

Article

'It's Hard to Talk About': Educators' Experiences of Belonging and Engagement in Equity-Focused Professional Development

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Abstract

Providing educators with equity-focused professional development (PD) is an evidence-based strategy for ameliorating inequitable student outcomes (e.g., racial achievement gaps). However, growing fatigue with—and backlash against—equity efforts may undermine the efficacy of this strategy. Drawing on social psychological research, we theorize that educators' engagement and buy-in for equity-focused PD depends, in part, on the extent to which they experience a sense of belonging within these environments. Using a focus group methodology, we explored K–12 educators' ($N = 79$) experiences of belonging—or lack thereof—in equity-focused PD, as well as their engagement with this PD. Through a four-phase systematic coding process, we identified environmental factors that facilitated or inhibited belonging, both generally and in racially specific ways. We also identified examples of how disengagement manifests in equity-focused PD, as well as the factors that educators believed contributed to disengagement. We discuss how these findings can provide insight into the growing backlash against equity-focused PD and be leveraged to improve the quality and efficacy of equity-focused PD.



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1. Introduction

Educator professional development (PD, i.e., professional learning opportunities provided through workshops, communities of practice, coaching, mentoring, etc.) is a key strategy for improving the quality of education in the U.S. The underlying theory of change contends that by providing PD, schools and districts can enhance educators' knowledge and practices, which, in turn, enhance student outcomes (Audisio et al., 2024; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Poekert et al., 2020). Schools rely on PD to improve student outcomes in a variety of domains, such as math, literacy, and behavior (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In recent years, as educational leaders have grappled with longstanding disparities in student performance (e.g., racial achievement gaps), many have turned to equity-focused PD as a solution. This form of PD aims to support educators in improving outcomes that differ along the lines of students' race or ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, disability status, language, and other characteristics (Bancroft & Nyirenda, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2024).

Although rigorous evidence of the effects of equity-focused PD on teachers or students is limited (Ash et al., 2025; Lewis, 2023; Matschiner, 2023; Singal, 2023), a growing body

of literature suggests that some equity-focused PD approaches are effective. For example, a systematic review of research on equity-focused PD for K–12 science teachers reported that many equity-focused PDs improve teachers' self-reported practices, student engagement, and/or student achievement (Bancroft & Nyirenda, 2020). Other research examining discrete equity-focused PD programs has demonstrated improvements in educators' knowledge (e.g., understanding of strategies to advance equity; Parker et al., 2016) and practices (e.g., decreases in inequitable disciplinary practices; Austin et al., 2024). Some research provides direct support for equity-focused PD's underlying theory of change, illustrating that PD-derived improvements in teachers' beliefs and practices predict enhanced psychosocial and academic outcomes among students, including reducing racial achievement gaps (L. M. Brady et al., 2024b).

Notably, as equity-focused PD has become more prevalent, so have examples of backlash from people who argue that efforts to advance equity are politically motivated, divisive, exclusionary, or designed to make certain groups (e.g., White people) feel bad about themselves (Banaji & Dobbin, 2023; Bergner, 2020; Meckler, 2022; Scully, 2022). This backlash illustrates that although equity-focused PD is guided by a theory of change and, at times, supported by evidence, it often fails to create the buy-in needed to be effective. Prior investigations have explored factors that may undermine buy-in and efficacy of equity-focused PD, focusing on PD content (Bancroft & Nyirenda, 2020; Poekert et al., 2020). For example, a systematic review concluded that equity-focused PD may be ineffective when it offers approaches that are not grounded in research or fails to explicitly connect its key concepts to educators' everyday practices (Matschiner, 2023).

In this paper, we extend prior investigations by focusing on educators' psychosocial experiences during equity-focused PD. We contend that these experiences are important to understand because they set the stage for how educators engage with equity-focused PD content and the likelihood that they will put this PD content into practice. Specifically, we focus on experiences related to teachers' sense of belonging, exploring how cues in equity-focused PD environments may facilitate or undermine belonging. Our theorizing builds upon nearly two decades of psychological and sociological research, which explores similar efforts to advance equity in organizational contexts (e.g., businesses) (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Kaiser et al., 2013; Kalev et al., 2006; Kirby et al., 2025). This research suggests that the lack of buy-in or backlash against equity efforts often occurs when people feel excluded from (Stevens et al., 2008) or threatened by these efforts (Chow & Knowles, 2016; Lisnek et al., 2022; Norton & Sommers, 2011; Rasmussen et al., 2022; Wellman et al., 2016). Cumulatively, this research illustrates that people often determine their level of support for equity initiatives by exploring questions like "Do I belong here?" and "Am I valued here?"

To articulate our theory, we first review research describing how belonging (or a lack thereof) influences individuals' engagement and performance in educational settings, applying this research to the context of equity-focused PD. We consider how belonging-related experiences may differ for White educators and educators of color, particularly when equity-focused PD concerns issues of race or ethnicity, as many do. Finally, we outline key theoretical hypotheses and provide initial supporting evidence from a qualitative study of K–12 educators. We conclude by connecting key findings about educators' experiences of belonging and engagement in equity-focused PD to the larger societal backlash against these efforts, discussing practical implications for improving educators' access to and engagement in high-quality, effective equity-focused PD.

1.1. Belonging Fosters Engagement and Performance in Learning Contexts

Participating in PD is about learning—about cognitive processes such as the acquisition of new knowledge, and processing and integrating new knowledge with old knowledge—

but it is also a social activity (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 2012). Moreover, this social activity requires educators to assume a different social role than the one they typically inhabit in their professional lives, positioning themselves as learners rather than teachers, which can come with a sense of uncertainty (Noonan, n.d., 2024). This is particularly the case in equity-focused PD, where educators learn new ideas and strategies through interacting with peers, facilitators, and, often, their school leaders (e.g., content area or grade level leads, administrators). As educators navigate the complex social environments of equity-focused PD, the values, norms, and interpersonal dynamics they encounter are likely to exert a powerful influence on their ability and willingness to learn.

Prior research reveals that learning depends upon cues in the surrounding environments—explicit or implicit, intended or unintended—that convey information about the extent to which individuals belong and can be successful. These environmental cues shape individuals' engagement and performance in both positive and negative ways. For example, in Steele and Aronson's (1995) seminal study, otherwise high-performing African American college students underperformed on tests of intellectual ability relative to their potential when they were reminded of negative stereotypes about their intelligence (i.e., cues that African American students do not belong and cannot be successful in college). In the thirty years since this initial work was published, research has replicated and extended the finding that belonging-related environmental cues shape performance among numerous social groups (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status) across a variety of situations (e.g., education, employment) (Murphy et al., 2024). This work illustrates that encountering cues that inhibit one's sense of belonging can set in motion psychological processes that consume cognitive resources and make it difficult to contend with new information or apply existing knowledge and skills (Pennington et al., 2016).

Further support for the importance of belonging in the learning process comes from research illustrating that changing how individuals construe their own belonging can enhance engagement and performance. For example, an intervention that facilitated belonging by helping college students reframe their negative social experiences improved academic performance and reduced the Black—White achievement gap (Walton & Cohen, 2011). A longitudinal analysis illustrated that this same intervention improved a variety of post-college outcomes for Black students (e.g., career satisfaction, wellbeing, health), in part, because those who participated in the intervention were more likely to connect with a mentor during college (S. T. Brady et al., 2020). In other words, experiencing greater belonging in college led students to increase their college engagement by connecting with people who could provide guidance. These connections facilitated long-term positive effects.

