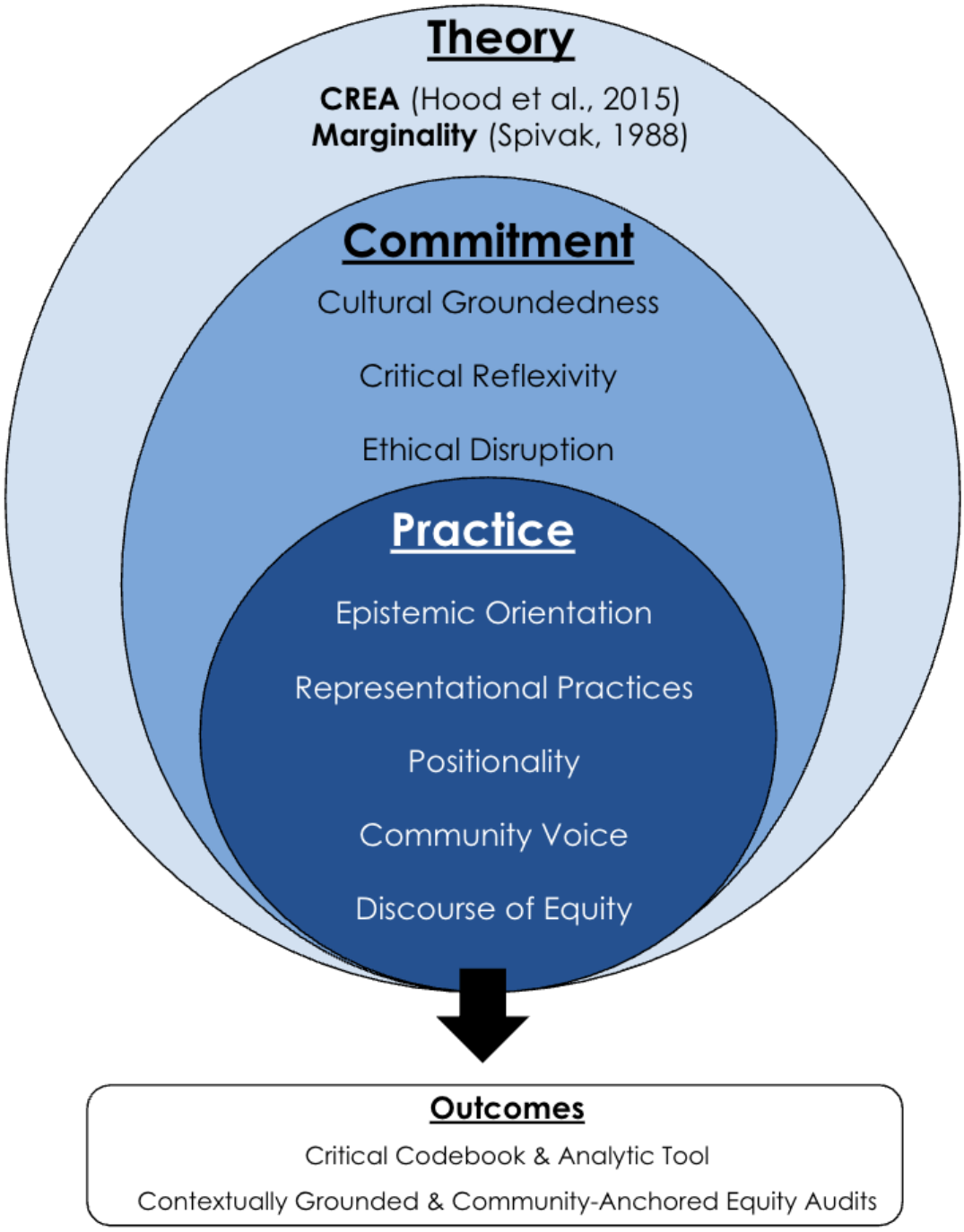
Conceptual Framework

As visualized in Figure 1, this study was guided by a novel conceptual framework that I titled Critical Reframing. I developed this conceptual framework to support the analysis of the focal equity audit through a lens that is both culturally responsive and critically reflexive. I've grounded the framework in two distinct yet complementary bodies of theory: Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA; Hood et al., 2015) and Spivak's (1988) theory of marginality. These theoretical traditions offer complementary insights into the methodological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of equity-focused research. Three core commitments emerged from these foundations to shape the design and interpretive approach of this study. These commitments were then operationalized through five analytic domains that guided the development of critical codebooks and informed the analysis of the focal equity audit materials, new interviews with the focal audit's co-directors, and comparative audits within the same state and a similar timeframe. Ultimately, these analytic domains supported the design of the Critical Reframing Tool, which is intended as a reflective tool for conducting more contextually-grounded and community-anchored equity research and evaluation.

Foundational Theories

The first theoretical foundation is Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA), developed by Hood and colleagues (2015). CREA offers a grounded stance focused on cultural, historical, and sociopolitical contexts in which evaluation takes place. CREA challenges dominant notions of objectivity and neutrality in research and instead emphasizes relationality,

Figure 1
Critical Reframing: A Nested Framework for Equity Analysis



Note. This framework illustrates how two foundational theories—Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA) and Spivak's (1988) concept of marginality—inform three core commitments which are operationalized through five analytic domains that guide critical analysis. The framework culminates in outcomes that reflect the product and purpose of the Critical Reframing framework.

community accountability, and the ethical imperative of engaging participants as co-constructors of knowledge. It asserts that evaluation is situated in culture and must be designed in ways that are responsive to the values, histories, and lived experiences of the communities being studied.

The second theoretical foundation is Spivak's theory of marginality. In particular, this study focused on her concept of subaltern and the "impossibility of pure representation" (Spivak, 1988). Spivak's work critiques how dominant institutions, like academia, policy, and research, often claim to include marginalized voices, but they simultaneously reproduce the conditions that silence those voices or make them invisible. Her theory shifts away from performative inclusion and toward the interrogation of the underlying assumptions and decision-making processes regarding who can speak, who is heard, and under what terms. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of district equity audits, where students and families from historically marginalized backgrounds may be "included" through data collection but ultimately misrepresented or excluded from meaningful interpretation and use of the findings.

Core Commitments

Three core commitments emerged from the intersection of CREA and marginality, to orient the framework's overall design and analytic approach:

1. Cultural Groundedness: This commitment draws from CREA's emphasis on honoring the cultural, linguistic, and historical knowledge of participants. It recognizes that evaluation must be situated within the sociocultural realities of the communities it engages and that research tools must be adapted accordingly (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Hood et al., 2015).
2. Critical Reflexivity: This stance emphasizes critical reflexivity, requiring researchers to consider how institutional practices and research traditions shape what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is authorized to speak (Mazzei, 2016; Spivak, 1988).

3. Ethical Disruption: This final commitment focuses on the need to move beyond technical equity analysis toward deeper, structural critiques. Drawing from critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017) and epistemic justice literature (Dotson, 2011; Frank, 2013), this principle encourages researchers to name and challenge the systems and discourses that obscure or misrepresent historically marginalized communities, even within well-intentioned equity efforts.

Analytic Domains

Finally, to operationalize these commitments in practice, the Critical Reframing framework was organized around five analytics domains. These domains formed the foundation of the critical codebooks for this study and served as the organizing structure for analysis and the development of a new analytic tool, the Critical Reframing Tool:

1. Epistemic Orientation: This domain examines what types of knowledge are centered or excluded, and how legitimacy is assigned to particular narratives or data sources.
2. Representational Practices: This domain analyzes how people and communities are portrayed, quoted, paraphrased, or omitted in reports or summaries of the findings.
3. Positionality: This domain evaluates how researcher or institutional perspectives are acknowledged, including reflection on power and interpretive authority.
4. Community Voice: This domain investigates the nature and depth of community engagement in the research process, particularly in framing questions and interpreting results.
5. Discourse of Equity: This domain assesses how equity is defined, operationalized, and communicated, including which groups and structural issues are prioritized or ignored.

These five domains provided a structure for analyzing both what the focal equity audit found and how it found it. They allowed the study to examine not just superficial disparities, but also the underlying assumptions, silences, and institutional discourses that shaped the construction of equity itself.

Thus, this study's analysis of equity audit data was conducted through a lens that not only investigated what disparities existed but also interrogated how the focal audit's original methods may have contributed to *epistemic silencing*—the absence, misrepresentation, or misinterpretation of marginalized students' and families' perspectives. As seen in Figure 1, the diagram highlights the distinct contributions of each tradition: CREA emphasizes cultural context, community accountability, relational evaluation, and equitable engagement, offering a grounded approach to culturally responsive inquiry. In contrast, Spivak's work brings attention to deeper structures of power that shape whose knowledge is legitimized or erased within systems. The intersection of these frameworks allowed for critical reframing, where traditional equity practices were rethought through the lenses of critical reflexivity, interrogation, and inquiry practices. This hybrid approach not only critiqued how conventional research produced knowledge, but also offered a pathway to more ethically grounded, critically-informed, and culturally sustaining approaches. It also informed the concrete outputs of this study, namely critical codebooks and an analytic tool, the Critical Reframing Tool, to support more reflexive and community-centered equity audit analyses in the future.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological approach used to critically analyze an existing district equity audit. Grounded in the Critical Reframing framework introduced in Chapter 2, this study employed a qualitative design to examine how institutional research practices shaped the visibility and representation of historically marginalized students and families. The chapter details the research design, including a description of a design revision due to data access constraints, data sources, analytic procedures, and considerations related to rigor, limitations, and research positionality.

Positionality

I approached this proposal as both a participant and an observer of the SUD Audit. Professionally, I supported the SUD Audit as a research intern for the non-profit research organization that led the evaluation. Although I was not involved in designing the original focus group protocols or survey instruments, I contributed to the qualitative analysis by coding focus group transcripts and survey responses using Dedoose software. A predetermined codebook guided this process, though I was given some autonomy to add subcodes under existing parent codes. I also helped co-author analytic memos that summarized key findings. As one of the few team members with qualitative research experience, I was invited to support the analytic phase but remained in a junior role. I observed how decisions about voice, representation, and reporting were made, often without deep engagement with cultural context or reflexive practices. These experiences contributed to my growing interest in how institutional research processes shape not only what becomes visible within equity-oriented work, but also how community experiences are translated, interpreted, and communicated through organizational systems.

As a bilingual Chicana doctoral student and practitioner-scholar whose professional work has focused on culturally and linguistically responsive practices, multilingual learners with disabilities, and equity-focused educational systems change, I approached this study with an awareness that educational research is never fully neutral or detached from broader systems of power and representation. My commitments to culturally and linguistically responsive research and critical qualitative inquiry shaped both the questions I asked and the interpretive lens through which I approached the data. At the same time, I remained attentive to the tensions and contradictions embedded within equity-oriented institutional work, including the ways such initiatives may unintentionally reproduce the very inequities they seek to address.

In this analysis, I occupied a different position; a role that allowed me to take leadership over how the data were re-interpreted, while remaining committed to a collaborative approach with a graduate research assistant who I trained and mentored. Because this study involved re-analyzing institutional artifacts that I had previously contributed to professionally, ongoing reflexivity was necessary throughout the research process. Memoing, collaborative coding discussions, and iterative analytic reflection served as important mechanisms for interrogating my assumptions, documenting interpretive decisions, and critically examining how my own positionality shaped meaning-making throughout the study. Rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, this study approached reflexivity as an essential component of critical qualitative inquiry and culturally responsive research practice (Bal & Trainor, 2016; Saldaña, 2016).

Research Design

This study was grounded in critical qualitative inquiry, drawing from interpretivist and poststructural paradigms. Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and seeks to understand how individuals and institutions make meaning within specific sociocultural contexts

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Poststructural perspectives, especially those informed by Spivak (1999) and Foucault (1980), emphasize the role of discourse, power, and positionality in shaping what counts as knowledge and whose voices are validated or marginalized. Therefore, in line with these paradigms, this study implemented a critical qualitative analysis design, in which an existing equity audit was treated as both a source of data and a site of inquiry. Rather than taking the audit's findings at face value, this study interrogated how those findings were constructed; examining the epistemological assumptions, analytic decisions, and institutional conditions that shaped what was ultimately reported. Furthermore, this study was guided by the Critical Reframing framework, which integrated principles from Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA) and Spivak's (1988) theory of marginality to develop the analytic domains described in Chapter 2.

Design Revision

The original design of this study proposed a mixed methods approach that included both qualitative re-analysis of focus group transcripts and a complementary quantitative analysis of student-level outcome data. However, as the study transpired, significant constraints emerged regarding access to key data sources. More specifically, the original focus group transcripts from the focal audit were not available for secondary analysis due to limitations in its consent agreements. Additionally, access to district-level and school-level quantitative data was not granted within the study's timeline, limiting the feasibility of the proposed quantitative analysis. As a result of these data access constraints, the study underwent a methodological revision. However, these constraints were not treated solely as limitations; they were understood as analytically significant and aligned with the study's central focus.

A key piece of this study's narrative lies within the inability to access certain forms of data, as it reflects the institutional conditions that shaped knowledge production, including decisions about what data are collected, who has access to them, and how they may be used. Therefore, this study shifted to a fully qualitative, document- and artifact-based design, in which the equity audit report and its component materials were treated as institutional texts. These texts were analyzed not only for their content, but also for what they revealed about the processes, constraints, and assumptions that informed their production. This design revision preserved the study's critical purpose by centering the examination of how institutional research practices construct representations of equity, while simultaneously foregrounding the role of access, policy, and organizational decision-making in shaping what can be know.

Context and Data Sources

To preserve anonymity of the Southwestern U.S. District (SUD) examined in this study, it will be referred to throughout the remaining chapters as the District. Likewise, the focal equity audit conducted within the District will be referenced as the SUD Audit. Comparative equity audits included in this study were conducted in different districts within the same state and a similar timeframe. These audits were completed and reported within 2020-2024 and are identified using pseudonyms (i.e., Audit D, Audit M) to distinguish them from the focal audit. This distinction is made to clarify reference of audits and to maintain consistency across analytic comparisons.

