Stepping forward on shaky ground: developing equity-centered principals in politically complex settings

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Introduction: Large urban districts across the country have tried to establish programs or partnerships that would ensure a pipeline of high-quality equity-centered school leaders. However, dubious, and sometimes hostile political contexts have often made these endeavors uncertain.

Methods: In this critical discourse analysis, we examine the contexts that frame the role of leadership pipelines in North Carolina, a state where the legislature has introduced several measures to diminish educational equity efforts along the K-16 spectrum.

Results: We find that the unsettled nature of a legal case, *Leandro v. North Carolina State Board of Education*, has helped to create an atmosphere of low certainty and that competing definitions of equity frame the role and necessity of leadership pipelines.

Discussion: Our findings offer important insights into the challenge of undertaking equity-centered reform in politically complex settings.

KEYWORDS

critical discourse analysis (CDA), educational equity, school leadership and school reform, politics of education, educational policies

Introduction

The state of North Carolina (NC) has experienced many shifts in how it has have moved toward or away from educational equity. While the state has historically grappled with issues like desegregation (i.e., Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education, 1971), recent iterations over the battle for equitable access to high-quality schools have been stymied by the State Legislature's efforts to, among several things, introduce bills to ban or limit how schools and universities discuss issues like race or hire educators who center educational equity in their practices (Schoenbaum, 2023a,b). The struggle to address historic inequities in NC have also manifested in the Legislature's refusal to comply with judicial rulings in the historic school funding case, Leandro v. State (1997), which found the state liable for underfunding several low-wealth school districts.

However, NC is not the only state with a legacy of battles over access to equitable education. For example, the Abbott decisions, beginning with *Abbott v. Burke* in 1985, include a series of verdicts by the New Jersey Supreme court that were aimed at restructuring school funding for 28 "poorer urban" school districts (Abbott v. Burke, 1985). In 1989, the case *Rose v. Council for Better Education* in Kentucky helped to establish "adequacy" as a threshold for funding, shifting the focus toward formulas that prioritized a list of skills every child in the state should have the opportunity to learn (Rose v. Council for Better Edu Inc., 1989). In 1993, the case Campaign for Fiscal Equity Inc. v State of New York (1995) included a coalition of parents who filed suit claiming that the state's governors

and legislature systematically underfunded New York City schools [Education Law Center (ELC), 2023]. In 2006, the New York State Court of Appeals agreed and determined the state needed to provide $5.5 billion in funding, a judgement they finally fulfilled during the 2023–2024 school year.

While several scholars have examined the impact of each of these cases including the Leandro v. State (1997) rulings (Barnett and Jung, 2021; Greif, 2004; Scherer, 2005), there has been less attention to the way cases like these fundamentally influence other categories of reform like school leadership development, particularly for assistant principals and principals. In this article, we examine how the Leandro rulings have contributed to the culture of school reform in NC and pay particular attention to the language and discourse surrounding the state's efforts to cultivate a pipeline of high-quality school leaders. In recent years, there has been an influx of funders in NC and around the nation who have sought to support the development and implementation of school leadership pipelines (Gooden et al., 2023). Some of these pipeline efforts have been aimed at equity-centered school leadership. However, even with increases in funding and attention to equity-centered leadership pipelines for schools, districts still face serious barriers as they contend with social, political, and institutional environments that are hostile and actively working against equity efforts (LoBue and Douglass, 2023; López et al., 2021). These hostilities sometimes manifest in policies or inaction as is the case with school funding in NC. But they can often simply manifest as discourse or rhetoric. These discursive strategies themselves create contexts that can shape adaptation and implementation of policies. As such, examining one state in the south, we ask how did discourses related to the Leandro v. State of North Carolina and educational equity shape the context for school leadership pipelines in North Carolina?

A focus on leadership pipelines for schools is crucial because as Fusarelli et al. (2018) have argued, "… investment in school leadership quality and stability is an oft-neglected policy lever in addressing the educational challenge of school improvement" (p. 287). Leadership pipelines have been studied for their sustainability (Turnbull et al., 2021), capacity to increase diversity and representation in the profession (Perrone, 2022), and their ability to create stronger, effective leaders (Steele et al., 2021). In this study we try to understand the discourses around these pipelines especially given the current trend across the United States (U.S.) to dismantle equity efforts in schools along the K-16 spectrum at their "root and branch" (Green v. County School Board of New Kent County, 1968).

Review of literature

Several areas of scholarship frame this study. First, we examine the research on language and discourse to understand the key mechanism used by policy makers to shape reform. Second, we discuss scholarship on overlapping contexts to make sense of the political, institutional, and societal environment surrounding school reform. Lastly, we discuss school leadership pipelines to examine what they are and why they are an essential aspect of equity-minded school reforms.

The power of discourse in school reform

Building consensus around specific school reform strategies, like equity centered school leadership pipelines, is difficult. As such, policy makers spend quite a bit of time building support for their agendas using discursive strategies that help them frame their arguments and plot their visions for reform. These strategies can help to garner support for specific initiatives and/or encourage opposition. As such, it is crucial that we understand discourse and how policy makers use them to shape the context for policy changes.

