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ISBN

9798186390701

Author

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Publication Date

2026-08-21

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Towards Transformative Professional Learning for In-Service Educators:
Developing Teacher-Led and Asset-Oriented Professional Learning Communities

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Lily Rachel Bryant

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2026

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Towards Transformative Professional Learning for In-Service Educators:
Developing Teacher-Led and Asset-Oriented Professional Learning Communities

by

Lily Rachel Bryant

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Tyrone Howard, Co-Chair

Professor Kristen Rohanna, Co-Chair

Extensive research has documented how culturally responsive or sustaining pedagogies benefit minoritized youth. Yet, critical scholars assert that prevalent professional development models for in-service teachers overemphasize generic best practices or data-driven school improvement and subsequently proliferate problematic deficit paradigms, rather than asset-oriented pedagogies. While understudied, existing research on equity-driven and asset-oriented professional learning suggests critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust are key components. Building on such literature, this qualitative case study explored how a public secondary school's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) piloted teacher-led and asset-oriented Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). As the study's lead researcher and the school site's

instructional coach, I utilized Reciprocal Learning Partnerships (RLP) as an equity-focused framework for designing the study's activities, developing its research questions, and analyzing the resultant data. Through observations, interviews, and document analysis, this study detailed the process for piloting a bottom-up model of context-specific and asset-oriented professional learning. It further uncovered that critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust developed as a result of facilitators cultivating a sense of authentic, purposeful work and modeling dispositions of vulnerability and care. To more deeply understand the intricacies of relational trust, this case study also explored the extent to which its multiracial participants expressed vulnerable reflections on lived experiences and surfaced their personal identities and positionalities in professional learning spaces. The resultant findings suggest that the emergence of identities and positionalities often remained internal and that relational trust may not have been cultivated evenly amongst educators encompassing a broad array of racial, ethnic, gender and other identities. Taken together, the insights of this case study stress the importance of adult-facing equity work in diverse public schools—teachers must first experience their own learning spaces as asset-oriented and culturally sustaining to reproduce the same humanizing conditions in classrooms with their students.

The dissertation of Lily Rachel Bryant is approved.

Samy H. Alim

Tonikiaa Orange

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University of California, Los Angeles

2026

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Acknowledgments

This project began with the critical and liberatory pedagogy I developed as a novice teacher through the Ethnic Studies Cohort of UCLA's Teacher Education Program. I am indebted to my first teacher-mentors, Darlene Lee and Eduardo Lopez, who guided me in this journey of self-knowledge and pushed me to live and breathe my values as a social justice teacher.

I have the utmost gratitude for my committee members Samy H. Alim, Tyrone Howard, Kristen Rohanna, and Tonikiaa Orange. It was the utmost honor to share space with you and discuss my work.

To my co-chair Dr. Howard, thank you for always pushing me with such warmth. Your thoughtful questions helped me clarify my ideas and think more deeply about my research and my work.

Kristen, I am so grateful for your mentorship as a researcher and practitioner. I have learned so much from you. Thank you for letting me borrow your wisdom and share your innumerable strategies, protocols, templates, and resources with my school and in this project. The PDSA templates, continuous improvement overview slides, and fishbone protocol diagram and steps from your course were invaluable to this work and have been included with your permission throughout my findings. As my co-chair, you always knew to push me just enough and never wavered in your faith that I would get it just right eventually.

Tonikiaa, you enter every space with a warmth, humor, and love that is coupled with a deep criticality and ferocity to think and do more radically and urgently. It is a way of leading and being I will spend a lifetime trying to emulate. Your mentorship in research and practice has been my life force these past several years. I am so grateful for you.

Leah! You emerged for me like an oasis in a desert...How lucky am I? Thank you for the many hours of shared thinking and processing. I am so blessed to have met you and be able to seek your wisdom.

I also want to thank Diane Durkin and Karen Jarsky who patiently read countless pages of convoluted and piecemeal drafts of this project. With your guidance, I developed my identity and skills as a writer capable of communicating my voice through a mere semicolon or em dash (and knowing their respective purposes too!). I will forever see writing as an exercise in, rather than just an outcome of deep thinking.

Artnelson and Chris, I cannot imagine the ELP journey without you both. Thank you for being my most trusted thought partners in developing my scholarship and holding it down in the wild world of K-12 public schools. Since day one, you made me think, reflect, and laugh harder than I ever thought possible these last three years. We did it (finally). I will treasure our friendship forever!

My scholarship reflects the wisdom of the many incredible teacher-leaders whom I have worked with—Sharon, John, Tony, Sean, Ernesto, Matthew, Sofia, Diana, Luis, Yolanda, Leah, Grethel, Diego, Kristi, Joel...Thank you for making every ILT meeting I ever shared with you feel humanizing, radical, joyful, and transformative. You give me hope and conviction that what we do each day matters and makes the world better. I also want to thank the school administrators I have worked with, Joy, Andrew, Melissa, who believed in me and trusted me with such grace and patience to lead this work.

My greatest joy has always been in the classroom—learning alongside all the funny, critical, fierce, intelligent middle school and high school students I have had the privilege of

knowing this last decade. So much of this work began with what I learned from these incredible young people in the best city.

To my aunt and uncle Jami and Owen, I am eternally grateful for your generosity.

Without your support, I would never have been able to do this program.

Mom and Dad, I could never have done this without you. You have always encouraged and supported me in all my endeavors. In this journey, you pushed me to just keep going even amidst the deep loss of our family home and beloved Highland Avenue and Altadena community. Witnessing your resilience got me through the grief and to the other side. I will always treasure our 2509 memories and look forward to many more in our new homes and with our newest family member. I love you both!

Seth, how can I possibly put into words my love and gratitude for you?! Thank you for taking care of me, for pushing me to just finish, for reminding me to slow down, for listening to my venting and rambling always, and for helping me to be a better, more loving and understanding person. In many ways, this whole project was about how we can see, hold, and care for each other as full human beings in this crazy and chaotic world. This is just who you already are. Every day and everywhere, I see you show up with love, compassion, and humor for everyone with whom you interact. I am so lucky. I can't wait to bring this new human into the world with you.

Vita

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2023	UCLA Center X: Cognitive Coaching Foundations
2023	UCLA Center X: Professional Leadership & Coaching Academy
2022	Bright Morning: Art of Coaching and Coaching for Equity
2021-2022	High Tech High, Center for Love and Justice: Liberatory PBL
2020	UCLA TEP, Ethnic Studies: Civil Rights in California Summer Series
2020	Equitable Grading & Instruction Certification
2019	Kagan Cooperative Learning Certification
2018-2019	Association of Raza Educators Los Angeles: Annual Summer Praxis Institute

2018	English Learner Authorization
2017	Single Subject California Teaching Credential, History & Social Science

Chapter One: Introduction

Following the uprising for racial justice in the summer of 2020, school districts across the United States funded reforms to address systemic inequities in education (Education Week, 2021; Mayberry, 2022; Schemmel, 2021). Today, the Trump administration contrarily mandates schools to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (Goldstein, 2025). The conflict in policy signifies the need for a more grassroots approach to educational equity. Even though immediate systemic change may be out of reach, targeted and localized actions can advance justice and equity every day in schools (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Howard, 2024). Efforts to improve instruction can yield transformative results, especially given the significant role of teacher beliefs and behaviors in student success (Childs & Wooten, 2023; Chin et al., 2020; Turetsky et al., 2021). In classrooms serving marginalized youth, educator effectiveness is predicated upon teacher thinking about race, culture, and diversity (Gay, 2013; Howard, 2011; Mellom et al., 2018). While entrenched deficit mental models can deny young people access to the education they deserve (Dudley-Marling, 2015), asset-based pedagogies foster academic excellence and social-emotional well-being for students with minoritized identities related to race, class, language and disability (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mellom et al., 2018).

Professional learning can yield more asset-oriented classroom instruction and improve the educational outcomes and experiences of marginalized youth (Turestky, et al. 2021; Uribe-Zarain et al., 2025). Where deficit paradigms do exist, however, top-down approaches to instructional improvement fall short in mitigating and addressing educational inequities (Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2023). Focused on “technical fixes,” prevalent reform efforts for professional learning do not

model asset-based mindsets or practices for teacher participants (Nelson & Guerra, 2014, p. 69; see also Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Picower, 2015). Instead, dominant professional development approaches may reproduce deficit paradigms by positing educators as passive recipients of generic best practices, reinforcing data systems that classify marginalized students as insufficient, and neglecting the complexities of how diverse educators think about issues of race, culture or bias (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Kohli, Picower, et al., 2015; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Picower, 2015; Safir & Dugan 2021).

Addressing the shortcomings of top-down improvement efforts, this study explored a bottom-up, teacher-led model of professional learning designed to foster and sustain asset-based pedagogies in educators of culturally diverse adolescents. Through an in-depth qualitative case study, I examined how an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), which brought together the principal, classroom teachers, and coordinators, iteratively codesigned and implemented teacher-led and asset-oriented Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Intending to contribute to the nascent field of improvement research with an equity focus (Russell & Penuel, 2022), this study investigated how a public secondary school's ILT collaboratively developed a model of peer-to-peer professional learning intended to nurture more culturally responsive and sustaining mindsets, practices, and systems.

Statement of the Problem

Scholars have established that the United States' history of White Supremacy, exclusion and forced assimilation drive contemporary educational inequities in schools (Berg & Parad 2024; Khalifa, 2018; Safir & Dugan, 2021); teacher thinking is not immune to the structural legacies of systemic racism (Childs & Wooten, 2023; Dudley-Marling, 2015; Starck et al., 2020; Turetsky et al., 2021). Foundational studies indicate that educators have approximately 1,500

daily interactions with students and make about 1,300 decisions each day (Edwards & Newton, 1995). Teacher thinking informs each of these decisions and interactions; accordingly, teacher thinking about race, culture, and diversity directly influences the educational outcomes and experiences of minoritized students (Childs & Wooten, 2023; Gay, 2013). Informed by prevalent societal prejudices and reinforced by the dominant culture of schools, implicit biases can shape teacher decision-making (Childs & Wooten, 2023; Raphael, 2026; Starck et al., 2020). Childs and Wooten define implicit bias as “the subconscious and unconscious beliefs and attitudes [one] has towards another individual or group” (p. 369). Indeed, nationwide studies affirm that most educators hold some degree of negative implicit bias towards youth with a broad range of marginalized identities (Chin et al., 2020; Starck et al., 2020; Turetsky et al., 2021).

Across the United States, the historical legacy of systemic inequities in schooling can manifest racial biases as deficit thinking—implicit or explicit beliefs pathologizing minoritized youth and their communities (Dudley-Marling, 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Patton Davis & Museus, 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Deficit paradigms are often reinforced by dominant practices in schools, like using student assessment data to differentiate expectations or justify remedial instruction (Galloway & Ishimaru; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Researchers have documented deficit views based on language, race, class, gender and disability (Childs & Wooten, 2023; Starck et al., 2020). For instance, institutional pressure to improve test scores might manifest as teacher bias against a student’s primary language, viewing it as a hindrance to meeting proficiency levels on a state assessment, rather than as an asset for literacy instruction (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Mellom et al., 2018). Such internalized beliefs can then easily translate into prejudicial classroom behaviors that harm young people (Dudley-Marling, 2015). For example, unmitigated deficit thinking can promote teacher-centered methods

that deny marginalized children access to critical thinking or rigor (Dudley-Marling, 2015; Hammond, 2014; McAfee, 2014). As a mental model, or “deeply held internal image,” deficit thinking reflects underlying systems (Senge, 2006, p. 163; see also Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Surfacing and mitigating deficit mental models thereby has the potential to not only transform teacher beliefs and practices, but also iteratively promote change throughout a larger organization (Senge, 1996).