Research on the experiences of first-generation college students (i.e., students whose parents did not attend college) similarly illustrates that students' engagement and performance improve when schools intentionally create environments that facilitate belonging. Many first-generation college students experience a cultural mismatch in college because the norms of higher education differ greatly from those of their families and home communities (Stephens et al., 2012a). This cultural mismatch signals to students that they do not belong in college and undermines their academic performance (Stephens et al., 2012b). However, when colleges change the learning environment by validating first-generation college students' cultural norms and providing them with role models who affirm their belonging and potential, these students exhibit greater engagement (i.e., use of support resources) and thus stronger academic performance (Stephens et al., 2014).

1.2. Belonging and Engagement in Equity-Focused Professional Development

Past literature suggests that experiencing a sense of belonging plays a key role in shaping individuals' outcomes in learning (and other) contexts. Moreover, this literature

illustrates that learning environments provide subtle, but nonetheless meaningful, cues about the extent to which individuals belong and can succeed. These cues shape how people engage and perform when learning new information and skills. Although much of the previous literature has focused on students in higher educational contexts, belonging is a key motivation that people—including educators—experience across social contexts (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cohen, 2022). Thus, it stands to reason that this key motivation also shapes educators' experiences as learners in the context of equity-focused PD.

Whether equity-focused PD is mandatory or elective, we contend that educators are likely to search for cues about whether they belong and can be successful. They may also enter equity-focused PD environments with pre-existing expectations and cultural stereotypes about such PD and the types of people who are welcome there. For example, research on prototypes of diversity, equity, and inclusion leaders suggests that many people expect that these leadership roles will be filled by people of color rather than White people, and they view people of color as being more likely to have the characteristics needed to succeed in these positions (Paluch & Shum, 2024). Similarly, research on cultural stereotypes suggests that White people are often presumed to hold biased beliefs about people from other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Morgenroth et al., 2024). If educators bring pre-existing expectations such as these to equity-focused PD, they may be particularly vigilant for cues in equity-focused PD environments that reflect these biases and thus communicate that certain people belong more than others. We anticipate that these cues are likely to shape educators' evaluations of their own belonging and potential for success. The prior research suggests that educators from all different backgrounds are likely to engage in this evaluation process. However, we anticipate that some expectations about equity-focused PD, and environmental cues about who belongs and can be successful, may differentially affect White educators and educators of color, particularly when equity-focused PD addresses issues of racial equity.

1.2.1. Belonging Concerns for White Educators

To the extent that White educators are consciously or unconsciously aware of stereotypes about White individuals' racial beliefs and their suitability to lead efforts to advance equity, they may enter equity-focused PD with concerns about how they will be treated or viewed within this context. They may scan the environment for cues (e.g., messaging from facilitators, comments from other participants, or the framing of the PD content) that indicate that they are likely to be seen as less competent about equity issues or presumed to hold negative racial beliefs that may not align with their own beliefs. When White educators encounter such cues, they may fear that they will make a cultural misstep and confirm negative stereotypes of their racial group. These fears may lead White educators—consciously or unconsciously—to disengage from equity-focused PD.

For example, research illustrates that White Americans who are concerned about appearing biased report experiencing heightened anxiety during interracial interactions (Shelton et al., 2010) and are thus likely to avoid these interactions (Plant & Butz, 2006). If they do not avoid interracial interactions altogether, White individuals who are concerned about appearing biased may inadvertently undermine the quality of their interactions by physically distancing themselves from members of other racial groups, signaling disengagement to the people of color with whom they interact (Goff et al., 2008). In cases such as these, disengagement can be a defensive response, allowing people whose belonging is threatened (i.e., because of concern about confirming negative stereotypes of their racial group) to protect their self-esteem. When people experience stigmatization or other threats to their belonging in a particular context, they often respond by exerting less effort or deciding that they do not care about succeeding in that context, disentangling their self-esteem

from their performance in the context where they experience threats to their belonging (Major & O'Brien, 2005). To the extent that White educators experience belonging-related threats or stigmatization in equity-focused PD, the research suggests that they may respond by withdrawing effort or electing not to participate.

Another possibility is that White educators who experience belonging-related threats will continue to participate (rather than disengage) in the context where they experience these threats, but the quality of their engagement will suffer. For example, people who experience a lack of belonging at school or work often respond to critical feedback in less productive ways than those who feel that they belong. Rather than learning from critical feedback, which could help them improve their understanding or performance, individuals whose belonging is threatened often reject the feedback, dismissing it as a reflection of the bias they experience in that context (Casad & Bryant, 2016). This defensive response allows individuals to preserve their self-esteem by electing not to invest in a situation where they are likely to face barriers to success (Major & Schmader, 1998). While the defensive response can be adaptive in the short-term, it can also prevent individuals from gaining new knowledge or skills.

For White educators, experiencing a lack of belonging in equity-focused PD may lead them to reject opportunities to think critically about their own beliefs and practices and the changes that they could make to better serve their students. Thus, even if they remain engaged in equity-focused PD, they may not fully take advantage of the opportunity to learn new information or improve their practices. Similarly, equity-focused PD may present an opportunity to discuss experiences and perspectives that are less familiar to some White educators (e.g., the perspectives of students of color or students from economically disadvantaged families). This information may feel threatening if delivered in a way that conveys to educators that their existing beliefs or behaviors are to blame for educational inequities. Rather than accepting new information as valid, educators may reject it in favor of their existing views (Gawronski, 2012). Some may even justify the inequalities they are faced with, or the aspects of the educational system that perpetuate these inequalities (L. M. Brady et al., 2024a; Jost, 2015; Nickerson, 1998).

1.2.2. Belonging Concerns for Educators of Color

Research on the experiences of educators of color in equity-focused PD is more limited than research on White educators' experiences. However, an emerging body of qualitative research, in addition to social psychological research, provides some insight into the factors that may influence belonging for educators of color. In some cases, educators of color may be attuned to the same belonging-related environmental cues as White educators, but the significance or implications of these cues may differ. For example, educators of color may be similarly aware of the assumption that people of color are better equipped than White people to lead diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. On the surface, this assumption could be interpreted as facilitating belonging for educators of color, as they are presumed to have the expertise needed to be successful in equity-focused PD. However, the assumption may also signal to educators of color that they are valued not as individuals, but for their utility in teaching others about equity, which may inhibit belonging. Indeed, qualitative research suggests that many teachers of color are comfortable talking about equity issues and are personally motivated to advance equity (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012; White et al., 2022), but the pressure to educate their White colleagues or shoulder the burden of leading equity work can create stress and fatigue (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Doan & Kennedy, 2022). Similarly, empirical research demonstrates that race-related stressors at work predict greater likelihood of burnout among educators of color (Mahatmya et al., 2022). To the extent that educators of color experience expectations about their involvement in or leadership of

equity-focused PD as race-related stress, they may be more likely to experience fatigue or frustration and therefore disengage from these efforts.

