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# How Understanding Continuous Improvement Through Lesson Study Can Inform Leading for Equity

## Introduction

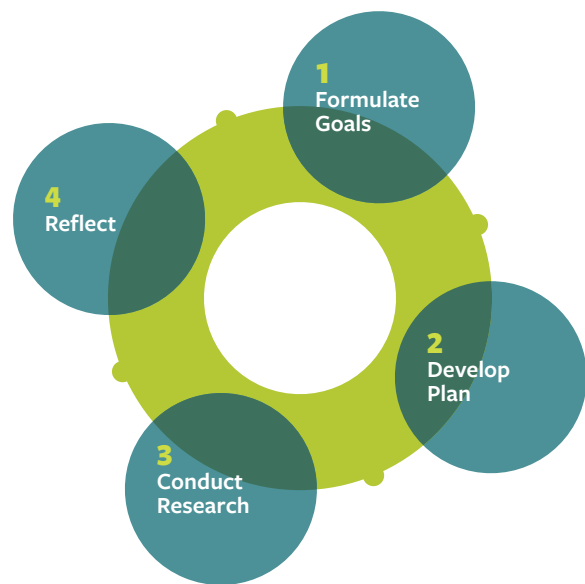
Continuous improvement is central to engaging in equitable school leadership and improving student outcomes. 21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) includes continuous improvement as one of its three underlying principles, along with equity leadership and professional learning. As outlined by the California Department of Education, “Continuous improvement in education is a broad term used to describe the ongoing efforts of local educational agencies, county offices of education, and individual schools as they work to analyze, understand, and address local needs over a period of time.”<sup>1</sup> Generally, continuous improvement is an approach to iterative cycles of research, assessment, and data-driven decision-making to promote change.<sup>2</sup> In education, schools and districts can leverage continuous improvement to improve student outcomes and teaching practices by prioritizing practitioners’ local needs.<sup>3</sup> continuous improvement is essential to transforming education systems in support of access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults who have been historically marginalized.

Lesson study, an approach to continuous improvement that originated in Japan, has many applications for professional learning internationally but to date has primarily focused on teacher classroom practice in the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

The lesson study approach to continuous improvement consists of a four-part cycle, as shown in Figure 1, “wherein educators 1) study the curriculum and formulate goals, 2) develop a plan (design a lesson that they believe will help them achieve that goal), 3) conduct research (implement and study the lesson in practice), and 4) reflect on what has happened.”<sup>5</sup> Through this process, teams co-plan “research lesson” cycles to gather data on student learning, engaging in self-study to improve their practice.<sup>6</sup> For over three decades, California schools have adapted this approach to support their teachers’ professional development.<sup>7</sup> More recently, researchers and practitioners are exploring how to leverage lesson study to support equitable school leadership and better understand how leaders learn to lead for equity.

As an approach to continuous improvement, lesson study is a collaborative professional learning opportunity for teachers to engage in the study of a challenging-to-teach topic and refine their instructional methods.<sup>8</sup> In California, for example, in a collaboration between the California Mathematics Project, the Sonoma County Office of Education, and Healdsburg Unified School District, lesson study was used to incorporate equity into mathematics instruction. Through this process, focal students were selected and included in the phases of the lesson study process, including lesson design based on individual student needs.<sup>9</sup> The work before, during, and after this process was reported to incorporate student voice and experience into the lesson planning process to more equitably support students, with implications for how the district works to help students learn and engage in math.<sup>10</sup> Another example of lesson study implementation to improve mathematics instruction includes Riverside County, California, where four districts partnered with California State University, San Bernardino, in the Developing Educators Learning to Teach

**Figure 1**  
*Stages of the Traditional Lesson Study Cycle*



Algebraically (DELTA) project which is based on a lesson study model. Teachers in the project reported gaining skills and confidence to optimize engagement and student success through participation in the lesson study process.<sup>11</sup>

This brief will:

1. provide an overview of lesson study as a continuous improvement approach for improving equity-focused professional learning,
2. share the application of lesson study to professional learning for equity-focused leadership, and
3. introduce an overview of implications for research and practice for an emergent Professional Learning Lesson Study (PLLS) model as a support for professional learning leaders to engage in lesson study and improve their offerings through equity-focused inquiry.