Educational equity requires dismantling deficit paradigms in schools and instead situating the experiential and cultural knowledge of diverse youth as foundational assets for new learning (Byrd, 2016; Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In the racialized context of American schools, unlearning deficit ideology and nurturing asset-based pedagogies requires nuanced models of teacher professional learning (Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Orange & Isken, 2021; Orange, Isken, & Rohanna, 2023; Turetsky et al., 2021). Overall, the literature suggests that critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust are key tenets of equity-driven and transformative teacher development (Berg & Parad, 2024; Biag, 2019; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Jacobs & Rinck, 2024; Orange & Isken, 2021; Picower, 2015; Senge, 2006). Gay and Kirkland (2003) define self-reflection as “analytical introspection, continuous reconstruction of knowledge, and the recurring transformation of beliefs and skills” (p. 182). Howard (2003) distinguishes *critical* reflection as thinking through how race and culture shape larger systems and influence one’s positionality and interaction with students. Collaborative inquiry signifies the cyclical process of reflection and action to develop and test new practices within a specific context (Berg, 2021; Jacobs Burns, et al., 2023; Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2021; Orange & Isken, 2021). Lastly, Orange and Isken (2021) describe relational trust as the “respect, personal regard, competence,

and integrity” amongst colleagues that is developed through “interactions, conversations, tension, and critical collaboration” (p. 82).

Existing research on cultivating asset-oriented pedagogies mostly examines teacher preparation programs or external professional development interventions (Hajisoteriou et al., 2019; Kose & Lim, 2010; Mellom et al., 2018; Rose, 2023). Little is known about how site-specific professional learning might be designed to foster and sustain more asset-oriented schools (Hambacher & Ginn, 2020; Matschiner, 2023; Nelson & Guerra, 2014). While scholarship has offered distributed leadership and organizational learning frameworks of how such professional development might occur (Biag, 2019; Berg & Parad, 2024; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Orange & Isken, 2021), few empirical studies have explored this process at urban school sites with diverse faculty. This study builds on the existing literature by exploring how a secondary school’s ILT—with its cross-functional team of the site’s principal, coordinators, and classroom teachers—collaboratively developed and implemented asset-oriented professional learning.

Teacher-Led and Asset-Oriented Professional Learning

In-service professional development around issues of culture, race, or bias for practicing teachers remains understudied (Matschiner, 2023). Only 30% of empirical research on race-related teacher learning from 2002 through 2018 examined in-service, rather than pre-service, educators (Hambacher & Ginn, 2020). Within the existing body of research, most studies have focused on shifting individual mindsets (Matschiner, 2023; Smith et al., 2024). However, “raising [individual] awareness” about culture, diversity, or bias does not consistently result in changes to classroom practices nor does it account for the systemic nature of racism and inequity in schools (Parkhouse, Lu, et al., 2019, p. 451; see also Matschiner, 2023). To nurture asset-oriented pedagogies, critical scholars assert that transformative professional learning needs to

situates teachers as active participants through a cyclical and collaborative process of reflection and action (Berg, 2021; Hammond et al., 2017; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Orange & Isken, 2021; Parkhouse, Senechal, et al., 2023; Picower, 2015; Senge, 2006).

Enacting relational trust, critical reflection, and collaborative inquiry in schools requires distributed models of school leadership, rather than traditional hierarchical ones (Berg & Parad, 2024; Biag, 2019; Khalifa, 2018; Senge, 2006). In the 1990s, ILTs emerged as a mechanism for shared leadership, intentionally situating classroom teachers and administrators as equal drivers of instructional improvements (Berg & Parad, 2024). By design, ILTs exist to develop teacher-leaders: classroom educators who facilitate the professional growth of peers in a way that is “neither supervisory nor hierarchical” (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 920; see also Berg & Parad, 2024; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Through the ILT, teacher-leaders can hone their capacity to lead colleagues in changing classroom level practices (Berg & Parad, 2024). Since the early 2000s, extensive research asserts that teacher-leaders can be essential to successful school reform (Cassata & Allensworth, 2021; Mujis & Harris, 2006; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). In particular, the literature confirms teacher-leaders’ unique ability to influence classroom instruction across a campus (Cassata & Allensworth, 2021; Cooper et al., 2016; Supovitz & Comstock, 2023; Yost et al., 2009).

Despite the plethora of studies on teacher leadership and instructional improvement, little research attends to how teacher-leaders might navigate colleagues’ thinking and practice in relation to culture and diversity (Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Poekert, et al., 2020; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). In a review of 54 empirical articles on teacher leadership, Wenner and Campbell (2017) identified only five studies that attended to diversity or equity. Two analyzed graduate-level courses preparing

teacher-leaders, while the other three examined the experiences of teacher-leaders of Color. Minimal empirical literature has explored how teacher-leaders might design and facilitate professional learning that promotes asset-oriented mindsets and practices (Friedrich & McKinney, 2010; Jacobs & Rinck, 2024).

Even fewer studies on teacher-led and asset-oriented professional learning have examined ethnically diverse educators in urban schools (Kohli, Picower, et al., 2015; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021). In the existing literature, the focus populations of teacher-led and equity-driven professional learning have been predominantly White and female (Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Jacobs & Rinck, 2024). Insufficient scholarship has examined the process through which educators with varying gender, racial, or ethnic identities might engage in asset-oriented instructional improvement together (García & Guerra, 2004; Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Jacobs & Rinck, 2024). Extending the work of previous scholars, this study explored how teacher-leaders with a diverse range of identities emerged and developed through the collaborative processes of a site's ILT.

Study Overview

My project is a direct result of the challenges I have faced in my work as an instructional coach dedicated to disrupting deficit paradigms and promoting culturally sustaining pedagogies and systems in urban Title I schools. As a researcher-practitioner, I led a school site's pre-existing ILT in iteratively codesigning and facilitating teacher-led and asset-oriented PLCs. The literature on transformative professional learning has informed the design of this project, as well as its conceptual framework rooted in critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust. Using a qualitative and descriptive case study design, I addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the process through which a secondary school's ILT codesigns and facilitates teacher-led and asset-oriented PLCs with fellow educators of minoritized students?
2. From the perspective of participating teacher-leaders, what facilitates critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust amongst colleagues in professional learning? What challenges emerge?
3. In what ways do diverse participants' identities and positionalities emerge during the process of codesigning and facilitating teacher-led and asset-oriented professional learning with fellow educators of minoritized students?

In answering these research questions, I hoped to offer a possible model of a transformative and context-specific professional learning program.

My previous training, coursework, and practitioner experience helped me lead the site's ILT to build the capacity of its teacher-leaders in facilitating asset-oriented PLCs. At the beginning of the 2025-2026 school year, the site's 34 teachers formed six content-based PLCs focused on identifying, analyzing, and addressing an equity-driven problem of practice for the duration of the school year. While the ILT included the principal and coordinators, only its teacher-leader members facilitated the PLCs with their peers. The ILT meetings and PLC sessions occurred on alternating weeks throughout the fall semester. In the teacher-led PLCs, teams of educators engaged in cycles of inquiry to co-construct, implement, and reflect on asset-oriented instructional strategies in the classroom. Throughout this process, the ILT served as a reflective and collaborative space for teacher-leaders to iteratively codesign PLCs and refine facilitation approaches with the cross-functional team.

While this process occurred throughout the entirety of the 2025-2026 school year, this case study only examined the 18 weeks of the fall semester. I recruited all 13 members of the

pre-existing ILT for the study. In addition to myself, this participant pool included two coordinators, the principal, and nine teacher-leaders. I also recruited an additional population of the site's math and science teachers as members of two different teacher-led PLCs. To answer my research questions, I collected video recordings, observation notes, and documents from the fall semester's ILT meetings. Given my project's attention to the nuances of teacher-led professional learning, I also conducted individual interviews with the ILT's nine teacher-leaders. Finally, I followed the development of the math and science teacher-led PLCs by observing two sessions of each over the course of the data collection period.

Study Significance

In this project, I studied how an ILT might begin the complex process of mitigating the effects of systemic deficit paradigms and cultivating more asset-oriented systems, mindsets, and practices. This endeavor required disrupting hierarchical leadership models and top-down approaches to school improvement, and instead, situating teacher-leaders as apt designers and facilitators of professional learning. By focusing on site-based professional learning for in-service teachers, my study sought to extend the literature on developing culturally responsive and sustaining educators that has focused predominantly on pre-service teachers. I hope that the insights of my research refine the complexities of doing equity work in spaces that, by design, reproduce inequity. The findings of this study may benefit classroom teachers, site administrators, and district leaders seeking to develop new instructional leadership spaces capable of nurturing more asset-oriented ways of being and learning together in schools.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

I begin this literature review by examining the problem of deficit ideology. While extensive research has documented that deficit mindsets and practices of classroom teachers can harm marginalized youth, scholars also emphasize how dominant school norms can reinforce rather than disrupt deficit ideology. In exploring the need for asset-oriented pedagogies, I emphasize how critical scholars have characterized professional learning capable of mitigating deficit thinking and fostering culturally sustaining beliefs, behaviors, and systems. I first examine how this type of professional development might cultivate critical reflection to surface internalized biases and nurture critical consciousness. Recognizing that changing beliefs or developing mindsets does not always ensure changes in behavior, I next explore how collaborative inquiry, grounded in multifaceted data, can support the enactment of new ways of thinking. In narrowing my focus to site-based professional learning, I subsequently review the literature on instructional improvement via Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), as well as on the relational power of teacher leadership and its association with school-wide change. The chapter converges on the support for further empirical research on how teacher-led PLCs—grounded in critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust—might generate and sustain more asset-based classrooms and schools. I conclude with a brief overview of my conceptual framework and its alignment with my research design.

The Problem of Deficit Thinking

Well documented in the literature as a form of bias, deficit thinking has remained a pervasive and prevalent challenge for decades (Childs & Wooten, 2023; Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Educational research defines deficit thinking as implicit or explicit beliefs that pathologize Students of Color (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Patton Davis & Museus, 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Examples of deficit mental models include racialized narratives that

Black and Brown parents do not value education, or that minoritized youth lack the foundational skills or experiences necessary for academic success (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2007). Recent quantitative studies affirm that some teachers in the United States—no matter how well-intentioned or equity-focused—may possess negative implicit biases towards minority groups based on race, language, class, gender or disability (Turetsky et al., 2021). For example, a nationwide study of 40,000 educators found that 55% hold some level of anti-Black implicit bias (Chin et al., 2020; Starck et al., 2020). Given that teachers have up to 1,500 daily interactions with students and make about 1,300 decisions each day (Edwards & Newton, 1995), biased mental models of deficit thinking have the potential to taint a wide range of decisions and interactions (Gay, 2013).

When educators view minoritized students as deficient, they may employ basic skills instruction that denies children access to rigorous learning experiences (Dudley-Marling, 2015; Hammond, 2014; Herbel-Eisenmann & Shah, 2019; McAfee, 2014; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Affirming the relationship between racialized deficit ideology and educational outcomes, Chin et al. (2020) found U.S. counties with higher rates of teacher implicit racial bias also had the lowest Black student academic achievement. Extensive qualitative research in classrooms further reveals how deficit thinking translates into teacher decision-making that perpetuates inequities (Herbel-Eisenmann & Shah, 2019; McAfee, 2014; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). For example, McAfee (2014) documented how a math teacher consistently called on Black youth to answer low-level review questions, while he asked White or Asian students to share their thinking about cognitively demanding tasks. As demonstrated in the study, deficit thinking easily translates into prejudicial behavior if educators lack professional learning opportunities grounded in self-reflection or critical inquiry (Warikoo et al., 2016).