The concept of discourse has been discussed by several scholars who describe it as more than simply talk. For example, scholars like Anderson and Holloway (2018) claim that discourse "… includes talk, text, and action as well as more broadly circulating narratives, sets of beliefs, and ways of seeing the world" (p. 190). In their definition, there is an emphasis on what things mean and what people do. Others see discourse and language as "… situated social practice, a mode of action that mutually shapes and is formed through the social" (Koyama, 2017, p. 6). In this definition, the authors focus on the way language is intertwined through reciprocal social interactions. Ball (2013) claims that this aligns with Foucault who says that language and discourse are not isolated from power and culture in a society, therefore, they are not neutral.

As it relates to school reform, discourse is used to help construct the landscape for change. In other words, policy makers engage different discursive strategies to help justify their policy solutions. For example, Carey (2014) conducted a critical discourse analysis to examine how specific labels were used to place blame for low academic achievement on students and educators. As a result of "unproductive blame," policy solutions were poorly designed and incapable of actually addressing real problems related to "… historical, social, and race-based inequities underlying the achievement outcomes primarily of students of color within urban schools" (Carey, 2014, p. 441). In summary, policy makers engaged discursive strategies to frame the problems and legitimize sometimes ineffective, hand-picked solutions.

Further, education policy makers also engage in discursive strategies that construct and reinforce power dynamics. For example, over the past two decades, many scholars have studied the impact of neoliberal ideologies on schooling practices (Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Horsford et al., 2018; Slater, 2015). One example of this is the rampant spread of choice systems in many large school systems. In New York City, for example, former mayor Michael Bloomberg, prioritized an agenda that centered messages about competition among schools and choice for parents and students (Shiller, 2011). When policymakers frame education reform around the concept of school choice, they often emphasize parental freedom and market competition but fail to explain how unequal access to information and lack of influence or power may actually create unequal experiences and less choice than predicted. These systems can reify oppressive structures that uphold the influence of wealthy families and construct or sustain power dynamics that favor those who already have the capacity to navigate choice systems (James, 2014).

If we accept that policy makers engage in discourse to influence behavior or strategies, then we can easily see how discursive

framing may help to subvert the intent of equity-centered school reform plans. Horsford et al. (2018) suggest we view policy as discourse and socially constructed. This is because policy makers may use discourse to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct problems in a way that restricts how an issue is understood (Bacchi, 2000). To add to that, Edelman (1988) and Wright (2005) say that policy making is contextual and responsive to powerful actors and/or performances. So, when advocates push for more progressive policies that disrupt the status quo, policy makers may engage in discourses that reframe problems as individually driven, rather than systemic.

Fairclough (1993) reminds us that language is a "… socially and historically situated mode of action, in a dialectical relationship with other facets of the social (its 'social context')—it is so shaped, but it is also socially shaping, or constitutive" (p. 134). In other words, discourse is a powerful tool that both influences and is influenced by social norms, power structures, and social contexts. Therefore, in order to understand discourse, we must also understand how it is shaped and how it shapes overlapping social, political, organizational and cultural contexts for school reform.

Contexts of school reform

Researchers have left no doubt that context matters for school reform (Datnow, 2005; Sanders, 2014; Talbert and McLaughlin, 1994; Welsh and Williams, 2018). As it relates to schools, context can be defined as the intricate relationship between institutions and ideas that work together to shape the cultural, political, and social dimensions of schooling (Slater, 2015; Sidney, 2007). There has been no point in the history of U.S. schooling where context has not played a significant role in what schools do and how they do it (Tyack and Cuban, 1997). This interdependence compels us to move beyond the surface to examine the complex and overlapping contextual dynamics that influence school reform efforts.

Much of the conversation around context often centers school level factors like demographics of students and teacher quality (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Johnson et al., 2012). However, according to a study by Flood et al. (2023), context includes micro level factors like a principal's professional capacity, macro level factors like "… larger sociopolitical and sociocultural perspectives" and meso level factors like "… characteristics of the school and the civic community surrounding the school" (p. 3). These points are corroborated by Datnow (2005) who examined the way reforms were shaped by their district and state level contexts. She found that schools were likely to abandon reform when there were few resources available to them, when schools perceived reforms were not working, when there was little support among the faculty for reform, or when there was a shift in demands from the district and state. When reforms did last, it was because resources were available to support leaders and educators rather than act in opposition to what they were doing. She added that while the district and state may not have been the ultimate reason schools dropped their reforms, they opened the window for schools to essentially climb through.

Roegman (2017) also maintains that it is overlapping contexts-social, occupational, personal, and organizational, that concentrate to shape how school leaders, especially superintendents, approach equity-centered work. In Roegman's (2017) framework social contexts refer to historically entrenched belief systems related to issues of race, gender, and even schooling itself, that work together to "impact educational systems and discourses around education" (p. 9). For example, segregated housing patterns are a social context that have direct impacts on student assignment policies and practices in schools. Organizational contexts refer to organizational norms including policies, rules, personnel patterns, and allocation of resources. Personal contexts include personal positionalities, racial and ethnic identities, and experiences. Finally, occupational contexts refer to professional knowledge and expertise, professional expectations, and connectedness or networking with others (Roegman, 2017).