How Lesson Study Informs Professional Learning

21CSLA is charged with providing high-quality professional learning for California’s educational leaders. As designers and facilitators of professional learning, how can we study and improve our offerings in the same way that teachers study their work? PLLS attempts to do this through supporting the capacity of regional leaders to improve professional leadership learning opportunities by engaging in equity centered self study. Taken from the traditional application of lesson study, and applied to the professional learning of leaders in community, PLLS is a novel application of lesson study within the U.S. context to facilitate the continuous improvement of professional learning practice. Grounded in a research–practice partnership model facilitated by 21CSLA, PLLS aims to build leadership resilience and support equity-driven outcomes across diverse educational contexts.

PLLS: Expanding on Traditional Lesson Study Models

21CSLA is working to redesign traditional lesson study in order to create a model of PLLS that goes beyond the standard lesson study cycles of study, plan, teach, and reflect. As shown in Table 1, in the traditional model of lesson study, teachers lead self-study,

implement lesson study with students, and focus on improving teaching. PLLS emphasizes equity-centered leadership, led by professional learning leaders and implemented with practicing educational leaders across diverse contexts in their respective Regional Academies (RAs)—seven grant-funded professional learning providers located throughout California.<sup>12</sup> The developing model focuses on the self-study and improvement of professional learning practices through analyzing professional learning offerings with an equity-centered focus.<sup>13</sup> This includes developing, expanding, and refining a model in which regional leaders can develop their own structures to engage in PLLS activities in their local contexts in the future. Rather than selecting a research lesson, 21CSLA supports educational leaders to focus on an equity issue in their region; plan, implement, and revise an approach to address that equity issue with ongoing peer and/or facilitator feedback; gather and analyze relevant data; revise and reimplement the approach; and, finally, reflect on possible improvements and/or further action needed. In line with traditional lesson study, 21CSLA offers PLLS so that leaders gain deeper content knowledge, increased observational skills, greater sense of self-efficacy, and stronger collegial networks.<sup>14</sup>

Table 1  
Comparison of Traditional Lesson Study and Professional Learning Lesson Study

|             | Traditional Lesson Study | Professional Learning Lesson Study |
|-------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Led by      | Teachers                 | Regional Academy Leaders           |
| Created for | Students                 | Educational Leaders                |
| Focused on  | Teaching                 | Professional Learning              |

## Supporting Self-Study of Professional Learning Leaders

PLLS is an innovative process implemented through practitioner cycles of inquiry focused on equity-centered professional learning with support from four individuals who are researchers and practitioners serving as facilitator leads from the 21CSLA State Center. In consultation with the seven RAs, State Center facilitator leads are in the process of co-creating a vision to design and implement a first-of-its-kind PLLS. Through deep collaboration, the PLLS collective engages in self-study to improve equity-focused professional learning offerings to educational leaders, with support and facilitation from researchers and practitioners in a community of practice model.<sup>15</sup> Areas of PLLS focus include leadership coaching for equity, equitable implementation of a transitional kindergarten training initiative, and the use of affinity groups to interrogate race in the educational leader context. Using this approach, practitioners identified an aspect of equity-focused professional learning offered in their region for deep, collaborative self-study. State Center facilitators then collaborate with practitioners in using the findings to inform their leadership and improve their professional learning offerings.

21CSLA has taken an iterative approach when developing its PLLS model, continuously refining its design and implementation through critical reflection and feedback. Professional learning providers may apply this approach in their own regions to support localized PLLS activities. RAs may also leverage practices from action research, like reciprocity, to create a PLLS community of practice that responds to their local needs. Ultimately, PLLS is designed to support regional leaders of professional learning in developing their capacity to use evidence to improve professional leadership learning opportunities.

