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Affinity in Action: Facilitator Practices That Sustain and Uplift Leaders of Color in Education

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Affinity in Action: Facilitator Practices That Sustain and Uplift Leaders of Color in Education

Executive Summary

Despite increasingly diverse student populations, educational leadership remains predominantly White. In 2020–2021, only 23% of U.S. and 35% of California public school principals identified as people of color (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], n.d.; Taie & Lewis, 2023), revealing a significant representation gap between students and school leaders. Leaders of color often face racialized stressors (e.g., bias, exclusion, and microaggressions) that threaten their well-being and leadership sustainability (Bristol & Shirrell, 2019; McGinnis et al., 2023).

Racial affinity groups have emerged as critical spaces of support, offering community, healing, and empowerment for leaders of color. Yet little is known about the facilitation practices that make these spaces effective. This project brief shares findings from a qualitative study of four facilitators leading affinity groups for educational leaders of color. Semi-structured interviews explored how facilitators created safe, supportive, and empowering environments. Five core practices emerged (see p. 2 sidebar for detailed descriptions):

- ▶ Engaging in reflexivity and contextual awareness
- ▶ Modeling vulnerability
- ▶ Co-constructing knowledge
- ▶ Attuning to intersectionality
- ▶ Centering empowerment

Affinity spaces, when intentionally facilitated, serve as powerful resources for racial healing, leadership development, and equity advocacy. However, structural barriers, such as a lack of institutional support or the need for long-term integration, can limit their sustainability. Embedding these spaces within broader equity efforts is crucial to realizing their full potential in transforming educational leadership.

Facilitator Core Practices for Creating Safe, Supportive, and Empowering Environments

► Engaging in reflexivity and contextual awareness

Facilitators continuously engaged with historical and sociopolitical dynamics, using current events and participants' lived experiences to ground discussions.

► Modeling vulnerability

Facilitators led with personal stories, cultivating trust and signaling that the space welcomed openness and care.

► Co-constructing knowledge

Groups were co-designed with participants, honoring lived experiences and centering collective learning over rigid agendas.

► Attuning to intersectionality

Facilitators recognized the layered identities of participants and ensured inclusivity through culturally responsive practices.

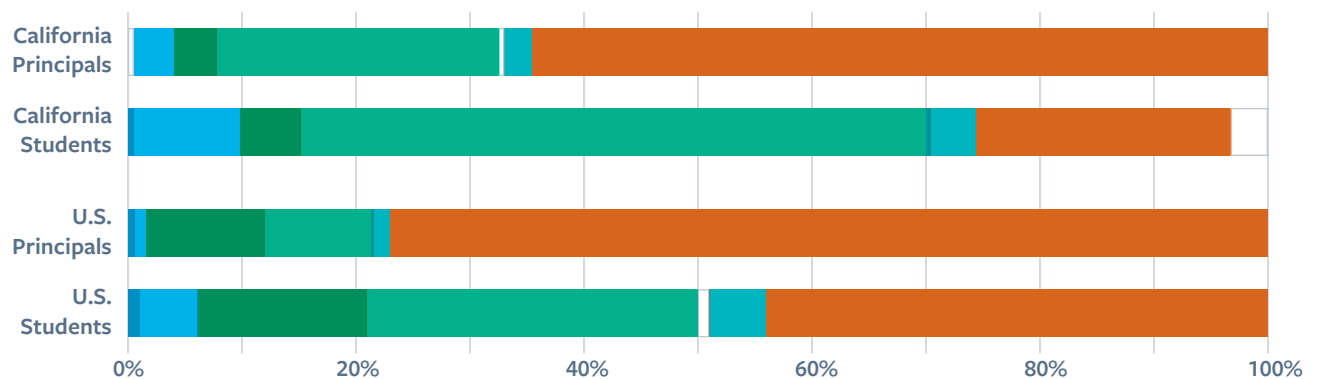
► Centering empowerment

Facilitators supported participants in reframing limitations, building agency, and leading with clarity and purpose.