The SUD Audit that serves as the foundation for this study was conducted during the 2023-2024 school year by a non-profit research organization following a request for proposals (RFP) issued by the district's Department of Contract and Procurement Services. It was commissioned to assess historical and current equities and inequities across several domains,

including resource distribution, access, inclusiveness, and program quality across the district's preschool through grade 12 system. The awarded team began work in June 2023 and completed the study in multiple phases, producing several internal memos and a publicly released final report.

The SUD Audit employed a mixed-methods approach using multiple data sources, such as focus groups, surveys, document reviews, and quantitative analyses of District data. On the qualitative side, the research team conducted ten focus groups, two each with students (n=23), caregivers (n=19), administrators (n=9), teachers (n=15), and non-instructional staff (n=11). These were offered in both in-person and virtual formats, but all were conducted in English, limiting accessibility for the 30% of students and families identified as multilingual. Surveys were distributed in both English and Spanish to recruit participants for the focus groups and gather feedback. A final feedback survey (n=9) included responses from District staff, families, and board members. In addition, the SUD Audit team reviewed over 15 District documents, aligned with three focus areas: student experience, staff support, and resource allocation. These artifacts included internal plans, policy memos, strategic frameworks, climate surveys, and school improvement documentation.

The SUD Audit culminated in a final report that outlined findings and recommendations across students, staff, and resource allocation domains. These included calls to implement culturally responsive walkthrough tools, expand behavior and mental health supports, allocate funding to support educators, and develop hold-harmless funding provisions for under-resourced schools. Despite the breadth of data collected, limitations in accessibility, language inclusion, and interest holder involvement were noted. Data collection protocols were designed and executed primarily by the SUD Audit team in coordination with District leadership, with

minimal community participation in interpreting or responding to findings. Moreover, the final recommendations were subject to approval by District leadership, and subsequent political shifts at the federal level influenced state and local shifts which led to the dismantling of the SUD's equity advisory committee and removal of the SUD Audit report from public access.

For this study, several sources of qualitative data from the focal audit, as described above, were analyzed. Additionally, new qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the SUD Audit's project co-directors (i.e., non-District personnel). These interviews were guided by protocols aligned with the analytic domains of the Critical Reframing framework. As seen in Appendix A, the interview questions were intended to explore which voices were prioritized, what constraints shaped the analysis, and how findings were ultimately constructed. Furthermore, due to the constraints to data access described above, this study drew various accessible data sources for different purposes, as listed on Table 1.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of the sources listed on Table 1 was guided by the Critical Reframing framework and unfolded through an iterative, multi-cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2016). Rather than approaching coding as linear or purely a technical task, this process took a recursive and interpretive approach with the data; noticing not only what was present in the artifacts, but also what was absent, muted, or rendered unintelligible through institutional discourse. The analytic process moved from broad descriptive categorization toward increasingly interpretive and theoretically-informed synthesis. Early coding cycles intentionally generated a large number of granular codes intended to "bucket" or organize the content of the audit materials into small conceptual groupings. As analysis progressed, these initial categories were compared, collapsed, refined, and synthesized into broader analytic patterns and tensions that ultimately aligned w

Table 1

List of Data Sources

Data Source	Description	Purpose	Analytic Use
SUD Audit Report and Component Memos	The primary data sources consisted of the final audit report and its component memos, including summaries of focus groups, school walkthroughs, meaning-making conversations, and exploratory data analyses. These documents synthesized qualitative findings and included representative quotes, which were treated as constructed representations of interest holder voice.	Examine how equity findings, interest holder experiences, and institutional priorities were represented within the SUD Audit process	First- and second-cycle coding; critical discourse analysis; analysis of representational practices; institutional framing; and equity narratives
District Public-Facing Materials	Public summaries and communications related to the audit were included to examine how findings were translated and presented to the broader community. These materials provided insight into institutional framing and dissemination practices.	Examine how institutional narratives about equity were constructed and communicated for public dissemination	Comparative discourse analysis; examination of narrative coherence and institutional dissemination of equity discourse
Comparative Equity Audit Reports	Equity audit reports from other districts, conducted within a similar timeframe, were included to provide comparative context. These documents supported analysis of how equity is operationalized and represented across different institutional settings	Situate the SUD Audit within broader equity practices and identify similarities/differences in institutional framing across contexts	Cross-case comparative analysis; examination of discourse of equity, methodological framing, positionality, and community representation across audit models
Semi-Structured Interviews with SUD Audit's Co-Directors	Two semi-structured interviews with the SUD Audit's co-directors provided additional insight into the analytic decisions, institutional constraints, and contextual factors that shaped the audit process. These interviews allowed for deeper exploration of elements not fully captured in the original written reports.	Examine how methodological decisions, institutional priorities, and positionality shaped the development and dissemination of the audit	Thematic analysis; critical memoing; triangulation of institutional decision making, positionality, and interpretive process across data sources

the five domains of the Critical Reframing framework. In this way, the coding process moved from descriptive organization of the data toward critical interpretation of how equity was represented, mediated, and operationalized institutionally.

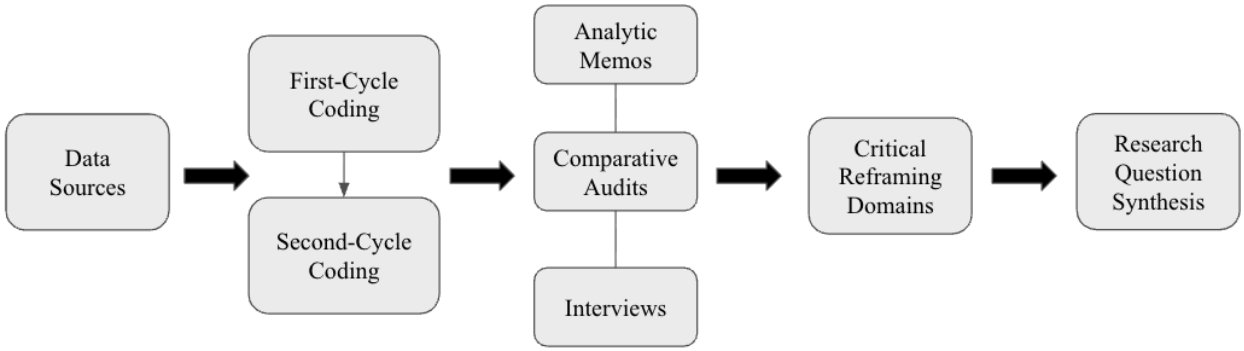
The first cycle of coding focused on surfacing the content and structure of the SUD Audit with: (a) descriptive coding that identified key topics and patterns across documents; (b) process coding that traced how institutional actions, decisions, and narratives unfolded; and (c) values coding that captured the beliefs, assumptions, and orientations embedded within those representations. Together, this first cycle produced a broad set of initial categories related to interest holder experiences, methodological decisions, institutional actions, recommendations, and equity-oriented beliefs and assumptions. At this stage, coding prioritized breadth and categorization rather than reduction, allowing the research team to map the range of topics, institutional logics, and recurring issues appearing across data sources. This cycle of coding allowed for an initial mapping of how equity was constructed, discussed, and operationalized within the SUD audit materials.

Building on that foundation, the second cycle of coding shifted from descriptive categorization toward deeper analytic interpretation and synthesis. Whereas first-cycle coding emphasized identifying and organizing many smaller categories across the data, second-cycle coding focused on examining relationships between those categories and reducing them into broader conceptual patterns. Axial coding (Saldaña, 2016) was used to identify relationships across emerging categories, particularly around recurring institutional conditions, implementation tensions and representational practices. This stage resulted in the development of broader axial categories such as institutional fragmentation, symbolic equity commitments, conditional access, and many other themes listed in the sample codebooks in Appendix B.

Following axial coding, versus coding (Saldaña, 2016) was used to examine recurring tensions and contradictions across the data. The versus codes functioned as analytic pairings that captured competing institutional logics and contradictions embedded throughout the audit materials. For example, tensions such as participation versus co-construction and symbolic equity versus material equity emerged repeatedly across data sources and analytic memos. A list of the tensions identified can be found in the sample codebooks in Appendix B, as well. This phase of analysis was especially concerned with tracing how meaning was produced through institutional logics, as well as where contradictions, gaps, silences, and tensions emerged across data sources. A flow diagram of the analytic process is displayed on Figure 2.

Figure 2

Flow Diagram of Analytic Process



Coding was conducted using Dedoose software to facilitate collaboration between the author as the primary coder, a trained graduate research assistant. To support analytic rigor, an iterative calibration process was used to establish consistency in code application across both coding cycles. Calibration began with a shared subset of data excerpts and proceeded with one parent code at a time, with the research team collaboratively reviewing each code definition and its associated subcodes. During this process, the codebook was refined to include clarifying examples and non-examples for first-cycle codes, and analytic notes with

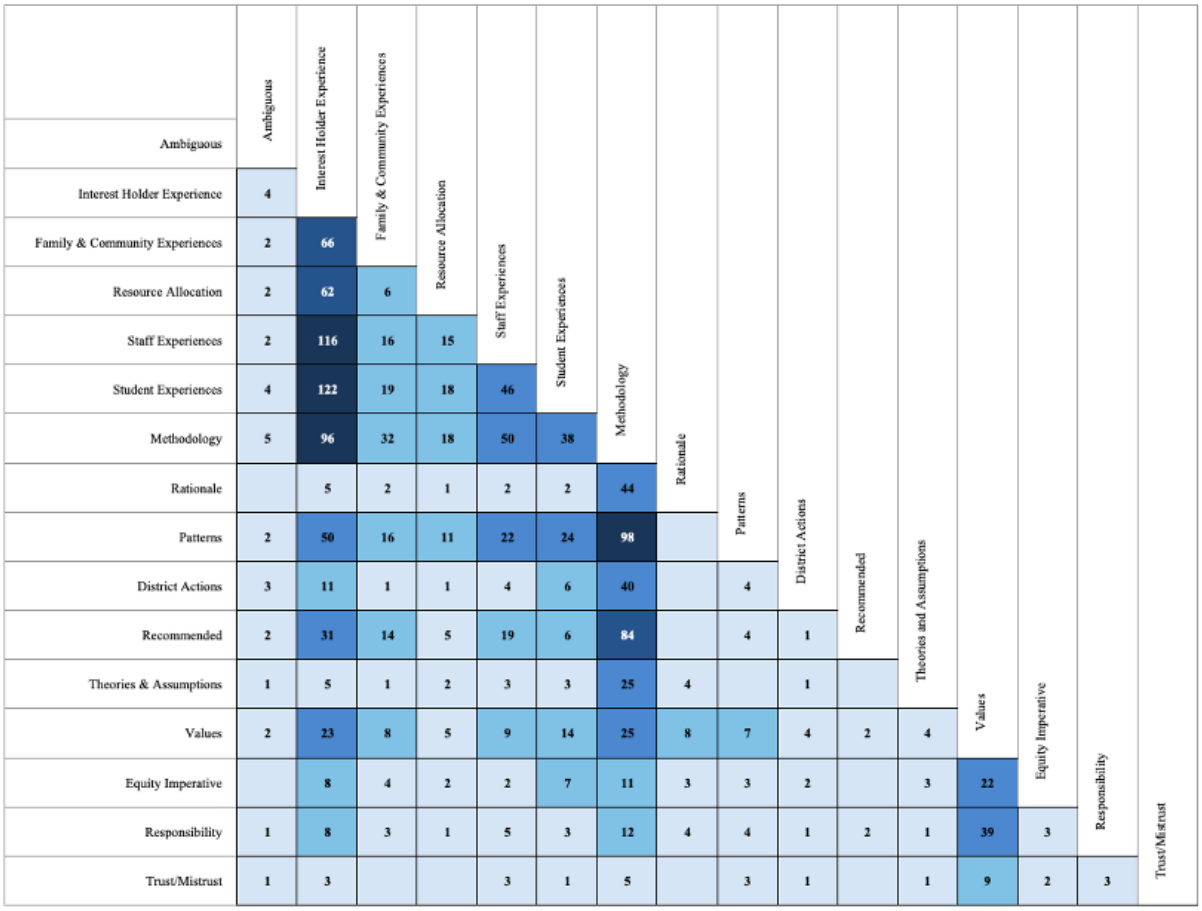
representative excerpts for second-cycle, theory-driven codes. This iterative process resulted in changes to parent code and subcode titles that resonated with the research team and facilitated the coding process.

Code co-occurrence visualizations were generated in Dedoose to support interpretation of relationship across codes, analytic domains, and institutional themes. Selected heatmaps are presented in Figures 3 and 4 as visual analytic displays used to identify areas of relational density, recurring tensions, and patterns or thematic convergence across data sources. These heatmaps were used heuristically to identify areas of relational density across codes and domains, and did not function as quantitative findings, but rather as analytic aids that helped guide memoing, second-cycle synthesis, and identification of recuring institutional tensions across the data. Additionally, the heatmaps further illustrate the refinement of themes from Figure 3 to Figure 4.

For example, initial calibration for first-cycle coding yielded 51 and 63 code applications across coders, which increased to 37 and 45 applications following refinement of code definitions and alignment discussions, resulting in agreement over 80% of the time. A similar process was used for second-cycle coding using the Critical Reframing framework, resulting in closely aligned code application counts of 78 and 79, or near-complete agreement. While there is no universally accepted benchmark for intercoder agreement in qualitative research, Saldaña (2016) noted that agreement between the 80-90% range is commonly regarded as a reasonable benchmark among researchers who to choose to report evidentiary statistics related to coding alignment. In this study, these percentages were not treated as indicators of objectivity or statistical reliability, but rather as evidence of increasing interpretive consistency and shared understanding across coders through iterative dialogue and refinement of the coding framework.