Other cues may be more unique to educators of color, given their different experiences in the teaching profession. For instance, teachers of color comprise approximately 21% of the U.S. teacher workforce ([National Council on Teacher Quality, 2024](#)), and, thus, many find themselves surrounded by primarily White colleagues. In the psychological literature, this experience is referred to as solo status, meaning that a person is the only member—or one of only a few members—of their group (e.g., race, gender) in a particular setting. Experiencing solo status can undermine belonging by heightening individuals' concerns that they will be viewed stereotypically or singled out and asked to represent their entire group ([Derricks & Sekaquaptewa, 2021](#); [Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2003](#)). Qualitative research suggests that solo status may be a common experience for educators of color, who report heightened visibility in equity-focused PD ([Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017](#)). Solo status may undermine engagement in equity-focused PD among educators of color, whether solo status leads them to feel isolated, disempowered, or likely to have their perspectives dismissed—or leads them to feel pressure to illustrate their expertise on matters of equity ([Ferlazzo, 2023](#)). This experience may also make educators of color hypervigilant to cues about their belonging and thus consume mental and emotional resources that could otherwise be used to engage in equity-focused PD ([Murphy et al., 2007](#)).

1.3. Theoretical Hypotheses and Current Research

Building on previous research, we theorize that when equity-focused PD creates an environment where educators feel they belong, they are more likely to engage with this PD and adopt the beliefs and practices that it offers. When environmental conditions in equity-focused PD inhibit educators' sense of belonging, we theorize that they are more likely to disengage or push back against equity-focused PD, ultimately undermining the efficacy of the PD and heightening tension around efforts to promote equity. In this paper, we explore these theoretical hypotheses qualitatively using a focus group methodology to learn about educators' salient belonging-related experiences and their observations about engagement and disengagement in equity-focused PD. This study was designed as an exploratory investigation of aspects of equity-focused PD environments that facilitate or inhibit belonging and engagement. While the focus group methodology cannot provide causal evidence in support of the theoretical hypotheses, we anticipate that the findings will provide insight for future research and practice related to improving the quality and efficacy of equity-focused PD.

2. Method

2.1. Study Context

The current research was conducted in a small district on the west coast of the U.S. with approximately 5700 students and 325 teachers. More than half of the student population (59%) identified as Hispanic/Latino. Slightly more than a third of students (35%) identified as White, with the remaining students identifying as Multiracial (4%), American Indian/Alaska Native (1%), Asian (1%), Black/African American (1%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (<1%). Teachers primarily identified as White (70%), with smaller proportions identifying as Hispanic/Latino (19%), Multiracial (6%), Asian (1%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (<1%). The district regularly offered equity-focused PD for school leaders, and school leaders offered equity-focused PD for their staff. The equity-focused PD provided within schools varied in timing, frequency, and focus, so, although educators at all schools had opportunities to participate in equity-focused PD, the sessions differed from one school to the next. Despite variation across schools, the

district's commitment to providing equity-focused PD means that participating educators had relevant experiences to draw upon during the focus group.

2.2. Participants

All educators in the district were invited to participate in focus groups ($k = 19$) with other staff from their school. Two focus groups were conducted at most schools, one that included approximately 4–5 members of the school's equity leadership team (total $n = 40$) and one that included approximately 4–5 staff (total $n = 39$) who were not members of the equity leadership team. The only exception was the district's high school, where we conducted one focus group with the equity leadership team and two with other staff members, due to the larger number of staff relative to elementary and middle schools. We elected to conduct separate focus groups for leadership teams and other staff to allow participants to share experiences that they might be reluctant to share in mixed company. For example, staff who were not members of equity leadership teams may have been reluctant to describe negative experiences with equity-focused PD facilitated by these teams. Similarly, equity leadership team members may have been reluctant to describe instances in which their colleagues' responses to equity-focused PD created challenges for facilitators.

2.3. Procedure

To recruit participants, school leaders shared an email describing the focus groups with their staff. Staff indicated their interest through an online response form, and all interested staff were invited to participate in a focus group. Focus groups lasted 60–90 min and were conducted in a private location at participants' respective schools (e.g., a conference room or classroom where other people could not overhear the conversation). Participants were provided with a consent form that included all required elements of informed consent, including but not limited to the purpose and voluntary nature of the research, risks and benefits, and a confidentiality assurance. Participants had an opportunity to ask questions prior to beginning the focus group, and all participants provided written consent to participate and to allow the research team to make a video recording of the focus group. Videos recordings were used for accuracy checks during transcription. To ensure participants' confidentiality, the names of participating educators and their schools were redacted from focus group transcripts, and the list of participating educators was stored separately from the video recordings. Additionally, all findings from the focus group are reported in the aggregate, and quotes extracted from the transcript are reported anonymously.

Each focus group was facilitated by one researcher, with one or two additional researchers taking notes. Facilitators used a focus group protocol to guide the conversation in a semi-structured manner. The protocol began with questions about educators' perceptions of how equity is prioritized (or deprioritized) in their district and about their perceptions of local and national conversations about educational equity. These questions were intended to generate contextualizing information and ease educators into discussion before moving to more specific questions about their own experiences in equity-focused PD.

2.4. Coding and Analysis

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed for coding purposes, and two research assistants independently reviewed each transcript for accuracy. The research team developed a codebook to support coders in identifying excerpts that described educators' experiences related to belonging and their own and others' engagement in equity-focused PD. Each code included guiding examples that reflected the underlying theoretical concepts (i.e., belonging, threat, engagement, disengagement). When possible, guiding examples included items from scales used to assess the constructs in previous research. Other guiding

examples were identified by team members who conducted the focus groups and recalled how participating educators discussed the key constructs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Primary Code Categories and Guiding Examples.

Code	Guiding Examples
Belonging	- Experiencing a sense of belonging and affirmation in equity-focused PD (e.g., being with other people who understand your experiences) - Teachers' identities (e.g., racial/ethnic/cultural background) are valued within the scope of an equity-focused PD
Threat	- Fear that educators are expected to behave a certain way about equity work because of their group status - Concern about being "wrong" or lacking knowledge about equity
Engagement	- Buy-in for equity-focused PD goals or practices - I can put into practice what is implemented in the trainings - I felt excited to implement the things I learned - It is important to me to apply what I learned in the training "When I understand how to apply the training, it's the best"
Disengagement	- Rejection of equity-focused PD goals or practices - I would have to make too many changes to put what I learned into practice "They walked out of the training." "I have to block off the back of the room, because people go there and disengage."

The second author trained research assistants to code all transcripts using a modified Rigorous and Accelerated Data Reduction (RADaR) approach (Watkins, 2017). In Phase 1, coders isolated relevant text by identifying unique responses to each relevant question in the focus group protocol. In Phase 2, coders independently applied the codes. In Phase 3, coders compared their independent codes for alignment and resolved discrepancies in code application. When coders were unable to resolve a discrepancy, they consulted with the second author to reach a resolution. Once coders reached agreement on all codes, the excerpts were indexed according to codes applied. In Phase 4, the lead author reviewed all indexed codes for adherence to the codebook and conducted thematic analyses within each code, cross-referencing transcripts and focus group recordings for contextual information when needed. Thematic analyses focused on documenting (a) environmental factors that facilitated or inhibited educators' experiences of belonging in equity-focused PD and (b) observations about educators' engagement (or disengagement) in equity-focused PD.

3. Results

3.1. Facilitators and Inhibitors of Belonging

Thematic analyses yielded two overarching categories of facilitators and inhibitors of belonging: those that were generalized (i.e., not explicitly tied to educators' own racial/ethnic or other identities; see Table 2) and those that were racially differentiated (i.e., specific to educators of color or White educators; see Table 3). In total, we identified three generalized facilitators and two generalized inhibitors of belonging. We identified one facilitator of belonging specific to educators of color, one inhibitor of belonging specific to educators of color, and one inhibitor of belonging specific to White educators. Thematic analyses also yielded four manifestations of disengagement in equity-focused PD (see Table 4).