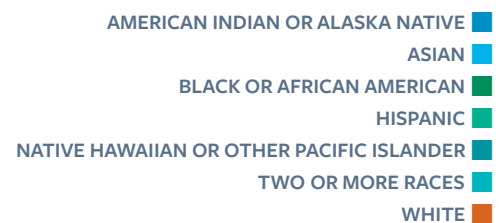
Background

While school student populations have become increasingly diverse (Denson & Chang, 2009), educational leadership remains predominantly White. As shown in Figure 1, in the 2020–2021 academic year, only about 23% of public school principals nationwide identified as a person of color, including those from Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, Alaska Native, or Pacific Islander backgrounds (NCES, n.d.; Taie & Lewis, 2023). In California, where student diversity is among the highest in the nation, the representation of principals of color is slightly higher but still limited, with approximately 35% of public school principals in the 2020–2021 school year identifying as people of color (NCES, n.d.; Taie & Lewis, 2023). This persistent gap highlights a critical disparity between the racial and ethnic diversity of school leaders and the students they serve, underscoring the importance of advancing equity and representation in educational leadership roles.

Educational leaders of color face various challenges, such as racialization and marginalization in the forms of biases, racial microaggressions, and discrimination, affecting their personal and professional well-being (Krull & Robicheau, 2020; McGinnis et al., 2023). Such experiences can impact their ability to lead and advocate effectively for their students and the communities they serve. Moreover, such experiences make it difficult for educators of color to feel supported and valued for their roles in the education community (Bristol & Shirrell, 2019; Hernandez & Murakami, 2016).

Figure 1*K–12 Public School Principals and Students by Race/Ethnicity in California and U.S. (2020–2021)*

See Table 1 for data and details.

**Table 1***Data for K–12 Public School Principals and Students by Race/Ethnicity in California and U.S. (2020–2021)*

Race/Ethnicity	CA Principals	CA Students ^a	U.S. Principals	U.S. Students
American Indian or Alaska Native—Non-Hispanic	*	0.5	0.6	1.0
Asian—Non-Hispanic	3.5	9.3	1.0	5.0
Black or African American—Non-Hispanic	3.8	5.3	10.4	15.0
Hispanic—Regardless of Race	24.7	54.9	9.3	29.0
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander—Non-Hispanic	*	0.4	0.3	*
Two or More Races—Non-Hispanic	2.3	3.9	1.3	5
White—Non-Hispanic	64.7	22.4	77.1	44.0

Data sources: California Department of Education, n.d.; NCES, n.d.; Taie & Lewis, 2023

* Reporting standards not met. Either there are too few cases for a reliable analysis, or the coefficient of variation (CV) for this estimate is 50 percent or greater (i.e., the standard error is 50 percent or more of the estimate).

^a California Department of Education reports include additional disaggregated racial/ethnic student groups that were not captured and/or reported across the groups presented here.

Leveraging Affinity Spaces to Support Educational Leaders of Color

For educational leaders of color, affinity groups serve as crucial support systems, offering a sense of community and validation in response to the isolation and marginalization often experienced within socially toxic educational institutions and organizations (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). These spaces are designed to foster a sense of belonging, offer mentorship, and address the unique challenges that educators of color face. Additionally, affinity groups play a vital role in fostering racial understanding, promoting empathy, and critically examining harmful racial dynamics (Oto & Chikkatur, 2019; Bayne et al., 2023). By providing a platform for members to share experiences, navigate racial microaggressions, and build solidarity with colleagues, these groups create opportunities for collective empowerment and resistance (Cormier et al., 2023). Furthermore, affinity spaces actively challenge and disrupt harmful racial structures, enhance racial literacy, and strengthen participants' sense of agency and belonging (Enumah et al., 2019; Oto & Chikkatur, 2019; Souto-Manning et al., 2022; Teixeira et al., 2021).

Facilitating Affinity Spaces

Facilitating racial affinity spaces involves creating safe and inclusive environments where individuals can grapple with racial issues, heal from racial trauma, and engage in critical dialogue. At a structural level, facilitators must also be ethnically representative of the racial group(s) they lead. Researchers have discussed various frameworks and approaches that can facilitate the creation of supportive and transformative environments. For example, facilitating such spaces may involve addressing racial sensitivities, developing racial literacy, and promoting critical dialogue on race.

Acknowledging educators' racial sensitivities and skills is an important aspect of facilitating racial affinity spaces. Research suggests that successful dialogues on race depend heavily on the facilitator's racial sensitivities and ability to navigate difficult conversations (Sue et al., 2009). Educators need to be aware of their own racial biases, fears, and anxieties and engage in self-reflection to better understand themselves as racial and cultural beings (Sue et al., 2009). Moreover, critical professional development (CPD) is another approach to facilitating racial affinity spaces. CPD provides sustained support and development opportunities for educators of color, helping them navigate the racial climate of schools and sustain their careers (Kohli, 2018). These spaces of racial literacy development, often collectivized and teacher-led, offer support and empowerment to teachers of color (Kohli, 2018).

