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Designing Professional Learning to Support District and School Administrators of Color

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Abstract

While a growing body of scholarship has examined professional learning communities for teachers of color, only a paucity of research has explored a community of practice (CoP) for district and school building leaders of color. This study investigated a 1.5-year CoP for traditional public school district and charter management leaders (n=27) across five geographic regions in the United States. We drew on the Equity Action Conceptual Framework and used a pre-, mid-, and post-professional learning community survey and two rounds of semi-structured interviews to understand how these leaders reported and described learning dispositions and skills to support their school systems' most historically resilient and marginalized students. We analyzed survey responses both across the professional learning community (PLC) and within the five geographic regions. Across the CoP, participants reported learning how to assess the organization's will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to disrupt inequitable policies and practices. A within-team analysis revealed that one traditional district and two charter school districts reported their greatest learning around maintaining critical social perspectives; two teams, both traditional public schools, reported their learnings related to maintaining and including critical instructional perspectives. To understand the mechanisms contributing to leaders' learnings, we asked participants to describe how the CoP supported their learning. They described how the requirement of a "small test" or an action research project requiring leaders to identify their organization's most marginalized students and redesign the necessary liberatory policies and practices needed to bring those students to the center supported their learning. We end by providing implications for future research, policy, and practice.

Keywords District leaders of color · Principals of color · Professional learning communities · Equity

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Over the last decade, as the ethnoracial composition of students in K–12 public schools across the United States has become more diverse (Gist & Bristol, 2022; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022), the teacher workforce remains relatively homogeneous. There is also an ethnoracial mismatch between students and their school leaders (Grissom et al., 2021). The percentage of school principals of color has marginally increased between 2000 and 2017 from 18% to 22% (Symonds & Hansen, 2022).

School leader ethnoracial diversity influences the experiences of both teachers and students in a school (Manchanda et al., 2024). Principals of color are more likely to hire and retain a diverse set of teachers (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023). In a systematic synthesis, two decades of literature point to a positive change in the ethnoracial demographics of teachers associated with diverse school leaders' hiring tendencies and lower teacher turnover rates (Grissom et al., 2021). A school leader's demographic background also influences student learning (Leithwood et al., 2010). Moreover, schools with larger numbers of Black principals are more likely to have Black students in gifted programs, compared to Black students in schools led by a White principal (Grissom et al., 2017). Consequently, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners continue to explore how to bolster ethnoracial diversity across the education leadership workforce (Brooks & Watson, 2019). Asian American, Black, Latine, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander superintendents comprise 0.25%, 3.85%, 2.95%, and 0.16% respectively, of the U.S. superintendent workforce (Thomas et al., 2023). There is less research on the role and training of school and district administrators (i.e., superintendents and chief academic officers) of color. Specifically, how they learn to organize their schools to support historically marginalized and resilient youth remains an unanswered question in the research literature. This study aimed to fill this empirical gap.

Despite the importance of the role of district and school building leaders in shaping the experiences and outcomes of teachers and students, little research has explored how and under which conditions professional development (PD) can support leadership practice (Cheung & Gong, 2022). PD for senior district and school building leaders is particularly beneficial, given that novice leaders are concentrated in historically disenfranchised communities, school districts, and schools (Bristol & Esboldt, 2020; Grissom et al., 2021). Moreover, there is great variability in leaders' preparation to assume their positions in the aforementioned types of school districts (Castro et al., 2018).

As K–12 educators become more ethnoracially diverse, school leaders of color (LOC) look to address long-standing issues impacting minoritized students (Flores, 2018). However, addressing these issues requires experience and training. As such, there is growing demand to expand PD centering equitable leadership practices for school and district leaders that can support teacher and student learning (Poekert et al., 2020). These equitable leadership practices focus on redressing past and present inequitable organizational policies and practices that constrain the capacity of minoritized students to move from the margins to the center (Stone-Johnson et al., 2021).

In this study, we examined a PLC for senior LOC, Equity by Design Community of Practice (ExD CoP), that trained senior school district LOC how to create

liberatory organizational change redressing inequitable district and school policies and practices. Over 19 months (January 2019–July 2020), under the facilitation of a Black female former principal, district and school leaders participated in a series of in-person and virtual convenings and site visits. The program first asked senior school district leaders to read and engage with texts about the history of race and racism in their districts. Next, participants engaged in an action research project, called a “small test” in the PD, that required leaders to identify their organization’s most marginalized students and redesign liberatory policies and practices to bring those students to the center. The ExD CoP was informed by literature on the work of district and school leaders who are uniquely positioned to create and enact equitable leadership (e.g., addressing discipline disproportionality, improving school climate, and improving teacher well-being) (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Thus, we review literature on the practices and experiences of school LOC. While diversity challenges exist in both the teaching force and school leadership, this paper primarily focuses on school leadership diversity which, in turn, impacts teacher diversity (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Despite limited literature on the training of superintendents or district leaders (White, 2023), this study adds to the research on social justice leadership.

Literature Review

This literature review illustrates the importance of equity in school leadership. The first topic draws attention to school leadership pathways for Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) educators. The contributions of LOC, and their relationship with teacher and student outcomes, are featured in the second section. The final section explores the role of professional learning for school and district LOC to facilitate the design and implementation of equitable policies and practices.

Education Leaders’ Pathways into and Out of the Profession

While this study explored one professional learning experience for district and school leaders, particularly school LOC, it is important to understand these educators’ pathways into and out of the profession. Researchers have expressed concern about the rising rate of principal turnover. In 2020–2021, approximately 6% of principals left their schools; in 2021–2020, about 16% principals left (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023). In some states, superintendent retention rates ranged from 65–80% and, based on National Center of Education Statistics Common Core of Data, the turnover rate is about 16%, which has significantly increased since the 2019–2020 school year (White, 2023).

The increasing ethnoracial diversity of school principals has not kept pace with the growing ethnoracial diversity in U.S. public schools (Grissom et al., 2021). One study described the school principal pipeline as “leaky” because the number of students of color graduating from secondary school and entering higher education has been static, and it has been difficult to retain teachers of color who often start their in-service career in a high-needs school with inexperienced school leaders (Fuller &

Young, 2022). Additionally, Perrone (2022) noted the blatant discrimination in the pipeline to the principalship because in-service teachers are often “tapped” for principalship by race-congruent school leaders. Once people of color begin their principal preparation, barriers to their advancement occur through workplace discrimination and lack of mentorship (Perrone, 2022). However, tracking this phenomenon remains difficult due to data scarcity. Robust data on the trajectories of school leaders disaggregated by race do not exist; even less is known about the pathways into and out of the profession for district leaders.