Leaders may be especially sensitive to the overlapping contexts of schools. This is particularly true when their work centers educational equity. Roegman (2020) warned against viewing principals as individuals working in silos. Instead, she found that "The role of context is especially important to consider in examining equity-focused principal practice, as different districts face different challenges related to providing all students with an equitable education" (p. 3). In his book, *Community-Engaged Leadership for Social Justice,* DeMatthews (2018) adds:

> Relatedly, principals need a deep understanding of their position within the hierarchy of a district and within an evolving school community context where history, unequal power dynamics, political struggles, and competing priorities and interest groups shape, constrain, or create avenues for transformation. Situational awareness requires both an accurate reading of the school context as well as the external forces that may be beyond the principal's control. (p. 141)

As such, it is not enough for leaders at the school or district level to simply have adequate training and professional expertise. This is because the context in which schools and districts engage in their work has serious implications for implementation and sustainability. It is incumbent upon us to be clear about the contexts that exist beyond simple demographics of schools. We must also know about how overlapping contexts discursively frame the necessity of preparing leaders for educational equity, especially in places where specific practices may be contested.

Necessity of school leadership pipelines

School leaders play a significant role in the academic, environmental and social objectives of their schools (Allen et al., 2015; Grissom et al., 2021; Boyd et al., 2011). This includes decisions on how they might foster equity of opportunities in addition to how they might ensure equity in outcomes for their students (Thessin et al., 2024). Given their responsibilities as instructional leaders (Hallinger, 2018; Gurley et al., 2015), disciplinarians (Welsh and Little, 2018; Williams III et al., 2023), and professional development directors (Beltramo, 2014; Buttram and Farley-Ripple, 2016), it is no wonder that pipelines are seen as a key reform strategy in a state with an entrenched history of low academic performance. As such, it is important to understand what

leadership pipelines are in order to understand how they have been discursively framed in conversations about school reform in NC.

Taylor and Youngs (2018) define leadership pipelines or succession planning as a strategy that "… ensures talent development and retention of human capital" (p. 71). Peters-Hawkins et al. (2018) add that succession planning is a methodical approach to replace leaders as they retire and move on to other roles. School leadership pipelines can take many shapes. One key strategy used by districts to shore up their pipeline of leaders is to engage university-district partnerships. These partnerships can involve formal arrangements that are established through legislative mandates as was the case in Browne-Ferrigno's (2011) examination of a partnership in Kentucky that transformed principal preparation in the state. They can also involve collaborations that are formed out of necessity to replenish a dwindling supply of leaders (Hayes and Burkett, 2021).

Even though pipelines may be helpful to establish and stabilize a dwindling workforce, districts can sometimes encounter challenges with implementation. For example, in their study of school leadership succession planning in one district, Peters-Hawkins et al. (2018) found that district plans to prepare leaders did not always live up to the reality. The district in their study suffered from poor planning, informal and ineffective structures, and "a gap between district vision and school implementation" (p. 23). In their study, the authors described that the district dealt with "… particularly salient and troubling" social challenges related to "… poverty, gangs, violence, and high transience" (p. 33). These challenges made implementation of the pipeline difficult.

Districts have also grappled with the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among school leaders. Several studies have tried to understand why leadership pipelines lacked diversity. For example, Williams and Loeb (2012) found that the lack of racial representation among school leaders was connected to lack of representation among teachers. Even though school leaders in urban communities were more likely to be people of color, they were still underrepresented in relation to the school populations, which were mostly students of color. Part of the problem with diversity in the pipeline may begin at entry points to the profession. Perrone (2022) also found that there are significant barriers to the principalship for women and educators of color, like low scores on licensure exams and racial bias in who is encouraged to pursue the principalship. Despite the inability of test scores to accurately predict success in the roles, results on the licensure may determine who and who isn't hired (Grissom et al., 2017). To address this "leaky pipeline," Fuller and Young (2022) argue for key reforms that systematically change how individuals become principals including diversifying the pipeline starting with diversifying the teacher workforce and the assistant principal pool.

Despite important problems with leadership pipelines, some scholarship has shown that preparing principals and assistant principals can be done well. For example, Gurley et al. (2015) found that a district's assistant principal academy was largely successful because it provided assistant principals opportunities to deepen their knowledge on specific characteristics of their job like instructional leadership, collaborative practice, and technology use. Also, scholars have long established that there is a need for equity-centered school leaders (Lewis-Durham, 2020; DeMatthews, 2015; Diem and Welton, 2020; Jackson, 2024). Eslinger (2023) argues that equity-centered leadership involves specific behaviors

like "ongoing self-reflection, confronting inequity, modeling equity, building the capacity of others, creating equity centered environments, and defining systems of equity" (p. 22–23). Others say that equity-centered leaders are important because they "closely interrogate the role educational systems play or have played in creating and maintaining systemic inequity" (Gooden et al., 2023, p. 3). Preparing equity-centered leaders matter because a study by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) (2022) has shown that nearly 40% of principals hope to leave their job in the next 3 to 4 years. This looming crisis in leadership should cause alarm because the lack of available leaders will have deep and sustained consequences for schools, especially those that are the most difficult to staff (Fink and Brayman, 2006) and especially those in places where educational equity is a top priority to improve schools.