Figure 3

Heatmap of First-Cycle Code Co-Occurrence Frequencies



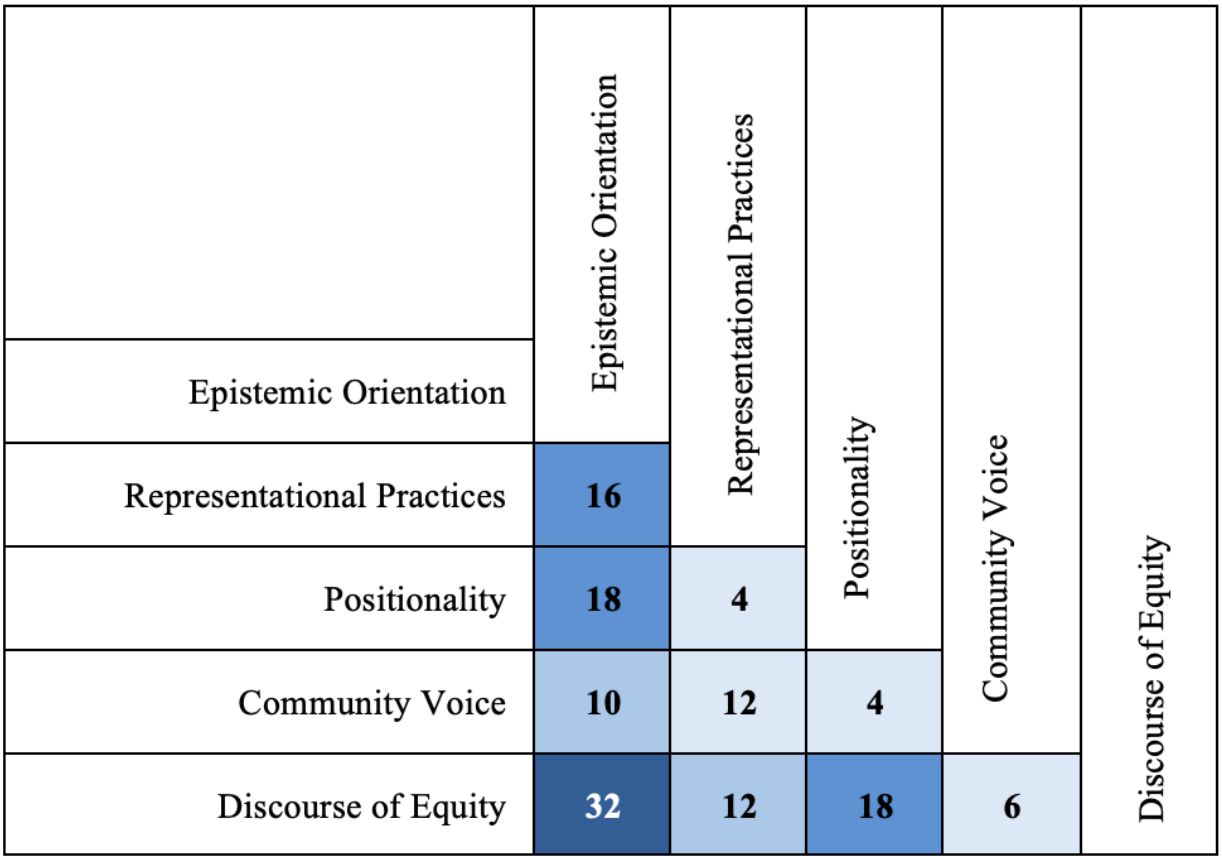
Code	Ambiguous	Interest Holder Experience	Family & Community Experiences	Resource Allocation	Staff Experiences	Student Experiences	Methodology	Rationale	Patterns	District Actions	Recommended	Theories and Assumptions	Values	Equity Imperative	Responsibility	Trust/Mistrust
Ambiguous																
Interest Holder Experience	4															
Family & Community Experiences	2	66														
Resource Allocation	2	62	6													
Staff Experiences	2	116	16	15												
Student Experiences	4	122	19	18	46											
Methodology	5	96	32	18	50	38										
Rationale		5	2	1	2	2	44									
Patterns	2	50	16	11	22	24	98									
District Actions	3	11	1	1	4	6	40		4							
Recommended	2	31	14	5	19	6	84		4	1						
Theories & Assumptions	1	5	1	2	3	3	25	4		1						
Values	2	23	8	5	9	14	25	8	7	4	2	4				
Equity Imperative		8	4	2	2	7	11	3	3	2		3	22			
Responsibility	1	8	3	1	5	3	12	4	4	1	2	1	39	3		
Trust/Mistrust	1	3			3	1	5		3	1		1	9	2	3	

Number of Code Applications	Significance
0-5	Minimal co-occurrence
6-20	Low relationship
21-50	Moderate relationship
51-90	Strong relationship
91+	Very strong relationship

Note. Darker shading indicates stronger co-occurrence frequencies across coded excerpts. Co-occurrence patterns were used heuristically to identify areas of relational density that warranted deeper memoing, second-cycle coding, and critical reframing analysis rather than as quantitative measures of significance.

Figure 4

Heatmap of Co-Occurrence Across Critical Reframing Domains



Note. Darker shading indicates stronger co-occurrence frequencies across second-cycle coding domains. The figure illustrates the interconnected nature of the Critical Reframing domains and demonstrates how issues related to any of the domains frequently overlapped during analysis.

Rather than relying on statistical measures of interrater reliability, this approach emphasized negotiated agreement and shared interpretive understanding. This process is consistent with qualitative research traditions that prioritize depth, context, and meaning-making over quantification of agreement (Saldaña, 2016). Additionally, this approach aligns with dialogic perspectives on qualitative analysis, which conceptualize coding agreement as an interpretive and collaborative process developed through ongoing discussion, reflexivity, and negotiation rather than strict replication of coding decisions. This process required the research team to hold frequent meetings to resolve disagreements, clarify coding definitions, and discuss

emerging findings through analytic memos. However, this iterative collaborative approach strengthened analytic coherence while maintaining alignment with the study's critical and interpretive aims.

Importantly, this calibration process was not solely intended to maximize coder agreement or produce frequency consistency across excerpts. Rather than treating disagreement solely as error requiring resolution, moments of interpretive divergence were also treated as analytically generative opportunities to interrogate how institutional discourse, representation, and equity narratives could be read across multiple overlapping domains (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023; Saldaña, 2021). In several cases, moments of ambiguity or interpretive tension prompted deeper analytic conversations regarding how particular excerpts reflected overlapping domains, institutional contradictions, or multiple possible readings of equity discourse. These discussions often generated insights that may not have emerged through a strictly frequency-based approach alone, particularly regarding the interpretive complexity of participant representation. Thus, coder dialogue functioned not only as a reliability practice, but also as an analytic process that supported reflexivity, analytic memoing, and deeper conceptual interpretation throughout the study (Bal & Trainor, 2016; Saldaña, 2021).

Additionally, all coding cycles were supported by ongoing analytic memoing, which served as a space to document interpretive decisions, coding decisions, and calibration discussions across coders, surface emerging insights, and critically reflect on the role of the researcher in meaning-making (Birks et al., 2008; Saldaña, 2016). Memos attended to moments of tension, silence, contradiction, as well as patterns in how institutional equity was represented across data sources. In addition to supporting analysis, memoing provided an audit trail of the research process and strengthened reflexivity throughout the study. Memos were the primary site

of analysis for major themes that were later synthesized to respond to the research questions. This included memos of multi-cycle coding and thematic coding of comparative audits and interviews. Sample codebook iterations are provided in Appendix B, and sample analytic memo materials are provided in Appendix C.

In addition to the analysis of the SUD Audit materials, this study incorporated a comparative document analysis of public-facing audit summaries and equity audits conducted in other districts. These documents were examined using the same analytic domains to explore how equity was framed, communicated, and operationalized across institutional contexts. Particular attention was given to differences in methodological transparency, the representation of community voice, and the framing of recommendations. This comparative lens situated the SUD Audit within a broader landscape of equity research practices and highlighted how varying methodological decisions produced different representations of equity, especially considering the similar timeframe and location of the comparative audits.

Interview data from the SUD Audit's co-directors were also analyzed through the Critical Reframing framework's lens, allowing for alignment across data sources. These interviews provided additional insight into the analytic decisions, institutional constraints, and contextual factors that shaped the audit process. They also offered an opportunity to examine how broader sociopolitical conditions and organizational priorities influenced both what was possible within the SUD Audit and how its findings were ultimately constructed and communicated.

Rather than integrating qualitative and quantitative strands in a traditional mixed methods framework, this study employed a qualitative integrations approach in which multiple data sources (i.e., SUD Audit documents, comparative audit reports, interviews) were brought into conversations through narrative synthesis (Saldaña, 2016). Integration occurred through

identification of patterns of convergence, as well as through careful examination of tensions, contradictions, and silences across sources. These moments of divergence were treated as analytically generative, prompting deeper inquiry into the epistemic assumptions and representational practices that shape dominant equity narratives (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Spivak, 1990). This approach allowed for a layered interpretation of equity, while also creating space to interrogate where those narratives fell short. By attending to both alignment and divergence across data sources, the analysis supported the broader aim of this study: to critically examine how equity is defined, represented, and potentially reimagined through institutional research practices.

Because this study involved secondary analysis of data originally collected under District consent protocols, an amendment to the IRB was submitted to include the semi-structured interview procedures. Interview participants were provided with informed consent, and all data was de-identified to protect participant privacy. This design attends explicitly to ethical representation and seeks to elevate, rather than exploit, the voices of students and District interest holders, while interrogating how institutional structures shaped the original focal audit's context for consent, participation, and analysis (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents findings from the critical re-analysis of the Southwestern Urban District (SUD) Equity Audit. Findings are organized by research question and reflect patterns, tensions, and themes that emerged through the multi-cycle coding process across data sources, including the SUD Audit report and component memos, public-facing dissemination materials, comparative audits, semi-structured interviews with the SUD Audit's co-directors, and analytic memos developed throughout the coding process. Guided by the Critical Reframing framework, analysis examined how equity was represented, interpreted, operationalized, and communicated throughout the audit process. While the five analytic domains of the Critical Reframing framework primarily guided second-cycle analysis, findings frequently overlapped across domains. As a result, findings are presented by research question rather than analytic domain to highlight how multiple dimensions of the SUD Audit intersected within broader institutional constructions of equity. A condensed synthesis of the key findings is displayed on Table 2, while a sample of full analysis synthesis can be found in Appendix D: Key Findings Matrices.

Throughout this chapter, the term "interest holder" is used intentionally to describe individuals and groups with vested interest in the District and its educational systems. These groups and individuals include students, families, caregivers, educators, staff, alumni, community organizations, and broader community members. The term is used to reflect the expansive range of individuals whose experiences, participation, and perspectives shaped or were affected by the SUD Audit process. While more specific participant groups are identified where appropriate, the broader term "interest holder" is used to emphasize the interconnected nature of public education systems and the multiple constituencies engaged in district equity work.

Table 2

Condensed Synthesis of Key Findings by Research Question

Research Question	Analytic Domains	Key Findings	Tensions
How did the original audit design and analytic decisions shape which student, family, and staff experiences were made visible?	Representational Practices Community Voice Epistemic Orientation	Interest holder experiences were institutionally mediated through reporting structures, processes, and methodological decisions that shaped whose perspectives became visible and actionable.	Visibility vs Erasure Participation vs Co-Construction Accommodation vs Transformation
In what ways did institutional priorities, access limitations, and sociopolitical conditions influence how equity was defined, analyzed, and communicated in the audit and its dissemination to the district community?	Epistemic Orientation Discourse of Equity Positionality	Equity was frequently operationalized through managerial, coherence-oriented, and data-centered institutional frameworks that shaped how findings were interpreted and publicly communicated.	Transformation vs Management Humanization vs Quantification Equity Intentions vs Equity Outcomes
How does a critical re-analysis of the audit, using the Critical Reframing framework, offer alternative interpretations of equity and suggest more culturally and linguistically responsive approaches for future district audits?	Representational Practices Community Voice Epistemic Orientation Discourse of Equity Epistemic Orientation	Critical re-analysis highlighted the importance of relational accountability, multilingual participation, positionality transparency, and community-centered approaches for future equity audits.	Recognition vs Redistribution Technical Authority vs Community Knowledge Symbolic Equity vs Material Equity

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 examined how the focal audit's design and analytic decisions shaped which student, family, and staff experiences became visible through the audit process. Analysis revealed that visibility within the SUD Audit was shaped through methodological decisions, institutional reporting structures, participation processes, and representational practices that influenced how stakeholder experiences were documented and communicated. Findings related to this research question emerged primarily through the analytic domains of representational practices, community voice, and epistemic orientation.

Mediation Through Institutional Reporting Structures

Across data sources, interest holder experiences frequently appeared through summarized institutional reporting structures rather than through direct transcript-based representation. Focus group findings, meaning-making conversations, and walkthrough observations were synthesized into memos and incorporated into broader District narratives and recommendations. Public-facing dissemination materials further condensed these findings into shorter summaries intended for broader local community audiences. Findings suggest that this process of institutional summarization shaped not only how interest holder experiences became visible, or in some cases invisible, but also if and how those experiences became institutionally legible, actionable, and publicly consumable within broader district narratives.

For example, dissemination materials repeatedly framed the audit through language emphasizing districtwide alignment, responsiveness, and continuous improvement, describing the audit as "the beginning of [the District's] journey toward educational equity" and highlighting plans to "prioritize recommendations, develop detailed implementation plans, and establish a framework for ongoing monitoring and evaluation," In contrast, component memos

and interest holder narratives documented substantially more tension regarding institutional responsiveness, fragmented implementation, and barriers to authentic collaboration. Community organizations specifically described the district as operating in a "transactional and uncollaborative manner" shaped by "burdensome bureaucratic processes," while participants across focus groups described mistrust, inconsistent communication, and uneven access to district supports. To further illustrate this, the District's public-facing summary described the equity assessment as "a direct reflection of the district's collective resolve to ensure that each student has what they need to succeed in college, career, and life" and emphasized the District's "commitment to equity and inclusivity." Yet, interview data reflected whether district leaders "didn't want to really hear from all those people because maybe they knew…there's only so much…they're going to give this equity assessment." These contrasts suggest that dissemination materials frequently prioritized coherence-oriented institutional narratives while minimizing, or in some cases silencing, the tensions and contradictions emerging from community experiences.