Benefits of School Leaders of Color

As of the 2020–2021 school year, 77% of U.S. public school principals were White, 10% Black, 9% Latine, and 3% other races (Taie & Lewis, 2022). As the student population and public-school leadership continue to diversify ethnoracially, a small but growing body of research has explored the experiences and capacity of LOC to create equitable outcomes for students of color (Waite & Wilkerson, 2023). This literature is focused on school leaders’ impact on various school community members, such as students and teachers, and suggests that their demographic backgrounds shape their leadership decisions (Nganga & Jamison, 2023).

Leaders’ Influence on the Teacher Workforce

A review of 38 studies on the outcomes of racially diverse and/or women school leaders found a small body of evidence that examined their relationship with diversifying the teacher workforce (Perrone, 2022). Black principals were more likely to hire and retain Black teachers, compared to White teachers. Further, when examining teacher applicants’ qualifications, classroom observation scores, and other indicators of effectiveness, researchers found principals hired same-race teachers in a manner that did not bias them towards hiring “lesser quality” candidates (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023). Moreover, Bartanen and Grissom suggested that Asian American teachers were less likely to leave the profession when they were in school led by an Asian American principal, compared to a principal of another race. Teacher turnover has also been explored through public school records in Missouri and Tennessee where Black teachers were less likely to leave under a Black principal, although this was only statistically significant for teachers in Tennessee (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023). This relationship does not always hold. When compared to having a White principal, one study found that Latina teachers had a higher probability of leaving schools led by Latina principals (Viano et al., 2023). Of note is that principals of all races with fewer years of experience tend to serve “high-needs” or “high-poverty” schools; this has implications for teachers’ achievement and organizational conditions (White, 2023). A recommended method for addressing principal attrition is collecting more employment data across principal careers to understand the trajectories of school LOC (Fuller & Young, 2022).

Another key finding from the literature on ethnoracially diverse women school leaders and teachers is the relationship between demographic matching and job satisfaction (Perrone, 2022). Teachers who were the same race and gender as their

principals reported positive perceptions of how their principal communicated and supported the state of discipline in the school (Viano et al., 2023). A policy brief on the state of racial diversity also identified relationality, mentorship, and social justice practices as unique skills that reduce teacher turnover (Castro et al., 2018). Overall, these positive teacher outcomes were seen frequently but inconsistently across racial groups, suggesting the need for more research to understand the nuances of race- and gender-congruence for teachers and principals (Perrone, 2022; Viano et al., 2023).

While some researchers have made connections between diverse school leaders and the increased likelihood that students of color will have same-race teachers (Bartanen & Grissom, 2023), others have problematized the “unfair treatment” of teachers of color (Perrone, 2022). The same body of research highlighting how teachers of color are more satisfied with diverse school leaders also found that White teachers and race-noncongruent teachers reported less satisfaction with diverse school leaders (Perrone, 2022). This suggests that mapping the differences between racially diverse and White school leaders and their teachers is complicated.

School Leaders’ Role with Outcomes of Historically Marginalized and Resilient Students

District and school LOC are also significant contributors to the academic and behavioral outcomes of K–12 students (Jang & Alexander, 2022; Shirrell et al., 2023). Along with achievement, school leaders are central to disciplinary trends and school climate, as explored in previous research on various student outcomes (DeMatthews et al., 2017). Leadership practices have little effect on student outcomes (e.g., academic scores, students’ learning attitudes) across many grade levels, types of leadership positions, and school performance levels (Tan et al., 2021). Moreover, a goal of providing equity training for school and district leaders is to redesign their top-down mechanisms of promoting social change. The ethnoracial composition of a school’s leadership can influence the experiences of teachers of color and the school’s social justice climate (Cheung & Gong, 2022). As a result, minoritized students thrive under transformational leadership, as detected by indicators of academic success and behavioral management (Gooden et al., 2018).

Research is growing on the types of schools led by racially diverse school leaders and whether these leaders are motivated to serve minoritized students (Rodriguez et al., 2016; Tillman & Scheurich, 2013). Using nationally representative data from the High School Longitudinal Studies of 2009, Jang and Alexander (2022) examined the role of Black women principals in 9th grade math achievement. Notably, Black principals served significantly higher percentages of minoritized students, compared to White principals, regardless of neighborhood. Their analysis revealed that a principal’s race or gender alone was not associated with math achievement, but the math achievement of all 9th graders was significantly higher when they had a Black woman principal, compared to a principal of another race and gender (Jang & Alexander, 2022). Furthermore, racially diverse leaders were also found to improve academic outcomes for minoritized students, increase diversity in gifted programs, and report higher parental involvement in the school (Perrone, 2022). The policy brief on leadership diversity emphasized that diverse school leaders maintain higher

attendance rates for students of color and less racial disproportionality in special education (Castro et al., 2018). This recent evidence suggests that school LOC transcend barriers to policy implementation, create positive school climate, and carry other sociopolitical agendas in service of improving student outcomes.

One area of research receiving considerable attention is school leaders' role in enacting exclusionary policies for historically resilient and marginalized students (Welsh, 2023). Using student and school leader demographic data from Texas public schools from 2014 to 2018, researchers compared rates of in-school suspensions by geographical school area and student race (Edwards et al., 2023). Black students had the highest percentages of suspensions, especially in small town and rural schools, and were most likely to be suspended across geographical contexts. In an analysis of student–leader race-matching, Black and White principals were found to suspend Black students at similar rates and, in certain contexts, Black principals were more likely to suspend Black students (Edwards et al., 2023). These findings were only found in race-matching for Black and White groups, not for Asian American and Latine groups. Similarly, Bartanen and Grissom (2023) found no evidence for the benefits of race-matching on reducing student suspensions.

While some studies suggest that principal race does not always ameliorate short-term disciplinary outcomes for students of color, other studies found that school LOC tend to use alternative disciplinary practices that decenter problematic, zero-tolerance policies—a byproduct of their cultural competency (Castro et al., 2018). If supported with multicultural and equity training, school leaders, particularly LOC, may develop and deepen their capacity to address disciplinary inequities (Murakami et al., 2016). These professional learning opportunities have the potential to grow school leaders' critical consciousness in service of creating organizational contexts in which the school's vision to support equity produces equitable student outcomes (Waite, 2021).

Developing Leaders of Color

School improvement efforts have historically focused on developing the capacity of teachers to facilitate student learning (Blazar, 2020; Cohen & Wiseman, 2022). While the school building and district leaders play critical roles in developing an ecosystem that can support schools (Johnson, 2020), there has been less scholarship on developing the capacity of these leaders through professional learning opportunities. Future directions in school leadership literature suggest the need for culturally-responsive and transformative approaches, critical race theory, and other social justice emphases in preparation programs (Castro et al., 2018; Grissom et al., 2021).