Despite their potential benefits, a limited understanding remains of the informal learning and support opportunities that affinity groups provide for educators of color (Noonan & Bristol, 2020), and even less research has examined their role in supporting educational leaders. Existing literature highlights a significant gap in exploring the healing and coping experiences of educators of color within affinity groups (Kulkarni et al., 2022). Additionally, there is a need for deeper insight into how these groups help leaders of color navigate isolation and the challenges of working within educational systems (Cormier et al., 2023). Given the increasing recognition of the systemic barriers and racialized experiences that leaders of color face in education, understanding the facilitation practices that sustain these spaces is essential.

What strategies and facilitation techniques most effectively create a safe and supportive environment within racial affinity groups?

Overview of the Study

This project brief presents key findings from a larger study that examines the facilitation experiences of individuals leading racial affinity groups for educational leaders of color. Specifically, the study investigates the research question: What strategies and facilitation techniques most effectively create a safe and supportive environment within racial affinity groups? We conducted semi-structured interviews with four facilitators who led affinity groups for Latinx leaders, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) leaders, African American male leaders, and leaders of color (i.e., a BIPOC space for educational leaders). In these interviews, we explored how facilitators created safe and supportive environments within their affinity spaces, the barriers or challenges they encountered, and their strategies for fostering participant engagement and connection. We qualitatively analyzed participant responses to identify emerging themes. Findings from this study contribute to a deeper understanding of how facilitators structure and co-construct racial affinity spaces to support educational leaders of color in navigating professional challenges and fostering collective growth. Findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of facilitation in supporting racial affinity groups and offer practical implications for those leading such spaces in educational and professional contexts.

Findings: Facilitating a Safe and Supportive Affinity Space for Educational Leaders of Color

The findings from this research brief highlight the intentional and relational practices facilitators used to cultivate powerful affinity spaces for educational leaders of color. Through these spaces, facilitators supported participants not only in processing their lived experiences but also in building community, strengthening leadership, and fostering resilience. Central to this work was the role of the facilitator, not as a content expert, but as a steady, empathetic presence committed to cultivating trust, co-constructing knowledge, and sustaining engagement. Across all themes, facilitators demonstrated a commitment to reflexivity, attentiveness to group dynamics, and responsiveness to the broader sociopolitical context. They modeled vulnerability, honored intersectional identities, and created space for personal healing and collective empowerment. Rather than prescribing a single approach, facilitators embraced flexibility, dialogue, and shared ownership as key design principles. The findings below are organized around five core themes that capture the depth and complexity of this work: engaging in reflexivity and context, modeling vulnerability to build trust and belonging, co-constructing knowledge with leaders of color, attuning to group dynamics and intersectionality, and centering empowerment.

► **Engaging in Reflexivity and Context and Climate**

Facilitators engaged in an ongoing practice of reflexivity, recognizing that learning in these spaces is complex because it centers people, not just content. They committed to staying informed about group dynamics and participants' lived experiences, continually reading about historical systems of oppression and seeking working definitions of concepts like "oppressive systems" to guide their actions. They approached current events and educational trends through platforms like *EdSource*, with a transformative rather than transactional lens, and sought visionary thinking beyond surface-level updates. Regular reflection was embedded in their process, with facilitators emphasizing the importance of pausing to take stock, both individually and through facilitated group conversations. These dialogues created opportunities for shared learning, deeper understanding, and iterative improvement of facilitation practices.

Facilitators also emphasized the importance of contextual awareness around leadership equity. One facilitator actively tracked the current status of leaders of color across school districts, monitored recruitment and retention efforts, and highlighted the gap between equity-oriented vision statements and actual implementation. By analyzing promising practices and persistent barriers, they grounded affinity group discussions in the lived realities of the field. Moreover, facilitators remained engaged with specific communities. For example, an AAPI affinity group facilitator brought relevant resources and data on anti-Asian violence into the space to inform timely and community-relevant discussions. By staying in tune with the historical context and current climate, facilitators ensured that the affinity group remained responsive to the present and attuned to the evolving needs of future leadership.