Table 2. Overall Facilitators and Inhibitors of Belonging.

Contributing Factor	N Excerpts	Illustrative Excerpts
Facilitators of Belonging		
Opportunities to build relationships	5	“We went to two or three full days . . . and we were with teachers from all grade levels, all different backgrounds. . . . You could start building trust with people at your tables, and it was just really intense. But to do something like that in a PD here that is—what is it, forty-five minutes?—It’s difficult. . . . I learned so much just having personal conversations with people at my table. [I] was more vulnerable with them, and they were with me, because we had spent so much time learning together. [In contrast, if] I sit at a table right now with a teacher that I’ve talked to twice, I don’t feel safe. It’s just it’s hard to build relationships to even have that culture. I don’t think that our staff has that culture.” “With the microaggressions, I think on one level, people were like, (a), I had no idea this existed and (b) it was almost camaraderie, like, ‘Oh, that’s happened to me, too.’ There was comfort in knowing that I was offended when that happened, and it wasn’t just me being [overly sensitive]. There was an aggression to it.”
Shared mission	4	We are all educators and we all—I mean 99.9%—want to become better and want what’s best for kids. When you address things [that lead students to feel] like they aren’t being treated equally, usually, staff want to improve in that area. So you focus it on that and say here are some suggestions and provide examples—here’s what you can do to improve in this area.” “When we became student-focused [thinking about] our space and what we’re doing with our kids, then it opened up [realizations] like, ‘Hey, this equity work is about building relationships . . . instead of focusing on me and my flaws, and the things I can’t change about my past, or who I am or where I come from.’ . . . I think that’s been a really positive turn this year, to get people reengaged in equity work. That’s something that I’ve been hearing.”
Inclusive approaches	2	“Equity PD that hasn’t gone well is when it’s really focused just on the classroom teacher, or when it’s just focused on the families. It has to include everyone.” “The more accepted people feel in a district based on some of that equity work, the more willing they are to participate and be part of equity teams and help move the dial forward, in the classroom [and] out of the classroom. But the less people feel comfortable being themselves in a district or school, then the more standoffish they are, which means the less effort and input they’re going to have when it comes to creating change.”
Interpersonal tension arising from divergent beliefs	6	“It was when the shootings happened—Breonna Taylor—and people were on the fence about that. That was a horrible thing, and then all of a sudden it was like ‘Blue lives matter,’ and it was like, ‘What’s happening?’ People visibly got mad, and there were people clapping in the background, and it’s like, ‘I don’t think this is where the conversation was supposed to go,’ but that’s how it ended.” “When we brought up equity and grading, there was such a huge reaction from people, and I understand that, but it was like, ‘Can we even talk about it? Can we have a conversation?’ It was really hard.”
Lack of interpersonal trust	4	“How do you set up an environment where everybody feels comfortable speaking their view, even if it’s not the popular view in the room or they don’t have a full understanding of equity? Creating a space and environment where people can say that and have a bigger conversation without feeling ostracized for their lack of equity experience, or lack of whatever it might be, I think that’s super important.” “It’s so often that people feel ashamed of their backgrounds, or they don’t feel comfortable sharing. I’ve been through almost all of it, and I’ve not shared with most people the things that I’ve been through. In one of our equity PDs that we did a few years back, we were all asked to go stand in a line in the gym. It was like take a step forward if you had this happen in your life, or take a step back if you experienced food scarcity, or homelessness, or things like that. It put a lot of people in a really vulnerable space, and to do that so publicly, with your entire staff of coworkers, is really difficult.”

Table 3. Racially Differentiated Facilitators and Inhibitors of Belonging.

Facilitators and Inhibitors of Belonging Among Educators of Color		
Factor	N	Illustrative Excerpts
Valuing educators' diverse backgrounds	2	"I think it's rare that I met a professional development where I feel—actually the one that we just had last January, was the first meeting where I even came back to the building and I said, 'That meeting felt so good!' It was all the dual language teachers, so you were with people that valued language acquisition, that valued learning multiple languages. It was a safe space, [because] you were in a small group." "It felt good because we were having honest conversations—it wasn't all sugar coated. I felt that my identity was represented in that room, but I don't get that feeling, when I'm at an [English language arts or math curriculum] training. In fact, I feel like you always have to come ready. I'm always prepared for a professional development—What are we going to have to speak about? Are we going to have to make sure that Spanish is included in the conversation?"
Overreliance upon contributions and leadership by educators of color	6	"I do see a lot of people of color doing the work district wide. But in the same breath, when we come back to our buildings, and in these predominantly White spaces, it's still the people of color who are leading the work and continuing the work when we've had to do the work for years and years and years." "We've also been served a lot of crap, to be really honest, or we've done a lot of PD, historically that I really think wasn't it wasn't put together, assembled, or created for people of color. So, at the end of it, it's like, yes, that was awesome for the White folks. I bet they really enjoyed that, or they learned something. But why am I here right now? In some cases, the people of color then become like 'Oh, share your experience,' like, we're supposed to talk about how the system has done us wrong. I feel like the goal in a lot of equity training, in general, still feels like it's to teach White people how to get it right. That doesn't have to be the driving force, but it just still feels like a lot of it is."
Inhibitors of Belonging among White Educators		
Feeling singled out or made to blame because of one's racial identity	4	"Some staff do feel like it's an attack on White people. There was a comment at our last PD, even though no one mentioned anything about White people the entire time, none of the examples brought up were about White people at all. They just felt like they were being targeted as a White male." "This summer, I attended a training and, apparently, I was not quite phrasing things correctly. My examples got used twice as the bad example. I shut down. I was like, 'I know what the kids feel like.' I did not want to be in that meeting. I did not want to be at that training anymore, because I just felt like nothing I could do was right."

Table 4. Observations of Disengagement among White Educators.

Observation	N	Illustrative Excerpts
Denial of personal privilege/disengagement	9	"The equity [PD] that I was at that was called a diversity training. People just got up and left. They just logged off and didn't want to do it. I even heard, 'Well, I might be White, but I don't have privilege, so I don't need to hear this. Or 'I was poor, too.'" "I can think of a handful of White males that have completely dismissed equity work. They walk out of the building and they don't have any care or concern about the system or the work that we're doing."

Table 4. *Cont.*

Observation	N	Illustrative Excerpts
Guilt, listlessness, or uncertainty about how to engage other cultures	3	“I’ve had people share with me that some of the equity training that we’ve had over the last couple of years [has left them] feeling bad about themselves [for being White] and feeling guilty. They walk away completely drained and not wanting to do any equity work because they feel like they’re bad, because we just were born that way. It’s so focused on being equitable that if you don’t feel like you know where to fit in with that or how it applies, or that you haven’t had those experiences, or that you’ve been really blind to them, then I’ve had some people that really disengaged over the last couple years.” “He [a White colleague] came back . . . and was like, I don’t have a culture. I was like, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. Can you explain?’ And he’s like, ‘Well, I just, I just feel like I’m’—that same white fragility/guilt thing—‘I just feel like anytime that I’m trying to appreciate a culture, now I’m appropriating it.’”
Inability or unwillingness to connect with the issues or material	3	“I would say that it very much impacts BIPOC [staff] in a certain way and the White [staff] in a certain way. [White staff see it as] as ‘Well, [it] doesn’t pertain to me. When I look at Brown kids, I don’t see my own kids. I don’t see my nieces and my nephews. I don’t see my grandma, I don’t see those people, because that’s not them.’ . . . I think that they don’t really feel the need to [try].” “I think the lack of shared experiences makes people uncomfortable. They don’t want to talk about it, or they’re looking at it and they just go, ‘Wow, I’ve never experienced anything [like that].”
Resistance to demographic change	2	“There’s a group of people that grew up in this area, and they’re working in this system as it was [when] they attended [District] High School. But our population has changed. [Our] demographics are changing. Students’ needs have changed dramatically, and . . . these staff still cater to the people that are like them, because they’re valuing something that isn’t here anymore. They’re valuing something that is gone and working in that system instead of in a new system. . . . But it is partly because it . . . feels personal to them. . . . They’ve gotta be able to feel vulnerable and look at themselves, and it’s hard. . . . We gotta acknowledge it’s hard for people to talk about.” “Very critical of any change.”