Stone-Johnson and colleagues (2021) explored the influence of attitudes towards equity in a sample of 77 predominately White and female district leadership coaches and preservice candidates. Almost 30% reported a neutral attitude or disagreed with the existence of educational inequality, 30% believed addressing inequity was unimportant, and 44% were neutral or agreed that immigrant students should assimilate to American culture. By contrast, most participants enjoyed working with ethnoracially diverse students and valued bilingual education (Stone-Johnson et al., 2021). Thus, the way the question and goal are framed matters; although some educators were less concerned about equity, most wanted to work with diverse students. One take-

away, then, could be that when professional learning centers improving student outcomes, White educators may support buy-in. Moreover, when professional learning for school leaders specifies actions and goals as based in equity, these educators have clear direction on how to implement organizational change (Rigby & Tegway, 2015). Thus, preparation programs and professional learning opportunities should develop the dispositions and skills for district and school leaders to design equitable policies and practices (Poekert et al., 2020).

Equity Action Conceptual Framework

The Equity Action Conceptual Framework (EACF), developed by Cheung et al. (2020), provides individual and collective guidance on equitable leadership practices for district and school leaders, focusing on self-assessment, reflection, and professional learning. EACF provides guidance for leaders to operationalize equitable and liberatory leadership in their specific context. PD support providers can draw on EACF to develop the capacity of district and school leaders to recognize how equitable practices are integrated, prioritized, and normalized into their organization. The framework is divided into three dimensions: (a) maintaining critical social perspectives, (b) maintaining critical instructional practices, and (c) strategizing for organizational change (see Fig. 1). Here, we focus on Dimension 1, Maintaining Critical Social Perspectives, which we argue is the foundational component of developing a school system or school with the capacity to enact a liberatory and equitable learning environment to move historically resilient students from the margins to the organization's center. Developing the critical awareness and perspectives of school and district leaders is foundational to establishing the enabling organizational conditions that design and enact equitable policies and practices (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Within each of the three EACF dimensions are three levels that are either intra- or interpersonal: (a) emerging practice (intrapersonal); (b) practicing in public (interpersonal and occasionally practiced with other organization members); and (c) norming the culture (interpersonal and consistently practiced throughout the organization).

Dimension 1: Maintaining Critical Social Perspectives

This dimension comprises four areas that operate at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels for district and school leaders; leaders cannot design equitable policies and practices externally if they have not developed a set of dispositions to do so (Leithwood et al., 2010). After developing these dispositions, leaders can begin to create the enabling policies and practices that bring historically resilient students from the margins to the center. These intrapersonal dispositions and interpersonal skills for district and school leaders include one's capacity to: (a) analyze the dynamics of power and privilege, (b) develop emotional acuity, (c) promote reflective practice, and (d) build collective knowledge of critical perspectives.

		Emerging (Individual practice) As <i>a leader for equity, I...</i>	Practicing in Public (Selected practice with others) <i>In my leadership work with others, I/We ...</i>	Norming the Culture (Consistent organizational practice) <i>In my leadership work with others, I/We ...</i>
Dimension 1: Maintaining and Including Critical Social Perspectives	A: Analyze the Dynamics of Power and Privilege	- Identify and discuss my relative power and privilege with respect to identity and leadership position - Remain open to examining my personal power and privilege in the context and in society	- Analyze and articulate the consequences of patterns related to individual power and privilege - Identify and articulate how existing practices, policies, or culture reinforce inequitable patterns related to power and privilege	- Develop, implement, and monitor systems for regularly examining how to diminish the effects of power and privilege with key leaders - Develop and practice a norm of ceding power so that hierarchies are flattened and the most marginalized lead
	B: Develop Emotional Acuity	- Personally identify and analyze emotional contributions to the social dynamic, including responses to successes, achievements, mistakes, disappointment, and setbacks - Identify and analyze others' responses to me - Personally identify areas of growth related to anticipating emotional responses	- Choose appropriate emotional responses to situations - Analyze and articulate the dimensions of situational awareness - Create conditions so that emotional responses are not a barrier to change - Collectively analyze individual and collective affective dispositions in building a positive, supportive, and culturally consonant community.	- Build the capacity of key leaders to understand how individual emotions contribute to the group dynamic - Support key leaders to develop high degrees of situational awareness
	C: Promote Reflective Practice	- Take personal learning risks to improve practice - Develop systems for personal reflective practice - Solicit feedback from others and use feedback to reflect upon my practice - Reflect on the ways my vision is compromised by the bureaucratic structures - Constructively analyze myself and situation and adjust to address barriers to change	- Identify and articulate how leader actions and vision intersect with constituents - Develop systems for feedback and internalizing reflective practice - Demonstrate ability to implement improvementsⁱⁱⁱ	- Build and sustain infrastructure that allows key leaders to regularly reflect on practice - Engage in regular reflection about the degree to which one's vision of leadership is actualized in present context
Dimension 1:	D: Build Collective Knowledge of Critical Perspectives	- Use critical perspectives to personally analyze how institutions and systems reproduce inequity - Personally identify practices that interrupt institutions and systems from reproducing inequity - Seek personal support and learning opportunities to develop additional critical perspectives - Personally practice disrupting deficit thinking and language in ways that provoke change	- Adapt, translate, and effectively use critical perspectives in the context to catalyze change - Regularly address deficit thinking and actions - Support others in developing critical perspectives^{iv}	- Develop a more inclusive culture through the expansion of critical perspectives - Increase the engagement of historically absent voices to expand understanding and dialogue about diversity and equity issues

Fig. 1 Equity by design conceptual framework (Dimension 1: Maintaining Critical Social Perspectives)

Analyze Dynamics of Power and Privilege

To create the enabling conditions in an organization, a district and/or school leader should analyze the state of power and privilege within their organization through intrapersonal exploration (Skrla et al., 2009). Leaders, over time, should be able to identify and verbalize their relative power and privilege as related to identity and their leadership role. District and school leaders should remain open to self-examining their power and privilege within the context of their organization and the greater society.

As district and school leaders begin to develop intrapersonal dispositions, they can move to practice in public with a select group of members in the organization what it means to analyze dynamics of power and privilege (Bryk et al., 2010). For example, leaders must begin to work with others to analyze and articulate the consequences of patterns related to individual power and privilege and how ongoing practices, policies, or culture reinforce inequitable patterns. After developing and enacting these emerging practices, district and school leaders should begin to normalize equitable policies and practices in the organization by working with other members across the district and in the school. Thus, leaders can develop and sustain organizational

practices that develop, implement, and monitor systems that examine ways to diminish the effects of power and privilege in key leaders. Ultimately, one primary goal for leaders working to analyze dynamics of power and privilege is to develop and practice a norm of ceding power so that hierarchies are flattened and the most marginalized lead.

Develop Emotional Acuity

Also central to maintaining critical social perspectives is the school leader's capacity to develop their own emotional acuity as well as the emotional acuity of other adults in the organization (Bandura, 2000). Developing emotional acuity requires leaders to learn to recognize and analyze emotional contributions to the social dynamics of their organization, including responses to any outcomes, like successes, achievements, mistakes, disappointments, and setbacks. Along with identifying and making sense of others' responses to their actions and other forms of communication, district and school leaders should identify their areas of growth related to anticipating emotional responses.

