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Introduction

The concept of a *community of practice* (CoP) is not new to educational spaces. Lave and Wenger's¹ well-known book, *Situated Learning*, builds on sociocultural understandings of learning as social and rooted in the local context to frame learning as a reason for increasing participation in communities of practice.* For school leaders, CoPs offer a framework both to facilitate *teachers'* growth and learning and to provide avenues for supporting *leaders'* own growth and development.² While much educational CoP literature has focused on teachers,³ a small body of research focuses on the possibilities and participation of educational leaders in CoPs. Given the continued urgency of equity-oriented leadership, this brief focuses on that body of research: CoPs for leadership development as it relates to equity and social justice.

In brief, a community of practice is a group of people who share a common interest (domain) and come together regularly (community) to exchange and develop knowledge, practices, and skills regarding their shared domain (practice; see Figure 1). CoPs can be formally structured within an organization or come together more organically. Three features of CoPs distinguish them from a general gathering of educators and are considered markers of progress. These include joint enterprise, or the level of initiative for learning; mutuality, the established norms and relationships among members; and shared repertoires, or communal routines, resources, languages, and tools, which are regarded as markers of competence or progress within CoPs.⁴

Figure 1.⁵



When it comes to developing leaders' equity-driven skill set and practice, CoPs can provide a meaningful space to move beyond simple cognitive-level shifts to change ways of being and doing. However, like other organizationally normed practices and approaches in schools, CoPs' orientation toward equity is not a given, nor do they serve as a magic solution. In what follows, we highlight how the literature has attended to equity by focusing on CoPs as sites of professional learning to support leaders' work to transform educational access, opportunity, and inclusion for marginalized and minoritized students. We also discuss what cautions this literature raises that are useful to consider for CoP design.

Challenges to Equity:

1. Interpersonal Dynamics

Because CoPs are made up of different groups of individuals, interpersonal and relational dynamics are crucial when thinking about the roles and possibilities of equity-oriented CoPs. For example, a study found that while CoPs can provide opportunities for learning for all educators, they did not automatically eliminate the disadvantages that African American educators and teachers of remedial classes face in terms of collegial recognition of their legitimate participation in CoPs.⁶ Likewise, as the burden of equity work often falls on people of color, the task of keeping an equity-focused center in CoPs may disproportionately fall on members of color.⁷

Reflect on Your Practice: How might you...

- ▶ structure personal invitations to marginalized members to participate in CoPs?⁸ Directly discuss and address the historically disproportionate burden on members of color?⁹
- ▶ mindfully co-design CoPs with participants and be attentive to participants who might need additional forms of support?¹⁰
- ▶ prioritize time for transformative relationship-building to address marginalization?¹¹
- ▶ expect disagreement, regard it as necessary, and establish adaptive shared repertoires for navigating those expected disagreements?¹²

2. Communication Norms

Since CoPs are rooted in social practices, centered on shared experiences and goals, effective communication plays a central role in their functioning. Scholars have pointed out how communication challenges can hinder the

achievements and possibilities of CoPs. Notably, a *pseudocommunity* frequently occurs, particularly during the initial stages of community formation, where members behave as if they unanimously agree rather than embracing disagreements and tensions as constructive learning opportunities.¹³ Relatedly, even within educator communities dedicated to addressing equity issues, established norms are never neutral and can embody dominant values. For example, frequently in white middle-class culture, norms can discourage addressing conflicts and inevitable tension, promoting instead a surface-level harmony that may endure over time. Yoon describes these behaviors as manifestations of *whiteness-at-work*, including everyday discursive actions that uphold white privilege.¹⁴ Whiteness-at-work can persist even through seemingly anti-racist intentions that might in practice entail constructing ideas of “safety” as white comfort,¹⁵ avoiding conflict and overvaluing politeness, and claiming an anti-racist alibi by positioning oneself as less racist or more conscious than others.¹⁶

Reflect on Your Practice: How might you build in questions on race, identity, and/or systems of oppression and opportunities to reflect on experiences as you build community?¹⁷