3.2. Generalized Facilitators of Belonging

Excerpts describing experiences of belonging in equity-focused PD that were not explicitly tied to a specific aspect of educators’ identities (e.g., racial/ethnic identity) were considered generalized experiences of belonging. Analyses of these excerpts pointed to three environmental cues that facilitated belonging among educators participating in equity-focused PD: opportunities to build relationships, a shared mission, and inclusive approaches (see Table 2 for frequencies and illustrative examples). Both explicitly and implicitly, educators identified these cues as contributing to their own experiences of belonging in equity-focused PD, drawing connections between their sense of belonging and their engagement in or enjoyment of the PD.

3.2.1. Opportunities to Build Relationships

Educators often pointed to opportunities to build relationships with their colleagues as facilitating belonging in equity-focused PD. Several educators who identified this facilitator noted that sharing their own experiences and learning from others’ experiences during equity-focused PD was powerful and effective. Participants reported experiencing “comfort” and the ability to be “vulnerable” with their colleagues in equity-focused PD that provided time and space for personal connections. One participant described receiving feedback from their colleagues that their willingness to share their experiences, especially those related to challenges or failure, helped others to feel more comfortable participating in

the PD. Another participant described experiencing “camaraderie” in an equity-focused PD designed to help educators understand microaggressions. During the session, participants discussed their own experiences of microaggressions, which left the participant with a sense of validation that “it wasn’t just me.” For educators who shared these experiences, having opportunities to build relationships seemed to provide an avenue for enhanced PD engagement through individual and small group discussion, and these opportunities left them feeling positively about the PD and their colleagues.

3.2.2. Shared Mission

Educators also noted that having (or being reminded of) a shared mission to create the best learning experiences possible for their students facilitated belonging. As one participant stated, “We are all educators, and we all—I mean 99.9%—want to become better and want what’s best for kids. When you address things [that lead students to feel] like they aren’t being treated equally, usually, staff want to improve in that area.” This observation about the power of a shared mission typically arose when participants described a distinction between equity-focused PD that was centered on educators (e.g., helping educators understand their own biases or reflect on their personal experiences) versus on students (e.g., helping educators understand equity issues students experience). When talking about equity-focused PD that centered on educators, participants described PD that created space for educators to explore their experiences but stopped short of helping educators connect those experiences to their work with students. As one participant noted: “When we became student-focused [thinking about] our space and what we’re doing with our kids, then it opened up [realizations] like, ‘Hey, this equity work is about building relationships . . . instead of focusing on me and my flaws, and the things I can’t change about my past’.” Centering students, and the practices educators can use to better engage students, was perceived as fostering greater engagement with equity-focused PD, in part because it allowed educators to feel a greater sense of belonging and agency to advance educational equity. Educators experienced a shift from focusing on their own faults (i.e., factors that undermine belonging) to their ability to make a difference for students.

3.2.3. Inclusive Approaches

Inclusive messages about who can participate in equity work also facilitated belonging for participating educators, and these messages were perceived as leading to increased engagement in equity-focused PD. For example, one participant noted, “Equity PD that hasn’t gone well is when it’s really focused on the classroom teacher, or when it’s just focused on the families. [It] has to include everyone.” Another educator pointed to the larger school and district culture as creating conditions whereby educators feel included in efforts to advance equity and thus motivated to participate in equity-focused PD: “The more accepted people feel in a district based on some of that equity work, the more willing they are to participate and be part of equity teams and help move the dial forward, in the classroom [and] out of the classroom.” Educators who described equity-focused PD that used inclusive approaches felt these sessions were more effective and engaging than others.

3.3. Generalized Inhibitors of Belonging

Excerpts describing inhibitors of belonging that were not explicitly connected to teachers’ identities (e.g., racial/ethnic identity) were considered generalized inhibitors of belonging. Two such inhibitors emerged: interpersonal tension arising from divergent beliefs and lack of interpersonal trust. In some respects, these factors may be two sides of one coin, as divergent beliefs may be more likely to produce interpersonal tension when the conditions created within equity-focused PD do not support educators in experiencing the trust they need to share authentically and listen with an open mind.

3.3.1. Interpersonal Tension Arising from Divergent Beliefs

When reflecting on equity-focused PD where educators experienced a lack of belonging, participants described instances in which PD participants held divergent social or political beliefs, and discussing these beliefs resulted in interpersonal tension. Some participants pointed to examples in which confusion or disagreement about the existence of an equity issue prevented productive conversation: “I remember [a colleague] being like . . . ‘But I don’t think it’s sexist that . . .,’ and it’s like, no, no, that’s not what we’re saying. It’s [about the] broader condition . . . the systematic laws.” Another participant described feeling stymied by interpersonal tension, questioning, “Can we even talk about it? Can we have a conversation?” Notably, observations of interpersonal tension were reported by participants who believed strongly in the value of equity-focused PD. These participants expressed frustration with the resistance they experienced from colleagues who were less supportive of equity-focused PD. Our sample did not include participants who were vocally unsupportive of equity-focused PD, but we anticipate that these educators also experienced frustration if, as focus group participants described, they found the conversations to be unproductive.

3.3.2. Lack of Interpersonal Trust

The second generalized inhibitor of belonging centered on equity-focused PD environments where educators did not experience enough trust to participate freely and authentically. Educators who reported this experience described instances in which they or others did not feel comfortable sharing their perspectives or when not knowing how others would respond undermined engagement. For example, one participant described discomfort during an exercise in which participants were asked to disclose personal experiences in a public way: “I’ve been through almost all of it, and I’ve not shared with most people the things that I’ve been through. In one of our equity PDs that we did a few years back, we were all asked to go stand in a line in the gym. It was like take a step forward if you had this happen in your life, or take a step back if you experienced food scarcity, or homelessness, or things like that. It put a lot of people in a really vulnerable space, and to do that so publicly, with your entire staff of coworkers, is really difficult.”

Participants also recalled instances when they or other people were reluctant to be vulnerable during equity-focused PD by sharing an alternative perspective or asking questions that would communicate that they were not well-versed in equity issues: “How do you set up an environment where everybody feels comfortable speaking their view, even if it’s not the popular view in the room, or they don’t have a full understanding of equity? Creating an environment where people can say that and have a bigger conversation without feeling ostracized for their lack of equity experience, or lack of whatever it might be, I think that’s super important.”