As district and school leaders develop intrapersonal dispositions around emotional acuity, they now have the capacity to enact interpersonal practices that demonstrate emotional acuity. For example, leaders must be able to support colleagues in choosing appropriate emotional responses to situations and verbalizing the dimension of situational awareness. Leaders should work with others to create conditions so that emotional responses are not a barrier to organizational change. Also, leaders should analyze both individual and collective effective dispositions that build a positive, supportive, and culturally consonant community (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Over time, as an indication that they have developed the emotional acuity to transform their organizations, school and district leaders can then build the capacity to understand how individual emotions contribute to the group dynamic and organizational culture. Finally, district and school leaders should support their colleagues to develop high degrees of situational awareness and other skills that facilitate emotional acuity.

Promote Reflective Practice

The third area central to maintaining critical social perspectives is promoting reflective practice within the organization (Brill, 2009). At the intrapersonal level, district and school leaders must take personal learning risks and ask for feedback from others to use and reflect on within their practice. Intrapersonal skills around reflective practice also include a consideration of how leaders' visions are compromised by bureaucratic structures. Additionally, district and school leaders must work individually to self-reflect constructively and adjust to address barriers to change.

As district and school leaders develop intrapersonal dispositions around promoting reflective practice, they will have the capacity to begin enacting practices with some team members such as collaborating with others to learn how actions and vision intersect with other people in their organization. District and school leaders will also create systems for feedback and internalizing reflective practice as well as demonstrate an ability to implement improvements (Skrla et al., 2009). As an indication

that they are moving to transform the organization to promote reflective practice, school and district leaders will be able to build and sustain an infrastructure that permits them to reflect regularly on how their practice and enacted policies enable and constrain achieving the organization's mission. It is also expected that leaders consistently engage in reflection on the degree to which one's vision of leadership is actualized in the present context.

Build Collective Knowledge of Critical Perspectives

The final area of maintaining critical social perspectives is the intrapersonal and interpersonal capacity of district and school leaders to build collective knowledge of critical perspectives. Intrapersonally, leaders should use critical perspectives to analyze personally how institutions and systems reproduce inequity as well as identify practices interrupting the reproduction of inequities (Dana, 2009). Leaders must seek personal support and learning opportunities to enhance their critical perspectives and personally practice disrupting deficit thinking and language to provoke change.

As district and school leaders develop intrapersonal dispositions around building collective knowledge of critical perspectives, they should begin to enact skills with other organizational members that include adapting, translating, and effectively using critical perspectives to catalyze change. Moreover, these leaders will regularly address deficit thinking and actions and support others with developing their critical perspectives. To create organizational transformation to sustain critical perspectives, district and school leaders develop a more inclusive culture by expanding critical perspectives. They will also increase the engagement of historically absent voices to expand understanding and dialogue about diversity and equity issues.

EACF outlines the intrapersonal dispositions and interpersonal skills that district and school leaders should develop to design and enact equitable policies and practices that bring historically resilient students from the margins to the center. To understand how district and school leaders learn to design and enact equitable policies, we examine a PLC for senior district LOC (i.e., district superintendents of color, charter management executive directors, and their respective deputies) and school LOC (i.e., principals) that centered on developing the capacity of these leaders to design and enact equitable policies for their most marginalized students. Specifically, we asked the following research question:

To what degree do school district leaders of color describe learning dispositions and skills to change policies and practices aimed at closing persistent opportunity gaps after participating in a professional learning community?

Method

We drew on the Equity by Design Conceptual Framework and use a pre-, mid-, and post-PLC survey (Chambers & Skinner, 2003) and semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 1998) to explore how 27 senior district LOC and primarily school LOC, across three traditional public schools and two charter management organizations, reported designing and enacting policies and practices to improve learning and socioemotional

outcomes for the most historically resilient students in the district after participating in a PLC. This study was part of a larger study aimed at understanding how education leaders who participated in a PLC learned to design and implement equitable policies and practices to close persistent opportunity gaps for historically resilient students.

Study Setting

A national foundation invited superintendents of color in traditional public schools and executive directors of charter management organizations of color to participate in a PLC that would build their capacity to reduce teacher turnover. The choice to invite both traditional public-school districts and charter management organizations to learn together was intentional. Although contentious ongoing debates characterize the rise of charter schools as undermining traditional public schools (Jabbar et al., 2022), charter schools play a role in improving outcomes for students of color from working-class families (Raymond et al., 2023).

An aim of the PLC, also referred to as the ExD CoP, was to provide senior district LOC and their leadership team with the dispositions and skills to design equitable policies and practices for their districts' most marginalized students. The CoP occurred over 19 months (January 2019–July 2020). The central task for each of the five school systems was to create an action research project, which the facilitator named as a “small test,” that required senior district leaders to (a) investigate the policies and practices that kept the organization's most resilient students at the margins; and (b) redesign the necessary liberatory policies and practices to bring those students to the center.

The CoP was comprised of senior district LOC from five school districts in the Midwest, Southwest, and East Coast, all serving predominantly students of color who qualified for free or reduced lunch (see Table 1). The largest school district in the CoP was Longhorn School District (all names are pseudonyms). Longhorn, a traditional public school in Texas, has a student population of 85,000, 90% of whom self-identified as students of color. The second largest district in the CoP was Arch Public School District in Missouri. Also, a traditional public school district, Arch has 20,000 students, 86% of whom were students of color. Mills Public School District in Massachusetts serves 16,000 students, 90% of whom self-identified as students of color. Two charter school networks also participated in the CoP: The No Excuses Charter Network in Georgia serves 4,600 students, all of whom identified as students

Table 1 Student Demographics of Community of Practice School Districts

	Mills public school district	Arch public schools	Long- horn school district	No excuses charter network	Rio grande charter network
# of Students	16,000	20,000	85,000	4600	2000
% Students of Color	90%	86%	90%	100%	96%
% Students receiving free or re- duced lunch	60%	72%	86%	96%	85%

of color; and the Rio Grande Charter Network in Texas serves 2,000 students, 96% of whom identified as students of color.

Study Sample

The members of each CoP were the most senior district officials. As such, the superintendent in each of the traditional public-school districts and the executive director for each charter management organization participated in the CoP. In addition to the most senior leaders, each district team included members of the senior leader's cabinet as well as one school building leader. It is important to note that most CoP members self-identified as persons of color (see Table 2).

Data Collection

Data from the larger project were collected from three sources: three rounds of surveys to each participant in the CoP; two rounds of semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 1988) with CoP members as well as the facilitator ($n=27$); and observations of the CoP, totaling 70 hours. We administered three surveys over the course of the CoP: one pre-survey in January 2019, a mid-point survey in January 2020, and a post-survey in July 2020. Each survey contained approximately 46 items. During each survey administration, we asked the same questions. Moreover, each survey item was aligned with one of the three levels within one of the three dimensions in the EACF (e.g., As a leader for equity, I assess the will, skill, knowledge, and capacity of the organization to disrupt inequitable policies and practices). CoP members responded to each survey item using a Likert Scale (i.e., strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree).