◀ *It's not about content—it's about people. The hardest part for me is staying attuned to the group and trying to truly understand. When I think about things like historical systems of oppression, I do intentional reading to build a frame of reference for myself—so I have a working definition of what an oppressive system is and what it is I'm actually trying to transform. I need that foundation to feel grounded in this work. I also try to critically engage with current events—like when I see something come through EdSource, I ask myself: Is this just a transactional issue, or does it reflect a transformative vision? That lens helps me stay aligned with the purpose of this space. —Latinx affinity group facilitator*

► **Modeling Vulnerability to Cultivate Trust, Connection, and Belonging**

Facilitators intentionally cultivated trust, connection, and a sense of belonging within the affinity group by centering human relationships over content delivery. Modeling vulnerability was a key practice in this effort. Facilitators shared personal stories—including experiences with racial trauma, hardship, and the intersection of identity and professional life—often naming the “proud wounds” they carried with both dignity and pain. Leading with their truths created an atmosphere of reciprocal openness, signaling that vulnerability was not only welcomed but also deeply respected. This authentic sharing helped participants feel seen, safe, and invited into deeper dialogue.

Trust and connection were further nurtured by establishing clear relational norms that emphasized respect, active listening, and centering issues rather than individuals in moments of disagreement. Facilitators paid close attention to early group dynamics, recognizing the newness of relationships. Facilitators approached their role not as problem-solvers but as steady, empathetic presences. Through deep listening and intentional facilitation, they fostered a space where participants could share without fear of judgment or dismissal, knowing their experiences would be met with care and support. By preserving the emotional integrity and purpose of the group, facilitators helped build a community where connection could thrive. Participants developed a shared sense of purpose, drew strength from one another’s stories, and experienced a collective sense of belonging rooted in authenticity, trust, and mutual care.

◀ *As the holder, you have the ability, most of the time, to also bring healing into it. So you, in some way, you’re not going to solve their problems—that’s a different thing. I’m not confusing deep listening and holding space with problem-solving. But there has to be a certain amount of safety for somebody to show up and talk about those things...they know they are not going to be looked upon differently because of what they had to say, or because they exposed a hurt, right? Or they need to be able to know they’ll get support...they need to be able to have empathy for each other. But that is all-in to me—the creation of a space like that and the maintaining of a space like that is the role of the facilitator. Not to control the space or turn it into a classroom setting but to maintain the integrity of what the space is for. —African American male affinity group facilitator*

► **Co-Constructing Knowledge and Co-Designing with Leaders of Color**

Facilitators emphasized the co-construction of knowledge as a central component of affinity group discussions. This flexible approach allowed facilitators to honor participants’ lived experiences while ensuring the group remained a dynamic and responsive support system. This process was grounded in an ongoing commitment to stay informed about group dynamics, current events, and the lived experiences of leaders of color. Facilitators actively engaged in reflective reading,

examined historical systems of oppression, and used frameworks to distinguish between transformative and transactional practices in education. They sought visionary ideas, not just surface-level updates, to deepen comprehension and guide action.

▲ *As I share in the meeting, you can't norm something that folks didn't have an opportunity to actively engage in co-designing, so we just create these opportunities for people to lean into and to consider as invitations. They're more about invitations to arrive and then, of course, providing opportunities for them to add anything else that they would like to bring in. That also reflects what they need and what they can contribute to the space. —Asian American and Pacific Islander affinity group facilitator*

► **Attuning to Affinity Group Dynamics and Intersectionality**

Facilitators approached affinity group work with a deep awareness of the fluid and evolving nature of group dynamics, centering intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) as an essential lens in their practice. While race remained the foundational anchor of the spaces, facilitators recognized that participants brought layered identities, including gender, culture, professional roles, immigration experiences, and generation, that shaped how they engaged in community. For example, one facilitator intentionally included diverse AAPI representation as a central feature of group design. They drew from a variety of diasporic voices and cultural practices to create a space where participants could see themselves reflected and valued. Small,

thoughtful gestures, such as quoting voices from multiple AAPI subgroups or recognizing cultural observances, helped foster belonging.

Creating a safe, co-constructed space also meant building trust not through a one-time setup, but through continuous attention to group conditions. Facilitators held space for both connection and challenge, encouraging participants to express needs, advocate for one another, and engage in reflective dialogue. When moments of harm arose, facilitators responded with cultural sensitivity and compassion, guiding while preserving the dignity of all involved. This included acknowledging the limitations of their own perspectives and navigating difficult conversations with clarity and care. Facilitators held space for raw, heartfelt expression while also emphasizing the importance of bridging across cultural and gendered experiences, particularly in educational contexts where women often outnumber men.