Methods

Because the topic of this paper calls for a methodology and analytic tool embedded with a critical lens, we conduct a critical discourse analysis to make sense of the discursive strategies used by policy makers to shape the context for the development and implementation of school leadership pipelines.

Description of site

In 1994, five low wealth school districts sued the state of North Carolina, arguing that their districts could not provide an equal education to their students. Even though the districts reported higher tax burdens for local property owners, they still experienced very low tax revenues (Leandro v. State, 1997). A core argument of the districts was that a family's wealth and income should not predict the quality of their child's education. In 1997, the North Carolina Supreme Court agreed and ruled that the state was obliged by its constitution to provide a "sound basic education" (Leandro v. State, 1997). The presiding judge, Judge David Lee, said, "An education that does not serve the purpose of preparing students to participate and compete in the society in which they live and work is devoid of substance and is constitutionally inadequate" (Leandro v. State, 1997). While the court did not specify a dollar amount to satisfy the judgement, a 2019 West Ed Report estimated that the state would need to invest an additional $4.3 billion to fully fund public schools over the next 8 years (WestEd, 2019).

It is important to note that within the ruling, certain characteristics of a sound basic education were highlighted. This included the provision of highly qualified teachers and principals. For example, in 2004 the courts ruled again and found that the state violated students' rights to a sound basic education and ordered the state to correct it by, among several things, providing a "…well-trained, competent principal" (Hoke County Board of Education v. State, 2004). The robust plan also addresses education broadly in areas like school funding, professional development, and diverse teacher recruitment (WestEd, 2019, p. 12).

This long and complicated path to ensure a sound, basic and fairly funded education for children, with plans to prepare high quality school leaders for North Carolina is far from over. The State Legislature, despite having a multimillion-dollar budget surplus,

refused to fund the Comprehensive Plan and as of December 2024, the NC Supreme Court delayed their decision about whether or not to compel the State Legislature to satisfy the *Leandro* rulings until March 2025 (Rivera Cotta, 2024).

Data collection

To understand the overlapping contexts defining pipeline work, we conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) and asked, how did discourses related to the *Leandro v. State of North Carolina* and educational equity shape the context for school leadership pipelines in North Carolina? Our study considers both the local and statewide political atmosphere and current trends to diminish the role of educational equity in schools. We believe a CDA is especially useful in this instance because CDAs help to examine dominant narratives about particular issues, like educational equity, and how certain pertinent information may be strategically excluded (Kulick, 2005). In addition, critical discourse analysis is research that studies the creation, preservation and reification of social inequality (Orelus, 2017; Van Dijk, 2015). Schools and districts are not neutral and themselves rife with politics and power struggles. In this case, we found that policy makers used discursive strategies to maintain the status quo related to equitable access to high-quality schools. As such, a CDA allows for an examination of the social and political structures that frame persistent issues like educational equity and the intentional preparation of leaders for equity.

One additional key aspect of CDAs is that they also allow for specific examination of the communities or contexts that shape discourse around key issues. In their study of discourses around racism and classism in schools, Bertrand et al. (2015) conducted a critical discourse analysis to understand the discursive strategies "policy insiders," which includes policy makers, elected officials, lobbyists, etc., used to frame inequities in schools (p. 3). Anderson (2015) also conducted a CDA to examine how school leaders and government officials framed lower track students in Singapore, with an emphasis on who was doing the framing. They found that social categories of students were shaped by top-down policies and bottom-up private perceptions of people. These examples point to the power of CDAs to investigate seemingly normal phenomena and to identify how different power structures create and reproduce socially constructed norms.

Critical discourse analysis calls for a critical examination of discourse, or language used in social and political contexts, and requires a strict focus on the way oppression, power, and ideologies are replicated (Stanton, 2019; Wilson and Carlsen, 2016). As such, we started by collecting all publicly available documents related to school leadership pipelines and educational equity in North Carolina including press releases, speeches, interviews made by the State Superintendent, and policy documents from various state and district entities. The time range of these collected documents was from 2018 through 2024. These speeches and press releases delivered critical information about the central actors and discursive strategies used to outline the problem and proposed solutions. We searched local publications (like newspapers and online education news sources like EdNC) for campaign speeches. In our search, we found evidence of the role of *Leandro v. State*

Board of Education, a legal case that helped to influence the state and many districts' contexts. As a result, we expanded our search to include court opinions and publicly available documents related to this case. In total, we examined 72 documents related to principal preparation and educational equity in North Carolina. Future researchers will need to submit Freedom of Information Act requests to procure internal documents that may illuminate how the state communicated messages about the principal pipelines and educational equity.

Analysis

Our analysis is informed by scholarship on overlapping political contexts and critical discourse analysis (Roegman, 2017). CDA scholars claim that there are several ways to analyze and bridge the societal macro–micro gap, and thus to arrive at a unified critical analysis. Van Dijk (2015) posits that CDAs can examine the following- the language and discourse of "… members of (several) social groups, organizations, or institutions…" and how they "… may act 'by' or 'through' their members" (pp. 468–469). This can also include action processes, or the way rhetoric and language can be used as a process to shape behavior and decisions like legislation, news making; or social processes like the reproduction of racism, context or social structure (Van Dijk, 2015). While Van Dijk's (2015) framework reflects a holistic approach to CDA, we primarily engage and pay specific attention to action processes related to inaction and delegitimization and social processes like the reproduction of systemic inequities in the NC educational system.