Even though the above research recognizes the structural origins of deficit paradigms, it focuses on individual thinking and behavior (Matschiner, 2023). Addressing systemic inequities like deficit thinking requires an analysis of school systems, not just individual teachers (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Matschiner, 2023; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Dominant cultural patterns in public schools reproduce and reinforce deficit paradigms. For example, Safir and Dugan (2021) highlight how schools and districts typically use singular quantitative data sources, like student assessment results, to drive professional development and school improvement plans. As the authors implore, such data collection and analysis approaches only uphold the categorization and classification of minoritized youth as deficient. Indeed, Galloway and Ishimaru (2020) highlight how professional development meetings driven by quantitative assessment data quickly disintegrated into venting sessions about students and families or planning remedial, back-to-basics instruction. Such research suggests that to truly mitigate deficit paradigms, professional learning needs to model an asset-orientation by utilizing more qualitative, experiential data to inform inquiry and situating teachers as active participants and co-constructors of knowledge. As I discuss next, research indicates that improving the educational experiences and outcomes of minoritized students requires teacher mindsets and practices, as well as school systems, that situate the experiential and cultural knowledge of diverse youth as foundational assets for new learning (Byrd, 2016; Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Asset-Based Mindsets and Practices

For the past three decades, scholars across the United States have developed frameworks of asset-based pedagogies. In 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings conducted a foundational 3-year study on effective teachers of Students of Color. Nominated by parents of African American children, the selected teachers regularly produced higher standardized test scores than their

grade-level colleagues. Drawing from her findings, Ladson-Billings (1995) first defined *culturally relevant teaching* as fostering academic excellence, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. To describe how teachers might elicit these outcomes, Gay (2010) later described *culturally responsive pedagogy* as locating new learning in the context of students' lived experiences and cultural frames of reference. Most recently, Paris (2012) distinguished *culturally sustaining pedagogy*: Critiquing the terms *relevant* and *responsive*, Paris asserted that asset-based pedagogies need to explicitly preserve the diverse cultural practices of minoritized youth. Despite variance, the three frameworks share a common aim of “dismantling a deficit approach to educating Students of Color and focusing instead on their strengths, assets, and communities in the classroom” (Will & Najjarro, 2022, p. 6). In the current study, I utilize the descriptor *asset-based* or *asset-oriented* to broadly capture the pedagogies and professional learning that challenge deficit paradigms about diverse students, and instead center, cultivate, and sustain the linguistic, cultural, and community capital of learners and teachers with minoritized identities (Celedón-Pattichis et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005).

Asset-based pedagogies require a set of beliefs that precede culturally responsive or sustaining practices (Gay, 2013; Howard & Terry, 2011). Asset-oriented educators situate schooling within a larger sociopolitical context and recognize its subtractive legacy perpetuating White supremacist constructions of knowledge (Gay, 2013; Hammond, 2014; Khalifa, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). In the classroom, teachers enact this mindset by designing learning experiences that foster and extend students' understanding of injustice and resistance (Howard, 2024; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Asset-oriented educators also believe in marginalized youth's capacity for academic excellence, as well as each student's unique array of cultural capital (Howard, 2024; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Yosso, 2005). In practice, these teachers

communicate high expectations for all children and design rigorous learning activities that center student voice and lived experiences (Dudley-Marling, 2015; Hammond, 2014; Howard, 2019, 2024). Finally, asset-oriented teachers believe in the value of self-knowledge and critical reflexivity (Howard, 2019; Paris & Alim, 2017). Through constant reflection, asset-based educators continuously revisit how systemic inequities, identities, positionalities, and culture shape teaching and learning in schools and classrooms (Aguilar, 2020; Orange et al., 2019)

Empirical research across the United States affirms that asset-oriented teaching in all content areas can nurture the academic achievement and social-emotional well-being of students with minoritized identities (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). For instance, several quantitative studies have reported a correlation between culturally responsive Ethnic Studies courses and increases in student GPAs and attendance (Bonilla et al., 2021), as well as improvements in standardized test scores and high school graduation rates (Cabrera et al., 2014). To offer a causal analysis of the relationship between asset-based pedagogies and academic achievement, qualitative research has also uncovered how culturally responsive education increases the motivation, engagement, and confidence of marginalized learners (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Byrd, 2016). Given the potential positive effects of asset-based pedagogies, it is essential to examine how professional learning can most effectively develop and sustain this approach in school communities that serve minoritized youth.

Professional Development for Asset-Based Pedagogies

To cultivate asset-oriented pedagogies in the classroom, professional learning systems need to first nurture critical reflections about race, bias, and equity (Aguilar, 2013; Aguilar, 2020; Berg & Parad, 2024; Jacobs, 2012; Uribe-Zarain et al., 2025). Research demonstrates that some models of professional development can build the critical consciousness of in-service

teachers (Uribe-Zarain et al., 2025). However, singular top-down workshops that overemphasize skills or strategies neglect the surfacing and mitigating of deficit mental models (Kohli, Picower, et al., 2015; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Picower, 2015). Professional learning needs to engage teachers in sustained critical reflection and dialogue around the interplay of their own identities, the cultural background of their students, and larger systems of injustice and oppression (Gay, 2013; Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Orange et al., 2019; Uribe-Zarain et al., 2025). Yet, building awareness does not always manifest as shifting behavior (Matschiner, 2023; Kennedy, 2016). To create asset-oriented change in classrooms, professional learning should engage teachers as active co-constructors of knowledge. Through collaborative cycles of inquiry, teachers learn in the context of their own classrooms by implementing change ideas and collecting experiential, qualitative data (Khalifa, 2018; Rohanna, 2022; Safir & Dugan, 2021). While the literature has established the effectiveness of site-based PLCs at promoting classroom-based inquiry (Berg, 2021; Hajisoteriou et al., 2019; Orange & Isken, 2021; Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2021), few studies examine how this format might advance culturally responsive mindsets and practices (Khalifa, 2018; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Lomeli, 2021). As I discuss in the sections that follow, a nuanced model of site-based and teacher-led PLCs—rooted in critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust—shows promise for moving educators and schools towards more asset-oriented mindsets, and in turn, practices.

Critical Reflection in Asset-Oriented Professional Learning

Critical approaches to teacher development undertake beliefs by advancing educator understanding of structural inequities, as well as how an individual's identities, positionalities, and biases shape teaching and learning in diverse classrooms (Aguilar, 2020; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Howard, 2003; Jacobs, 2012; Matschiner, 2023; Picower, 2015). Contemporary models of

critical professional development consistently create space for “complex reflection about structures, policies, and practices that guide social and school based inequities” (Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021, p. 90). Gay and Kirkland (2003) defined *self-reflection* as “analytical introspection, continuous reconstruction of knowledge, and the recurring transformation of beliefs and skills” (p. 182). Howard (2003) distinguished *critical self-reflection* as the ability to think through how systems of oppression influence one’s positionality and interaction with students. Critical self-reflection precedes the enactment of asset-based pedagogies in diverse classrooms (Hammond, 2014; Howard, 2003; Howard & Terry, 2011). To mitigate deficit thinking and cultivate asset-based pedagogies, professional learning must nurture educators’ capacity to contend with questions of culture, race, and bias (Aguilar, 2020; Howard, 2011; Orange et al., 2019).

Professional development that effectively fosters critical reflection in practicing educators remains elusive (Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Parkhouse, Senechal, et al., 2023). While pre-service teachers develop their capacity for critical reflection through accreditation courses with trusted mentors and coaches, in-service teachers typically lack the time and space to engage in this work (Hambacher & Ginn, 2020; Matschiner, 2023). Revealing such challenges, studies examining a broad array of approaches yield mixed results in professional development’s ability to foster the more asset-oriented beliefs of in-service teachers (Kose & Lim, 2010; Parkhouse, Senechal, et al., 2023). However, broad definitions of professional development, encompassing everything from graduate coursework to singular workshops, limit the generalizability of the findings. When filtered for models that sustain learning over an extended period, the literature reveals greater potential for professional development to promote critical reflection and cultivate asset-based mindsets (Mellom et al., 2018; Uribe-Zarain et al., 2025). Recurring support, often with long-term coaches and mentors, can surface and shift beliefs.

Cycles of Inquiry Support Enactment of Learning

Changing beliefs about race or culture does not mean teachers enact asset-based practices in the classroom (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Matschiner, 2023). In fact, several studies have documented an incongruence between teachers' purported beliefs and their actions following professional development (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Kennedy, 2016; Matschiner, 2023). As Kennedy (2016) asserts, "teachers can learn and espouse one idea, yet continue enacting a different idea, out of habit, without even noticing the contradiction" (p. 947). Several critical scholars have highlighted the role of inequitable school systems in proliferating such contradictions (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Matschiner, 2023; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Specifically, institutional pressure to improve test scores and the resultant dominance of deficit-based approaches to data collection and analysis may hinder educator ability to put culturally responsive mindsets into practice (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Without asset-oriented approaches to classroom-level inquiry, professional development may fail to improve teaching and learning for minoritized youth.

To advance enactment of asset-oriented mindsets, the literature suggests professional learning should engage teachers in participatory inquiry that is context-specific, reflective, and cyclical (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Friedrich & McKinney, 2010; Gay, 2013; Hajisoteriou et al., 2019; Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2021; Rose, 2023; Senge, 2006). Inquiry cycles prompt educators to investigate a challenge within their own classrooms by developing and executing a plan of action and then collecting and analyzing multifaceted data to further refine the intervention (Hajisoteriou et al., 2019; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Specifically, the collection of classroom-level data, or what Safir and Dugan (2021) characterize as "street data," can generate shifts in teacher thinking and practice, as well as broader school systems (see also Parkhouse,

Gorlewski, et al., 2021; Rohanna, 2022); classroom-level student data, like student work samples, discussion scripts, or participation trackers, can surface inequities in real time and enable “rapid feedback loops” with the potential to reshape every day decisions and behaviors (Safir & Dugan, 2021, p. 51).

Embodying these features, action research has served as the principal form of high-quality professional learning attending to culturally relevant education (Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014; Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2021). Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al. define action research as a “self-reflective and collaborative process” that enables participants to “reflect on, and then address educational inequities stemming from the unequal distribution of power across cultural groups” (p. 413). Originating from improvement science, Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles often structure teacher action research: Educators develop a change strategy to address a context-specific problem of practice, implement the change, study results from classroom-level data, and act on the findings by quickly refining or adjusting the change strategy (Hajisoteriou et al., 2019; Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2021; Rohanna, 2022). Such an approach yields enactment as teachers drive their own learning in the specific contexts of their classrooms (Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2021; Rohanna, 2022).

Empirical research affirms action research models of professional learning can foster teacher enactment of new ways of thinking (Brown & Crippen, 2016; Jacobs, 2012; Moore-Lawrence, 2017; Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2021; Rose, 2023). Demonstrated in the literature, action research empowers teachers to recognize how inequities may be rooted in their own assumptions and biases and develop solutions within their locus of control (Brown & Crippen, 2016; Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2021; Rohanna, 2022). Rohanna (2022), for example, found that teacher-driven PDSA cycles fostered changes in both thinking and practice. Through the

collection and analysis of qualitative data from students, PDSA cycles enabled teachers to disprove pre-existing assumptions. Rohanna conceptualizes such transformation as “double loop learning”: Teachers not only shifted their behavior, but “question[ed] underlying values [and] norms...ultimately leading to changes in how and/or why certain practices [were] being done” (Rohanna, 2022, p. 102; see also Argyris & Schön, 1996). When grounded in cycles of inquiry, professional learning can surface mental models like deficit ideology and promote new ways of teaching (Berg, 2021; Senge, 2006).