Additionally, the first round of semi-structured interviews focused on district leaders' professional background experiences, current equity challenges in their district, and reflections on participating in a race-based PLC for senior district LOC. The second round of interviews focused on senior LOC reflecting on the pre-, mid-, and post-survey analysis for their district. We asked leaders to predict how their team responded to survey items that showed the greatest positive shift from pre- to post-survey. We then presented each interviewee with a visualization (see graphs in Find-

Table 2 Demographics of Community of Practice Participants

District	Mills public school district (n=4)	Arch public schools (n=5)	Longhorn school district(n=7)	No excuses charter network (n=5)	Rio grande Charter Network (n=6)	Total(n=27)
Race/ethnicity						
Asian	0	0	0	1	1	2
Black	2	4	4	4	3	17
Latine	0	0	2	0	2	4
White	2	1	1	0	0	4
Gender (%)						
Women	66	80	71	80	83	78
Men	33	20	29	20	17	22

ings) and asked participants if they saw themselves represented and the degree to which the visualization represented their experiences in the CoP.

Finally, we observed three in-person CoP convenings; each convening occurred over 2 days. Data collection occurred at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the remaining convenings became virtual. We then observed 19 virtual sessions; two included all members of the CoP, while the remaining 17 sessions were either with individual district teams or with role-alike members across teams (e.g., superintendents and CMO executive directors). In total, data collection took place over 20 months (January 2019–August 2020).

Data Analysis

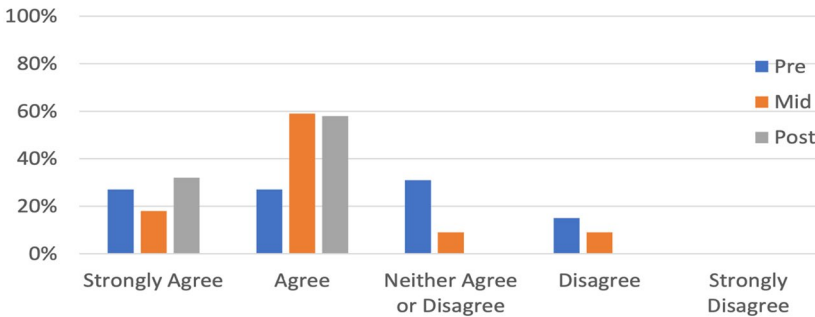
We analyzed survey responses by using a mean average for each item. Specifically, we explored similarities and differences across the CoP and within each team. To understand the degree to which participants learned a set of dispositions and skills to create liberatory environments through the design of equitable policies and practices, we paid particular attention to survey items across the CoP and within teams in which participants reported the greatest shift between pre- and post-survey. Here, we explore the greatest shifts to survey items in Dimension 1 of the EACF—Maintaining Critical Social Perspectives.

For the semi-structured interviews, we began by reading the transcribed interviews and Contact Summary Forms (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to develop a sense of the transcripts' meaning (Creswell, 2009). We used MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, to organize interviews for analysis by creating codes. The codes allowed us to attribute meaning to the qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We identified patterns around what senior district LOC learned in the CoP and how they learned in the CoP to design equitable policies and practices for their school systems' most historically marginalized and resilient students.

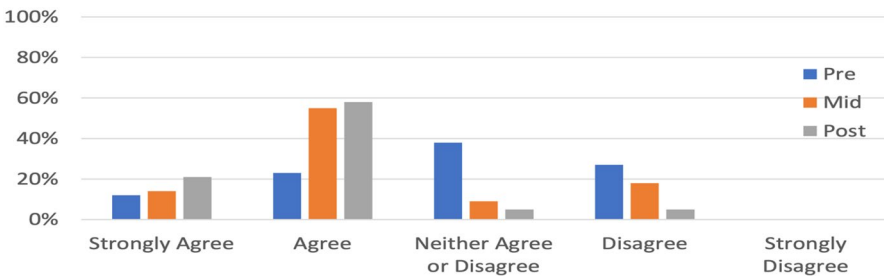
Findings

We analyzed the pre-, mid-, and post-surveys administered to each of the ExD CoP participants ($n=27$) over the 1.5-year CoP to understand the degree to which these leaders reported changing policies and practices aimed at closing persistent opportunity gaps after participating in a PLC. While we initially present two items across the CoP in which senior district LOC reported the greatest shifts in their responses, we focused this section on an analysis of three teams: Longhorn School District, No Excuses Charter School, and Rio Grande Charter School. These three teams (one traditional public school and two charter management organizations) reported the greatest shifts on Dimension 1 of the EACF, which we argue is the foundational dimension for school systems and schools to design and enact liberatory environments for historically resilient students.

As a leader for equity, I...assess the will, skill, knowledge, and capacity of the organization to disrupt inequitable policies and practices



Graph 1 Equity by design community of practice (n=27)



Graph 2 Equity by design community of practice pre-, mid-, and post-survey response (n=27).

Greatest Shift in Mindsets/Beliefs

The greatest shift on the survey item across the three administrations for the 27 senior district and school leaders was in participants' attitudes towards assessing the organization's will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to disrupt inequitable policies and practices. After participating in the 1.5-year ExD CoP, participants reported that their greatest learning was in this area (see Graph 1). Before the CoP, slightly more than 40% reported being able to assess their organization's capacity to disrupt inequitable policies and practices; by the end of the CoP, 100% reported having the skill and knowledge to disrupt inequitable policies and practices.

The second greatest reported shift in participants' perceptions about the ExD was for the question on developing a theory of change to disrupt inequitable policies and practices based on an analysis of data (see Graph 2). Before the CoP, approximately 30% of participants believed they engaged in a theory of change to disrupt inequitable policies and practices; by the end of the CoP, the percentage increased to 80%.

To further underscore how senior education leaders reported changing policies and practices aimed at closing persistent opportunity gaps after participating in a PLC, we used data visualizations (see Fig. 2), specifically a word cloud, from words in the items across all three surveys that highlighted the greatest positive shifts in



Fig. 2 Word cloud of positive shifts in equity by design community of practice

participants' learning. Words such as "power" and "gap" featured most prominently in the word cloud.