To focus our analysis, we took an exploratory, inductive approach, searching the documents for emergent patterns without consideration of prior literature or CDA. During this stage we found clear patterns related to academic performance, accountability, educational equity, school leadership preparation, and the politics of schools. We then engaged in an iterative process that involved reducing and merging codes and identifying relationships within the data. Then, with our framework in mind, we engaged in a second round of coding during which we reviewed the initial set of codes and then looked across the coded documents to ask these questions derived from our consideration of CDA and overlapping contexts of school reform, "How are school leadership pipelines being framed within different context-social structures in the district and state?" and "What action processes and/or social processes are evident in the discursive framing of equity?." The analytic questions together helped us to find evident patterns that reflected competing notions of educational equity and the framing of leadership pipelines. Some of the codes that emerged in this phase were things like "positionality of superintendents" and "economic justification." We then engaged in a final round of analysis that helped us to connect our reduced codes to larger themes.

Trustworthiness and limitations

We attended to trustworthiness in a few ways. First, we coded the same data and compared our codes, noting and

talking through discrepancies. Specifically, we ensured inter-coder reliability by clarifying how each coder defined and conceptualized different codes. We engaged frequently in deep discussions about our interpretations, working through our analysis collaboratively. Second, we looked for instances of convergence that helps scholars examine concepts from multiple vantagepoints (Rosiek, 2019). While the absence of interviews is a limitation, we engaged in this process of confirming, disconfirming, and affirming information. Thus, our efforts to ensure data collection and analysis were rigorous, extensive, and intentional.

Findings

Our findings center around three themes that emerged in our data analysis including the continued denial of equitable education, discursive construction of principal pipelines, and competing conceptualizations of equity. These themes show how dominant ideologies about equity can create uncertainty in school reform efforts, effectively reproducing the status quo and potentially entrenching systems of social inequality.

Continued denial of equitable education—Leandro v. State of North Carolina

In our examination, we found compelling evidence that the state's failure to satisfy the *Leandro* ruling helped to shape the context around leadership pipelines. For example, the 2021 Comprehensive Remedial Plan required that by 2030 every NC school district have a partnership with a "school administrator preparation program that meets [National Educational Leadership Preparation] standards and provides full-time, year-long internships" and that all school leader plans will "recruit and prepare" diverse candidates that match NC students (Comprehensive Remedial Plan, 2021, p. 18). However, in 2021, after Judge David Lee ordered the state to comply with the ruling, the state appealed the decision. The case then returned to the courts and a new judge, Judge Michael Robinson, agreed that the state was responsible for funding the plan and that the 2021–2022 budget underfunded the Comprehensive Remedial Plan by $785 million. He also found that the courts could not order the state to fund the plan. In 2022, the State Supreme Court reheard the case and again upheld the North Carolina Constitution. In its 2022 opinion, the Court stated:

> This Court has long recognized that our Constitution empowers the judicial branch with inherent authority to address constitutional violations through equitable remedies. For 25 years, the judiciary has deferred to the executive and legislative branches to implement a comprehensive solution to this ongoing constitutional violation. Today, that deference expires. If this Court is to fulfill its own constitutional obligations, it can no longer patiently wait for the day, year, or decade when the State gets around to acting on its

constitutional duty "to guard and maintain" the constitutional rights of North Carolina schoolchildren (Hoke County Board of Education v. State, 2004).

Through a CDA lens, this statement reflects a large and looming role for the state judiciary as it attempts to compel the State Legislature to act. The statement foregrounds the role of the courts and their "constitutional obligations" to see that the *Leandro* judgement is satisfied. However, this reflects a power struggle, leaving to question who will be responsible. The Court's statement also implies that the executive and legislative branches are shirking their responsibility, which means that NCs entrenched systems of inequity remains in place undisturbed until someone or some branch decides to act. While the statement does not address the power of children and families directly, we can see that their exclusion implies they have very little power, while the branches of government engage in a battle over who is in control and how they should enact their authority.

In addition, as Orelus (2017) and Van Dijk (2015) have said, discourse can contribute to the preservation of social inequities. In our study, we found this to be true as the executive and legislative branches of government in NC clashed in their perspectives on how to fulfill the *Leandro* decision. This is evidenced not simply in the legislatures refusal to fund the plan, but also in how they discursively frame the necessity of the expense. For example, in 2023 Governor Roy Cooper, a democrat in his last term, outlined a budget plan that would fully fund *Leandro*, provide increases in pay for school leaders and provide principals in state-designated turnaround schools with coaches (Granados, 2023). Cooper states, "The major focus of my budget is strengthening education, with historic investments from cradle to career. We can and should make good on the constitutional guarantee of a sound basic education" (Granados, 2023). Analysis showed, however, that there was clear opposition to these plans. For example, in response State Senate President, Phil Berger, said:

> This is an irresponsible, unserious proposal from a lame-duck governor who wants future North Carolinians to pick up his tab. Gov. Cooper wants to go on a reckless spending spree by raising taxes, raiding the state's savings account, and proposing the largest increase in year-over-year spending in the state's history. He is following the same failed Democratic playbook that is causing residents to flee blue states like New York, California, and Illinois. (Granados, 2023)