Currently, in each of the identified areas of focus, professional learning providers from the RAs engage in a continuous improvement process that maintains an equity focus throughout the PLLS cycle. As shown in Figure 2, each cycle consists of five phases:

1. defining a research goal
2. developing a research plan
3. implementing and observing the plan
4. revising and reimplementing
5. reflecting

Throughout these phases, continuous improvement is grounded in a learning community which consists of formative data analysis through consultation with facilitators and collaboration among colleagues. This community of practice is planned and facilitated by the State Center leads who provide reflective guidance and consultation throughout the process. This community of practice also provides consultancy protocols that center equity across the PLLS cycles, with implications for subsequent cycles of the process and improved, equity-centered professional learning practices across the seven represented regions. Central to the model and subsequent practice is the adaptive facilitation based on participant learning, reported experiences, and feedback from the community of practice. Additionally, the consultancies include opportunities for deeper cross-provider collaboration as well as facilitator-coordinated opportunities to showcase provider learning.

21CSLA's PLLS approach utilizes action research to create the opportunity to apply lesson study as an approach to continuous improvement to support regional leaders' deep and collaborative self-study in a professional learning practice, use the findings to inform their leadership, and develop capacity to improve professional learning offerings. Lesson study also provides a rich context for consultancy

**Figure 2**  
*Professional Learning Lesson Study Cycle*



protocols with the goal of equity-focused continuous improvement. For example, traditional consultancy protocols are adapted for educational leaders seeking to investigate an equity issue in their context, solicit feedback from colleagues, consider possible improvements, and reflect. This administrative consultancy protocol emphasizes inquiry development to acquire increased insight and information about the equity issue to generate solutions and evaluate alternatives through planned interaction with colleagues. Consultancy protocols and instructional rounds from the lesson study context have been readily adapted to the PLLS model for educational leaders seeking to self-study an equity-focused practice by soliciting insight and feedback from colleagues, considering possible improvements, and reflecting in community.<sup>16</sup> These practices support identification of an equity-centered focus of self-study, a process by which to collect formative data, and a clear emphasis on what is learned throughout the process to improve

future professional learning offerings for leaders. 21CSLA's PLLS offerings support leaders in developing their ability to engage in equity-centered leadership learning and continuous improvement through data-driven collaboration and feedback processes.

### **Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice**

The ongoing development and application of a PLLS model grounded in self-study has implications for equity-centered practice and resilience as professional learning providers continue their work across rapidly changing and increasingly challenging educational contexts. Self-study is essential for improving equity-centered learning opportunities across education systems and fostering leadership resilience, collaboration, and communication. 21CSLA's efforts towards formalizing a self-study practice through the use of PLLS engage professional learning providers in continuous improvement through use of collaborative, research-based structures to analyze formative data, implement consultancy protocols, and systematically reflect on their learning. PLLS facilitation practices actively engage leaders in a collective, self-study community that brings together researcher-practitioners and regional leaders around a common focus for improvement of professional learning practices that advances equity in schools. PLLS supports educational leaders and professional learning providers by building capacity to design and refine professional learning through cycles of equity-centered self-study, embedding reflective practice in a supportive learning community. Additionally, PLLS fosters collaboration across diverse educational contexts through a structured model that is both adaptable and replicable. Ultimately, the support provided by the model promotes equity by grounding improvement efforts in data, participant feedback, and inquiry into issues of access, opportunity, and inclusion.

## Reflection Questions

- **Professional Context** What systems exist in your school or district for leaders to engage in continuous improvement related to the professional learning that is provided to staff?
- **Leadership Capacities** How might implementing lesson study for leaders add to existing supports in your context related to learning to lead for equity?
- **Equity in Schools** What is one area of professional learning in your school or district in which you could apply equity-focused lesson study?

21CSLA facilitators are developing a PLLS model to contribute to future continuous improvement research and practice in the field of education that can be adapted by others to examine professional learning structures and practices that may perpetuate or disrupt equitable school leadership. Researchers and practitioners alike can contribute to the refinement of this PLLS model in their own localized professional learning contexts.