While these studies demonstrate promising conclusions, all examined approaches to professional learning that occurred outside of participating teachers’ school sites. Several researchers have suggested that external settings might bolster the transformative learning of educators given that school systems often perpetuate and reinforce deficit ideology (Kohli, Picower et al., 2015; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Rohanna, 2022). Yet, external formats may neglect the cultivation of trusting relationships amongst a school site’s faculty that precedes equity-driven and context-specific instructional improvement (Orange & Isken, 2021; Orange, Isken, & Rohanna, 2023). Further, the existing studies lack the observational data that may offer greater insight as to how a school’s educators authentically engage in critical reflection and action research with one another (Matschiner, 2023).

PLCs as a Context-Specific Model of Collaborative Inquiry

As a context-specific approach to professional development, PLCs offer a format for *collaborative inquiry*, or the “collective enactment of action research” (Nelson et al., 2010, p. 175). The literature broadly defines PLCs as site-based teams of educators who come together to improve teaching and learning (Grimm, 2024; Kennedy, 2016; Leonard & Woodland, 2022). Reflective dialogue and action inquiry, key characteristics of PLCs, support educators in

“gain[ing] new perspectives, understand[ing] themselves better as teachers, negotiat[ing] their understandings, and develop[ing] agency to change improve their teaching” (Grimm, 2024, pp. 1136-1137). Empirical studies on PLCs demonstrate a range of benefits, such as increasing teacher efficacy, improving student achievement, and cultivating positive school cultures (Grimm, 2024; Leonard & Woodland, 2022). Less is known about how this format of professional learning might support the complex work of developing more asset-oriented schools and classrooms (Khalifa, 2018; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Lomeli, 2021). Over the past decade, several scholars have begun to examine PLCs dedicated to equity and cultural responsiveness (Berg, 2021; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Khalifa, 2018; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Lomeli, 2021).

Facilitating Equity-Driven and Culturally Responsive PLCs

Researchers distinguish equity-driven PLCs as spaces through which teams of educators identify existing incongruencies between values and actions, and then co-construct new practices (Berg, 2021; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Lomeli, 2021). Such a process is conducive to shifting beliefs, behaviors, and systems by centering race and culture in localized discussions of teaching and learning (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Hewko, 2023). In equity-driven PLCs, uncomfortable conversations are natural and necessary (Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Nelson et al., 2010). While tools and strategies may promote critical and productive dialogue, transformative conversations may depend most on trusting relationships between PLC facilitators and their members (Kennedy, 2016; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Parkhouse, Lu, et al., 2019). Yet, many studies on transformative PLCs offer little descriptive analysis of the facilitator vis-a-vis the participants (Kennedy, 2016; Parkhouse, Lu, et al., 2019). Research still needs to more closely examine how facilitators of equity-driven

PLCs might navigate their identities and positionalities in developing and leading learning about sensitive topics like culture, race, or diversity (Parkhouse, Lu, et al., 2019).

Most research on asset-oriented PLCs has identified the school site's principal as the primary facilitator (Grimm, 2023; Grimm, 2024; Khalifa, 2018). For example, Galloway and Ishimaru's (2020) qualitative case study found that principals leading equity-driven PLCs increased "culture-conscious talk and individual awareness" (pp. 122-123). However, such shifts appeared isolated to the team's nine teachers and did not manifest across the broader organization. In addition, deficit framing of students persisted as a limiting mental model. Such limitations indicate the hierarchical power of administrators may negate the rapport required shifting beliefs and practices across a school site (Berg, 2021). Transformative PLCs may thereby necessitate a more horizontal facilitator. In fact, organizational psychology suggests leaders who arise from relationships, rather than from formal titles or expertise, drive change in complex systems (Supovitz et al., 2010). To offer a more relationship-centered model of professional learning, this study examines how a school's *teacher-leaders* might emerge as apt facilitators of asset-oriented PLCs.

Teacher-Leaders and Transformative Professional Learning

As both peer and leader, teacher-leaders have the potential to navigate uncomfortable conversations and nurture transformative learning with colleagues (Berg, 2021; Cooper et al., 2016; Margolis & Huggins, 2012; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Unlike administrators who might employ authoritative power to create change, teacher-leaders can influence others in a way that is "neither supervisory nor hierarchical" (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 920). This section reviews the defining characteristics of, and empirical findings on, teacher leadership. I then examine the

minimal scholarship on teacher-led PLCs. In noting how teacher-led PLCs may evade critical dialogue, I then stress relational trust as the cornerstone of my own case study.

Defining Teacher Leadership and the Characteristics of Teacher-Leaders

Existing literature has defined teacher-leaders' roles, activities, and dispositions. Scholarship broadly defines teacher-leaders as classroom educators with additional responsibilities (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher-leaders may hold formal positions like department chair, union representative, or site committee member (Harris, 2003; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), or exert informal leadership through interactions such as peer coaching and collaborating with colleagues (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). For this study, I define teacher-leaders as full-time classroom educators who also facilitate professional learning with peers. Scholarship characterizes teacher leadership as student-centered and exerted through influence rather than directives (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). As individuals, teacher-leaders maintain an internal commitment to advance their instructional practices and exemplify dispositions of collaboration, inquiry, and reflection (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012).

Teacher Leadership Drives Instructional Change

Teacher leadership has long been established as an effective avenue for instructional improvement (Mujis & Harris, 2006; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Several studies in diverse contexts have established a correlation between teacher leadership and instructional change (Cassata & Allensworth, 2021; Supovitz & Comstock, 2023; Yost et al., 2009). Most recently, Supovitz and Comstock (2023) revealed a strong positive association between the presence of teacher-leaders and teacher reports of change in instructional practices

across several school districts in multiple states. Research using multiple data sources further confirms such correlation. Through classroom observations at a singular school site, Yost et al. (2009) noted steady increases in teacher application of new strategies because of teacher-led professional development. Corroborating student and teacher surveys, Cassata and Allensworth (2021) similarly found substantial increases in teacher implementation of new practices following a district-wide teacher leadership program. The diverse contexts and methods of these quantitative studies suggest the generalizability of their findings; teacher-leaders have the potential to drive measurable changes in the practices of colleagues.

Teacher-Led PLCs

While quantitative studies affirm an association between teacher leadership and instructional improvement, qualitative approaches reveal *how* teacher-leaders promote change in fellow educators. Utilizing interview and observation data, a few researchers have documented the nuanced facilitation of teacher-leaders—as opposed to administrators or external providers—within a PLC context. With their proximity to the classroom, teacher-leaders drew from examples in their own teaching and shared authentic reflections about student learning with peers (Grimm, 2023). Charner-Laird et al. (2016) noted how participants in a series of teacher-led PLCs repeatedly emphasized their appreciation for “working with a leader who was also learning ... alongside them” (p. 989). In the study, one PLC member explicitly described how “this mix of participation and leadership meant that [they] could literally ‘see’ [the teacher-leader’s] involvement in the work,” which encouraged their own classroom enactment of new learning (p. 990). As classroom educators, teacher-leaders can uniquely model the dispositions and practices of reflective inquiry (Grimm, 2023, 2024; Charner-Laird et al., 2016).

Although teacher-led PLCs do foster enactment and build community (Charner-Laird, 2016; Grimm, 2023, 2024), they may avoid deeper dialogue about underlying beliefs (Grimm, 2024; Nelson et al., 2010). Several studies confirm their avoidance of conflict. For example, Grimm (2023) described how teacher-leaders in Sweden cultivated a positive PLC climate that encouraged different views, while also noting the absence of disagreement. Cooper et al. (2016) uncovered similar findings in the United States, explaining how a PLC teacher-leader “prioritized a professional community with high morale over promoting any specific teaching practice” (p. 102). Notably, the facilitating teacher-leader neglected to explicitly name factors of race or culture in advocating for discussion-based teaching at school sites serving mostly Black students. Without explicit conversations about the relationship between instruction and culture, teacher-led PLCs may affect only superficial changes.

As the above studies suggest, “egalitarian and autonomous norms” can encourage teacher-leaders to avoid discussions about bias, race, or culture (Grimm, 2024, p. 1144; see also Nelson et al., 2010). When teacher-led PLCs explicitly center equity, they are more likely to cultivate the relational trust required of shifting from congenial conversations to critical dialogue (Friedrich & McKinney, 2010; Nelson et al., 2010; Orange & Isken, 2021; Orange, Isken, & Rohanna, 2023). Originating in the context of school improvement, relational trust is the “mutual respect, personal regard, competence, and integrity” amongst colleagues that is developed through “interactions, conversations, tension, and critical collaboration” (Orange & Isken, 2021, p. 82). Unlike the collegial conversations described above, relational trust fosters dialogue that surfaces underlying assumptions (Orange & Isken, 2021). My case study aimed to explore how an ILT might support teacher-leaders in developing tools and strategies for cultivating relational trust in conjunction with critical reflection and collaborative inquiry.

Teacher-Led PLCs for Equity and Asset-Oriented Teaching

While varying in context and methodology, a series of studies exploring equity-centered teacher leadership most closely parallels my research focus. In the southeastern United States, these researchers examined how teacher-leaders in a university's Teacher Leadership Academy (TLA) facilitated equity-centered PLCs (Jacobs, 2012; Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Jacobs & Rinck, 2024). Although this research provides valuable context for my own work, the teacher-leader populations were largely homogenous and predominantly White females. In my study, the participating teacher-leaders included males and females and represented a range of ethnic and racial identities. In addition, my research extends this existing scholarship by more closely examining the processes through which a site-based ILT might support teacher-leaders in cultivating the skills, dispositions, and strategies required of crafting and facilitating asset-oriented PLCs.

Nuances of Teacher-Led and Equity-Driven PLCs

Intending to offer a teacher-led model, Jacobs, Burns, et al. (2023) examined equity-driven PLCs at a single school site. Like my study's characterization of asset-oriented professional learning, Jacobs, Beck, et al. (2014) define equity-driven PLCs as making "issues of race, class, culture, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and so forth" central to instructional improvement (p. 577). While the broader school district served mostly White students, the elementary school of their study more closely resembles the context of my research: The student population was majority Latino (65%), and 94% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Throughout the course of one school year, the teacher-leaders collaboratively planned and facilitated eight distinct PLCs amongst the site's educators. Researchers collected teacher-leaders' year-long professional development plans, as well as field notes and teacher-leader

reflections. The case study methodology and robust data collection clarified the distinct characteristics of teacher-led and equity-centered professional learning.

Many features of equity-centered and teacher-led professional learning align with pre-existing research on transformative professional development (Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023). However, the researchers highlighted three specific nuances. First, community building within the teacher-led PLC extended beyond superficial “getting-to-know-you” activities. Instead, teacher-leaders had participants share life experiences around marginalization and privilege. This approach cultivated relational trust—a required precedent for tackling site-specific inequities. Second, teacher-leaders fostered critical dialogue that centered race and culture. Through structured discussion protocols, teacher-leaders invited each participant to share how biases might be shaping their assumptions or interpretations. And third, teacher-leaders utilized cycles of inquiry to raise consciousness about incongruences across core values, internalized beliefs, and classroom practices. These cycles allowed PLC participants to collect authentic data from their classrooms and make tangible connections to student-facing inequities.