Similarly, the final combined SUD Audit report frequently translated complex community experiences into broad institutional categories. For example, concerns regarding inequitable access to enrichment opportunities, inconsistent implementation of special education services, and lack of teacher supports were synthesized into generalized themes such as "resource parity," "teacher training," and "district communication." Although these summaries preserved the existence of concern, findings suggest that the process of institutional synthesis also reduced the contextual specificity, emotional nuance, and relational dimensions present within participant narratives. One co-director reflected on this tension directly, explaining that institutional dissemination often required findings to fit within "nice boxes," despite the reality that "this is all messy." He questioned whether some simplification efforts were intended merely

to streamline reporting or whether they reflected broader institutional concerns regarding control, visibility, and public accountability.

Interview findings further supported this interpretation. One co-director reflected that dissemination required balancing transparency with organizational readability, explaining that reports intended for broader audiences often needed to remain "digestible" and "actionable" for district leadership and community consumption. The other co-director discussed how institutional reporting structures sometimes required translating community concerns into forms that district systems could operationalize, particularly through recommendations, implementation language and systems-oriented framing. These reflections suggest that representation within the SUD Audit was shaped not only by what participants shared, but also by institutional expectations regarding how findings would ultimately circulate publicly or require softening upon dissemination.

Participation Structures Expanded Access

Findings also indicated that the SUD Audit incorporated multiple efforts intended to increase participation and accessibility. These included translated recruitment flyers, multilingual outreach efforts, interpreters offered during focus groups, alternative survey participation options, and multiple forms of community engagement (i.e., meaning-making conversations, focus groups). Public-facing documentation emphasized that the assessment sought to gather "as many perspectives as possible" through "culturally responsive data collection" practices. In addition, meaning-making conversations findings highlighted efforts to include diverse community perspectives, including engagement with families, community organizations, and historically underserved populations. For example, findings referenced the importance of outreach to newcomer families, multilingual communication practices, and culturally responsive

relationship-building approaches. At the same time, these accommodations frequently remained layered onto existing institutional participation structures rather than fundamentally restructuring them. As reflected in analytic memoing, multilingual access often operated through accommodation-based supports such as translated flyer and interpretation offerings, while the broader audit process itself remained English-centered and institutionally structured. Still, participants described positive relationships with the District Equity Office and appreciated efforts to include community voice in district discussions.

At the same time, findings suggest that participation remained mediated through institutional structures that shaped who was able to participate, under what conditions, and which forms of participation ultimately became actionable within institutional reporting structures. Analytic memos questioned whether participation structures fully captured the perspectives of families and organizations most impacted by inequitable systems, particularly given that participation frequently depended on existing district relationships, institutional access, scheduling flexibility, language accessibility, and familiarity with district engagement structures. Analytic memoing additionally questioned whether participation structures unintentionally privileged families and organizations already connected to district systems, raising concerns regarding which community voices became most institutionally visible and actionable within final reporting. These tensions clearly aligned with second-cycle codes related to participation versus co-construction and accommodations versus transformation.

Comparative audit analysis further illustrated variation in how participation structures were conceptualized across equity audits. For instance, Audit C described extensive use of surveys, focus groups, and interviews with interest holders while still maintaining a highly standardized discussion structure across participant groups. In contrast, Audit S more explicitly

framed community participation as connected to power sharing, historical harm, and collaborative dialogue with affected communities. These findings reflect alternative, and sometimes more expansive or meaningful, ways of integrating the community and interest holders into the audit process.

Visibility Varied Across Student and Interest Holder Groups

Findings additionally revealed variation in how different student and interest holder groups were represented throughout the SUD Audit documents. Some student populations and equity concerns appeared more explicitly represented across findings, recommendations, and dissemination materials than others. For example, audit findings consistently emphasized multilingual learners, culturally responsive practices, restorative approaches, and broad district equity goals. At the same time, some marginalized student groups appeared less consistently visible within broader district narratives despite evidence of inequitable educational experiences documented throughout the audit materials. For instance, interview data reflected that African American/Black students were rarely mentioned explicitly outside of student focus groups, despite substantial disproportionalities identified throughout exploratory data analyses and disciplinary findings. Specifically, African American students composed about seven percent of the District's student body at the time of the study, yet they received nearly 20% of all disciplinary referrals. One co-director similarly reflected on this tension stating that, "Native students weren't really incorporated…there was a large population of immigrant students in [District] that they weren't really incorporated." This is confirmed by the exploratory data analysis which excluded Native American students on data tables, despite broader district demographic diversity and the stated goals of inclusive participation.

Analytic memos also identified questions related to which community members and organizations participated in the audit process, as well as how participant selection may have influenced the representation of interest holder perspectives. Additional memoing noted that SUD Audit staffing decisions intentionally considered racial, linguistic, and professional representation, while some forms of identity representation appeared less explicitly visible across the broader audit process and findings. Memo reflections additionally noted that some identities appeared more institutionally visible or "safe" to foreground publicly than others, suggesting that representation itself was shaped by broader assumptions regarding institutional legitimacy, audience receptions, and organizational comfort. Notwithstanding, findings overall suggest that interest holder visibility within the SUD Audit was shaped not only by participant experiences themselves, but also by institutional reporting structures, participation processes, methodological decisions, and representational practices that influenced how those experiences became publicly visible within the final narrative.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 examined the ways institutional priorities, access limitations, and sociopolitical conditions influenced how equity was defined, analyzed, and communicated throughout the focal audit process. Findings revealed that equity was frequently framed through institutional systems, implementation structures, accountability practices, and organizational coherence. Institutional priorities, District leadership structures, and broader sociopolitical conditions all shaped how equity was defined and communicated throughout the SUD Audit process. Findings related to this question emerged primarily through the domains of epistemic orientation, discourse of equity, and positionality.

Influence of Institutions and Systems

Across the final SUD Audit report and recommendations, equity was frequently operationalized through implementation plans, monitoring systems, dashboards, accountability measures, and frameworks that positioned inequity as a problem of organizational coordination and systems management. Recommendations commonly referenced structures such as data collection systems, progress monitoring, strategic planning, and accountability frameworks intended to support districtwide coordination of equity initiatives. On a similar note, SUD Audit findings frequently connected equity concerns to systems-level improvement efforts (i.e., staff development, instructional alignment, program access). To further illustrate this finding, institutional recommendations repeatedly emphasized "continuous improvement," "monitoring systems," "districtwide alignment," and "evidence-based prioritization protocols," positioning equity work through managerial and systems-coordination frameworks. Thus, findings suggest that organizational coherence and implementation fidelity frequently became the dominant mechanisms through which equity was rendered actionable.

Findings also indicated that District leadership structures played a significant role in shaping which recommendations and equity concerns became prioritized within the SUD Audit process. Audit documentation and interview data described prioritization meetings involving District chiefs and leadership teams who participated in determining which recommendations became central priorities. Interview findings further indicated that institutional considerations, management realities, and District partnership dynamics influenced aspects of the audit's implementation and dissemination processes. More specifically, one co-director shared that the formal presentation to the community occurred at a board meeting where the District "sterilized" the SUD Audit's findings. On another occasion, a co-director described dissemination as a

"political meat grinder," explaining that tensions emerging from community narratives often became muted once filtered through public communication structures, board politics, and institutional concerns regarding public reception.

In addition, interest holders frequently described variation in how equity initiatives were implemented across schools and departments. Findings referenced fragmented systems and inconsistent implementation practices. This was illustrated by parents and caregivers who expressed concern regarding uneven access to programs across campuses, like dual immersion and special education. Some participants described District structures as operating independently from one another, contributing to variation in how equity initiatives were experienced across the district. This was particularly evident in focus group data with participants, including students and staff, expressing disappointment with decaying infrastructure and under-resourced athletic programs compared to other schools in the district. Families additionally described barriers related to transportation, program access, and inconsistent implementation of supports, suggesting that formal access did not always translate into materially equitable participation. At the same time, the final audit report emphasized districtwide commitments to "continuous improvement," "organizational alignment," and the development of "implementation plans" intended to support equitable outcomes across the district. Thus, interest holder concerns frequently contrasted with districtwide equity narratives emphasizing coherence and inclusion.

Public Dissemination Materials Emphasis

Analysis of District public-facing materials revealed that dissemination documents frequently emphasized organizational alignment, district responsiveness, and coherence-oriented messaging. Public-facing summaries condense findings into streamlined narratives intended for broader local audiences and frequently highlighted district commitments to equity-centered

improvement efforts. While dissemination materials referenced inequities identified within the SUD Audit, findings indicated that public-facing narratives often muted or softened tensions by emphasizing systems-level solutions and districtwide priorities rather than extended discussion emerging from interest holder experiences.

Furthermore, comparisons between internal component memos and public-facing dissemination materials suggest differences in the level of detail and complexity with which interest holder concerns were represented across reporting formats. For example, the District summary repeatedly framed the equity assessment through language emphasizing collaboration, responsiveness, and future improvement efforts, stating that the report represented "the beginning of [the District's] journey toward educational equity" and emphasizing plans to "prioritize recommendations develop detailed implementation plans, and establish a framework for ongoing monitoring and evaluation." While this framing positioned the District as engaged in active equity work, it simultaneously redirected attention away from some of the more critical tensions documented throughout the component memos.

Contrastingly, component memos documented substantial concern from families, staff, and community organizations regarding inequitable resource allocation, inconsistent implementation of district initiatives, district turnover, and barriers to authentic collaboration. Community organizations specifically described the District as appearing "more responsive and reverent to more affluent, White, and homogenous communities," while also noting frustrations regarding institutional bureaucracy and limited co-planning opportunities. On a similar note, exploratory data analysis findings documented significant disproportionalities related to disciplinary referrals, school segregation, and gifted and talented identification practices. Findings showed that Black students were "consistently overrepresented in disciplinary

referrals," while Gifted and Talented programs demonstrated substantial racial disproportionality across campuses. However, dissemination materials frequently repositioned these inequities within broader narratives emphasizing improvement systems, implementation planning, and districtwide progress.

Interviews with SUD Audit co-directors reflected frustrations and challenges aligned with these findings. For instance, they recalled a community presentation where district leadership remained largely silent despite "a year and a half, two years of work," simultaneously discouraging more direct public responses to criticism or tension. One co-director described regret regarding the dissemination process overall, concerned that "they [District leaders] didn't even know that they did an equity assessment" and questioning whether the findings had ever fully reached the broader community members who may have been most invested in using the audit to advocate for structural change. The same co-director described feeling conflicted about "what did you really want us to do?" and whether district leadership was fully prepared to engage the difficult implications of the findings publicly. Additionally, interview data reflected the tensions between producing analytically rigorous findings and maintaining a positive organizational relationship with the District throughout implementation and dissemination. One co-director described the challenge of ensuring that findings remained "usable" for district audiences while still accurately representing community concerns. Another co-director discussed how dissemination often involved balancing transparency with political and institutional realities particularly during periods of heightened public scrutiny surrounding equity initiatives. These reflections suggest that dissemination functioned not simply as neutral communication, but as an interpretive and institutional process shaped by audience, politics, organizational priorities, and perceptions of feasibility.

Influence of Sociopolitical and Institutional Conditions

Findings additionally indicated that broader sociopolitical conditions and institutional constraints influenced aspects of the study and the SUD Audit's dissemination context. During the study timeline, shifts in federal and state educational priorities contributed to changing institutional conditions surrounding equity-focused work, including scrutiny of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. These changing conditions affected aspects of data accessibility and institutional participation related to the study. Although the original design of this study anticipated inclusion of additional district-level quantitative data, those data were ultimately not made available to the research team. Findings from interviews and analytic memoing suggest that evolving institutional priorities, district turnover, and broader sociopolitical conditions influenced aspects of access and organizational responsiveness during this study. The dismantling of the District's Equity Advisory Committee was a major influencing fact of this data inaccessibility.

Interview findings further suggest that audit implementation and disseminations occurred within broader institutional pressures related to timelines, public accountability, leadership transitions, and shifting political discourse around educational equity. One co-director reflected that districts were increasingly navigating concerns regarding how equity language would be interpreted publicly and politically, particularly amid growing resistance to DEI initiatives in some educational contexts. Specifically, the co-director reflected that districts were increasingly navigating fears regarding public backlash, political scrutiny, and community resistance to equity-centered initiatives, particularly amid broader national shifts around immigration, conservatorship pressures, and DEI discourse. Additionally, interview data noted that

institutional turnover frequently complicated continuity, implementation coherence, and long-term relationship building with community members.

These findings aligned with patterns identified in the comparative analysis, especially with the audits conducted on a similar timeline. For example, Audit S was completed and reported in 2023, and it explicitly acknowledged the political and temporal constraints shaping the study, noting that the report was produced under a highly compressed timeline. It went on to further clarify that the researchers did not control how district leadership would ultimately utilize the findings. The report additionally framed the audit as an attempt to ask, "different questions" and consider "different vantage points" to support more equitable decision making. Similarly, comparative findings revealed substantial variation in how equity itself was defined institutionally. Some audits framed equity primarily through organizational coherence, implementation systems, and accountability structures, while others emphasized historical harm, power sharing, redistributions, and participatory justice. For example, Audit S defined equity through concepts such as "redistribution of power," "repairing racial and educational harm," and "power sharing processes" with historically marginalized communities. In contrast, Audit D framed equity more narrowly through coherent improvement systems, achievement outcomes, and institutional alignment structures.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 examined how a critical re-analysis of the focal audit, using the Critical Reframing framework, offered alternative interpretations of equity and suggested more culturally and linguistically responsive approaches for future equity audits. Findings suggest that the Critical Reframing framework surfaced alternative interpretations of equity by drawing attention to the institutional processes through which representation, participation, and

interpretive authority became negotiated across the audit process. Through second-cycle coding and comparative analysis, the re-analysis highlighted patterns and tensions that were less explicitly visible within the original SUD Audit reporting structures.

Community Member Framing

Across focus groups, meaning-making conversations, and analytic memos, community participants frequently described equity in relational terms. Findings emphasized the importance of trust, responsiveness, culturally responsive relationships, authentic engagement, and long-term accountability between schools, communities, and the District. Participants frequently discussed equity not only as access to programs and services, but also as the quality of the relationships and communication between the District and the communities they serve. Family and community experiences often reference the importance of collaboration, transparency, and sustained responsiveness in shaping perceptions of equity within the District. Additionally, findings indicated that participants frequently connected equity concerns to lived experiences of accessibility, communication, and institutional responsiveness rather than solely to formal district initiatives or accountability measures.

