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**School Community Perceptions of an Equity Team in a Suburban School:  
An Instrumental Case Study**

By:

Ilana Shipe, EdD.

Drexel University

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Supervising Professor:

Dr. Kristine Lewis-Grant

Editors:

Dr. Penny L. Hammrich

Professor and Dean

Dr. Rajashi Ghosh

Associate Professor and Department Chair for Policy, Organization, and Leadership

Copy Editor:

Anthony Hopkins

Director of Marketing and Communications

# **School Community Perceptions of an Equity Team in a Suburban School: An Instrumental Case Study**

## **Abstract**

Equity reform is a pressing issue in education, particularly because historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups comprise the majority of the student population in U.S. public schools. Equity teams are a recent reform effort, yet evidence of their effectiveness is emergent. The purpose of this instrumental case study was to understand an equity team's actions to address disparate educational outcomes for students of color, and how the work of the equity team was perceived by the larger school community. This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What actions do equity teams take to establish equitable school environments in high-performing, suburban, public schools?
2. How does the school community perceive the work of equity teams in high-performing, suburban, public schools?
3. How do teachers, staff, and parents perceive the work of equity teams?

This instrumental case study is based on data collected from a school-wide survey and semi-structured individual and group interviews with members of the school community. Findings resulting from data analysis included: (a) the Watts Equity Team is still in its infancy; (b) the school community is largely unsure of the team's existence or efforts; (c) based on MAEC's components of an equitable school, Watts High School exhibits moderate evidence of an equitable learning environment.

## **Aim**

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to understand a suburban high school equity teams' actions to address disparate educational outcomes for students of color and how the work of the team was perceived by the larger school community.

## **Problem**

As the population of students of color grows, educators are working with an ever-diversifying student body. For K-12 schools, this means that marginalized students, though still minoritized, will no longer be in the minority of the population. It also means that the types of learners are continuing to diversify; students of color will soon outnumber dominant culture students. If the students are changing, schools will need to adjust in order to establish and sustain equitable learning environments. They will need to confront inequities, a task perfectly suited for an equity team. Substantial research exists for urban school environments and there is a recent study on equity teams in an urban environment (Morton, 2018), but more research is needed on suburban schools and their efforts to utilize culturally sustaining pedagogy and create equitable learning environments. In order to identify and implement the necessary steps and training, schools need assistance. With the recent advent of equity teams, little is known about how they address educational disparities for students of color in suburban public schools, and how their work is perceived by members of the school community (Cramer, Little, & McHatton, 2017).

## **Research Findings**

Three findings emerged from the study: (a) the Watts Equity Team is still in its infancy; (b) the school community is largely unsure of the team's existence or efforts; (c) based on

MAEC's components of an equitable school, Watts High School exhibits moderate evidence of an equitable learning environment.

In the two years since its inception, the Watts Equity Team hosted a book study event and is still working out plans for a second event. The team experienced a pandemic and multiple changes to its membership and is still in the process of identifying which equity-related data would be appropriate for them to use.

The second finding is that more than half of the participants were either unsure of the team's efforts or believed that there was no team. The majority of respondents who had indicated clear awareness of the team's existence were either unsure of the team's activities or believed that the team's efforts had not made yet a positive impact on the school environment.

The third finding is that Watts has evidence of the indicators of an equitable learning environment, but is not yet equitable. The MAEC (2020a) components of an equitable school include: equity-focused mission, inclusive climate and visual environment, collaboration of all groups within the school community, and partnership with all stakeholders to support students. Watts High School has not yet met all the characteristics to be considered equitable. The mission is not Watts-specific, rather the school team adopted the district's mission statement. The environment is not yet inclusive for all students; adults in the school community have observed students at Watts feeling comfortable and included if their differences were in appearance or intellect while students whose differences were related to race or ethnicity have been observed feeling alienated and unsupported. In addition, data indicate that some students of color feel a need to assimilate and also feel marginalized. Collaboration and partnerships to ensure that all groups within the school community are represented and supported are still in development.

### **Conclusion**

Given the diversity of the student body and the predominately White staff, everyone in the school community needs equity training so that all students can be served. Training is a critical component of any equity efforts. The findings of this study also support the assertion that the work of an equity team is extensive (Hanover Research, 2019). In the two years that the team has existed, the Watts Equity Team has begun building a more inclusive culture but the data indicates that it is not yet inclusive for all and that there is much work ahead. In addition to focusing on the culture, they still need to analyze data; examine policies, practices, and procedures; identify inequities; and facilitate relevant trainings.

Equity teams should relentlessly pursue equity by persisting in the face of adversity, whatever form it takes. They need to craft an equity vision, investigate inequities, lead equity reforms, and monitor the progress of those reforms (Khalifa, 2020). The principal should lead the equity team as the position of authority to both model and make change. Equity teams should include team members from all school community groups and reflect the diversity of the school. Equity teams need to ensure that the school climate is positive. The work of the team must be promoted and celebrated. In order for the school community at large to be aware of and involved in equity efforts, an equity team needs to clearly and intentionally share what it does with the larger school community. The equity team should partner with parents, community groups, local colleges/universities, and/or feeder schools. Finally, an equity team needs to use data to inform its activities.

District-level leaders need to support equity teams by providing them with training, encouragement, and funding. All employees, including new hires need equity training,

specifically on how equity is operationalized in the district, what is expected by the district, what students need, and also how to ensure educational equity for all learners.

Schools/Colleges of Education must prepare school leaders to effectively engage in equity work as part of their school leadership training programs (principals, superintendents, etc.). School leaders need to know what equity work is and they need a deep understanding of equity-focused theories. In addition, school leaders need to understand how to lead equity work within a school context. They must also support a national dialogue on educational equity. There is not yet a national definition of equity as it relates to educating students. There is also not yet an agreed upon definition or characteristics of an equitable learning environment. Educational scholars and researchers should partner with school leaders to engage in a conversation to help craft such a definition and national standard for equity.

### **Research Implications**

Future studies should be expanded to include students and staff. This may allow for increased generalizability of results. They should devote more time to the study to get a longer range view; extended time would offer additional opportunities for observation and data collection, thus increasing the amount of data for the study. A multi-site and/or wider study could increase the generalizability of the results; future research should be expanded into a multiple site study within a district to offer insights that can only be gained through a comparative analysis and also include community and community partnerships. This addition could offer a more complete picture of the perceptions of the equity team's efforts.

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### **Author Biography**

Ilana Shipe received her EdD in Educational Leadership and Management with a concentration in Creativity from Drexel University. She has worked in K-12 education in various capacities for 20 years, serving a variety of student populations. Currently, she serves as the proud principal of an elementary school. Ilana was a co-presenter at the 2019 Pennsylvania Principal's "LEAD19" Conference on the topic of How Cultural Equity Can Be Infused Into Your Organization. Her research focus is on educational equity and equity teams.