The findings of Jacobs, Burns, et al. (2023) underscore my study’s conceptual framework for professional learning, but do not answer my research questions. Firstly, the teacher-leaders in the study were predominantly White and female. In contrast, my research questions specify the diverse racial, ethnic, and gender identities of participating teacher-leaders in exploring how identities and positionalities emerged when designing and facilitating professional learning with peers. Secondly, the researchers’ case study aimed to uncover the features of equity-centered and teacher-led professional learning. Instead, my first research question attends to the processes through which teacher-leaders surfaced and developed as members of a cross-functional team charged with iteratively codesigning asset-oriented PLCs.

Challenges to Equity-Centered and Teacher-Led Professional Learning

Designing and facilitating learning spaces that move classrooms and schools away from deficit paradigms and towards asset-oriented pedagogies is complex work that cannot be left to teachers alone. As demonstrated by Jacobs & Rinck (2024), teacher-leaders need site-based collaborators to foster common understandings of equity and build capacity for critical conversations. Extending these findings, my study utilized West River's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) as the key mechanism for supporting teacher-leaders' design and facilitation of transformative PLCs. Emerging from distributed leadership theory, ILTs intentionally bring together administrators, coordinators, and classroom teachers as equals (Berg & Parad, 2024). Through this "vertical complement" of a site's instructional leaders, the ILT can strengthen the conditions for effective teacher-led PLCs by ensuring that larger school systems advance equity (Berg & Parad, 2024, p. 9). While my study's ILT included the principal and coordinators, I focused on how teacher-leaders surfaced and developed as equal members of this team. Using the features of equity-centered and teacher-led professional learning, I examined how the ILT iteratively codesigned and facilitated asset-oriented and teacher-led PLCs grounded in critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust.

Conceptual Framework

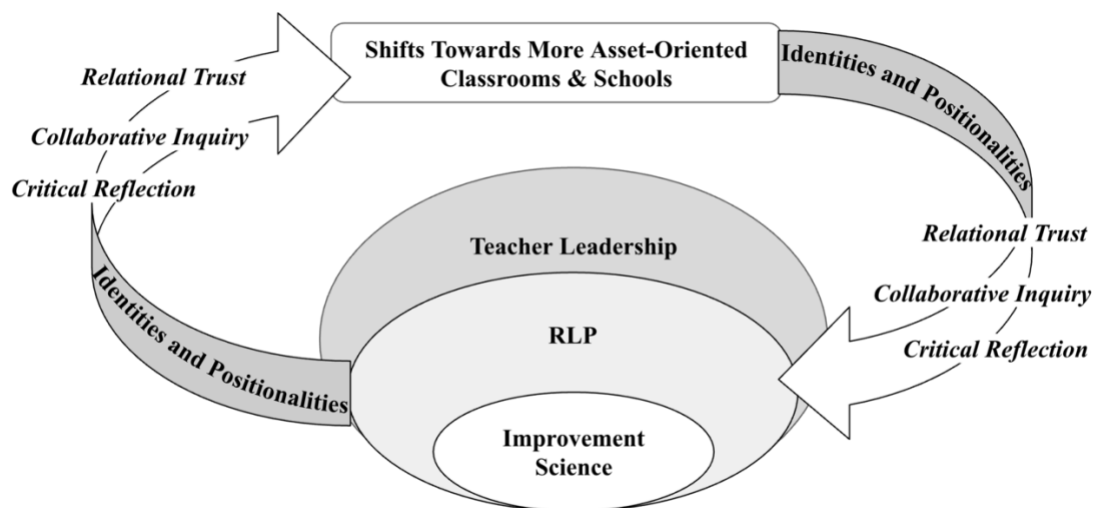
At its core, this study aimed to explore the process of designing a collaborative learning space that could promote change in a complex system. I utilized a model of professional learning grounded in improvement science tools, but within Orange and Isken's (2021) framework of Reciprocal Learning Partnerships (RLP; see also Orange, Isken, & Rohanna, 2023). With its attention to the dynamics of identities and positionalities, RLP shapes how a team might engage in equity-driven instructional improvement (Orange & Isken, 2021; Orange, Isken, & Rohanna,

2023). As illustrated by Figure 2.1, my study’s framework wielded improvement science through RLP and the overarching theory of teacher leadership. This conceptualization suggests teacher-leaders, with their relationship-centered approach to fostering change, are apt facilitators of transformative professional learning.

Grounded in this chapter’s literature review, my framework hypothesized that these three concentric frameworks foster the relational trust, collaborative inquiry, and critical reflection required of cultivating more asset-oriented classrooms and schools (Grimm, 2024; Nelson et al., 2010; Orange & Isken, 2021; Orange, Isken, & Rohanna, 2023). My conceptual framework further proposed that this process is iterative and informed by the unique identities and positionalities of individual participants. As schools become more asset-oriented, relational trust, collaborative inquiry, and critical reflection evolve and restructure how educators see themselves in relation to one another, as well as how they understand and enact improvement science, RLP, and teacher leadership.

Figure 2.1

Conceptual Framework: Teacher-Led and Asset-Oriented Professional Learning



Reciprocal Learning Partnerships

To promote change across a school system, this study's professional learning model utilized improvement science tools. However, improvement science alone is not sufficient to foster the relational trust and critical dialogue required of mitigating deficit ideology and advancing more asset-oriented schools and classrooms. In fact, the data-driven inquiry of improvement science can reinforce deficit paradigms and remedial approaches to "fixing" students rather than improving instruction and advancing equity (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). While improvement science informed the practical components of this project, RLP served as the key conceptual framework of my research. Developed at the intersection of critical race theory, sociocultural learning theory, and critical third space theory, RLP wields improvement science tools with the criticality required of transformative and equity-centered professional learning (Orange & Isken, 2021; Orange, Isken, & Rohanna, 2023).

Through four key principles, RLP structures a team's collaboration around an explicit equity stance (Orange et al., 2019; Orange & Isken, 2021). The principles are (1) naming the particular equity issue at play in a context-specific problem of practice; (2) developing relational trust to share how identities and positionalities shape individual perspectives on the equity issue; (3) co-constructing equity actions particular to the problem's context; and (4) engaging in critical reflection to refine both the equity actions and the collaborative processes of the team (Orange et al., 2019; Orange & Isken, 2021; Orange, Isken, & Rohanna, 2023). As Orange, Isken, and Rohanna (2023) explain, each RLP principle connects to the phases of improvement science. Principle 1, naming the equity issue, and Principle 2, relational trust, support the first phase of improvement science, identifying and understanding a problem of practice, by deepening and complicating the team's analysis. These principles can surface deficit mental models as the root

cause of problems of practice and reveal how participants' unique identities or lived experiences generate divergent perspectives on underlying equity issues. Principle 3, equity action, bolsters the inquiry or PDSA phase of improvement science by ensuring theories of change reflect asset-oriented instructional practices. Finally, Principle 4, critical reflection, guides the entire improvement process by prompting teams to continuously revisit previous assumptions as well as how their own identities and positionalities shape educator collaboration and interaction. Principle 4 can also help push teachers to collect different kinds of data throughout PDSA cycles and avoid perpetuating deficit narratives.

RLP not only guided the improvement science phases of this project, but also the process through which educators interacted, collaborated, and co-constructed knowledge. As a framework for collaboration, RLP intentionally disrupts traditional hierarchical roles and resituates teachers, administrators, and coaches as equal partners in advancing educational equity. In conjunction with teacher leadership, RLP principles drove the ILT in its own collaborative work, as well as in developing the agendas, objectives, and activities of the teacher-led PLCs. Additionally, RLP structured my approach to data collection and analysis. I used RLP's core themes of equity, reciprocity, relational trust, identities, and positionalities to craft interview questions, and used them to code and analyze the resulting data. It is important to note that no published empirical research on the RLP framework existed at the time of this project. My case study approach reflected this novelty as I iteratively designed the ILT's work to align with RLP.

Conclusion

The United States' history of injustice and oppression continues to make the mitigation of deficit thinking and the cultivation of asset-oriented pedagogies in public secondary schools a

critical challenge to educational equity (Berg & Parad 2024; Khalifa, 2018; Safir & Dugan, 2021). As demonstrated throughout this literature review, much scholarship has examined effective approaches to transformative professional development, as well as the potential for teacher-leaders to promote instructional improvement. Little research has explored professional learning that is both asset-based and teacher-led (Jacobs & Rinck, 2024; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023). This project sought to extend the existing scholarship on teacher-led and equity-centered PLCs through a case study of teacher-leaders representing a range of racial, ethnic, and gender identities. Ultimately, my work aimed to explore a possible model of professional learning in secondary education by examining the process through which a diverse leadership team iteratively codesigned and facilitated asset-oriented learning spaces with colleagues.

Chapter Three: Methods

Broad, top-down approaches to in-service teacher development fall short in mitigating deficit ideology and fostering asset-oriented classrooms and schools (Kohli, Picower, et al., 2015; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Picower, 2015). As demonstrated throughout the previous chapter, cultivating asset-oriented pedagogies instead requires context-specific and peer-to-peer professional learning grounded in critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust (Grimm, 2024; Nelson et al., 2010; Orange & Isken, 2021; Orange, Isken, & Rohanna, 2023). Using improvement science tools within the frameworks of RLP and teacher leadership, this qualitative case study aimed to explore such a model of professional learning via an Instructional Leadership Team's (ILT) development of asset-oriented and teacher-led Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

Research Questions

My project studied the development of this bottom-up and relationship-centered approach to in-service teacher learning by investigating the following research questions:

1. What is the process through which a secondary school's ILT codesigns and facilitates teacher-led and asset-oriented PLCs with fellow educators of minoritized students?
2. From the perspective of participating teacher-leaders, what facilitates critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust amongst colleagues in professional learning? What challenges emerge?
3. In what ways do diverse participants' identities and positionalities emerge during the process of codesigning and facilitating teacher-led and asset-oriented professional learning with fellow educators of minoritized students?

Research Design & Rationale

To answer these research questions, I used a descriptive qualitative case study design. Case study design allows for an in-depth exploration of a complex process that is intricately connected to a particular context (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Esposito & Evans-Winter, 2022). Bounded by location, content, and time, case studies involve a variety of data collection methods over a sustained period (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Esposito & Evans-Winter, 2022). Through a qualitative case study, this project examined a particular group of teacher-leaders at a singular school site, focusing on the process of how a team developed and implemented a new model of professional learning over the course of one semester. As the school site's instructional coach, I led the ILT in this endeavor, negotiating the duality of my role as both researcher and practitioner.

My qualitative case study approach reflected this project's conceptual framework of Reciprocal Learning Partnerships (RLP) and improvement science, as both emphasize how the nuances of a school's particular context shape its efforts to change. Similarly, the specific characteristics of asset-oriented mindsets and practices depend on the particularities of a site's students and community (Gay, 2013). My active participation in the ILT, as well as its iterative process, may signal action research methods. However, the project did not fully qualify as action research because the ILT did not collectively work to develop or answer the research questions of this study. Instead, my project utilized an in-depth qualitative case study design to examine the processes of a team using aspects of action research. Likewise, a quantitative approach would not be appropriate because the research questions focused on describing processes and interpretations, rather than measuring results. Figure 3.1 provides an overview of my project's design, as well as my role across each of the study's layers.

Figure 3.1

Overview of Case Study Design

The Case Study

*As a **researcher-practitioner**, I designed this qualitative case study of how my school site's **ILT** iteratively codesigned and facilitated teacher-led and asset-oriented **PLCs** with fellow educators of minoritized students over the course of one semester.*

The ILT

*As a **participant-observer**, I planned and facilitated the case study's **ILT** meetings. Together, we iteratively codesigned teacher-led and asset-oriented **PLCs**.*

The PLCs

*As a **non-participant observer**, I sat quietly and observed as teacher-leaders from the **ILT** facilitated the case study's **PLCs** with colleagues.*

Overview of the Case

This in-depth qualitative case study took place in the specific context of West River Magnet School.¹ West River Magnet is a public Title I span school in a large urban district serving over 95% Students of Color with low socioeconomic status. The school encompasses 6th through 12th grade and enrolls roughly 520 students, 92% of whom are Latinx. Remaining racial subgroups include small percentages of Black, Filipino, Asian, White, and mixed-race students. Eight percent of the site's students are English learners, and 17% are students with disabilities. West River Magnet's demographics suited my study's focus on fostering asset-oriented mindsets and practices in educators of minoritized youth.