More specifically, meaning-making conversation findings highlighted concerns regarding inconsistent communication, barriers navigating district systems, and the need for stronger culturally responsive relationships between schools and families. Families of newcomer students specifically discussed challenges accessing information and educational resources, while community organizations emphasized the importance of direct partnerships and authentic collaboration rather than transactional engagement practices. Participants further framed equity through material and relational dimensions simultaneously. Community members discussed inequities not only through disparities in resources, staffing, and programming, but also through

whether communities felt heard, respected, and meaningfully included in the District's decision-making processes. As one co-director reflected during interviews, meaningful equity work requires districts to operate "as real partners, not as somebody trying to complete a contract." This validates the way interest holders emphasized that trust depended not simply on opportunities for participation, but on non-extractive collaboration, transparency, and follow-through beyond the audit process itself. These findings complicated more technical and managerial understandings of equity centered primarily on implementation systems, dashboards, accountability metrics, or coherence-oriented organizational structures.

Comparative audit findings reinforced these distinctions. For example, Audit S explicitly defined equity through redistribution, repair, power sharing, and participatory processes with historically marginalized communities, while the SUD Audit more frequently operationalized equity through institutional improvement structures and systems-oriented implementation language. The Critical Reframing analysis therefore suggests that future equity audits may benefit from approaches that more explicitly foreground relational accountability, transparency regarding positionality, multilingual representation, and community co-construction throughout both data collection and dissemination practices. Rather than positioning community participation primarily as consultation or feedback, findings suggest the importance of designing future equity audits in ways that distribute interpretive authority more collaboratively across researchers, districts, and interest holders.

Overlapping Tensions

Finally, findings suggest that the Critical Reframing framework helped illuminate recurring tensions across domains related to representation, institutional authority, community participation, equity discourse, and methodological interpretation. Second-cycle coding

demonstrated substantial overlap across all five analytic domains. Analysis revealed that issues related to representation, participation, interpretation, and institutional communication frequently operated simultaneously across multiple domains rather than as isolated categories. For example, discussions of community participation often intersected with questions related to institutional authority, public dissemination practices, and methodological representation. Additionally, efforts to broaden participation through translated recruitment materials and interpreters frequently coexisted alongside English-dominant participation structures and institutionally mediated reporting processes. Similarly, public-facing commitments to restorative and culturally responsive practices often appeared alongside participant descriptions of exclusionary discipline, fragmented implementation, and inequitable access across campuses.

Furthermore, findings suggest that equity narratives were frequently shaped through overlapping institutional, methodological, and discursive processes that influenced how interest holder experiences became represented, interpreted, and communicated throughout the SUD Audit process. Collectively, findings related to Research Question 3 suggest that the Critical Reframing framework surfaced alternative interpretations of equity by drawing attention to overlapping institutional tensions, relational elements of community engagement, and variation in how equity was operationalized across district audit contexts,

Findings Summary

This chapter presented findings from the critical re-analysis of the SUD Equity Audit. First, findings demonstrated that interest holder visibility was not neutral or automatic, but shaped through institutional reporting structures, participation processes, and methodological decisions that influenced whose experiences became visible, actionable, and publicly represented within the final audit narrative. Although the audit incorporated multiple efforts to broaden

participation and representation, findings suggest that institutional mediation continued to shape how community experiences were translated into district-oriented findings and recommendations. In addition, this obscured interest holder needs and concerns in the operationalization of audit recommendations while complicating subsequent implementation efforts.

Second, findings revealed that equity within the SUD Audit was frequently operationalized through systems-oriented implementation frameworks, organizational coherence structures, and managerial approaches to accountability that were themselves shaped by broader institutional and sociopolitical conditions. Public dissemination practices, leadership priorities, shifting political discourse surrounding DEI initiatives, and institutional constraints all influenced how equity was framed, communicated, and prioritized throughout the audit process. Comparative analysis further suggest that equity audits vary substantially in how they define equity, ranging from coherence-oriented institutional improvement models to approaches more explicitly grounded in redistribution, repair, and participatory justice.

Finally, the Critical Reframing analysis surfaced alternative interpretations of equity by foregrounding relational accountability, positionality, multilingual participation, and community-centered understandings of equity work. Findings suggest that equity concerns were frequently experienced and articulated relationally by interest holders, particularly through issues related to trust, responsiveness, transparency, and authentic collaboration. Collectively, these findings highlighted how equity audit function not simply as technical assessments, but as interpretive and institutional processes shaped by representation, power, participation, and broader political conditions. In doing so, this study suggests the need for additional critical and culturally responsive examinations of equity-oriented inquiry processes, particularly as educational systems

navigate increasingly contested sociopolitical conditions surrounding DEI-related work (Artiles, 2019; Bal & Trainor, 2016; Hood et al., 2022). Findings further suggest that future research may benefit from examining not only what equity audits report, but also how institutional structures, dissemination practices, and political contexts shape what becomes visible, actionable, and publicly legible within equity-oriented reform efforts (Paris & Winn, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Chapter 5 discusses the implications of these findings for equity-focused research and evaluation, culturally and linguistically responsive inquiry, and future equity audit design.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to critically re-analyze a districtwide equity audit conducted in a large urban school district in the southwestern United States in order to examine how methodological decisions, institutional conditions, and representational practices shaped the construction and communication of equity within the audit process. This study drew from a few bodies of work, including Spivak's (1988) concept of marginality, Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment (CREA; Hood et al., 2015), culturally and linguistically responsive research (CLRR) frameworks (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Bal & Trainor, 2016). Pulling those bodies together with the Critical Reframing domains developed through this study, this study explored how institutional research practices may simultaneously illuminate and constrain the experiences of historically marginalized students, families, and communities.

Findings from this study suggest that equity audits are not neutral or purely technical processes. Rather, they are interpretive, political, and institutional acts shaped by organizational priorities, methodological assumptions, sociopolitical contexts, and broader systems of power. Furthermore, the findings indicated that even equity-oriented research initiatives may unintentionally reproduce institutional logics that mediate community voice, constrain representation, and prioritize managerial coherence over relational accountability and transformative participation. Hence, this chapter discusses the findings in relation to the study's research questions and conceptual frameworks, considering implications for future equity-focused research and evaluation. Additionally, using the findings of this study, I developed and introduce the Critical Reframing Tool to support more reflexive and community-centered approaches to equity inquiry. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research,

limitations of the study, and final reflections on the future of equity-oriented educational inquiry within ever-evolving sociopolitical conditions.

Visibility Through an Institutional Lens

The first major finding of this study was that interest holder visibility within the SUD Audit was not neutral or automatic, but institutionally mediated through methodological decisions, reporting structures, participation processes, and representational practices. Although the SUD Audit incorporated multiple efforts to broaden participation, including multilingual recruitment materials, community engagement sessions, interpreters, and focus groups, findings suggest that institutional systems continued to shape how community experiences became legible, actionable, and publicly represented. This finding aligns with Spivak's (1988) argument that representation is never a transparent process, but one mediated through institutional structures that determine whose voices become intelligible within dominant systems of knowledge production. Throughout the SUD Audit, participant experiences were frequently translated into summarized themes, district-oriented recommendations, and implementation categories that rendered community concerns administratively actionable while simultaneously reducing some of their contextual complexity and relational nuance. In several cases, concerns related to mistrust, inequitable treatment, bureaucratic barriers, and exclusion became reframed through managerial language focused on implementation systems, coherence structures, and organizational responsiveness.

Importantly, this study does not suggest that SUD Audit intentionally excluded marginalized voices. Rather the findings suggest that institutional inquiry processes themselves shape the conditions under which community experiences become visible. As Hood et al. (2022) argued, culturally responsive evaluation requires attention not only to participation, but also to

the systems through which community knowledge is interpreted, translated, and circulated. Similarly, Paris and Winn (2014) emphasized that educational inquiry must move beyond extractive models of participation toward approaches that recognize communities as knowledge holders rather than merely sources of data.

Findings from comparative audits reinforced the tension mentioned above. Across audits, participation was often framed as evidence of inclusivity, yet community experiences frequently remained mediated through institutional reporting structures that condensed complexity into generalized themes and recommendations. For example, several audits highlighted multilingual focus groups, community listening sessions, and broad interest holder participation as indicators of inclusive engagement. Yet, final dissemination materials primarily translated participant concerns into systems-oriented recommendations related to implementation, communication, and organizational alignment. In the SUD Audit specifically, concerns related to mistrust, bureaucratic barriers, and inequity access to programs and resources were frequently reframed through managerial language emphasizing implementation structures, accountability systems, and districtwide coordination. This finding suggests that representation alone is insufficient if communities are not meaningfully included in interpretive authority, dissemination decisions, and implementation processes.

This tension also reflects a broader institutional pattern in which historically marginalized communities are invited to participate in inquiry processes yet remain constrained in how their perspectives are ultimately communicated publicly. In many ways, participants were rendered visible, or seen, within the audit process while remaining partially silenced, or unheard, within dissemination and decision-making structures. This dynamic recalls the longstanding proverb that children should be “seen and not heard,” a phrase historically associated with hierarchical

and authoritarian forms of social control that permit presence while limiting voice and interpretive authority. It also aligns with research by Sul and Dominguez (2024) who reported that Latine participants were being "mined" for their stories about trauma rather than being heard for their full personhood. Although the SUD Audit sought to elevate community experiences, findings from this study suggest that institutional dissemination practices sometimes functioned similarly by allowing community participation while simultaneously mediating, narrowing, or administratively reframing how critiques circulated publicly. From a critical and culturally responsive perspective, this raises important questions not only about who participates in equity-oriented inquiry, but also who retains authority over meaning-making, representation, and the public communication of equity.

Equity Audits as Political Processes

The second major finding of this study was that equity audits function not simply as technical assessment tools, but as institutional and political processes shaped by organizational priorities, leadership structures, dissemination practices, and broader sociopolitical conditions. Across the SUD Audit and comparative audit examples, equity was frequently operationalized through systems-oriented implementation frameworks, accountability structures, and managerial approaches to coherence and improvement. This finding complicates dominant assumptions within educational accountability literature that equity audits function primarily as objective mechanism for diagnosing inequity (Skrla et al., 2004). While audits may provide important opportunities to identify disparities and promote institutional reflection, findings from this study suggest that equity itself becomes institutionally negotiated through organizational structures, leadership priorities, implementation feasibility, and public accountability pressures.

This study additionally revealed how dissemination practices shaped public understandings of equity. Public-facing materials frequently emphasized coherence, responsiveness, and future planning while softening tensions surrounding mistrust, inequitable resource distribution, inconsistent implementation, and institutional fragmentation. Interview findings further suggest that dissemination itself became a politically mediated process, with one co-director describing how findings passed through a "political meat grinder" that at times "sterilized" more critical tensions emerging from community narratives. These findings support the argument that dissemination should not be understood as neutral communication, but as a process through which institutions manage legitimacy, risk, and public accountability.

These findings are particularly important within the current sociopolitical climate surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in the United States. When the SUD Audit and comparative audits were originally conducted, DEI initiatives were increasingly institutionalized across educational systems, and many districts publicly emphasized commitments to DEI and culturally responsive practices. This is evident by the number of comparative equity audits located for this study which were completed between 2020 and 2024 within the same state. However, during the course of this study, significant political shifts occurred nationally and across many politically conservative state contexts that contributed to heightened scrutiny of DEI initiatives and increasing political resistance toward DEI-oriented educational work. Educational agencies within these contexts were increasingly navigating legal uncertainty, public scrutiny, and pressure to align local practices with evolving federal and state discourse surrounding DEI-related initiatives.

These broader shifts materially shaped the study itself. Institutional willingness to share data, publicly engage in equity discourse, and sustain participation in equity-centered inquiry

became increasingly complicated amid changing political conditions. At the same time, professional organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; 2025), the American Evaluation Association (AEA; 2024), and recent issues of the American Journal of Evaluation (AEA; 2026) continued to reaffirm commitments to culturally responsive inquiry, equity-focused evaluation, and inclusive educational research. Collectively, these conditions suggest that DEI work is not disappearing but evolving strategically within increasingly contested political environments. This finding reinforces the importance of situating equity audits within their broader political and institutional contexts. Educational equity work does not occur outside of power, policy, and public discourse. Rather, equity inquiry is shaped by institutional fears, political pressures, organizational strategies, and public narratives regarding legitimacy, accountability, and reform. As a result, future equity-oriented inquiry must remain attentive not only to methodological rigor, but also to the political conditions that shape how equity work becomes possible, constrained, or publicly reframed over time.

Relational Accountability and Critical Reframing

The third major finding of this study was that the Critical Reframing analysis surfaced more relational, reflexive, and community-centered understandings of equity than those emphasized though managerial or systems-oriented audit structures. Across meaning-making conversations, focus groups, comparative audits, and interviews, interest holders frequently framed equity relationally through concepts such as trust, responsiveness, transparency, collaboration, and long-term accountability. This finding aligns with culturally and linguistically responsive research traditions that position community relationships, reciprocity, and co-construction as central to ethical inquiry (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Bal & Trainor, 2016; Hood et al., 2022). Rather than understanding equity solely through resource allocation, implementation

fidelity, or organizational coherence, interest holders emphasized the value of communities feeling genuinely heard, respected, and included in decision-making processes.

Notably, findings from the second co-director interview revealed how positionality itself became both a methodological asset and a site of institutional tension. One co-director reflected on navigating intersecting identities as a Black researcher, educational leader, District parent, and audit co-director, while also expressing concern that aspects of the audit team's diversity were at times symbolically foregrounded to enhance institutional legitimacy without corresponding structural commitment to implementation and accountability. He further described moments during dissemination processes, particularly public-facing board presentations, where he felt pressure to soften or strategically silence certain critiques in response to political sensitivities, audience expectations, and board constituencies. These reflections suggest that even when marginalized identities are institutionally included within equity-oriented work, interpretive authority and public critique may still become constrained through broader organizational dynamics. These findings further deepen the study's argument that representation alone cannot substitute for meaningful redistribution of interpretive authority, decision-making power, and long-term institutional accountability.