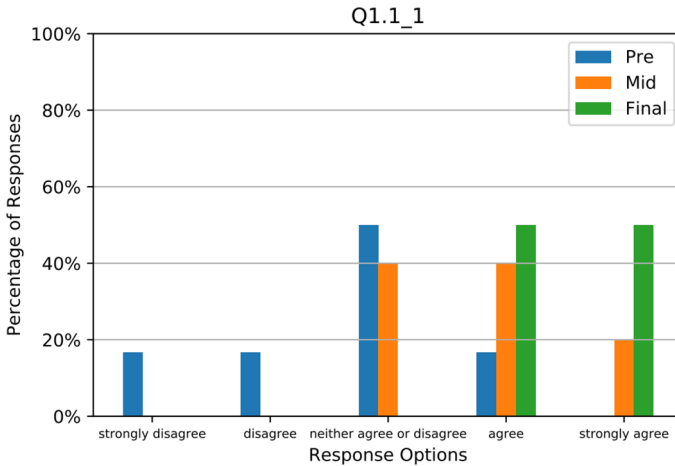
Our findings about participants' reporting the greatest shifts in their learning around developing a theory of change and the skill, will, and knowledge to disrupt inequitable policies and practices illuminated the data visualization around the most reoccurring item words for items with the greatest participant response change such as "gap" and "power." Moreover, as we posited in the EACF (Cheung et al., 2020), central to a district and school leader's capacity to learn how to create equitable learning environments is their capacity to understand the dynamics of power and privilege.

Within the Community of Practice

As noted above, beyond analyzing in the aggregate the greatest shifts in the skills and dispositions across the 27-member CoP, we also conducted a within-case analysis to understand the greatest shifts in behavior reported by senior education leaders in each district or charter management organization.

The Longhorn School District served the largest number of students (85,000) in the CoP. The greatest shift over the 1.5 years for the district's CoP members was in their increased capacity to identify and discuss "my relative power and privilege with respect to identity and leadership position." At the beginning of the CoP, approximately 82% of Longhorn participants indicated they strongly disagreed, disagreed, or were neutral about prioritizing an understanding of their power and privilege as related to their leadership positions (see Graph 3). It is important to note that when compared to other senior district leaders from the other CoPs, Longhorn participants were the only ones to disagree on this item during the pre-CoP administration. At the end of the CoP, *all* participants agreed or strongly agreed that they acknowledged their power and privilege in their daily leadership practices.

Given that the study's design included semi-structured interviews, insights from CoP participants drew attention to the mechanisms that informed why no Longhorn leader reported discussing their relative power and privilege with respect to identity and leadership position at the start of the convening to 100% agreeing at the end of the CoP. For example, one senior Black woman leader who serves in a policy role in the district described herself as "the Black woman in leadership [that] White people are comfortable with. I can be your token person." This leader added that her colleagues may view her as though "really she's like a White person." However, this senior Black woman leader described how she initiated a conversation about White privilege with her colleagues, recognizing that it has been



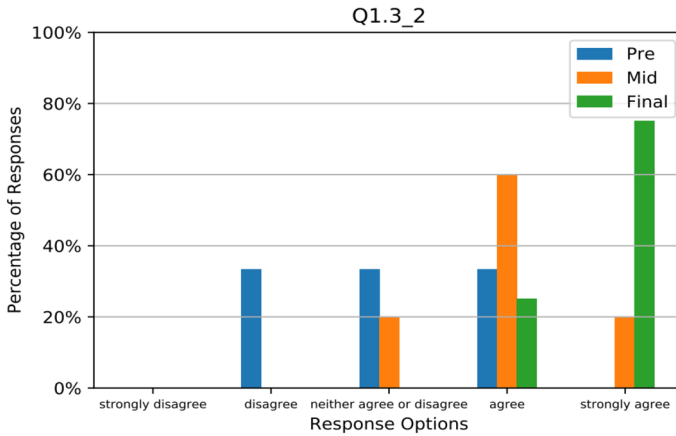
Graph 3 Longhorn school district pre-, mid-, and post-survey response (n=7). As a leader for equity, I identify and discuss my relative power and privilege with respect to identity and leadership position

mostly negative for me, but it's been a positive also because those White individuals have been in authority and power and liked me because I [am] close to what you think a person should be. I've gotten positions because of that, so that's worked in my favor, but that doesn't make me feel good. I never really thought of it at the time, but since Equity by Design, I know that that's been the case.

For this Lonestar senior district leader, participating in the CoP provided a way of understanding not only her White colleagues' power and privilege, but also her assumption of some aspect of her own power in the district, by making White "people feel comfortable."

The second greatest positive shift from pre- to post-survey administration for members of the Lonestar CoP was around creating systems or structures for reflective practice. Before the CoP, approximately 60% of participants were neutral or disagreed on developing systems for reflective practice (see Graph 4). At the end of the CoP, 100% either agreed or strongly agreed to develop systems for reflective practice. For example, the district's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) director, a Black woman, described how by participating in the CoP she became aware that her team members may have had different perspectives about the achieving elements of the district's goals:

It was an opportunity to hear and sometimes even in Longhorn before we talk about listening to others which was very helpful and we were all on the call together, just to hear what you are all doing. Are we on the right track, does this make sense? Even though they were on the team, we may not have been talking about [the same thing], we all had different seats in the district...so what are we doing?



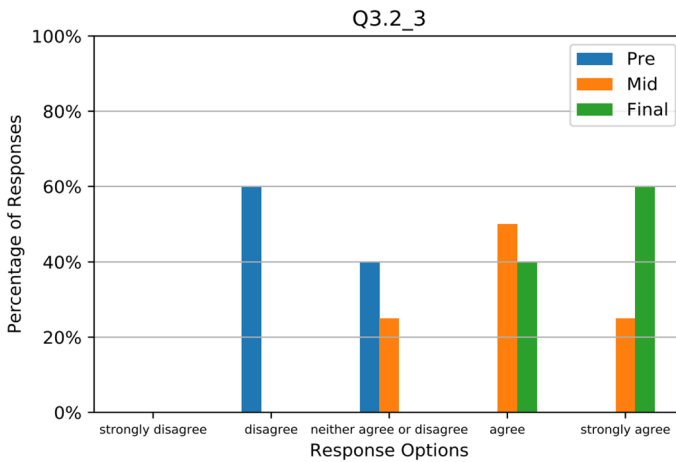
Graph 4 Longhorn school district pre-, mid-, and post-survey response (n = 7). As a leader for equity, I develop systems for reflective practice.

One primary learning, according to three survey administrations and interviews with Lonestar senior district leaders, was the need to engage in reflective practice.