Facilitators also used *testimonios*¹ (Bernal et al., 2012; Covarrubias et al., 2023)—counter-storytelling—to cultivate deeper connections, structuring group time intentionally to balance small-group intimacy with whole-group reflection. They emphasized that affinity spaces are not about consensus, but about listening, learning, and building solidarity across differences. As the group evolved, facilitators anchored transitions and shifts through shared rituals, such as intention-setting, mourning, and reflection, reinforcing the space's purpose and supporting participants in navigating both personal and collective growth.

¹ Bernal et al. (2012) describe *testimonio* as “an approach that incorporates political, social, historical, and cultural histories that accompany one’s life experiences as a means to bring about change through consciousness-raising. In bridging individuals with collective histories of oppression, a story of marginalization is re-centered to elicit social change” (p. 364).

◀ *If somebody makes an off comment on somebody's experience, as a facilitator, you can hold their dignity and correct the off comment.... Hold that person's dignity while letting them know, "It's not okay that you've done this." So that's what I mean...holding the spaces works.*

—African American male affinity group facilitator

► Centering Empowerment

Affinity groups play a significant role in fostering a sense of empowerment among educational leaders of color. Facilitators described empowerment as a dynamic, multi-layered process that includes capacity building, helping leaders recognize alternative pathways to achieving their goals rather than feeling constrained by systemic barriers. This included providing concrete skills and tools, deepening participants' understanding of systemic challenges, and offering strategies for action and resistance. A critical mindset shift involved moving beyond narratives of victimization to embrace agency, reframing limitations into questions like "What is within your power?," and encouraging goal-centered action, even in the face of resistance or limited authority.

Empowerment was also rooted in awareness of local and historical contexts, including unpacking assumptions that participants brought with them and those embedded within the space. Moreover, facilitators would cite the tenets of LatCrit, AsianCrit, and BlackCrit to contextualize the microaggressions that participants felt. Facilitators emphasized the importance of learning about the histories of race, discrimination, slavery, and the development of civil rights to help leaders build knowledge and context for their work. These spaces supported participants in recognizing diverse definitions of equity and justice and encouraged small, actionable steps toward

systemic change. More than personal development, affinity groups also served as sites of coalition building, where collective strength and solidarity were central. Through shared experiences and diverse perspectives, leaders drew from a deep sense of communal and ancestral support, described metaphorically as having "hands on your back." This collective empowerment traveled beyond the space, equipping participants to practice restorative leadership in everyday interactions, mentor students in self-advocacy and resilience, and sustain the internal fortitude needed to lead, especially for those who are "the one and only" in their setting. Affinity spaces thus functioned as spaces for reflection and powerful engines for ongoing encouragement, action, and transformation.

▲ *As this is your space, this is a space for you to own, and this is a space where you don't have to explain yourself and that you know folks are here to honor and to wrap their arms around each other and share as much or as little as it makes sense for you...even in those collective spaces...So we would do breakouts, and then they would come back into a whole group, and we would process as a group. I think, even in those collective spaces, how people shared, and the amount of depth and quality that they shared, was entirely up to them. No one is asked to share X, Y, and Z...if they just want to share right then, then that's fine, too. —Asian American and Pacific Islander affinity group facilitator*

Creating space for and acknowledging the multiple, intersecting dimensions that shape leaders' experiences is critical to ensuring that all participants feel seen, respected, and included.

Critical Considerations for Affinity Groups

Several key considerations must be addressed when facilitating affinity groups to ensure their effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability. While affinity groups create essential spaces for support and empowerment, they may also encounter challenges such as exclusionary practices, resistance from non-participating leaders, or the unintended reinforcement of organizational silos. Facilitators also need to be prepared to address the emotions and feelings that may accompany discussions related to personal experiences of oppression and marginalization. Without careful facilitation, these spaces risk being perceived as divisive rather than inclusive. It is especially important to continuously consider the intersectional identities of leaders of color, including but not limited to race, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, language, ability, and professional role. Creating space for and acknowledging the multiple, intersecting dimensions that shape leaders' experiences is critical to ensuring that all participants feel seen, respected, and included.

Additionally, structural and policy constraints can limit the effectiveness and accessibility of

affinity groups. Bureaucratic barriers and a lack of institutional buy-in may hinder their impact, making it difficult to establish and maintain these spaces within educational systems. A further challenge lies in sustaining long-term commitment to equity goals beyond participation in affinity groups. Without continued institutional support and intentional integration into broader organizational priorities, the influence of these groups may diminish over time, reducing their potential to drive systemic change. Addressing these complexities is essential to ensuring that affinity groups serve as meaningful, intersectional, and sustainable spaces for learning, leadership development, and collective advocacy within educational leadership.

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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.

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