This finding further supports Thorius's (2023) argument for equity-expansive approaches to educational inquiry that move beyond compliance-oriented models toward approached rooted in relational accountability, co-construction, and sustained community partnership. Similarly, Bal and Trainor (2016) cautioned against reducing culturally responsive inquiry to rigid procedural checklists or depoliticized frameworks detached from community context and power relations. Collectively, findings from this study suggest that future equity audits may benefit from shifting away from narrowly managerial understanding of equity toward more reflexive and

relational approaches that foreground positionality, multilingual accessibility, participatory interpretation, and collaborative dissemination practices. Such approaches may allow equity inquiry to function not merely as institutional diagnosis, but as an ongoing process of relational accountability and community-centered meaning making. Finally, these finding fully align with the perspective shared by one of the SUD Audit co-directors during the first interview:

> Commitments to achieve education equity are not enough. Policies and practices must change accordingly. The intent of our work is to address and fix education practices and systems, not students and families, because students and families are not broken. Culturally responsive data inquiry methods must be used in order include the voices, expertise, needs, and aspirations of those most impacted by, and therefore knowledgeable about, education inequities.

A Critical Reframing Tool for Equity Inquiry

One of the primary contributions of this study is the development of a Critical Reframing Tool intended to support future equity-oriented research and evaluation efforts. Findings from this study suggest that equity audits are not neutral or purely technical assessment processes, but rather interpretive and institutional practices shaped by methodological decisions, political conditions, organizational priorities, representational choices, and broader systems of power. As a result, the present study argues that equity-oriented inquiry requires not only methodological rigor, but also ongoing reflexive examination of how equity is operationalized, represented, interpreted, and communicated throughout the inquiry process. The Critical Reframing Tool illustrated in Table 3 is intended to function as an iterative and collaborative reflection guide that research/evaluation teams revisit throughout all phases of equity-oriented inquiry alongside interest holders and community partners. Rather than serving as a one-time evaluation checklist,

the tool is designed to support ongoing dialogue, reflexivity, and collective examination of how institutional conditions, participation structures, dissemination practices, and interpretive decisions shape equity-oriented work over time. Importantly, the tool is intended to be adaptable across contexts and should be modified collaboratively based on the linguistic, cultural, historical, and relational needs of the communities involved in the inquiry process. As much as possible, the tool should be revisited collaboratively with community partners and interest holders throughout the inquiry process to support shared interpretation, relational accountability, and more transparent examination of institutional assumptions and decision-making practices.

While the present framework includes observable indicators intended to support practical self-evaluation, it should not be interpreted as a rigid compliance-oriented rubric or universal standard for determining whether equity work is sufficiently "critical." As Bal and Trainor (2016) cautioned, rubrics themselves may become "tools of control" or demarcation devices if detached from the situated and evolving nature of culturally responsive inquiry. Hence, the Critical Reframing Tool is intended not as a mechanism for scoring equity work, but as a dialogic and reflexive framework intended to help audit teams, evaluators, researchers, and community partners identify strengths, tensions, absences, and opportunities for deeper relational accountability throughout the inquiry process. Findings from the present study especially highlighted the importance of examining not only who participates in equity-oriented inquiry, but also who remains, or is made, absent, underrepresented or institutionally marginalized throughout equity inquiry processes. As such, the tool intentionally includes opportunities for teams to document evidence of practice, reflect collaboratively on tensions and limitations, and identify areas requiring continued growth and accountability.

Table 3

Critical Reframing Tool

Epistemic Orientation	
Indicators of Responsive Practice • Equity is explicitly defined • Multiple forms of evidence (e.g., lived experience, institutional data, community feedback) are included • Interest holder experiences are included throughout the inquiry process • Inquiry team revisits operationalizing of equity at every phase of the inquiry process	**Questions for Reflection** • What forms of knowledge are prioritized? • What perspectives or experiences are minimized or excluded? • How did institutional assumptions shape interpretation or decision-making?
Evidence and Notes	
Opportunities for Growth	

Table 3 continued

Representational Practices	
Indicators of Responsive Practice	**Questions for Reflection**
• Participant experiences are represented with context and nuance • Reports include direct participant perspectives when appropriate • Dissemination materials acknowledge tensions and limitations transparently • Multilingual dissemination strategies are considered and implemented when possible	• Are findings softened, condensed, or reframed during reporting or dissemination? • How were participant experiences translated into institutional recommendations? • Do dissemination materials reflect community concerns consistently?
Evidence and Notes	
Opportunities for Growth	

Table 3 continued

Positionality	
Indicators of Responsive Practice • Inquiry team discusses the impact of positionality and institutional roles on the audit • Reflexive memoing, collaborative reflection, and/or positionality discussions are documented • Community feedback informs interpretation and dissemination • Methodological and institutional limitations are acknowledged transparently	**Questions for Reflection** • Who holds interpretive authority throughout the inquiry process? • How did inquiry team member positionality shape representation and interpretation? • Were any institutional relationships or power dynamics left unexamined?
Evidence and Notes	
Opportunities for Growth	

Table 3 continued

Community Voice	
Indicators of Responsive Practice	**Questions for Reflection**
• Recruitment materials and participation opportunities are accessible across multiple languages and contexts • Translation and interpretation supports are available throughout participation opportunities • Inquiry team identifies absent or underrepresented groups and examines participation barriers	• Who participates most frequently throughout the inquiry process? • Which groups remain absent or underrepresented, and why? • How are communities involved beyond participation alone? • Are any participation structures unintentionally exclusionary?
Evidence and Notes	
Opportunities for Growth	

Table 3 continued

Discourse of Equity	
Indicators of Responsive Practice	**Questions for Reflection**
• Equity is discussed structurally and relationally rather than solely through outcomes or compliance metrics • Dissemination materials acknowledge institutional tensions and implementation challenges • Inquiry teams examine how sociopolitical or organizational conditions shape equity discourse • Equity language remains connected to community concerns and lived experiences	• How is equity framed publicly throughout the inquiry process? • Did institutional or sociopolitical pressures shape dissemination language or implementation priorities? • Are equity commitments reflected in actual implementation efforts?
Evidence and Notes	
Opportunities for Growth	

Implications

Equity Research and Evaluation Teams

Findings from this study suggest that equity-oriented research and evaluation teams may benefit from approaches that move beyond technical compliance models toward more reflexive participatory forms of inquiry. This aligns with culturally responsive and critical qualitative scholarship emphasizing that equitable research requires attention not only to representation and participation, but also to relational accountability, interpretive authority, and the co-construction of knowledge with communities (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Hood et al., 2022; Paris & Winn, 2014). Findings from this study suggest that broad participation alone does not necessarily ensure equitable representation if institutional structures continue to shape how community experiences are interpreted, translated, and operationalized within final reports and implementation efforts.

Furthermore, findings reinforce the importance of reflexivity and positionality within equity-oriented inquiry processes. Consistent with Milner (2007) and Bal and Trainor (2016), this study suggests that researchers and evaluators must remain attentive to how methodological decisions, institutional affiliations, and organizational pressures shape whose experiences become visible, legitimate, and actionable within educational research and evaluation. Rather than positioning equity audits as neutral technical assessments, findings from this study suggest the equity inquiry should be understood as a relational and interpretive process shaped by broader systems of power, discourse, and institutional accountability.

Culturally Responsive Researchers and Critical Evaluation Scholars

This study contributes to growing conversations within culturally and linguistically responsive research and critical evaluation traditions regarding representation, institutional mediation, and the politics of educational inquiry. Findings suggest that equity-oriented inquiry

requires attention not only to who participates in research processes, but also how institutional structures shape representation, interpretation, dissemination, and implementation. This finding aligns with culturally responsive and critical qualitative scholarship emphasizing that research is never fully neutral or objective, but always shaped through historical, political, institutional, and relational dynamics (Bal & Trainor, 2016; Milner, 2007; Spivak, 1988).

Findings from this study further suggest that participation alone may be insufficient if community experiences continue to be *translated* primarily through institutional reporting structures and organizational priorities. Consistent with humanizing and culturally responsive inquiry traditions (Arzubiaga et al., 2008; Hood et al., 2022; Paris & Winn, 2014), this study reinforces the importance of relational accountability, reflexivity, and co-constructed approaches to knowledge production that attend to how community narratives become interpreted, circulated, and operationalized within institutional contexts. Findings additionally support that "voice" within qualitative inquiry is always mediated throughout interpretive processes rather than transparently transferred from participant to text (Mazzei, 2016). Collectively, these findings suggest that future equity-oriented inquiry may benefit from approaches that move beyond procedural participation toward more critically reflexive, relational, and community anchored models of evaluation and research practice.

District Leadership and Educational Systems

For district leaders and educational systems, findings from this study suggest that equity-oriented initiatives may require more than the production of reports, strategic plans, or implementation dashboards. Rather, sustainable equity work appears to depend upon long-term relational trust, distributed accountability structures, transparent communication practices, and meaningful inclusion of historically marginalized communities in decision-making processes.

Findings additionally suggest that symbolic commitments to equity may be insufficient when not accompanied by material investment, structural authority, and sustained organizational accountability. Future district equity audit efforts may therefore benefit from approaches that distribute interpretive authority more collaboratively and create clearer mechanisms for translating community-identified concerns into long-term structural action

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study relied primarily on document analysis, interviews, and secondary qualitative artifacts rather than direct access to raw district focus group transcripts or district-level quantitative datasets originally anticipated within the study design. As a result, analysis relied primarily on institutional summaries, synthesized reporting materials, and dissemination artifacts rather than raw participant-generated transcripts and complete quantitative datasets. Although these materials provided substantial insight into how equity was operationalized and communicated institutionally, reliance on summarized representations may have limited access to some of the contextual, relational, emotional, and discursive complexity present within original participant narratives prior to institutional synthesis and disseminations (Mazzei, 2016; Paris & Winn, 2014). Again, these constraints were not solely viewed as methodological limitations, but also as reflections of the institutional dynamics that structure knowledge production (Mazzei, 2016; Spivak, 1988). Decisions regarding data access, representation, and dissemination are themselves part of the phenomenon under examination.

Additionally, this study occurred during a period of substantial sociopolitical transition surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives within the United States. During the course of this study, shifting federal and state educational priorities contributed to changing institutional conditions surrounding equity-focused inquiry and public engagement with DEI-

related work (Flath, 2025). These broader sociopolitical dynamics influenced aspects of institutional responsiveness, data accessibility, dissemination practices, and the positioning of equity-centered initiatives within educational systems. At the same time, professional organizations and equity-focused scholars continued to reaffirm commitments to culturally responsive and justice-oriented inquiry, suggesting that equity-oriented work is evolving rather than disappearing within contemporary educational contexts.

More specifically, institutional instability within the District also shaped the broader context of the study. During the study's timeline, the District underwent substantial leadership turnover and restructuring, including changes in oversight and accountability systems connected to implementation of audit recommendations. Responsibilities associated with the focal equity work were redistributed across district structures, often without continuity from individuals directly involved in the focal audit process. These conditions complicated access to additional data sources and further reinforced findings regarding fragmentation, implementation drift, and institutional mediation within equity-oriented initiatives.

Finally, this study was interpretive and qualitative in nature, grounded in critical qualitative inquiry and culturally and linguistically responsive research traditions. As such, findings are not intended to function as universally generalizable claims regarding all equity audits or educational systems. Rather, the purpose of this study was to critically examine how equity was represented, operationalized, and communicated within one focal audit context while offering conceptual and methodological insights that may inform future equity-oriented research and evaluation efforts.

These broader shifts materially shaped the study itself. Institutional willingness to share data, publicly engage in equity discourse, and sustain participation in equity-centered inquiry

became increasingly complicated amid changing political conditions. Again, at the same time, professional organizations continued to reaffirm their commitments to culturally responsive inquiry, equity focused evaluation, and inclusive educational research (AEA, 2024; 2026; CEC, 2025). These developments suggest that, although equity-oriented work is increasingly occurring within contested political environments, many educational and evaluation organizations continue to position culturally responsive and equity-focused inquiry as central to ethical and inclusive professional practice. This finding reinforces the importance of situating equity audits within broader political and institutional contexts. Educational equity work does not occur outside of power, policy, and public discourse. Rather, equity inquiry is shaped by institutional fears, political pressures, organizational survival strategies, and evolving public narratives regarding accountability. As a result, future equity-oriented inquiry must remain attentive not only to methodological rigor, but also to the political conditions that shape how equity work becomes possible, constrained, or publicly reframed over time.

Conclusion

This study began with a relatively straightforward, overarching question regarding how equity audits shaped the visibility of marginalized experiences within educational systems. However, the findings ultimately revealed a more complicated reality: equity inquiry itself is shaped by institutional mediation, political conditions, representational decisions, and competing understandings of accountability, legitimacy, and reform. At the same time, the findings also revealed the persistence of researchers, educators, families, and communities committed to more relational and justice-oriented approaches to educational inquiry. Even amid shifting political climates and increasing scrutiny of DEI work, culturally and linguistically responsive inquiry continues to evolve, adapt, and persist across educational spaces. In many contexts, equity-

oriented work has not disappeared, but rather shifted strategically in language, framing, and implementation in response to broader sociopolitical pressures.