In the 2025-2026 school year, West River Magnet began implementing professional development through PLCs. The site's ILT, which included nine teacher-leaders alongside the school's principal and three coordinators, iteratively codesigned each PLC session. As a member of the ILT, the principal ensured that broader school-wide structures supported asset-oriented

¹ A pseudonym. To protect the confidentiality of participants, all names of people and places, except my own are pseudonyms.

professional learning; the teacher-leaders, in contrast, focused on classroom-level instructional change by facilitating the PLCs with their peers (Berg & Parad, 2024). The school site's principal, Joy, demonstrated a commitment to distributed leadership, and viewed herself as a peer in the ILT, rather than as its determiner. Such conditions made West River Magnet a unique site conducive to this case study's examination of how teacher-leaders surface and develop. In bounding my case to the first 18-weeks of the fall semester, I collected rich and authentic data as to how West River's ILT piloted teacher-led and asset-oriented PLCs.

Context of the Case Study

West River dedicated every Thursday afternoon to one hour of teacher professional development, and the district required schools to utilize a portion of this time for PDSA cycles. For the 2025–2026 school year, West River Magnet enacted these PDSA cycles through PLCs. This focus on developing PLCs through preexisting weekly professional development aligned with the objectives of my case study. As the site's instructional coach, I had the unique opportunity to support West River Magnet in piloting a nuanced approach to teacher-led instructional improvement grounded in the equity-driven and asset-oriented framework of RLP.

Content of the Case Study

Although professional learning and teacher leadership occurred in various forms at West River Magnet, this case study primarily focused on the fall 2025 semester's ILT and PLC meetings. During this time, I facilitated the ILT meetings every other week; in the alternate weeks, the ILT's teacher-leaders facilitated their respective PLCs with the rest of the school's classroom teachers. At the same time, I provided ongoing all-staff professional development that related to asset-oriented mindsets and practices. Although not the focus of my case study, I also collected documents from these sessions to provide additional context to my findings. A table of

all case study activities, including the ILT meetings, PLC sessions, and whole-group professional learning is provided in Appendix A. I describe each of these components of the case study in the subsections that follow.

The ILT

I facilitated the ILT as we codesigned teacher-led and asset-oriented PLCs. At the start of the semester, the opening ILT sessions focused on building rapport with the team and providing an overview of continuous improvement. Participants in the ILT collaboratively analyzed school-wide data, with particular attention to student subgroups like English learners, Black students, and students with disabilities. In alignment with the RLP framework, we discussed how to reframe patterns in large-scale quantitative data as potential equity issues related to classroom instruction. For example, we noted that the school site had made little progress in improving the academic achievement of Students of Color with disabilities. This indicator translated to a context-specific equity issue such as “West River Magnet’s current instructional practices do not cultivate the academic self-efficacy of Students of Color with disabilities.” Throughout this process, I encouraged ILT members to share how their individual identities and experiences shaped their understanding of equity and cultural responsiveness in the classroom.

In early October, the ILT’s focus shifted to codesigning PLCs grounded in critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust. In each of our subsequent meetings, teacher-leaders brought artifacts and reflections from the previous week’s PLCs. Together, we refined our tools and strategies for the following week’s session. For example, teacher-leaders brought their PLC’s identified change strategy; as a group, the ILT discussed the cultural responsiveness of the change idea. Then, we co-constructed reflection questions for the

following week's PLC to encourage members to articulate a more explicit connection to asset-based mindsets.

In leading this process, I introduced texts and tools to develop our collective capacity. These additional resources included Khalifa's (2018) questions for culturally responsive PLCs, Safir and Dugan's (2021) *Street Data*, the National Equity Project's (2025) definition of educational equity, and New York City's Department of Education's *Improvement Science Handbook* (2018). I collected documents, field notes, and video recordings from the ILT meetings to describe how we collectively designed asset-oriented and teacher-led PLCs, as well as the emergence of our identities and positionalities throughout this process.

The PLCs

By early September 2025, the site's teachers formed several distinct content-specific PLCs, each led by teacher-leaders from the ILT. The PLCs met on alternating Thursdays during the school's designated professional development time. In the PLCs, teams of classroom teachers engaged in several cycles of collaborative inquiry to identify, understand, and address an equity issue related to classroom instruction. Through Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles, teachers iteratively (1) co-constructed a change strategy; (2) implemented the change strategy and collected data; and (3) studied the data to determine how to refine or adjust the change strategy.

Supported by the ILT, teacher-leaders developed tools to infuse PDSA cycles with the RLP framework. In crafting a change strategy, teacher-leaders prompted PLC participants to explicitly name how the practice reflected the assets of a particular student population or identify qualitative and student-centered data sources to assess the strategy's effectiveness. Teacher-leaders were also coached to model critical reflection in describing how PDSA outcomes may have challenged underlying deficit beliefs or fostered a more asset-oriented mindset. Throughout

the course of this project, the ILT aimed to develop PLC facilitation approaches that centered the role of identities and positionalities in conversations about teaching and learning. In addition, all PLC sessions opened with activities to build relational trust and closed with reflective prompts about the team's collaboration.

Whole-Group Professional Development

While learning across the school's entire faculty is not the focus of this research project, the novelty of teacher-led and asset-oriented PLCs at the school site necessitated whole-group professional development. Unlike the PLCs, whole-group professional development included all the site's teachers in four meetings across the study time frame. To alleviate the burden on teacher-leaders, I planned and facilitated these sessions. The first two focused on developing a shared understanding of equity-driven continuous improvement, and the remaining sessions centered on culturally responsive mindsets and practices for emerging bilinguals or Students of Color with disabilities.

Access

At the time of the case study, I was beginning my first year at West River Magnet and my fourth year as a secondary instructional coach. West River Magnet's principal, Joy, is my former mentor, and she recruited me to serve as her school's instructional coach for the 2025-2026 school year. When she hired me in February 2025, I detailed my project's proposal, and she granted me permission to conduct my case study at the site through the pre-existing ILT and weekly professional development structure. We worked collaboratively to develop the scope of this project in alignment with the site's instructional priorities. I secured access by completing the district's research approval process in the summer of 2025.

Participants & Recruitment

Participants in this case study included West River Magnet’s nine teacher-leaders from the ILT, as well as the team’s principal and two coordinators. I also collected artifact and observational data from the teacher-led math and science PLCs. I discuss the recruitment process for each of these participant groups separately below.

The ILT Members

For this case study, I deliberately selected the nine teacher-leaders from West River Magnet’s pre-existing ILT as my primary participants. As defined in the literature, formal teacher-leaders are full-time classroom teachers who hold additional responsibilities for facilitating the professional learning of colleagues (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). I qualified Sharon, the site’s teacher-librarian as well as Sofia, the middle school reading interventionist, as teacher-leaders because both educators spend the entire school day in the library or a classroom with students, and co-facilitated the English PLC with the high school and middle school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers. The rest of the ILT’s teacher-leaders served in an official capacity as department chairs or co-chairs. The ILT’s teacher-leaders represented a diverse range of racial, ethnic, and gender identities, as well as years of experience. This population contributed new insights to the development of teacher-led professional learning that has focused predominantly on White and female participants (Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Jacobs & Rinck, 2024). In addition to myself and the teacher-leaders, my case study’s ILT also included the principal and two other coordinators. Table 1 below provides demographic data as well as the role and pseudonym for all ILT members who participated in the study.

Table 3.1

ILT Study Participants

Role	Pseudonym	PLC	Gender	Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity	Years in K-12
Instructional Coach (Facilitator)	(Me)	None	F	White	10
Principal	Joy	None	F	Asian	26
Coordinator	Leah	None	F	—	17
Coordinator	Yolanda	None	F	Latina	10
Teacher-Librarian	Sharon	HS English	F	Other White	18
Literacy Interventionist	Sofia	MS English	F	Latina	25
ELA Teacher Department Co-Chair	Luis	HS English	M	Latino	21
ELA Teacher Department Co-Chair	Diana	MS English	F	Latina	7
Science Teacher Department Chair	Sean	Science	M	Black	7
Math Teacher Department Chair	Matthew	Math	M	Latino	22
History Teacher Department Chair	Tony	History	M	—	—
Music Teacher Department Co-Chair	John	Arts	M	White	24
Visual Arts Teacher Department Co-Chair	Ernesto	Arts	M	Chicano	21

Note: — indicates missing demographic data due to participant nonresponse.

In our August 26th meeting, I briefly reviewed my study with the ILT. However, to prevent coercion or feelings of obligation to participate in the study, I had my UCLA colleague Chris, who is not a district employee, formally introduce the study, recruit participants, answer questions, and collect consent forms following our ILT meeting on September 8th. At the conclusion of the session, I left the meeting and Chris provided a verbal overview of my study and reviewed the consent forms. Chris communicated that the project would largely take place through the existing structures at the school site (i.e., ILT meetings and weekly professional development), with the addition of a one-on-one interview with ILT members who were also classroom teachers. He emphasized that participation was voluntary, and that all ILT members would maintain their positions on the team, regardless of whether they agreed to be in the study. The consent form asked all participants to indicate which data collection methods they would like to participate in. These included document collection, ILT video recordings and field notes, PLC observations, and one-on-one interviews. By September 19th, all ILT members had consented to participate in the study and all forms of its data collection.

Math and Science PLC Members

My project's examination of teacher-led PLCs necessitated the additional participation of the site's teachers who were not members of the ILT. West River Magnet currently employs 34 classroom teachers who were divided across six department-based PLCs. I included all members of the math and science teacher-led PLC as participants in this case study. I chose to observe the math PLC because I had become aware of conflicting perspectives amongst its members. I anticipated that observing its sessions would offer significant insight as to how trust and collaboration may be built through tension. As the most diverse PLC regarding race and gender, I felt that observing the science PLC might offer insight as to how identities and

positionalities emerged throughout the processes of equity-driven continuous improvement work.

To recruit additional teachers from the math and science PLCs, I followed a similar process to that of the ILT. I briefly mentioned my study to each teacher and asked them to attend a Zoom session on September 16th if they were interested in participating. As with the ILT, my colleague Chris reviewed the parameters of participation during the Zoom meeting. All members of both PLCs consented to the study and its collection of observation and document data.

Data Collection

As an in-depth qualitative case study, my project required multiple data collection methods across its several layers. To answer my three research questions, I collected data through documents or artifacts, video recordings, observation field notes, and interviews as well as a detailed research journal that I had written in regularly since June 2025. Table 1 provides an overview of data collection in this project's various components, which I describe in more detail throughout this section.