In some ways, this inhibitor went together with the facilitator of providing opportunities to build relationships. Although sharing personal experiences helped educators build relationships with their colleagues and foster a sense of belonging, asking educators to share their equity-related personal experiences or perspectives publicly was less successful in fostering belonging, particularly when there was not a pre-established level of trust among PD participants. Educators may experience these requests as forced vulnerability, which may create a sense of threat and lead educators to opt out or disengage.

3.4. Racially Differentiated Facilitators and Inhibitors of Belonging

While the facilitators and inhibitors of belonging discussed above were shared by educators with a variety of racial/ethnic identities, there were also distinct facilitators and inhibitors that emerged among educators of color relative to White educators (see Table 4).

3.4.1. Facilitators and Inhibitors Among Educators of Color

Educators of color shared one facilitator of belonging (valuing educators' diverse backgrounds) and one inhibitor of belonging (overreliance on contributions by educators of color) in equity-focused PD. In some ways, these factors represent a push and pull: while it was validating for educators of color to feel that they could discuss their cultural backgrounds or culturally derived experiences during equity-focused PD, it was also frustrating or alienating to feel that they were expected to shoulder the responsibility of leading their school's equity work or teaching their colleagues about equity issues. Equity-focused PD that engaged educators of color in ways that communicated that their primary function was to teach or support their White colleagues undermined the sense that educators from these backgrounds were truly valued.

Valuing Educators' Diverse Backgrounds. Educators of color described experiencing a sense of belonging in equity-focused PDs that engaged their diverse backgrounds in ways that communicated value and respect. One participant described a positive experience in an equity-focused PD with a small group of dual language teachers: "Actually the one that we just had last January, was the first meeting where I even came back to the building and I said 'That meeting felt so good!' It was all the dual language teachers, so you were with people that valued language acquisition, that valued learning multiple languages. It was a safe space, [because] you were in a small group." Another participant concurred, adding, "It felt good because we were having honest conversations—it wasn't all sugar coated. I felt that my identity was represented in that room, but I don't get that feeling, when I'm at an [English language arts or math curriculum] training. In fact, I feel like you always have to come ready. I'm always prepared for a professional development—What are we going to have to speak about? Are we going to have to make sure that Spanish is included in the conversation?"

Overreliance Upon Contributions and Leadership by Educators of Color. The most frequently discussed inhibitor of belonging among educators of color related to the extent to which equity-focused PDs relied upon the contributions and leadership of people of color. One educator of color shared that they often felt like they were expected to use their experiences to educate White colleagues: "We've also been served a lot of crap to be really honest, or we've done a lot of PD, historically that I really think wasn't put together, assembled, or created for people of color. So, at the end of it, it's like, yes, that was awesome for the White folks. I bet they really enjoyed that, or they learned something. But why am I here right now? In some cases, the people of color then become like "Oh, share your experience," like, we're supposed to talk about how the system has done us wrong. I feel like the goal in a lot of equity training, in general, still feels like it's to teach White people how to get it right. That doesn't have to be the driving force, but it just still feels like a lot of it is."

Some educators extrapolated beyond equity-focused PD to discuss how educators of color were relied upon to lead equity work more broadly at the district and school level: "I do see a lot of people of color doing the work district wide. But in the same breath, when we come back to our buildings, and in these predominantly White spaces, it's still the people of color who are leading the work and continuing the work when we've had to do the work for years and years and years." Educators of color who shared these examples noted the fatigue and emotional toll that they experienced in equity-focused PD. As one participant commented, "Protecting our own health [is important], because we're constantly engaging in it as BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] people."

3.4.2. Facilitators and Inhibitors of Belonging Among White Educators

While no facilitators of belonging specific to White educators were identified through the thematic analysis, one inhibitor of belonging specific to White educators emerged (see Table 4).

Feeling Singled Out or Made to Blame. Both White participants and participants of color reported that feeling singled out or made to blame (explicitly or implicitly) due to one's racial identity created threat among White educators. For example, one participant commented, "Some staff do feel like it's an attack on White people. There was a comment at our last PD, even though no one mentioned anything about White people the entire time, and none of the examples brought up were about White people at all. They just felt like they were being targeted as a White male." A participant who identified as White also shared a personal example to illustrate how being spotlighted after making a mistake during an equity-focused PD created a sense of threat: "This summer, I attended a training and, apparently, I was not quite phrasing things correctly. My examples got used twice as the bad example. I shut down. I was like, 'I know what the kids feel like.' I did not want to be in that meeting. I did not want to be at that training anymore, because I just felt like nothing I could do was right."

3.5. Engagement and Disengagement

Analyses of excerpts coded as relating to educators' experiences of engagement or disengagement in equity-focused PD yielded virtually no vivid first-hand accounts of what these experiences felt like. When educators acknowledged their own experiences of engagement or disengagement, these were typically cursory and offered in relation to factors that facilitated or inhibited their sense of belonging. Instead, in excerpts coded in this category, educators tended to elaborate on how their colleagues (most often stating or implying that they were talking about their White colleagues) exhibited disengagement during equity-focused PD.

3.5.1. Denial of Privilege and General Disengagement

The most common manifestation of disengagement was through the denial of educators' own privilege and thus the rejection of the need for equity-focused PD, along with other more general forms of disengagement. As one participant recalled, "I even heard, 'Well, I might be White, but I don't have privilege, so I don't need to hear this.' Or 'I was poor, too.'" Another noted, "Some people don't want to touch it at all. Some people don't want to be involved. They don't want to have it in the classroom. They don't want to learn about it. They don't want to do anything."

3.5.2. Guilt, Listlessness, or Uncertainty About How to Engage Other Cultures

Participants also shared examples of colleagues who seemed to give up because equity-focused PD left them feeling overwhelmed by a sense of guilt, listlessness, or uncertainty about their role in equity work and how they could respectfully engage other cultures. One White participant summarized their conversations with White colleagues as: "I've had people share with me that some of the equity training that we've had over the last couple of years [has left them] feeling bad about themselves [for being White] and feeling guilty. They walk away completely drained and not wanting to do any equity work." Another participant recalled an experience in which they were uncertain about how to respond when a White colleague returned from an equity-focused PD and expressed, "I don't have a culture. . . I just feel like anytime that I'm trying to appreciate a culture, like now I'm appropriating it."

3.5.3. Inability or Unwillingness to Connect with the Material

Participants also described disengagement as manifesting in an inability or unwillingness to try to personally connect with equity-focused PD material. As one participant stated, “I think the lack of shared experiences. . . makes people uncomfortable. They don’t want to talk about it, or they just go, ‘Wow, I’ve never experienced anything [like that].’” Another summarized their perception of the disconnect their White colleagues felt as, “[It] doesn’t pertain to me. . . . When I look at Brown kids, I don’t see my own kids. I don’t see my nieces and my nephews. I don’t see my grandma. I don’t see those people, because that’s not them.’ . . . I think that they don’t really feel the need to [try].”

3.5.4. Resistance to Demographic Change

Finally, in discussing factors that prevented their colleagues from engaging in equity-focused PDs, participants theorized that some educators’ lack of engagement was rooted in their resistance to demographic changes in the community. As one educator surmised, “There’s a group of people that grew up in this area, and they’re working in this system as it was [when] they attended [District] High School. But our population has changed. [Our] demographics are changing. Students’ needs have changed dramatically, and . . . these staff still cater to the people that are like them, because they’re valuing something that isn’t here anymore.” Another participant concurred that some of their colleagues were “very critical of change.” At the same time, participants felt that this resistance was surmountable through PD that allowed participants to be vulnerable: “It is partly because it . . . feels personal to them, you know? They’ve gotta be able to feel vulnerable and look at themselves, and it’s hard. . . . We gotta acknowledge it’s hard for people to talk about.”