Continuous improvement is one of the three underlying principles of 21CSLA. The adaptation of lesson study to a leadership context exemplifies an innovative continuous improvement approach that elevates self-study, community collaboration, and improving professional learning. This bears implications for educational leaders across higher education and school district contexts who are charged with providing equity-centered professional

learning experiences to those in leadership positions. Improving leadership performance is connected to student achievement, as studies have found that having an effective principal has nearly the same effect as having an effective teacher.<sup>17</sup> Implementing continuous improvement approaches such as PLLS has the potential to improve the learning and practice of equity-oriented leaders in classrooms, schools, districts, and beyond.

## Conclusion

Beyond outcomes rooted in equity-focused continuous improvement, the process of adapting LS to meet the needs of professional learning providers underscores the importance of collaborative work towards equity-centered practices across the state in diverse educational settings and political contexts. Through the ongoing, collaborative development of PLLS, a community of practice engages in authentic communication and partnership centered on equity-focused self-study that includes researchers examining practice, facilitation, and equity implications. This collaboration and focused communication between researchers and practitioners has resulted in co-creation of a PLLS practice model that exemplifies leadership resilience through equity-focused professional leadership learning as the center of self-study practice for continuous improvement.

PLLS is a sustainable model for advancing equity-centered leadership development. By combining structured self-study with collaborative inquiry, PLLS helps professional learning providers reflect, adapt, and improve their offerings in response to real-world challenges. It offers a practical, research-informed approach to building leadership capacity and fostering continuous improvement in diverse educational contexts.

## Additional Resources

### California Department of Education: Continuous Improvement Resources

[tinyurl.com/cdecontimp](https://tinyurl.com/cdecontimp)

### California Department of Education: Lesson Study with a Focus on Equity

[tinyurl.com/lswafoe](https://tinyurl.com/lswafoe)

### California Department of Education: Quality Professional Learning Standards

[tinyurl.com/cdeqpls1](https://tinyurl.com/cdeqpls1)

### California Equity Performance Improvement Program (CEPIP): Ways 2 Equity Playbook (W2EPB)

[tinyurl.com/waystoequity](https://tinyurl.com/waystoequity)

### Carnegie Foundation white paper on Continuous Improvement in Education

[tinyurl.com/carnegiefoundation](https://tinyurl.com/carnegiefoundation)

### Continuous Improvement: Ayer Elementary School Case Study

[tinyurl.com/ayerelem](https://tinyurl.com/ayerelem)

### Continuous Improvement: Promoting College Access in Fresno Unified School District Case Study

[tinyurl.com/fresnoud](https://tinyurl.com/fresnoud)

### School-wide Lesson Study: John Muir Elementary School in San Francisco

[tinyurl.com/johnmuirelem](https://tinyurl.com/johnmuirelem)

### The Lesson Study Group

[tinyurl.com/lessonresearch](https://tinyurl.com/lessonresearch)

## Notes

1. California Department of Education, n.d.-a
2. Bryk et al., 2015; Yurkofsky et al., 2020
3. Bryk et al., 2015; Park et al., 2013
4. Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Lewis et al. 2006
5. Lewis et al., 2006 as cited in Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 181
6. Lewis et al., 2006
7. Jetter & Hancock, 2012; Lewis et al., 2009
8. Lewis et al., 2006; Murata, 2011
9. California Department of Education, n.d.-b
10. California Department of Education, 2021
11. Jetter & Hancock, 2012
12. 21CSLA, 2025
13. Park, et al., 2013; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999
14. Akiba et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2004
15. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015
16. Kamler, 2006
17. Grissom et al., 2021

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## 21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

## About 21CSLA

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and works in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, California Subject Matter Project, and seven 21CSLA regional academies throughout the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. Programs are provided at no cost to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

## Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research–Practice Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research–Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g., webinar video recordings and highlights, briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit [21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research](http://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research).

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