Here it is obvious that there are competing perspectives about the purpose and necessity of funding *Leandro*. While Cooper's plan highlights a need for sound, basic education, Berger's comments reflect a combative tone where, instead of focusing on the issue at hand, he verbally attacks Cooper in a display of power. He also discursively framed funding *Leandro* as a "raid," a term often associated with an attack. The statement diminishes Cooper's legitimacy by calling the proposal "irresponsible", thus likely also diminishing the legitimacy of the court's decision in *Leandro*. By extension, this could also cause public support to decrease for the proposals, effectively preserving a system that the courts plus many families and educators see as a failure. As Datnow (2005) argues, reforms are more successful when

they receive broad based support. These statements reflect deep tensions that can easily hamper practices like school leadership preparation pipelines.

Discursive construction of principal pipelines

Our analysis showed that conflicting sentiments about satisfying *Leandro* did not stop with the Courts, Governor, or State Legislature. These tensions were also reflected in the state superintendent's complex perspectives on *Leandro* and in how the purpose of leadership pipelines were framed. For example, at a meeting with a local media outlet in North Carolina, the State Superintendent of Education, Cathy Truitt who began her role in 2021, said that "Leandro is not a plan, y'all. It's off the table. It's in the courts. It is not a viable plan for North Carolina's public schools" (Rash, 2024). While this sentiment contributed to a larger narrative about the viability and legitimacy of *Leandro*, during Truitt's tenure, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction also established priorities for "transforming the human capital pipeline" [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), 2023, p. 35]. This priority was outlined in the state's strategic vision for North Carolina public schools, "Operation Polaris, 2.0" and, like several other priorities it names, is related to *Leandro's* comprehensive plan that called for well-trained school administrators.

Leaders were clearly an important focus in Operation Polaris 2.0, and its earlier iteration Operation Polars 1.0. This is evidenced by the programs that the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) created to help develop leaders like the Assistant Principal Leadership Accelerator Program, a pipeline program that would "… train, support, and mentor [assistant principals] to accelerate readiness for the rigorous demands of the principalship" [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), 2023 p. 37]. They also shared plans to develop a School Leadership Academy [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), 2023] which, along with the accelerator program, shared similarities with the Governor's budget plan as each called for funding for coaches to support the leaders, especially those in low-performing schools.

It should be noted, however, that the preparation of assistant principals, and teachers were also each discursively framed as key human capital priorities. For example, Truitt stated

> Finally, I know that in order to equip students, we must invest in the very people on the frontlines who lead, teach and guide every day. This is why we will develop a human capital strategy that creates a robust pipeline of highly qualified teachers, principals, and school support personnel in every district [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), 2021].

This notion of "human capital" as a justification to improve the pipeline of leaders is also attached to notions around shortages. A press release that announced a partnership between NCDPI, the Belk Foundation—a private funder, and the North Carolina Principal and Assistant Principal's Association read, "Funded by NCDPI and the Belk Foundation, NCPAPA will establish the AP Accelerator Program, a statewide leadership initiative for rigorously selected Assistant Principals with a high potential for being fast-tracked into the principalship to combat shortages across the state" [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), 2022a]. This emphasis on "human capital" and "shortages" by both Truitt and the Foundation positions school leaders as mere assets, reflecting a market-based approach and possibly setting the stage for mechanistic or standardized approaches to education. These tactics run counter to the humanistic aspects and equity-centered approaches to schooling and may even be an intentional effort to avoid addressing historic oppression and discrimination in the NC educational system.

Further, even though NCDPI rarely showed direct connections between their pipeline work and *Leandro*, we found at least one occasion where Truitt directly referenced the relationship between Operation Polaris and *Leandro*. She said, "So, the comprehensive remedial plan, which is part of *Leandro*, that's the plan to address these needs, is very much present in my strategic plan Operation Polaris, which is aligned to the state board [of education's] strategic plan, as well" (Schlemmer, 2023). The act of making this connection is significant even if it is contrary to other statements she made. In this instance, her comments gave the plan legitimacy and likely justified the pipeline work across the state. In fact, we found several districts across the state who engaged in leadership pipeline work. While some of those districts justified their efforts to develop pipelines using the same shortage argument as NCDPI, others more blatantly framed their pipeline work as equity commitments. For example, Tricia McManus, superintendent of Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools stated that the district's principal pipeline was "… grounded in equity-centered leadership, competencies, and behaviors…' (Superville, 2021). McManus has also been on the record in support of the *Leandro* decision stating, "The Leandro Plan is critical to the future success of students across the state of North Carolina" (Superville, 2021). In addition, she said:

> Adequately funding education and providing quality resources and support to address the academic, social, emotional, and physical wellbeing of our students should be a number one priority for lawmakers and others invested in the future of our state and local communities (Superville, 2021).

Other districts like Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, with a prominent "equity-centered leadership framework" have also engaged in pipeline work that prioritized equity (Anderson and Turnbull, 2019).