Table 3.2

Data Collection Overview

Component	Activities	Individuals Involved	Target Sample	Data Collection
<i>Primary Data Collection</i>				
ILT	1 6-hour retreat 9 1.5-hour meetings	• Facilitator (Lily Bryant) • 9 teacher-leaders • Principal • 2 coordinators (13 total)	• All ILT members	• Documents (slide decks, artifacts) • Observations (video recordings and field notes)

			• Teacher-leaders	• Teacher-leader interviews
4 PLCs	6 1-hour sessions each	• 1 math teacher-leader • 1 science teacher-leader • 3 additional science teachers • 6 additional math teachers (11 total)	• All members of math and science PLCs	• Documents (slide decks, artifacts) • Observations (field notes)
<i>Secondary Data Collection</i>				
Whole-Group Professional Development	• 4 1-hour sessions	• All teachers (34 total)	NA	• Documents (slide decks, artifacts)

The ILT

Document Collection

I collected slide decks from all ILT meetings, including an all-day retreat in June that was my first time meeting the team (10 total). Each session utilized a common slide deck template that documented each meeting's agenda, activities, and outcomes. The slide deck templates also included a "what" and "why" for each activity in the session. With respect to answering my research questions, the slide decks offered data on the strategies, tools, and resources the ILT used to develop teacher-led and asset-oriented PLCs. Other collected documents included meeting artifacts like note catchers, poster charts, and agendas. Each meeting's documents were stored in a dated and labeled Google Drive folder.

ILT Observations

Observations of the ILT helped me provide a rich narrative of this case study's process and reveal themes in how identities and positionalities emerged. To collect observational data, I video recorded six ILT sessions (Meetings #4 - #9) using my personal iPhone. I did not begin recording until Meeting #4 on October 6th, 2025, because I was still waiting to receive formal approval from West River Magnet's district and the consent of participants. In December 2025, I used Rev Software to transcribe the ILT video recordings; I then edited the transcriptions by hand by rewatching all meeting videos. During this time, I noted moments when participants had small group conversations that evaded audio recording. Rewatching the meeting videos and editing the transcripts in December helped me prepare for the interviews, as I was better able to recall salient conversations or activities that teacher-leaders mentioned.

In all ILT sessions, I also maintained a research journal to record dated jottings and reflections about each meeting. I further used the ILT Observation Protocol, attached as Appendix B, to capture my immediate thoughts and connections to the research questions at the conclusion of each meeting. The protocol reflected my attention to identities and positionalities, as well as my study's conceptual framework of critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust.

Teacher-Leader Interviews

In answering my research question specific to teacher-leader perspectives, I conducted 1-hour individual semi-structured interviews with each of the ILT's nine teacher-leaders throughout January 2026. To assure confidentiality, all interviews took place in a private setting using my personal Zoom account. I used Zoom to both record and transcribe each interview.

In the interviews, I asked teacher-leaders about how they developed their understanding of identities and positionalities in transformative professional learning, as well as

what strategies, tools, or protocols they felt to be most effective in facilitating asset-oriented PLCs. I also asked teacher-leaders to reflect on how they viewed our development of asset-based mindsets and practices, and to what extent they perceived shifts in colleagues' thinking or behavior as a result of the fall semester's professional learning program. The teacher-leader interview protocol is attached in Appendix C.

The PLCs

Document Collection

As with the ILT, I collected and stored the slide decks and PDSA plans from the math and science PLCs. PLCs crafted PDSA plans using a provided Google Slide template, which I stored and dated in a password-protected Google Drive folder. The PDSA plan template from Rohanna (2024d) was continuously revisited and tweaked by the ILT throughout the semester.

PLC Observations

To understand the process of designing and implementing teacher-led and asset-oriented professional learning, I also collected data through observations of teacher-led PLCs. PLC observations offered descriptive details that demonstrated facilitation strategies and dispositions of teacher-leaders. I observed the math and science PLCs two times each over the duration of the case study.

During the meetings, I used time-stamped two-column field notes template in a dated and labeled Google Doc (i.e., __ PLC # __; Date __). One column captured words and actions of the teacher-leaders, while the other was dedicated to the words and actions of participating teachers. The observations focused on how identities and positionalities emerged throughout the PLC session, as well as how teacher-leaders facilitated critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust. Examples of key observational moments were instances like how teacher-

leaders communicated the “why” of an instructional practice or centered student assets rather than deficits in data analysis. Immediately after each PLC, I also recorded my own reflections in the PLC Observation Protocol, attached as Appendix D. Each Google Doc of observation notes was stored in a password-protected folder in my personal Google Drive.

Whole-Group Professional Development

As part of my secondary data collection, I archived all slide decks and accompanying artifacts from the fall semester’s whole-group professional development sessions. After each of these meetings, I recorded personal thoughts and reflections in my research journal. These documents helped detail the narrative of this case study’s processes and broader context.

Data Analysis

By the end of December 2025, I had completed all data collection except for individual teacher-leader interviews. During this time, I transcribed the video recordings of the ILT meetings using Rev software. I then re-watched each of the meeting videos and edited the transcripts. I also compiled and sequenced documents from the case study activities. These included slide decks and artifacts from all the ILT, PLC, and whole-group professional development sessions. On a wall in my office, I posted the agenda for each ILT meeting in chronological order and added sticky notes to indicate the PLC and whole-group sessions that took place in between the meetings. I also added sticky notes to indicate what materials supplemented the work of the ILT. Finally, I took this time to organize and re-read my project journal. All these activities helped me refine my interview protocol and clarify any salient moments I wanted to discuss with teacher-leader participants.

By mid-January, I had completed all the interviews. Before beginning any coding, I read through and annotated all the interview transcripts. My annotations included highlighting

quotations I felt were significant, initial thoughts or interpretations, repeated words or phrases, and even some common language I noted across the data. To prepare for first cycle coding, I made a draft code book of structural codes using my conceptual framework and research questions. These included identity and positionality, relational trust, collaborative inquiry, and critical reflection. I also added two additional structural codes: context and leadership moves. These two codes were added based on my initial reading of the data and connected to my first research question about the processes of the ILT.

First Cycle Coding

In late January 2026, I began the structural coding of all interview and video transcripts, as well as my research journal using MaxQDA software. Most of the time, I attached the deductive codes to large sections of text. As I engaged in this initial coding process, I wrote in-text memos to capture my initial thinking about certain data pieces and how I was seeing their connection to the structural codes. After I completed each structural code bucket, I also wrote a brief memo to capture my thoughts on trends and patterns emerging within the data. I continued first cycle coding in more detail with the interview transcripts only. I went through each bucket of structural codes, and inductively coded smaller pieces of data using a combination of process, in vivo, and concept coding (Saldaña, 2013). These codes were then organized as subcodes of my structural code buckets. After I completed first cycle coding for each structural code bucket, I added more thinking to my initial structural code memos. I also selected a small number of quotations I felt were particularly significant for each structural code and wrote memos about each one.

Second Cycle Coding

After completing first cycle coding, I created a code map for each structural code bucket using MaxQDA's open coding feature (Saldaña, 2013). This process generated categories within each structural code bucket of critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, relational trust, and identities/positionality. As I began creating categories, I wrote analytic memos and drew diagrams or concept maps to reflect on relationships across emerging themes. After corroborating these categories and themes with my other data sets (observation notes, research journal, and artifacts), I eventually refined them into the major findings of this study.

Credibility

A key credibility issue in my approach to this case study was my bias as both its researcher and practitioner. To mitigate biases in interpreting the data, I triangulated themes and findings across the interviews, observations, and documents collected throughout the study. These robust and diverse data collection methods allowed me to describe what actually occurred throughout the case study, rather than basing findings on my own beliefs or interpretations of what happened (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). I also addressed the issue of my own bias in interpreting data and making conclusions through the longevity of the project. Over 18 weeks, I collected rich and concrete evidence to support my findings. Finally, I used member checks by reporting back my analysis to the ILT. The team had the opportunity to review my findings and analysis, share the extent to which they agreed with my interpretations, and provide comments as I prepared my final report (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Ethical Issues

I intentionally designed this project to integrate organically into the existing structures of the school site and the work already required by the site's principal and district leadership. With the permission of my principal, I planned the ILT meetings and collected corresponding

observation and document data from the ILT and PLCs during work hours. While this approach alleviated the typical ethical considerations of research on an intervention, i.e., the additional workload on school staff, it also presented challenges. I needed to first ensure that teachers knew their participation in the study was voluntary and had no implications for their role or membership in the pre-existing ILT and PLCs. In my recruitment letter, I explicitly stated that all staff could decline study consent and still participate in both entities. Given my principal's support of the study, I also wanted to ensure participants understood there were no repercussions for declining consent. I did not share team members' participation decisions with the principal or any other staff member and communicated that their choice to consent or not would remain confidential in my recruitment documents.

As a result of my project's design, I also needed to consider the ethical issue of anonymity. For example, the site's principal and district review the agendas and outcomes of the ILT as well as the PLC sessions. In recruiting my participants, I clarified that the data collected beyond the district and principal requirements (i.e., interviews, meeting video recordings, and field notes) were for the sole purpose of the study and would not be shared directly with administration or district leadership in any form. In my recruitment letter, I stated that these data pieces would be stored on my personal and password-protected Google Drive account, rather than the district one. I also used pseudonyms for all participants and the school site to remove any identifying information.

My racial identity as a White leader working with predominantly teachers of Color also presented the potential ethical issue of racial battle fatigue (Helena, 2023). I worked to ensure the teacher-leaders in this study did not bear the sole responsibility for facilitating conversations about culture, race, and bias in instructional inequities. In designing the project, I

intentionally interspersed whole-group professional development with PLC sessions to alleviate the potential for racial battle fatigue for any teachers of Color who participated in this study. As the primary facilitator of the whole-group sessions, I modeled centering discussions of culture, positionality, and identities as we considered instructional practices.

Positionality and Role Management

My coursework and professional experience have prepared me with the tools, strategies, and dispositions to lead the work of this case study. I received my teaching credential and Master's in Education through an Ethnic Studies program that equipped me with culturally sustaining mindsets and practices. As a classroom teacher, I continuously developed my pedagogy through further professional development around Ethnic Studies and liberatory education, as well as equitable grading and instruction, cooperative learning, and Youth Participatory Action Research.

As an instructional coach, I have planned and implemented numerous professional development sessions on cultural responsiveness and equity in the classroom. I also led my previous site's ILT for over 3 years, and prepared teacher-leaders to facilitate equity-driven continuous improvement cycles with colleagues in their departments. In my leadership roles, I completed multiple training sessions around how to have equity-centered conversations with teachers about classroom instruction. I also recently completed coursework in equity-driven continuous improvement and participated in a multiday RLP training with colleagues at my previous school.

While I felt well equipped to lead the work of my case study, attempting this project at a new school site presented critical challenges regarding my positionality and role management. At the beginning of this study, my only existing relationship was with Joy, the site's principal,

who served as my mentor when I began my teaching career over 8 years ago. Therefore, I needed to intentionally build trust and rapport with the site's teachers, as well as other ILT members, prior to recruiting participants for this project. This was not just a necessary endeavor for this study, but also for my success in my professional role.

I strove to accomplish this in a variety of ways. First, at the end of the 2024-2025 school year last June, I facilitated West River Magnet's full-day ILT retreat. I planned this session to center on team building and co-constructing the ILT's mission and vision statement. My participation in and facilitation of this foundational meeting was critical to build trust and rapport. In early August, I also participated alongside the site's teachers in the district's multiday summer professional development series. Once all teachers returned to campus for the start of the school year, I had one-on-one introductions with every staff member before the end of the first week. I also introduced myself to the staff during a faculty meeting through a brief "about me" slide that shared my leadership vision. Finally, I wrote a letter of introduction that described how I could provide support and shared a hard copy of this letter with each teacher the second week of school.