4. Discussion

Focus groups conducted with K–12 educators in a district that has provided ongoing equity-focused PD generated useful insights about educators’ experiences related to belonging and their observations about engagement and disengagement in equity-focused PD. By systematically coding and analyzing focus group transcripts, we identified several facilitators and inhibitors of belonging, which educators suggested impacted their ability or willingness to engage in equity-focused PD. We also identified examples of disengagement in equity-focused PD among educators who were perceived as being threatened by or otherwise opposed to the PD content. In the following sections, we discuss key findings in each of these areas in relation to the existing literature, acknowledge key limitations of the current work, and describe implications for future research and practice to improve the quality and efficacy of equity-focused PD.

4.1. *Belonging Facilitators and Inhibitors*

Educators reported experiencing a greater sense of belonging and feeling that equity-focused PD was more successful when PD provided opportunities for relationship building, a sense of shared mission among educators, and inclusive approaches to advancing equity. This finding aligns with prior qualitative research in educational settings, which suggests that effective equity-focused PD creates a community where educators experienced safe and trusting relationships (Jacobs et al., 2024). The findings also align with a broader body of social psychological research on the common ingroup identity model, which indicates that creating conditions where people with different experiences or identities have shared goals and can conceive of themselves as belonging to a single group leads to more positive intergroup interactions and decreases intergroup bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2012). Thus, in many ways, the factors that educators pointed to as promoting a sense of belonging and

productive conversation in equity-focused PD are the same factors that research suggests educators can deploy to foster belonging and engagement among their students.

On the other hand, educators' sense of belonging was inhibited when equity-focused PD created learning environments where differences in educators' beliefs led to interpersonal tensions or where educators did not experience the support that they needed to be vulnerable or work through differences in perspectives. These educators often reported frustration and exhaustion related to performing equity work in their schools. This finding bolsters previous research, which suggests that educators need PD environments where they feel safe to be vulnerable when navigating experiential and perceptive differences (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017). More research is needed to understand how to foster productive dialog across differences in perspective, particularly in contexts like equity-focused PD. However, an emerging body of research points to one potential approach: the cultivation of intellectual humility, which refers to an individual's understanding of the limits of their own beliefs and knowledge (Porter et al., 2022). This research suggests both that fostering intellectual humility could promote more productive and respectful conversations between people with differing points of view (Bowes et al., 2022; Stanley et al., 2020), and that people are more likely to experience intellectual humility when they feel connected to others and that others will be responsive to their ideas or experiences (Jarvinen & Paulus, 2016; Reis et al., 2018). To the extent that equity-focused PD integrates approaches that encourage intellectual humility, these efforts may create conditions that are more conducive to productive conversation and a sense of belonging among people with differing perspectives on the key issues at hand.

Belonging facilitators and inhibitors also manifested in racially specific ways. Educators of color reported experiencing a lack of belonging when they were relied upon to use their racialized experiences to educate White colleagues or to continually lead their school or district's equity work. In these cases, educators' racial identities were leveraged in burdensome ways that took a toll on their wellbeing. The sentiments expressed by educators who shared this experience aligned well with research on diversity fatigue, which describes the additional labor many educators of color undertake to support equity initiatives (Doan & Kennedy, 2022). The findings also align well with qualitative research on racial battle fatigue, which refers to the "psychological, emotional, and physiological toll of confronting racism" (Pizarro & Kohli, 2018). For example, Villavicencio and colleagues (2024) reported findings from research on racial battle fatigue within equity-focused PD that mirrored findings from the present study. First, Villavicencio and colleagues' findings pointed to examples of how White educators resisted equity-focused PD through denying personal privilege or disengaging from the session, much as educators in our sample reported of some of their White colleagues. Second, their findings suggested that White educators' resistance took an emotional and relational toll on educators of color, leading them to re-evaluate their relationships with their colleagues and to feel greater pressure to lead equity work and educate their White colleagues. Educators of color shared similar sentiments and expressed frustration and fatigue caused by shouldering the burden of tending to their White colleagues' feelings and resistance to equity work and simultaneously being tasked with leading this work. While the qualitative nature of both prior research and the research presented here limit conclusions about cause and effect in terms of White resistance to equity-focused PD and wellbeing among educators of color, the converging findings provide evidence that the experiences shared by educators in our sample may not be limited to this district or the PD in which educators participated.

While educators of color pointed to various negative experiences with White colleagues' reactions to equity-focused PD, they also reported positive experiences of belonging in equity-focused PD that engaged their diverse backgrounds and values in meaningful

ways and created opportunities for them to connect with colleagues who shared similar experiences or values. Educators of color reported high levels of engagement and enthusiasm in these PDs, where they experienced validation of their perspectives and experiences. These findings echo research on the importance of racial affinity groups for educators of color, which suggests that storytelling and camaraderie between educators of color plays a powerful role in supporting wellbeing (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). While empirical evidence on the efficacy of these groups is relatively limited, research suggests that some teachers of color turn to affinity groups to both provide professional learning opportunities and support retention among teachers of color, who are underrepresented in the teaching profession and likely to face challenging and/or discriminatory working conditions that may lead to higher rates of attrition (Gonzalez, 2025).

Among White educators, a sense of being singled out or blamed because of their racial identities inhibited belonging in equity-focused PD. Notably, many of the excerpts discussing this inhibitor of belonging were secondhand reports of how participants believed some of their White colleagues felt. This may be an artifact of the study design: because participants were sharing experiences in a group setting, they may have been hesitant to resurface uncomfortable experiences from their own lives. However, research suggests that these secondhand reports have some validity. Concerns about being perceived as racist or judged as being incompetent in matters of race creates anxiety for many White Americans and hinders their ability to authentically connect with people from different racial backgrounds (Taylor et al., 2024). To the extent that White educators experience these concerns in equity-focused PD, particularly PD focused on race or ethnicity, they may also experience negative consequences in terms of their comfort or willingness to engage in the PD. Importantly, these internal belonging concerns may be easily masked by other attributions about educators' motivations for disengaging from equity-focused PD. That is, when White educators experience a lack of belonging due to negative stereotypes about their racial attitudes, the product of that lack of belonging (i.e., disengagement) can appear to confirm these negative stereotypes, preventing a deeper, more accurate understanding of the key factors motivating White educators' behavior. More research is needed to understand the extent to which the secondhand experiences of White educators' lack of belonging reported in this study reflect White educators' own lived experiences. However, to the extent that these experiences reflect reality, equity-focused PD providers are likely to benefit from taking White educators' belonging-related experiences into account alongside other explanations for White disengagement, such as White fragility and racism (e.g., DiAngelo, 2011).