It is clear from our analysis that the framing of leadership pipelines and the conflicting statements about the importance of *Leandro* shaped the context for reform. Even though the legitimacy of *Leandro* was questioned, we saw that the state and local districts used discursive strategies to describe the purpose and necessity of school leadership pipelines, making it difficult though not impossible to use them as an equity strategy.

Competing conceptualizations of equity

Our analysis also reflected inconsistent and competing messages about the role of educational equity. To be clear, the

Court's decision in *Leandro* focuses on a "sound basic education" in relation to fair funding for North Carolina public schools, or more explicitly, the case takes on "adequacy" and does not specifically leverage equity or even equal funding. However, our analysis showed that local districts and private funders incorporated educational equity in pipeline initiatives, despite competing discourses about the role or importance of educational equity at the state level.

For example, the Belk Foundation, one of the major funders of the Assistant Principal Accelerator Program, articulated a clear stance on its commitment to educational equity. Their website states, "It's in our community's best interest to seek equity in access to excellent teachers and leaders, funding, and additional supports for student learning" (Belk Foundation, n.d.). Likewise, NCDPI, under the leadership of Truitt, also described their leadership academy as a space where principals would learn how to "… focus on leading an equity-centered student culture and on observation and feedback" [North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), 2022b]. However, Truitt stopped short of fully embracing equity. While Operation Polaris 2.0 did mention equity related to leadership pipelines, Truitt publicly articulated mixed messages about equity. For example, in an interview with a local media outlet, Truitt said:

> It's important to define what equity and education mean, because we're starting to lose our way in this battle of ideologies. Equity in education means providing every child what they need at the time they need it… It does not mean ensuring equal outcomes (Dillon, 2021).

In another interview, she repeated her stance and added "To me, equity means giving all children what they need when they need it. We do fund our highest quartile of high poverty schools 34%, more than the bottom quartile. Is that enough? I don't know" (Schlemmer, 2023). If we examine these statements clearly from a CDA lens, we can see that on the surface Truitt seems to lean into notions of individual needs of students, which is a good thing. However, it can easily obscure the reality of systemic inequities that must be addressed as the state simultaneously provides every child with what they need and remedy inequitable structures. One example of the state addressing systemic challenges would be fully funding *Leandro*.

Truitt also made claims about putting students first, over politics, declaring that "…our children's education is too precious to play politics with," and that she was "going to try [her] hardest to separate politics from this role—to do what is right," because she wants to "keep this about students instead of politics" (Marchello, 2020). These statements try to frame politics as unnecessary or unimportant as it relates to schools and imply that it is politics that is the obstacle. However, Truitt makes no mention of the system inequities that have caused the inequality and does not reference how the State Legislature has refused to fund *Leandro* for more than 30 years.

As mentioned, our analysis revealed that individual school districts, especially those with equity policies, were more likely than the state to articulate clear stances on equity. For example, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School Policy Code 1100 Equity defines equity as "[going] beyond basic principles of equality;" specifically, "[committing] to educational equity involves the removal of institutional barriers so that all students, regardless of their race, socio-economic class, language proficiency, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or ethnic background, can benefit from all aspects of the learning environment" (Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, 2020, p. 1–2). Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools was also one of eight school districts around the country to receive a Wallace Foundation grant to "produce school leaders capable of advancing their own district's vision of equity" (Clarida assisting WSFCS to develop equity-centered principal pipeline, 2023). In partnership with two universities, the district developed an assistant principal pipeline with the goal to recruit, develop, and support, school leaders.

Even with the clearer stances, however, we found that the pipeline work was still threatened by leadership changes, especially at the local level. For example, in 2022, there was an unprecedented school board election in Winston Salem/Forsyth County Schools, which involved more than a dozen candidates who ran for three at-large seats. In previous years, the district often had too few candidates for seats (Fielders, 2022). We found that the heightened interest in the school board was part of a national trend that focused on the role of school boards in curriculum content wars. Many of the candidates spoke about their interest in critical race theory, whether they believed it was taught in the district or not, and how they would center family perspectives (over politicians) in their stewardship of schools. Regina Garner, a libertarian candidate running for Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School's Board of Education, proclaimed that "the Board of Education, nor the schools, teachers, or staff, are responsible for influencing inclusivity" and that "they should not be relating to students regarding race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or religion" (Diaz, 2022). While Garner lost the 2022 election, the fact remains that these conversations are extremely political and contributed to the larger discourse around the necessity of equity-centered work in a state where nearly 30 years of litigation has led to more questions than answers.

Discussion

We began this paper describing the legacy of battles for educational equity in North Carolina. Since the 1990s, the state has been embroiled in a clash over *Leandro v. State of North Carolina,* a case that called for a sound, basic education and, among several things, competent school leaders for students in low wealth districts. While we found that the state did take some steps to create and develop pathways and pipelines for school leaders, we also identified how the legacy of the *Leandro* case created politicized discourses around school leadership preparation and educational equity. Through politicized discourse, politicians and elected officials trivialized complex issues like educational equity or simply ignored them altogether. These factors overlapped to create a context of uncertainty and disagreement about how, if at all, the state would remedy this enduring struggle to ensure access to equitable education for NC students.