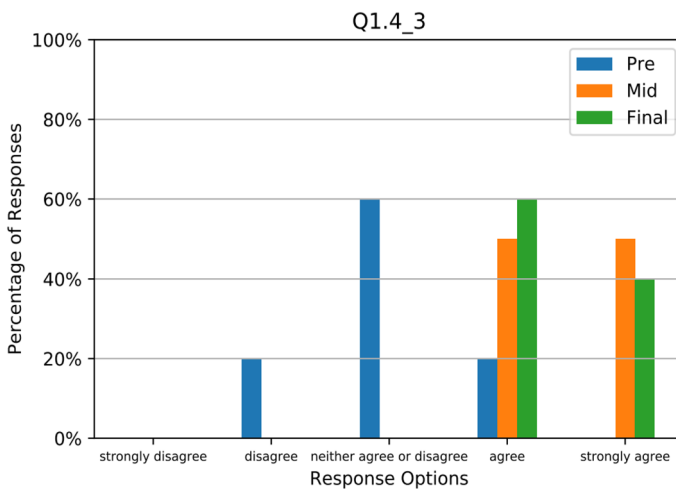
No Excuses Charter Network

The No Excuses Charter Network is one of the nation's largest charter management organizations. During the first survey administration, before the start of the CoP, 60% and 40% of senior charter leaders disagreed or were neutral, respectively, on engaging in the development of a theory of change to disrupt inequitable policies and practices based on an analysis of data (see Graph 5). At the end of the CoP, all participants agreed they were engaging in theory of change, informed by evidence, to disrupt inequitable policies and practices. In fact, 60% of the No Excuses Charter leaders strongly agreed to using this practice after participating in the CoP.

When asked about their primary learnings to create conditions for liberatory change or conditions that would create more equitable outcomes for the organization's most marginalized students, senior charter leaders pointed to the CoP's requirement about engaging in a "small test." As noted, the CoP facilitator required the five teams to design a "small test" or an action research project that created policies and practices to bring the most disenfranchised students from the margins to the center. The Asian American executive director noted that the CoP leadership team was comprised of all people of color who were leading a district that was 100% students of color. Thus, the LOC made assumptions, based on their fictive kinship, about what they believed students of color needed. As the executive director noted, "As a team of all people of color who mostly have proximity to being on the margins growing up, we no longer are on the margins. And so, assumptions versus actual proximity, we needed to create processes to not assume." She added how, during one leadership meeting that occurred during their CoP



Graph 5 No excuses charter network pre-, mid-, and post-survey response (n=5). As a leader for equity, I... - Engage in the development of a theory of change to disrupt inequitable policies and practices based on an analysis of evidence/data



Graph 6 No excuses charter network pre-, mid-, and post-survey response (n=5). As a leader for equity, I seek support and learning opportunities to develop additional critical perspectives

participation, another leadership team member inquired: “Did you ask the most vulnerable person?” Engaging in the small test or action research project supported senior district leaders in this network to engage in developing a theory of change to disrupt inequitable policies and practices based on analysis of evidence.

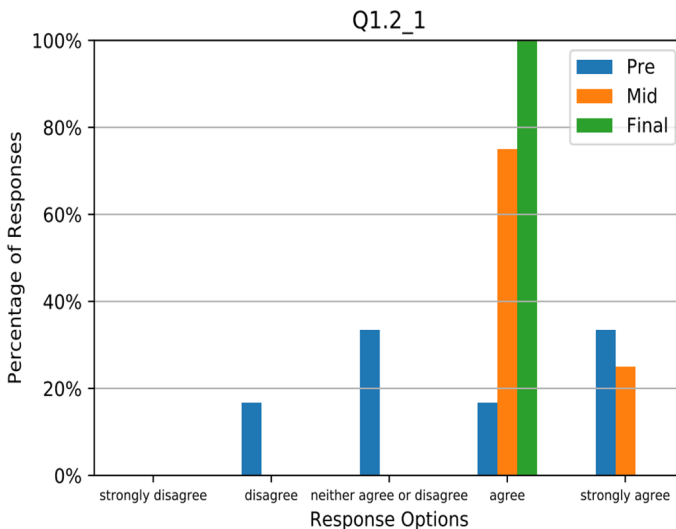
The second positive shift reported by senior leaders in the No Excuses Charter Network was on the survey question around seeking support and learning opportunities to develop additional critical perspectives. Before the CoP, 60% reported being neutral on this survey item (see Graph 6). After the CoP, 60% and 40% agreed and

strongly agreed, respectively, that they sought support around learning opportunities to expand their critical awareness. For example, a Black woman principal of an elementary school in the No Excuses Network shared that she began to develop closer partnerships with families after participating in the CoP: “So understanding your job truly as a partnership with families and not something that you’re doing for them or like, as a service, you know, I think that’s probably the most important lesson I learned that year in terms of how to walk into work as a school leader.” Central to the project of developing one’s intrapersonal capacity to design equitable policies and practices is learning the disposition of seeking support and engaging in learning opportunities to develop additional critical perspectives (Cheung et al., 2020). This principal learned, through participating in the CoP, that her role as a leader required meaningful partnerships with families to create learning conditions that supported all students.

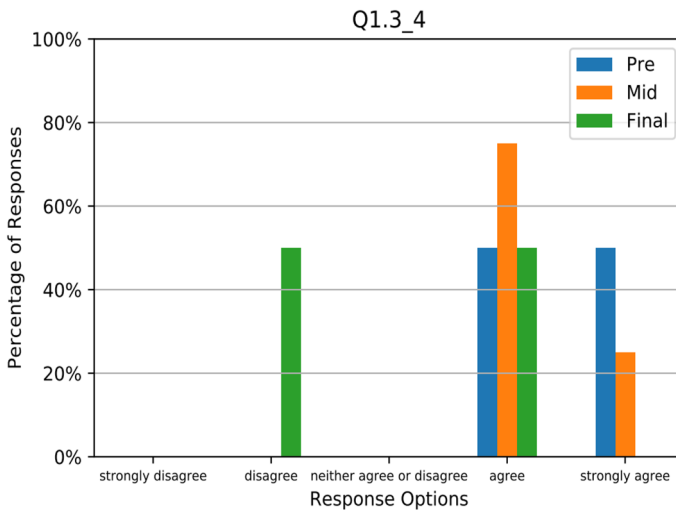
Rio Grande Charter Network

The Rio Grande Charter Network is one of its state’s largest charter management organizations. Before the CoP, slightly less than half of senior leaders reported identifying and analyzing emotional contributions to the social dynamic, including responses to successes, achievements, mistakes, disappointments, and setbacks (see Graph 7). At the end of the CoP, all participants agreed they had the capacity to see and make sense of how their emotions shaped their responses to positive and challenging experiences in the organization.

An analysis of one Rio Grande leader, a Black woman who directs the organization’s DEI efforts, illuminated how her emotional acuity developed in the CoP to lead



Graph 7 Rio grande charter network pre-, mid-, and post-survey response. As a leader for equity, I identify and analyze emotional contributions to the social dynamic, including responses to successes, achievements, mistakes, disappointments, and setbacks



Graph 8 Rio grande charter network pre-, mid-, and post-survey response. As a leader for equity, I reflect on the ways leader vision is compromised by the bureaucratic structures

liberatory change. Specifically, this senior charter school leader described that her learning came from observing the CoP's facilitator:

Centering the conversation, centering the examples, the story around race and around being Black in particular. But what I think is so fascinating about the way that [the CoP facilitator] does it and that it's from a place of liberation. I've been in spaces where I have designed and even done things from a place of trauma and healing. And I think what has been special about this particular [CoP] convening has been me being able to really seek it and engage it and be in it from a place of liberation.