3. Coexisting and Competing Priorities

Like other educational initiatives, CoPs may be sites where competing demands and priorities arise. CoP participants need to be prepared to navigate these tensions while keeping equity at the center in their leadership, learning, and practice. For example, leaders must navigate external demands related to budgeting or assessment that may constrain their equity aspirations and agency. CoPs that intentionally engage with these competing and/or conflicting values or goals, rather than ignoring them, open

opportunities for leaders and communities to learn and develop localized practices for navigating these tensions.¹⁸ However, without intentional engagement, CoPs can reproduce dominant relations of power, exclusion, and ideologies such as meritocracy. In the beginning stages of building CoPs, leaders must consider competing pressures to work toward a coherent focus on equity. In this initial stage, CoPs also benefit from attending to both personal and social assumptions as well as the structures of power in the school and broader community.¹⁹ While CoPs can be emergent, iterative, and open to different directions, defining the learning projects at the initiation of the community and attending to how they progress and change can support the alignment of learning within the shared domain.²⁰

Reflect on Your Practice: How might you bring attention to organizational dynamics at play?²¹ How might you frame tensions as a source for learning?²²

Further Opportunities for Equity:

Educator learning communities, including CoPs, centered on **shared goals** and **active participation**, offer an important tool for equity.²³ Scholars particularly emphasize the importance of attending to local context and practitioners’ identities through **sustained self-reflection**.²⁴ Some scholars have also indicated the potential for CoPs to support leaders’ and educators’ **learning about race** and systems of power. CoPs can provide a space for educators to **engage in difficult conversations and share resources** and advice that might shape practices.²⁵ Given the adaptive, rather than technocratic, approach that justice-oriented efforts require, the **collective and dialogical structure** of CoPs can support educators to develop as social-justice agents of change.²⁶ In short, CoP leaders or coordinators,

tasked with the community's day-to-day organization and operation, need to be attentive to the multiple dynamics addressed above. As they support CoPs, leaders should take an adaptive approach, be responsive to progress and needs within the CoP, and support CoP members to inform the direction of the communal work.²⁷

While outside of the field of education, an example from healthcare research shows how CoPs can foster **moral resilience** in the face of moral distress and ethical dilemmas through shared dialogue and solidarity. This has implications for educators who similarly face moral distress and ethical dilemmas, as CoPs can support practitioners to engage in inquiry rather than being stuck in frustration, collectively explore possible paths of action, and disrupt negative thinking patterns.²⁸ Given the way that equity-minded educators must continually navigate the organizational and structural constraints of working for justice within our systems of schooling,²⁹ these findings have promising implications for educators as well as healthcare providers.

Finally, beyond individual learning within a community, CoPs can operate as a tool for equity-oriented **organizational learning**.³⁰ Equity-minded change in schools requires multifaceted efforts and systems-wide change. As part of a social learning system, CoPs can shift collective school and district cultures and structures to better enable equity learning for all.³¹ Overall, while CoPs take unique forms, foci, and dynamics responsive to the members within them, these guiding principles offer questions not for a specific road map, but for reflection and purpose alignment.

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*Largely overlapping with professional learning communities (PLCs), CoPs find theoretical distinction in their social/situated learning theory origins. CoP literature also tends to emphasize not only the shared practices within the community but also the collective developed identity and natural adaptation and flexibility to the community's enterprise and collective experience. Furthermore, while research on PLCs is more exclusive to educational spaces, CoPs are used across industries (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Martel, 2020; Vangrieken et al., 2017; Wenger, 1999).

Notes

1. Lave & Wenger, 1991
2. Lambert et al., 2022; Printy, 2008; Scribner et al., 2007
3. Vangrieken et al., 2017
4. Wenger, 2000
5. Scaled Agile, 2023
6. Printy, 2008
7. Ahmed, 2012; Marineo, 2022
8. Printy, 2008
9. Marineo et al., 2022
10. Horn & Kane, 2015
11. Hakkola et al., 2021; Miranda, 2012
12. Picower, 2011
13. Grossman et al., 2001
14. Yoon, 2012
15. See: Leonardo & Porter, 2010
16. Yoon, 2012
17. Costino, 2018
18. Watson, 2013
19. Lipman, 1997
20. Wenger, 2000
21. Lipman, 1997
22. Picower, 2011
23. Carter Andrews & Richmond, 2019
24. Ng & Tan, 2009
25. Hakkola et al., 2021; Maldonado Franzen & Benavides, 2023
26. Kohli et al., 2015
27. Wenger, 2000
28. Delgado et al., 2021
29. Picower, 2011
30. Bensimon, 2005
31. Wenger, 2000

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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 research 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, research briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research>

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