4.2. Disengagement in Equity-Focused Professional Development

While focus group participants overall described a range of factors that promoted a sense of belonging and engagement in equity-focused PD, they also described instances when their colleagues disengaged. Some of these observations included an additional attribution, suggesting that some educators—most often White male educators—disengage because they either reject the notion that they have privilege or because they feel that the disadvantages they have faced are overlooked in the conversations within equity-focused PD. Although the data do not provide first-hand accounts by White educators who exhibited this response to equity-focused PD, the secondhand observations by focus group participants align well with past literature describing how White Americans negotiate their racial privilege. For example, Knowles et al. (2014) described three key strategies White individuals deploy when confronted with information about White privilege: denying that White privilege exists or that they have benefitted from it, distancing themselves from their racial identity, or dismantling systems of privilege. While this research describes

responses of White Americans generally, qualitative research with White teacher candidates in Canada suggests that many respond to information about racial inequity by denying the existence of White privilege (Solomona et al., 2005). Similarly, research conducted in the United States with teachers who participated in equity-focused PD suggests that many White educators exhibit resistance to such PD, which can create psychosocial burdens for educators of color (Villavicencio et al., 2024).

Another key observation about White educators' disengagement focused on their expressions of guilt, listlessness, or uncertainty about how to connect with other cultures. This observation was reported by educators of color, who expressed frustration at being asked to tend to White colleagues' self-focused reactions to equity-focused PD content. When faced with information about equity that produced a sense of discomfort or challenged them to think differently about their behaviors and assumptions, focus group participants reported that some of their White colleagues entered a state of confusion and despair. Because the data do not provide first-hand accounts of this experience, we do not have a full understanding of the implications for White educators' beliefs and actions following equity-focused PD. Some research suggests that White guilt (i.e., feelings of guilt arising from awareness of White privilege) can motivate support for pro-equity efforts, such as affirmative action (Swim & Miller, 1999), while other research suggests that there are limitations to the extent to which White guilt motivates support for equity (Iyer et al., 2003). This observation also aligns with research on White fragility, which suggests that many White people show low levels of tolerance for uncomfortable discussions about racial equity, which can result in defensive and unproductive behaviors, including disengagement (DiAngelo, 2011). Indeed, one participant used the term "White guilt/fragility" to describe what they believed was happening among White colleagues who disengaged from equity-focused PD.

The other two manifestations of disengagement that emerged from focus group discussions concerned what participants believed to be cognitive (versus behavioral) disengagement with the content of equity-focused PD. First, some participants noted that colleagues who could not find ways to connect their own lives and experiences to the content of equity-focused PD were less likely to engage. Because these reports were secondhand and reflected assumptions about others' behaviors based on comments these individuals made, it is unclear whether educators were unable or unwilling to look for ways to connect with the content. Nonetheless, the hypotheses that participants shared about their colleagues' disengagement align well with research describing the importance of making material personally relevant (i.e., providing opportunities for people to find meaningful connections to their lives) when teaching new ideas (Priniski et al., 2018).

Second, participants noted that some of their colleagues seemed to disengage because they were uncomfortable with the demographic changes in the student population and the broader community. They perceived these colleagues as holding on to an outdated understanding or image of their school that reflected a time when the community was less racially diverse. While this explanation once again comes from secondhand accounts, research suggests that it may indeed help to explain why some White educators disengage in equity-focused PD. Experimental research illustrates that White Americans report feeling threatened by the shifting racial demographics in the United States, particularly the decrease in the proportion of White Americans relative to other racial groups (Craig & Richeson, 2017). Moreover, this threat can undermine White Americans' support for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (Danbold & Huo, 2014). To the extent that White educators experience demographic changes in their own communities as threatening, the research suggests that they may be more likely to disengage from or even push back against equity-focused PD that is designed to help educators navigate these changes.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

While this study offers valuable insights into educators' psychosocial experiences in equity-focused PD, it also includes methodological limitations that warrant consideration and constrain the generalizability of results. First, the data were drawn from focus groups conducted within a single school district. Participants' experiences are likely shaped by the local culture and the district's history of efforts to advance educational equity, through equity-focused PD and other initiatives. These findings may not generalize to districts with different demographics, commitments to educational equity, or approaches to advancing educational equity. Research using quantitative methods, such as nationally representative surveys or experimental or quasi-experimental designs, can provide clarity regarding whether and where the patterns identified in the current study are likely to generalize. Relatedly, although the data suggest potential connections between educators' sense of belonging and engagement in equity-focused PD, the study design does not provide information about the direct or causal relationships between these variables. These questions are better suited for exploration through quantitative means.

The focus group design also constrains what can be learned in terms of structural and contextual factors that may have contributed to the ways educators experienced their own identities in equity-focused PD or how they made sense of their own and other's engagement. For example, it is possible that school or district practices, policies, or histories contributed to educators' expectations about the PD and its content or to their experiences of interpersonal tension in equity-focused PD. Similarly, these structural factors may have fueled some educators' unwillingness to engage with equity-focused PD. It is also possible that contextual factors such as educators' pre-existing relationships (or lack thereof) with their colleagues shaped how they experienced their own identities and willingness to engage with equity-focused PD. These factors may prove fruitful for further exploration through semi-structured interviews and survey research that is more conducive to systematic comparisons of structural and contextual influences on educators (e.g., [Morman et al., 2025](#)).

Finally, while focus groups are effective for generating rich and nuanced insights, the group-based nature of the study may have prevented educators from sharing more personal or sensitive experiences. For instance, when discussing disengagement from equity work, participants spoke more freely about their observations of their colleagues' behaviors rather than their own, providing little insight into how participating educators navigated vulnerability, discomfort, or resistance in equity-focused PD. More confidential methods, such as individual interviews or anonymous surveys, could provide greater insight into these experiences.

6. Implications: Understanding Equity Backlash and Creating Inclusive Equity-Focused PD

Providing educators with equity-focused PD is an evidence-based strategy for improving student outcomes, but the growing backlash against efforts to advance educational equity has called into question the future of this strategy. Notably, shifting federal guidance regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts has put pressure on U.S. schools to eliminate initiatives like equity-focused PD or risk losing federal funding ([Hampton et al., 2025](#)). In the public dialogue around this issue, some people have argued that equity initiatives, such as equity-focused PD, are divisive, exclusionary, and discriminatory against Whites ([Asare, 2023](#); [Ellis, 2025](#)). This dialogue shifts the focus away from how schools can create equitable outcomes for students most in need (i.e., low income and racial/ethnic minority students) to how efforts to ensure all students have access to high quality education alienate

and disadvantage White individuals. This study provides a meaningful starting point for understanding where some of the resistance to equity efforts comes from.

Our findings suggest that disengagement, resistance, and/or backlash to equity-focused PD may stem not only from ideological opposition but also from a lack of attention to the learning environments that equity-focused PD creates for educators. Some educators disengage or reject the ideas they encounter in equity-focused PD because the PD environment fails to meet their psychological needs as learners. When educators do not feel that they are valued—when they experience explicit or implicit devaluation—in equity-focused PD, fatigue, avoidance, and resistance may emerge, even among those who strongly believe in the importance of advancing educational equity. With repeated exposure or pressure to participate in equity efforts, frustration may grow into resentment or backlash against these efforts, ultimately undermining the efficacy of equity-focused PD to create equitable outcomes.

By investigating educators' diverse belonging-related experiences and their implications for educators' engagement in equity-focused PD, this study offers a pathway for more productive efforts to advance educational equity. Rather than viewing resistance as a fixed expression of individual ideological opposition, we ask: What do educators need to feel supported and included in challenging discussions about educational inequities? How can we create environments where educators can share authentically and learn from different perspectives? Just as many equity-focused PDs ask educators to create environments that are inclusive of and foster success for all students, equity-focused PD providers are likely to improve engagement and the impact of their programs if they create environments where all educators feel like they belong and can be successful.

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