Here, the director of Rio Grande Charter's DEI efforts described how it was less the content from the CoP and more its enactment that served as a model for how to channel one's emotions to support the learning of others.

Another change in this network's senior education leaders over the CoP was the degree to which they reflected on how a leader's vision could be compromised by bureaucratic structures. Before the CoP began, participants all agreed or strongly agreed about the role of bureaucracy in compromising leaders' vision (see Graph 8). However, at the end of the CoP, seemingly contradictory, 50% agreed and 50% disagreed about reflecting on how one's leadership is compromised by bureaucracy.

An examination of CoP members' experiences provide important insights into senior charter leaders' survey responses. For example, the Latine executive director noted: "I would have assumed and operated that bureaucracy is over there. And then as I went through the CoP and worked with my principals, in many ways, I was the bureaucracy for them.... I increased my awareness around the power I have around creating obstacles or challenges for people." The executive director's experiences supported the change that some CoP members reported around her awareness of and

then removal of bureaucratic structures that might compromise the leader's vision. However, it became somewhat contradictory when, at the end of the CoP, 50% of the Network moved from agreeing that they reflected on the ways a leader's vision is compromised by bureaucratic structures to 50% disagreeing. One small insight into this dramatic shift might be how senior district leaders were now aware of the inequities existing across the charter network and the role of bureaucracy in perpetuating those inequities. The Black DEI director described how the charter management organization historically maintained a highly tracked system. However, the ethnoracial student demographics have changed, from exclusively Latine to a growing number of Black students who are concentrated in the lower academic track:

We don't even cut data by race and ethnicity. Part of that is because we started off, we have this system where we're tracking students, but everyone had the same ethnicity.

So, it didn't necessarily make sense then. Now, we know that there's so much inequity between race and ethnicity. We now have data that tracks that right now across the network. And so, our inability to kind of change and evolve with the times is really holding us back from even having the awareness that this inequity exists.

Thus, it stands to reason, that the DEI director's disagreement at the end of the CoP about how her charter network's vision was compromised by the bureaucratic structures could be a result of her own awareness about how inequities are reproduced in school systems through participation in the ExD CoP.

Conclusion

Central to this article was an exploration of the degree to which district and school LOC reported and described learning dispositions and skills to change policies and practices aimed at closing persistent opportunity gaps after participating in a PLC. To measure district and school leaders' learning, we administered a pre-, mid-, and post-survey aligned with the three dimensions of the EACF (Cheung et al., 2020). The 27 senior district and school leaders reported that their *greatest* learning after participating in the 1.5-year PLC was being able to assess their organization's will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to disrupt inequitable policies and practices. The *second greatest* learning that senior district and school leaders reported was being able to develop a theory of change to disrupt inequitable policies and practices based on an analysis of data. Each of the two reported learnings fell within the foundational dimension of EACF, Maintaining Critical Social Perspectives. Given that across the 27 participants senior district leaders reported the greatest learnings from EACF's Dimension 1, we conducted a within-case analysis to explore what other teams, if any, reported their greatest learning in Dimension 1. Of the five teams participating in the CoP, three teams (Longhorn, No Excuses, and Rio Grande) reported the greatest shifts in Dimension 1.

To understand the mechanisms contributing to the reported changes by these three teams, we asked senior district leaders to describe what they learned about designing liberatory practices and policies that would bring historically resilient students from the margins to the center. One senior district leader in the Longhorn School District, a Black woman, described how her acquiring power in the district was influenced by maintaining the status quo. Specifically, she said she had historically made White colleagues “feel comfortable.” By the end of the CoP, she began asking her White colleagues to examine their White privilege. The executive director of the No Excuses Charter Network, an Asian American woman, described how she and her leadership team of color engaged in a theory of change that relied less on their lived experiences of people of color and the demographic kinship shared with the students of color in their school system and more on asking “the most vulnerable person” about their experiences. The small test or the action research project supported senior district LOC to engage in this liberatory practice of getting proximate to the organization’s most marginalized and resilient students. Moreover, the executive director of the Rio Grande Charter Network, a Latine woman, described how through participating in the CoP she learned that the bureaucratic structures constraining the leadership team’s vision was not a function of someone else’s ineffective leadership but rather her leadership: “I was the bureaucracy for them.” Finally, this study adds to the burgeoning literature on developing the capacity of LOC to create equitable and liberatory learning environments for historically resilient and marginalized students. It breaks new empirical ground by examining which dispositions and skills superintendents of color and charter management executives of color and their respective teams reported and described learning by participating in a CoP.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

Given our findings, we provide the following implications for research, policy, and practice.

Research

Future research should explore the organizational dynamics that influence why three (one public school and two charter networks) of the five teams reported their greatest learning around maintaining critical social perspectives, while the other two public school teams learned more about maintaining critical instructional perspectives. The two charter networks, which operate multiple schools across the country (i.e., No Excuses) and the state (i.e., Rio Grande) described their greatest shift in the foundational dimension. What about these large charter networks, and possibly charter networks in general, contributes to the greatest learning at this building-block dimension within the EACF? One possibility is that the public schools had already done work on critical social perspectives but had done less work on critical instructional perspectives, whereas the charter networks had done more prior work on instructional but not critical social perspectives. Future research should also explore the design features of the PLC that facilitated learning for senior school district LOC.

Policy

As states continue to require schools, and more recently building leaders, to engage in ongoing professional learning to clear and maintain their credentials, so too should they require the most senior district leaders to engage in ongoing PD. Given the body of research that teachers continue to learn throughout their career (Stosich & Bristol, 2018), policymakers must ensure that all adults, particularly those wielding the most power, have opportunities to engage in continuous professional learning.

Practice

Nonprofit organizations, school districts, and schools of education should continue to develop PD support programs for school and district leaders (Gist et al., 2021). One study participant described how the facilitator's delivery of the content as well as the PD content supported her learning. Given the role of school districts and schools of education in credentialing school leaders who support teachers by identifying a set of skills and dispositions for these leaders, so too is there a need to develop the capacity of PD providers. Schools and districts rely on PD providers to support both teacher and student learning. Expanding the capacity of PD providers can be useful in professionalizing the work of PD providers.

Limitations

Our goal was to address the gap in the research related to effective professional learning communities for leaders of color. In this exploratory study, we describe and analyze one professional learning community for district and school building leaders of color that occurred over a 1.5-year period including the impact on the participants. While the sample is small and not generalizable, the leaders of color who participated in the study reported growth in their skills, capacity, and knowledge to lead for equity within their work contexts. The results reveal that leaders of color benefit from specialized professional learning that is tailored to their needs. Additionally, increased understanding of effective professional learning for leaders of color will impact practice and policy to support the diversification of the educational leader workforce.

Declarations

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Ethical Approval Partial financial support was received from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies.

Competing interests The authors declare they have no financial interests.

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