Ultimately, this study argues that equity audits should not be understood merely as technical tools for diagnosing inequity, but as deeply interpretive and political processes that shape how educational systems define equity, represent communities, and imagine possibilities for institutional transformation. This finding aligns with scholarship in critical qualitative inquiry and culturally responsive evaluation which argues that educational research and evaluation are always shaped by institutional power, political context, and interpretive decision-making rather than functioning as fully neutral or objective processes (Bal & Trainor, 2016; Hood et al., 2022; Skrla et al., 2009). Therefore, the hope of this work is not to provide a final answer regarding what equitable inquiry should look like, but rather to invite ongoing critical reflection regarding how educational systems might engage communities more ethically, reflexively, and collaboratively in the pursuit of educational justice. This hope extends to the scholars conducting such work, as my role in this study was not only shaped by institutional documents and audit artifacts, but also by ongoing reflection within equity-oriented inquiry itself. As educational systems continue to navigate evolving sociopolitical and institutional conditions surrounding equity work, this study underscores the importance of reflexivity, relational accountability, and sustained critical examination of how educational inequities are represented, interpreted, and addressed.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Institutional Framing and Voice in Equity Audits Multi-Interview Protocol

Interview 1–Technical Aspects: Joint interview with both project co-directors

Estimated Duration: 60 minutes

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. As described on your informed consent form, you've been asked to participate in interviews regarding your experience as a co-director for the [District] equity audit. I've asked you both to attend this initial interview together, as the majority of the questions are focused on how you collectively made
decisions regarding technical aspects of the audit. You've also been asked to participate in a separate, one-on-one interview which will focus on your perspective of how the methodological choices represented the voices of interest holders. I will share the questions for that ahead of time, just as I did before this interview, in case that is helpful to you. The purpose of these interviews is to provide a better understanding of how and why your audit was conducted, with the goal of generating new insights that might inform methodology of future equity audits and research.

Overview

During this interview, you may respond at any time, answering as few or as many questions as you would like. Our discussion will last approximately one hour, but you may excuse yourself at any time.

Confidentiality

The information I report will be anonymized, meaning my team will ensure that your personal identity will not be shared through our reporting.

Logistics

With your permission, I would like to take notes and record the session. This will help my team transcribe and code our conversation during our analysis. Do you give your permission to record?

Thank you. I have a pre-determined set of questions I will start with. I may not directly ask all the questions on my list, and I may ask follow-up questions for clarity and detail. Some questions may seem to lead to overt or obvious answers. This is not feigned ignorance on my part, it is intentional, as I am trying to capture your methodological decisions explicitly. Let's begin.

Interview Questions

Current Positions

Let's start with some background and context. Tell me about your current position.

- How long have you been in this role?
- What are your areas of specialization?
- How long have you two been collaborating professionally?

Prior Experience

Have you worked on equity-focused evaluations or audits before?

- If so, how did that inform your work on this project?
- If not, what drew your interest to this project?

Original Equity Audit

How did you hear about this project?

How did you come to be involved and lead this project?

What was the RFP process like?

- Who was involved in the RFP?
- Why did the district put out the RFP?
- What do you understand to have been the district's motivation or goals in initiating this audit?

How did you make staffing decisions for this project?

- Who did you recruit and why?
- What were some of the logistical challenges?

What strategies did you use to build coherence across the team's approach and values?

- Were there smaller teams leading each phase of the project?
- How was communication handled (e.g., shared drive, emails, meetings)?

Can you describe the collaboration process with district staff?

- How often did you communicate/meet?
- Was there a specific person or group of district staff who led/represented the district?
- Were there any challenges or supports that influenced the collaboration?

Are you satisfied with the final report?

- Is there anything you would change about it?
- Were there any components where there was uncertainty or disagreement about inclusion in the final report?

Conclusion

Thank you for your insight. Those are all the questions I had planned. I'm wondering, is there anything I didn't ask that you think I should have? Do you have any questions for me? I really

appreciate your participation. As a reminder, I will send out the questions for the next interview ahead of time, in case that is helpful for your thinking.

Interview 2–Theoretical Aspects: Individual interviews with each project co-director

Estimated Duration: 60 minutes

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Today's interview will be one-on-one, as it's aimed at gathering your perspective on the methodological decisions made throughout the audit and how that represented the voices of interest holders. Again, the goal is to learn from these interviews to generate new insights that might inform methodology of future equity audits and research.

Overview

During this interview, you may respond at any time, answering as few or as many questions as you would like. Our discussion will last approximately one hour, but you may excuse yourself at any time.

Confidentiality

The information I report will be anonymized, meaning my team will ensure that your personal identity will not be shared through our reporting.

Logistics

With your permission, I would like to take notes and record the session. This will help my team transcribe and code our conversation during our analysis. Do you give your permission to record?

Thank you. Like last time, I have a pre-determined set of questions I will start with. I may not directly ask all the questions on my list, and I may ask follow-up questions for clarity and detail. Let's begin.

Interview Questions

Epistemic Orientation

Let's begin with some broad context. What assumptions or guiding principles shaped the audit?

- Were there references or guidance from formal frameworks or theories?
- Was there any tension in reaching consensus with the project team?

How did your team decide what types of data would be prioritized and considered valid or actionable?

- How did the team decide between focusing on people's stories versus measurable outcomes and data point?

Representational Practices

Looking back, do you feel any perspectives were over- or underrepresented? If so, what are some examples of that?

- How did the team determine whose quotes would be included in the final report?
- Were there any specific considerations around how participants were paraphrased, anonymized, or categorized?

Community Voice

To what extent were community members engaged in shaping the questions, methods, or interpretation of findings?

- Were there any feedback loops with interest holders?
- Who was involved in the dissemination of the final report and findings?

What were some barriers to deeper engagement with families, students, or community members?

Discourse of Equity

How were the terms "equity" and "culturally responsive" defined during the planning and implementation phases?

- Were there initial definitions that you provided for the team?
- Did you align with these definitions?

How did external factors (e.g., district politics, funding, timelines) influence the framing or scope of equity in the audit?

- Were there internal debates about which equity issues to prioritize (e.g., race, disability, language, income)?

Positionality

How did you and your team approach your role as researchers in this context

Do you recall any moments when your positionality (e.g., professional background, identity) shaped your interpretation or recommendations?

- What tensions emerged between your commitments and institutional expectations (e.g., client feedback, reporting constraints)?

Closing Questions

What did you learn in doing this project that you think you would do differently?

What advice would you offer to future audit teams who want to ensure more inclusive and critical approaches to equity?

Conclusion

Thanks again for your insight. Those are all the questions I had planned. I'm wondering, is there anything I didn't ask that you think I should have? Do you have any questions for me? I really appreciate your participation.

Appendix B: Codebooks

Sample of First-Cycle Descriptive Codebook

Parent Code	Sub-Code	Description
Interest Holder Experience identify broad topics	**Student Experiences**	Sections that discuss how students experience learning, services, or school climate/culture
	Staff Experiences	Descriptions of staff experiences regarding their roles, professional capacity, institutional support, or school climate/culture
	Family & Community Experiences	Mentions of caregiver and/or community involvement, outreach/communication, or school climate/culture
	Resource Allocation	References to budgets, staffing, or funding practices, including descriptions of infrastructure
Methodology highlight verbs and actions	**Recommended**	Actions the audit team advised the district to take
	District Actions	District implementation (e.g. strategic plans) or actions completed/started towards addressing equity before the audit was conducted

	Patterns	Issues, patterns or themes the audit team identifies or claims in the report
	Rationale	Rationale or description for methodological decisions made (e.g. data sets, methods, decisions)
	Theories & Assumptions	Mentions of frameworks that guided methodology; Assumptions about how culture/climate and equity are defined (e.g. joy, strong culture, positive): Identity labels/descriptions (e.g. English learners, disabilities, race/ethnicity)
Values tag beliefs, priorities, and judgement	**Equity Imperative**	Statements about the moral or practical necessity of equity
	Trust/ Mistrust	Language signaling belief or skepticism toward the district or interest holders
	Responsibility	References to who is accountable for implementation, change, or outcomes
Ambiguous tags any excerpts for further discussion	**N/A**	Apply this code anytime there is something meaningful that doesn't seem to fit neatly under any other code

Sample of Second-Cycle Axial and Tension Codebook

Axial Code	Description	Example Indicators
Institutional Fragmentation	Conditions in which district systems, initiatives, or practices operate inconsistently across schools or departments	Inconsistent implementation; initiative turnover; communication gaps
Conditional Access	Situations where programs or resources technically exist but remain inaccessible to some student groups due to structural barriers	Transportation barriers; selective enrollment; uneven program distribution
Symbolic Equity Commitments	Institutional expression of equity, inclusion, or support that are not sufficiently implemented	Aspirational language; broad commitments; limited accountability
Differential Recognition	Uneven institutional visibility or acknowledgement of marginalized groups	Selective celebration; racial omission; identity prioritization
Structural Mediation of Practice	Institutional structures shaping or constraining educator practices and student experiences	Staffing shortages; policy constraints; insufficient training
Deficit Production	Narratives that position students or families as responsible for inequitable outcomes	Blame language; academic gatekeeping; cultural pathologizing
Equity Fatigue and Performativity	Experiences where equity initiatives are perceived as superficial, inconsistent, or unsustainable	Performative professional development; initiative overload; lack of follow-through

Versus Code	Description	Example Tension
Technical Authority vs Community Knowledge	Tension between institutional expertise/data systems and community-rooted experiential knowledge	Technical expertise positioned as more authoritative than lived experience
Accommodation vs Transformation	Tension between efforts within existing systems and deeper structural redesign of participation practices	Inclusion efforts remain bounded by institutional norms
Visibility vs Erasure	Tension between institutional recognition of some marginalized groups and omission or obscuring of others	Some inequities become highly visible while others remain muted
Symbolic Equity vs Material Equity	Tension between institutional equity rhetoric and actual material conditions experienced by interest holders	Equity commitments coexist with persistent inequities
Formal Access vs Functional Access	Tension between technical availability of programs/resources and meaningful accessibility	Programs exist but remain structurally inaccessible to many families and students
Participation vs Co-Construction	Tension between consultation-based participation and shared decision-making power	Interest holder input collected without meaningful authority
Restorative Framing vs Punitive Reality	Tension between restorative discourse and exclusionary disciplinary practices	Restorative language alongside punitive responses to student behavior
Equity Performance vs Structural Change	Tension between visible equity initiatives and deeper systemic transformation	Equity work framed as performative or disconnected from practice

Autonomy vs Accountability	Tension between school-level flexibility and districtwide consistency	Principal autonomy contributes to uneven equity implementation
Care vs Deficit Ideology	Tension between educator expressed care and deficit-oriented explanations of student outcomes	Compassion coexists with pathologizing discourse
Humanization vs Quantification	Tension between narrative-based understandings of students and reliance on measurable indicators	Data systems are prioritized over human experiences
Objectivity vs Interpretive Mediation	Tension between claims of neutrality and the interpretive decisions shaping representation	"Neutral" reporting still reflects institutional interpretation
Transformation vs Management	Tension between justice-oriented change and bureaucratic systems management approaches	Equity framed primarily through implementation and compliance
Recognition vs Redistribution	Tension between symbolic recognition of diversity and redistribution of material resources/opportunities	Diversity celebrated without equitable resource allocation
Narrative Complexity vs Institutional Coherence	Tension between messy interest holder realities and softened institutional reporting	Contradictions softened in public-facing narratives
Equity Intentions vs Equity Outcomes	Tension between institutional commitments and interest holder experiences of inequity	Good intentions disconnected from implementation
Shared Power vs Institutional Control	Tension between collaborative decision-making rhetoric and centralized institutional authority	Leadership retains final interpretative power

Sample of Critical Reframing Theoretical Codebook

Parent Code (Analytic Domains)	**Definition/ Examples**
Epistemic Orientation	This domain examines what types of knowledge are centered or excluded, and how legitimacy is assigned to particular narratives or data sources. Whose thoughts and opinions were accepted/rejected? Giving importance to some stories over others. How were mindsets and biases determined and/or shifted.
Representational Practices	This domain analyzes how people and communities are included or omitted from equity work at their district Are there researchers and/or district staff who represent community members (ie: social identity – race, social class, language, culture, sexual orientation)
Positionality	This domain evaluates how researcher or institutional perspectives are acknowledged, including reflection on power and interpretive authority. What are people bringing with them to do the work? Are they willing to shift/reflect? Are there ways people's positionality is enabled or hindered by their institution? Are you allowed to be you or not?

Community Voice	This domain investigates the nature and depth of community engagement in the research process, particularly in framing questions and interpreting results. How are they involved and how much? What enablers or barriers exist to community engagement?
Discourse of Equity	This domain assesses how equity is defined, operationalized, and communicated, including which groups and structural issues are prioritized or ignored Who is defining it? Who is leading the effort? Who is not involved?

Appendix C: Sample of Analytic Memo Materials

Use this memo template after completing a coding segment from the final report. Memos help us capture early interpretations, theoretical tensions, and patterns that may shape our second-cycle analysis. Reference the reflection guide to prompt as needed.

Coder Name:

Date & Section Coded	**Initial Impressions:** What stood out? What language felt 'official' versus emotional or community-driven?	**Recurring Themes:** What topics, actions, or beliefs are repeated across the section?	**Values & Logics:** What values, assumptions, or priorities do you see reflected?	**Silences or Contradictions:** Were there things left unsaid or tensions between what was said and how it was said?	**Reflexivity and Questions:** Did any part of your background (e.g. personal, academic) shape what you noticed?
8/7/25 - Document Review & Meaning-Making Memos	The memos generally felt pretty jargony. There's a lot of terms related to strategic documents and plans from the district. It was a little hard to read around these. I'm not sure that's the most accessible or readable for all interest holders		See [research assistant]'s memo for details about equity (abstract, but valued)	It seems that the district has already implemented a lot of things, and the audit teams call that out while simultaneously exposing the big gaps that exist. I wonder if this created tension when they had to report back. Who is part of the community they are referring to? Are their views aligned?	I was part of the audit team, but not for any of the components coded here, so it was interesting to see a lot of things that align with what we'll see in the focus group data.

Memo Reflection Guide

Use this reflection guide to support individual memo writing after coding a section of the report. These prompts are designed to help you surface your initial interpretations before discussing themes as a team. There are no right answers; just be honest, curious, and reflexive.

What changes or recurring themes did you notice?

- Did the report describe anything that had changed over time?
- What processes or steps did the district or audit team take?
- Who seemed to be the primary actors or decision-makers in this section?

What values or logic were present?

- What assumptions do you think the authors were making?
- Were there any value-laden words or emotionally charged phrases?
- What did this section imply about what counts as 'equity' or success?

What was left unsaid?