In answering our research question, how did discourses related to the *Leandro v. State of North Carolina* and educational equity shape the context for school leadership pipelines in North Carolina?, we found three major, although complex findings. First, we found that politicized discourses related to the *Leandro v.*

State of North Carolina case helped to fuel partisanship and reinforce existing inequities, which is evidenced by the state's continued refusal to satisfy the *Leandro* judgement. This is directly related to Datnow's (2005) scholarship on the effects of district and state level context on school reform strategies and with Orelus' (2017) scholarship on the way discourses can preserve inequality. While Governor Cooper proposed funding solutions, Senator Berger referred to him as a "lame duck" and as "irresponsible." These ad hominem attacks diverted attention from the central problem of inequity in the NC educational system, reinforced existing power structures, and impeded progress in a system that has historically failed to redress harm (Allen, 2022). Further, this finding is also directly related to Roegman's (2017) conceptualization of organizational contexts where politics play a central role in whether or not reform is even possible. In fact, some argue that politics have more influence on practice than does the professional knowledge of leaders like superintendents or principals (Fusarelli, 2006). As such, harsh political discourse like those viewed in this case not only create uncertainty, but they may also very well impact how and when districts implement needed reforms.

Despite the complicated context, we also interestingly found that NCDPI, school districts, and their partners (like universities and private funders) continued to plan, develop, and enact leadership preparation pipelines. On one hand, local districts like Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools partnered with a funder to develop equity-centered assistant principal preparation pipelines. Echoing the scholarship on the need for equity-centered leadership pipelines (Gooden et al., 2023), the district positioned this initiative as both an opportunity to consistently develop high quality leaders to improve schools, but also as an opportunity to make an ideological shift to one that centered educational equity. On the other hand, however, the state framed leadership pipelines as an opportunity to shore up a dwindling pool of school leaders. This aligns with Bertrand et al. (2015) who examined the power of policy actors to frame policy problems and solutions. This framing has the power to promote specific understandings that can "…divert attention from structural issues…" (Bertrand et al., 2015, p. 2), and "… limit or expand possibilities for policy changes supportive of educational equity agendas" (Bertrand et al., 2015, p. 23). They argue, then, that discourses that reify inequity should be named and challenged.

Our third finding revealed competing discourses around the role of educational equity, which were especially pronounced for the State Superintendent. Through a CDA lens, *who* is doing the framing is as important as *what* is being framed (Anderson, 2015). When Truitt claimed that equity could simply be defined by its inputs like providing every child with what they need, because of her role and because of how she framed the issue, she simultaneously marginalized the idea that equity should be visible in its outputs, a sentiment that has been firmly dismissed by scholarship on educational equity (Espinoza, 2007). Anderson (2015) has argued that situations like this point to power dynamics when some issues are elevated while others may be relegated to the periphery.

As we have mentioned, previous studies have studied how difficult it is to facilitate leadership pipelines when the political and social contexts are challenging (Horsford et al., 2018; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018; Roegman, 2017). These factors together make it difficult for reforms like equity-centered leadership pipelines to thrive especially if the tensions and political uncertainty effect whether or not reforms receive broad-based support (Datnow, 2005) or if they flounder and dissipate. In our case, the State Legislature, the entity that controls the budget, and Cathy Truitt, continuously delegitimized *Leandro*, a move that likely decreased support for the remedies attached to it.

The dynamics observed in this study offer important insights into the broader debate around access to educational equity in NC and around the country. Given the current state of affairs, it is likely that both educational policies and practices will continue to be heavily influenced by politicized discourses, especially those related to constantly litigated issues like educational equity. The politicized discourses we observed reflect a pattern of inconsistency and uncertainty and even though discourse is necessary to aid with decision making, we argue that the way we talk about reform can ironically create more confusion where there should be clarity.

Conclusion

Our study makes important contributions to research on social and political contexts of schools. Existing research has discussed how overlapping contexts can influence leaders and leadership preparation (Roegman, 2017). In our examination of overlapping contexts in North Carolina, we agree that the contexts affect each other. But we add that discursive framing of different issues adds complexity to the contexts. We were surprised by our findings that, despite the lack of support from the State Legislature, NCDPI and local districts continued to develop assistant principal and principal pipelines. We were not surprised, however, that these entities differed in how they framed the purpose of the pipelines. We believe that these differences are part and parcel to the highly political, polarized times we exist in today. Still, future research will have to look more explicitly at why these plans forged forward in uncertain conditions by talking directly with those responsible for implementation.

Our findings also contribute to research on critical discourse analysis. It is impossible to address matters of inequity without addressing the elephant in the room—politics, and the very systems that allowed these inequities to exist in the first place. Proclaiming that students deserve to be put first seems very noble on the surface, until efforts to truly help students neglect to identify the very matters that put them in a position to need help. We agree that critical discourse analysis are the appropriate methods to make sense of the relationship between language and power and add that the power dynamics should be investigated more closely to understand what and how they frame and reframe educational initiatives. Power dynamics are often complex, historical, and subject to evolution. Future discourse analyses will also need to examine if, how, and why discursive framing shifts and what that means for schools and districts in practice. It is impossible for districts to shield themselves completely from these shifting narratives. Still, so long as leaders understand how context and

language shape power, they can be better prepared to handle the inevitable complexity of reform.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

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