- Were there groups or perspectives that seemed missing?
- Were there tensions between stated values and described actions?
- Did anything feel contradictory or unresolved?

Reflexivity & Questions

- Did any part of your background (e.g. personal, academic) shape what you noticed?
- Did you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with the way things were written?
- Were there moments that activated a strong emotional, cultural, or political response in you?
- What do you wonder about how this section relates to the broader findings?

Appendix D: Sample of Key Findings Matrices

Representational Practices Key Findings

Excerpt/ Evidence	First-Cycle Codes	Second-Cycle Codes	Analytic Interpretation	Emerging Theme
The audit included translated recruitment flyers, multilingual outreach, interpreter availability, and direct translation during some focus groups	Methodology; Family & Community Experiences;	Accommodation vs Transformation	Accommodation was labeled as inclusion, rather than through fully multilingual or co-constructed engagement practices	Efforts toward linguistic inclusion revealed structural limits of participation
"African American/Black students were rarely mentioned explicitly outside of student focus groups"	Representation; Student Experiences; Patterns	Visibility vs Erasure	Some marginalized identities appeared less visible within equity narratives despite disproportionate inequities	Visibility operated unevenly across marginalized groups
Focus group findings were summarized through memos rather than direct transcript representation	Methodology; Patterns; Interest Holder Experience	Direct Knowledge vs. Institutional Interpretation	Community experiences were filtered through institutional interpretation before appearing in final report	Interest holder voice was mediated by institutions
"...the district operates in a transactional and uncollaborative manner"	Family & Community Experiences; Trust/Mistrust	Participation vs Co-Construction	Community engagement was framed as collaborative while interest holders described relationships as extractive or limited	Community participation remined constrained by institutional structures

Epistemic Orientation Key Findings

Excerpt/ Evidence	First-Cycle Codes	Second-Cycle Codes	Analytic Interpretation	Emerging Theme
"[Research Organization] meticulously analyzed a multitude of district data sets..."	Methodology	Technical Authority vs Community Knowledge	Institutional expertise and formal data analysis were positioned as primary sources of legitimacy within the audit process	Institutional expertise functioned as epistemic authority
The audit emphasized "evidence-based" recommendations and "rigorous" prioritization protocols	Recommendations; District Actions	Objectivity vs Interpretive Mediation	Equity was framed through technical and procedural language that emphasized neutrality and evidence-based decision making	Equity was operationalized through technical rationale
Focus group findings were synthesized into memos and interpreted through institutional reporting structures	Methodology; Patterns; Interest Holder Experience	Direct Knowledge vs. Institutional Interpretation	Community perspectives became filtered through institutional interpretation before appearing in final findings	Community knowledge was institutionally mediated
District leaders participated in prioritization processes that determined which recommendations became foundational priorities	Methodology	Shared Power vs Institutional Control	District leadership retained authority over which inequities and recommendations became actionable	Institutional leadership shaped epistemic legitimacy

Positionality Key Findings

Excerpt/ Evidence	First-Cycle Codes	Second-Cycle Codes	Analytic Interpretation	Emerging Theme
District leaders participated in prioritization processes that determined which recommendations became priorities	District Actions; Recommendations	Structural Mediation of Practice	Although stakeholder input informed the audit, leadership retained final authority over which findings became actionable priorities	Institutional authority shaped the boundaries of equity action
Equity work was repeatedly described as fragmented across campuses and departments ("I call them fiefdoms")	District Actions	Institutional Fragmentation	School level autonomy contributed to uneven implementation of equity initiatives and inconsistent accountability measures	Positionality was mediated through decentralized institutional structures
Participants described equity-related professional development as "performative, disingenuous, and inadequate"	Equity Imperative; Values	Equity Fatigue and Performativity	Interest holders expressed tension between visible equity initiatives and the absence of sustained transformation	Equity leadership was constrained by institutional implementation gaps
District personnel frequently expressed care and commitment toward students while simultaneously describing barriers through deficit-oriented views	Staff Experiences; Values; Student Experiences	Deficit Production	Equity-oriented intentions coexisted alongside narratives that reproduced assumptions about student limitations or family deficits	Institutional actors navigated competing equity orientations

Community Voice Key Findings

Excerpt/ Evidence	First-Cycle Codes	Second-Cycle Codes	Analytic Interpretation	Emerging Theme
Meaning Making Conversations were conducted to gather community priorities and feedback during the early audit development	Family & Community Experiences; Methodology; Values	Symbolic Equity Commitments	The audit included intentional efforts to engage the community in shaping the assessment process, though institutional actors retained authority	Community participation was invited within institutionally bounded structures
Flyers were translated into multiple languages and interpreters were made available during some focus groups	Methodology; Family & Community Experiences	Conditional Access	Institutions acknowledged linguistic diversity while maintaining existing institutional participation norms	Accessibility efforts remained accommodation-based rather than structurally transformative
Community organizations described the district as "transactional and uncollaborative"	Trust/Mistrust; Family & Community Experiences	Participation vs Co-Construction	Community members described engagement processes as limited in relational depth and shared authority	Institutional engagement structures were constrained in reciprocal participation

Discourse of Equity Key Findings

Excerpt/ Evidence	First-Cycle Codes	Second-Cycle Codes	Analytic Interpretation	Emerging Theme
Recommendations repeatedly emphasized culturally responsive practices, restorative approaches, and inclusive learning environments	Equity Imperative; Recommended	Symbolic Equity vs Material Equity	Equity was framed through justice-oriented language emphasizing inclusion, belonging, and responsiveness	Equity discourse emphasized transformative aspirations
Equity recommendations were operationalized through implementation plans, accountability systems, dashboards, and monitoring structures	District Actions; Methodology; Recommended	Transformation vs Management	Equity became institutionalized through systems-management and implementation frameworks	Equity was operationalized through managerial logics
Interest holders described equity initiatives as performative, disingenuous, and inadequate	Equity Imperative; Values; Patterns	Equity Fatigue and Performativity	Interest holders expressed skepticism toward equity initiatives perceived as disconnected from material change	Equity discourse was experienced unevenly across interest holder groups
Restorative practices and culturally responsive language coexisted alongside reports of punitive discipline and exclusionary student experiences	Student Experiences; Equity Imperative	Restorative Framing vs Punitive Reality	Equity-oriented discourse frequently conflicted with students' lived experiences of institutional practice	Equity rhetoric and institutional practice were not always aligned

Analytic Memos Key Findings

Domain(s)	Code Alignment	Theme	Notes
Positionality; Representational Practices	Visibility vs Erasure; Inclusion vs Institutional Legibility	Researcher/team positionality shaped what forms of representation became visible	The audit team's own composition and staffing decisions mattered deeply. There was intentional team building around racial, linguistic, and professional expertise, including Latine/Spanish-speaking and Black representation, but also flagging of possible silences around LGBTQ+ representation. Representation was considered, but some identities remained less institutionally "safe" or visible.
Community Voice	Participation vs Co-Construction	Community voice was shaped by participant access and institutional selection	Who participated in the audit mattered deeply, not just the fact that they participated. The research team had wonderings about which community organizations and families were included and whether they represented "successful" or "struggling" students.
Discourse of Equity	Recognition vs Redistribution	Equity discourse sometimes created competition among marginalized groups	There was a noted tension regarding special education. The audit emphasized vulnerable students but seemed to frame the attention to special education as needing ALL the help. This contradiction supports a nuance: equity discourse sometimes positions student groups in competition with one another rather than through intersectionality

Comparative Audits Key Findings

Theme	Notes
Some audits are much more explicit about defining equity.	Audit S is the strongest example because it defines equity through redistribution, education debt, power sharing, and repairing racial/educational harm. It also explicitly names students with intersecting marginalized identities, including bilingual students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, immigrant students, and students experiencing housing instability. The study audit can learn from this level of definitional clarity.
The study audit appears stronger than some comparative audits in breadth of data collection activities.	The study audit included Meaning Making Conversations, Exploratory Data Analysis, Document Review, Policy Review, Focus Groups, and Walkthroughs. That is broader than most, especially considering the report compared to Audit D's short board presentation, which was the only publicly accessible report for them. Also, the study audit is more multidimensional than audits organized mainly around achievement/programmatic gaps.
Audit M offers more explicit implementation specificity.	Audit M's recommendations are very concrete: define expectations, develop a plan, assign responsibility, identify evidence/reports, timelines, and department roles. The study audit could learn from that level of operational detail.
Audit D shows the limits of coherence-oriented equity discourse.	Audit D frames equity through a "coherent educational improvement system" and achievement improvement for African American students and English learners. This could be useful, but it is less explicit about power, representation, community voice, or historical harm.
Audit C is useful because it names ambiguity in district equity definitions.	Audit C found interest holders lacked a shared definition of equity, and that systems to identify/address inequities were unclear. This gives a direct comparison for the study audit. Equity audits can identify the absence of shared definitions, but the stronger move is to analyze how those definitions are produced, by whom, and with whose knowledge.

Interview 1 Key Findings

Theme	Notes
RQ 1: Design and analytic decisions shaped visibility through team composition, method selection, and interpretation structures	The co-directors described intentional staffing decisions based on racial/linguistic identity, professional expertise, local knowledge, and equity mindset. They also described smaller teams leading different components, which helps explain why different data activities may have carried different assumptions, lenses, and forms of visibility.
RQ 2: Institutional priorities influenced how equity was defined and communicated.	The interview shows that the team was trying to balance equity-centered commitments with organizational realities: staffing structures, project management, district partnership, and methodological feasibility. One co-director specifically said equity work requires people who understand systems of oppression and do not blame families and communities for outcomes.
RQ 3: Critical re-analysis offers a more reflexive interpretation of equity audit design.	The interview gives evidence that the audit was not simply "technical". Instead, it was shaped by researcher beliefs, positionality, staffing choices, feedback cycles, and efforts to avoid deficit thinking. That supports the study's argument about future audits needing to make positionality, interpretive authority, and decision rules more explicit.

Interview 2 Key Findings

Theme	Notes
RQ 1: Design and analytic decisions shaped visibility through methodological framing, participation structures, and selective representation.	The interview reinforced that the audit's mixed methods design intentionally combined broad quantitative analysis with qualitative community engagement to contextualize inequities and "tell the stories" behind district data. The co-director described the quantitative phase as helping identify broad district patterns while focus groups and meaning-making conversations were intended to "drill down" into lived experiences and contextualize inequities. However, the interview also revealed that visibility within the audit was shaped by methodological and resource constraints, including limited student representation, underrepresentation of immigrant communities, native students, and Spanish-speaking families, and reliance on institutionally structured engagement opportunities.
RQ 2: Institutional priorities, politics, and sociopolitical conditions shaped how equity was communicated, interpreted, and acted upon	The interview strongly reinforced findings related to institutional logics, leadership mediation, and performative equity practices. The co-director described competing institutional motivations behind the audit, explaining that some district leaders viewed the audit as genuine opportunity for improvement while others appeared more focused on producing an "output" in response to political pressure. He characterized dissemination processes as a "political meat grinder," describing how findings became "sterilized" once filtered through board politics and public communication structures. The co-director also connected these tensions to broader sociopolitical conditions, including shifting national political climates, fear around immigrations enforcement, district conservatorship pressures, and increasing resistance to equity-centered initiatives. Findings additionally suggested that equity implementation lacked structural accountability, as responsibility for recommendations became diffused across leadership teams without clear ownership or authority.
RQ 3: Critical re-analysis surfaced tensions related to positionality, performativity, implementation, and institutional accountability	The interview deepened the study's critical reframing analysis by revealing how positionality operated simultaneously as a methodological asset and a site of institutional tension. The co-director reflected on his intersecting roles as a Black researcher, district parent, and equity audit co-director describing moments where he felt his racial and parental identities were symbolically foregrounded to increase institutional credibility while substantive findings were later politically softened or resisted. He explicitly questioned whether aspects of the audit process had become performative, particularly when district leaders publicly highlighted the diversity and community connectedness of the audit team while avoiding deeper structural conversations about inequity and implementation. Finally, the co-director emphasized that future equity audits may require stronger implementation structures, clearer leadership accountability, and more intentional "architecting" of political and organizational support to ensure findings lead to sustained action rather than becoming reports that "sit on a shelf."

Synthesis of Key Findings by Research Questions

Research Question	Analytic Domains	Key Findings	Tensions
How did the original audit's design and analytic decisions shape which student, family, and staff experiences were made visible?	Representational Practices Community Voice Epistemic Orientation	Community experiences were frequently filtered through institutional interpretation before appearing in final reports. Participation structures expanded access through translated materials, interpreters, surveys, and meaning-making conversations, yet participation remained shaped by institutional norms and mediated reporting structures.	Visibility vs Erasure Participation vs Co-Construction
In what ways did institutional priorities, access limitations, and sociopolitical conditions influence how equity was defined, analyzed, and communicated in the audit and its dissemination to the district community?	Representational Practices Epistemic Orientation Discourse of Equity Positionality	Equity was frequently operationalized through implementation systems, accountability structures, dashboards, monitoring systems, and coherence-oriented management frameworks. Public-facing reports emphasized district alignment, responsiveness, and organizational stability, while softening tensions emerging from interest holder narratives. Comparative audit analysis further revealed substantial variation in how districts defined equity, with some audits emphasizing redistribution, power sharing, and historical harm more explicitly than others.	Transformation vs Management Humanization vs Quantification Equity Intentions vs Equity Outcomes
How does a critical re-analysis of the audit, using the Critical Reframing framework, offer alternative interpretations of equity and suggest more culturally and linguistically responsive approaches for future district audits?	Representational Practices Community Voice Epistemic Orientation Discourse of Equity Epistemic Orientation	The Critical Reframing analysis revealed that equity was not only represented through formal findings, but also constructed through institutional participation structures, interpretive authority, and methodological decisions that shaped whose knowledge became actionable and publicly legible. Comparative audit findings suggested that future equity audits may benefit from greater transparency regarding positionality, clearer definitions of equity, strong multilingual participation structures, and more explicit attention to power, representation, and institutional mediation throughout the audit process.	Recognition vs Redistribution Symbolic Equity vs Material Equity

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