Limitations

As a qualitative case study, my project's context-specific approach limits the generalizability of its findings. The site's pre-existing mechanisms for teacher-led professional learning as well as the principal's commitment to teacher leadership were unique features that may not be easily replicated in other contexts. The process of developing a teacher-led and asset-oriented model of professional learning will also inevitably look different at a school with varying demographics in staff or students. In addition, the study may be limited given its shortened scope. It is unlikely that substantive change in mindsets or practices occurred over the

course of a single semester. Nonetheless, I hope the findings of the project provide critical insights as to how a site might begin to develop a model of context-specific and peer-to-peer professional learning that disrupts deficit paradigms and advances asset-oriented pedagogies.

Chapter Four: Case Study Overview

This in-depth qualitative case study explored a bottom-up model of professional learning aimed at diminishing deficit thinking and fostering more asset-oriented pedagogies and practices. The resultant findings offer a detailed account of how a site-based Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) piloted teacher-led and asset-oriented Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) with colleagues. For clarity, I have divided my findings into two chapters delineated by my research questions. In this chapter, I utilized my project journal and collected artifacts to answer my first research question by presenting narrative findings on how the ILT collaboratively developed and implemented professional learning. In Chapter 5, I then answer my second and third research questions through interpretive findings that describe what facilitated critical reflection, collaborative inquiry and relational trust, as well as how diverse participants' identities and positionalities emerged throughout the case study's work.

I begin this chapter by describing the ILT's June 2025 retreat, a key pre-meeting during which the team co-constructed a mission statement for the new school year. To provide further context to the case, I then recount West River's first whole-group professional development session in mid-August. In this opening meeting, I provided the staff with an overview of how equity-driven continuous improvement would frame the semester's professional development program. Moving into the core of this study, I then detail the ILT's early attention to deficit thinking, as it facilitated the identification of a school-wide problem of practice and instructional focus. As I report, this process took place over several weeks through PLC activities like root cause analysis and student empathy interviews. Finally, I summarize how the ILT then shifted its focus to tools and strategies for addressing the site's co-constructed problem of practice. Through the PLCs, the ILT's teacher-leaders facilitated collaborative Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles to implement and assess different change ideas in the classroom.

For reference, Appendix A provides an overview and chronology of all case study events including the ILT, PLC and whole-group meetings.

While the case study generally unfolded as planned, a school-wide conflict in mid-November initiated a pivot from the student-facing work of reflection and inquiry to the adult-facing task of building relational trust. As I discuss in the next chapter, this shift became central to my study's attention to the relational dynamics of professional learning that seeks to address issues of culture, race, and bias.

Co-Constructing the ILT's Mission Statement

In anticipation of my work the following year, West River's principal invited me to facilitate an all-day retreat with the site's pre-existing ILT at the end of the 2024-2025 school year. The team included the principal, two coordinators, and nine teacher-leaders. With a focus on building trust and clarifying purpose, I planned the June 2025 session to center on the team's co-construction of a mission statement. We began with Elena Aguilar and Bright Morning's (2026) Identifying Core Values as an inclusion exercise. Using a provided list, each team member shared their top three core values, such as joy, authenticity, and justice, while also naming some of the lived experiences that led them to hold these. Recognizing equity as a core value for many of us, we then examined the National Equity Project's (2025) definition of educational equity: "educational equity means that each child receives what they need to fully develop their academic and social potential" (p. 1). Finally, we reviewed the school-wide mission and vision statement, included in Appendix E, to anchor the team's purpose in the context of the school site. Each of these activities built coherence around the values and objectives the team wanted to prioritize in its mission.

Upon completing these pre-work activities, the team spent the afternoon co-constructing and workshopping the ILT's mission statement, a process captured and documented in Appendix E. Individual members first drafted their own version of the team's mission statement, which they then shared in groups of three or four. These small groups next cocreated one mission statement to share with the entire team. Together, the whole group then workshopped the three resultant mission statements into one by bolding common words or phrases. After some back and forth wordsmithing, the team agreed upon the final mission statement below:

The mission of the ILT for the 2025-2026 school year is to codesign and lead professional learning that is informed by multifaceted data and promotes cross-curricular collaboration, educational equity, and student-centered instruction, while also fostering a reflective community of educators committed to growth and social justice.

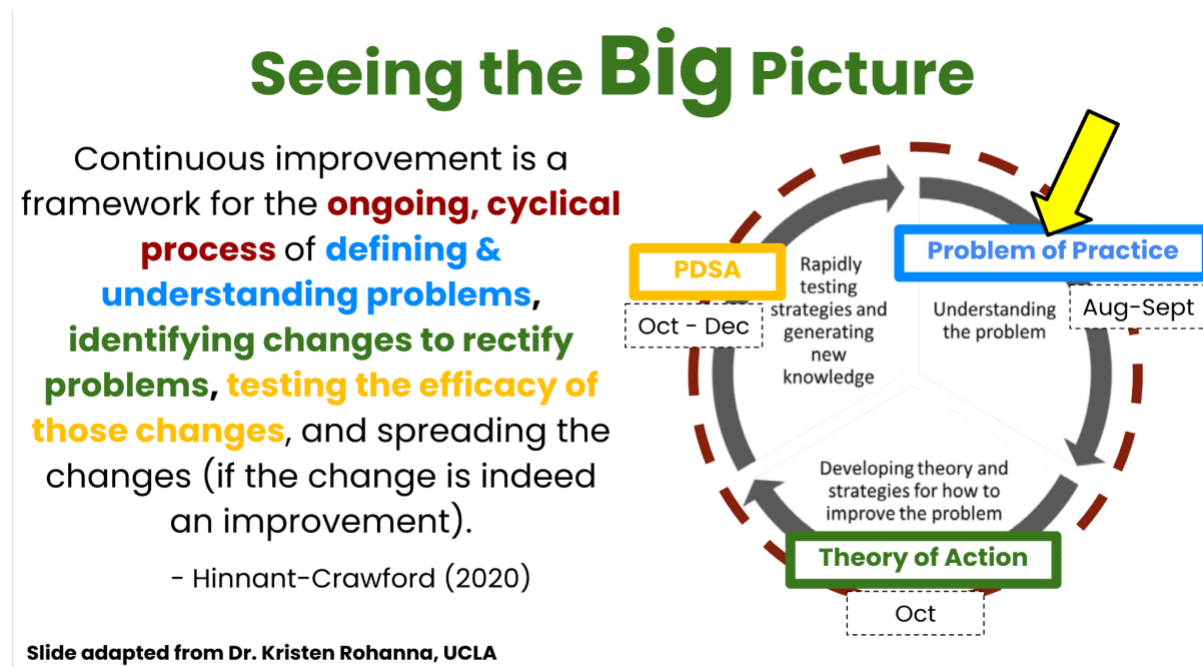
This mission statement became a key point of reference throughout the entirety of the case study. As evidenced by session slide decks from the fall 2025 semester, every subsequent ILT meeting opened with revisiting the mission statement and reflecting on how each session's agenda supported the work we had set out to do in June.

Seeing the Big Picture: Framing School-Wide Professional Learning

When the new 2025-2026 school year began in August, I provided the entire staff with some context for the semester's professional learning program. On the 19th, I facilitated our first whole-group professional development meeting. Using the slide in Figure 4.1, I explained each phase of continuous improvement as (1) understanding a problem; (2) developing strategies to improve the problem; and (3) testing strategies through PDSA cycles of inquiry, and how these phases would frame our professional development program for the entirety of the school year.

Figure 4.1

8/19/2025 All-Staff Meeting #1 Slide: Seeing the Big Picture



Note: Adaption of material from & Hinnant-Crawford, B.N. (2020). *Improvement science in education: A primer*. Myers Education Press; and Rohanna, K.L. (2024a). Continuous improvement overview slide. In K.L. Rohanna (Ed.), *EDUC 224: Leading change through evaluation: Methods of continuous improvement*. UCLA.

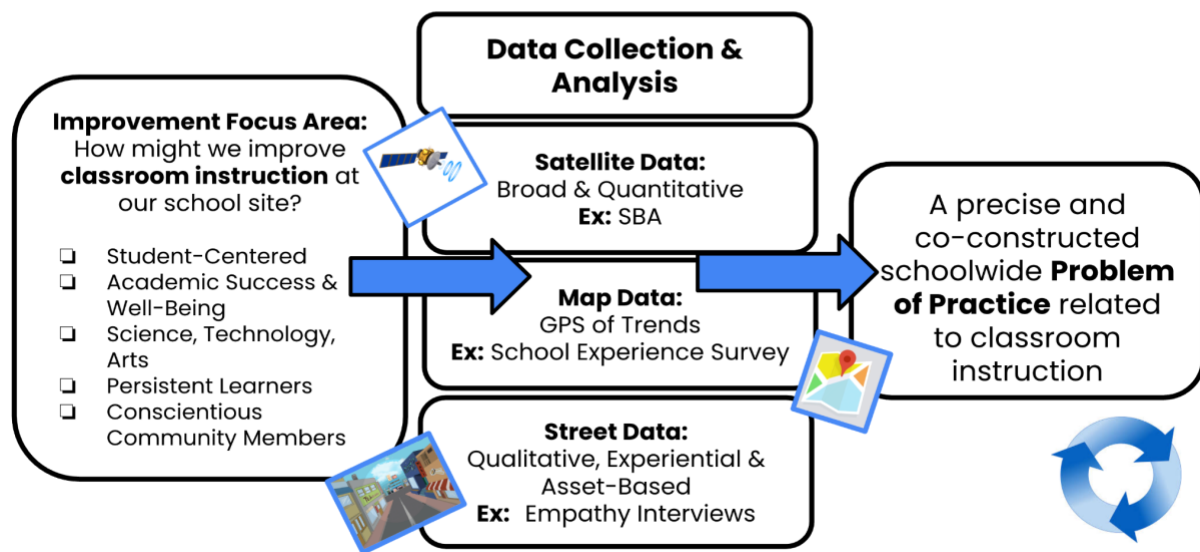
In elaborating on continuous improvement’s first phase, I reviewed how we would collect and analyze different types of data over the next several weeks. As shown in Figure 4.2 below, one of the meeting slides included Safir and Dugan’s (2021) three-tiered framework in *Street Data* to delineate this process. Safir and Dugan distinguish data across three levels. Broad and quantitative, “satellite data,” like standardized assessment scores, hover far above the classroom. While satellite data may illuminate patterns, it offers little insight as to why certain trends may be occurring. Closer to the ground, surveys, for example, serve as “map data” that can more fully depict how students, families, and teachers might perceive the school culture. At eye-level

resides “street data,” the “qualitative and experiential data” that captures the daily experiences of students and other community members (p. 57). As Safir and Dugan suggest, street data offers invaluable insights as to why patterns of inequity might exist in a school’s map or satellite data by centering the daily experiences of students through empathy interviews, classroom observations, or work samples. As I presented to the staff, taking the time to integrate all three levels of data would help us identify and understand a problem of practice that addressed underlying equity issues at our school.

Figure 4.2

8/19/2025 All-Staff Meeting #1 Slide: Understanding the Problem

Phase 1: Understanding the Problem



Note: Adaption of materials from Safir, S., & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation*. Sage Publications, Inc.

To begin the process of identifying a problem of practice, teachers spent the rest of the August 19th meeting examining satellite data from the previous year’s state testing results. In teams, teachers used the Center for Leadership and Educational Equity’s Atlas Protocol

(McDonald & Allen, n.d.) to describe and interpret patterns in student performance across gender, race, disability, and language subgroups. In the final part of the protocol, teachers discussed implications for classroom practice. As captured in note catchers from the session, initial observations hinted at potential inequities in classroom instruction; English learners, students in special education, and middle schoolers made only small, if any, improvements in meeting Math and English standards. I concluded the session by revisiting Safir and Dugan's (2021) framework, emphasizing that to develop an equity-centered problem of practice we would need to dig deeper—the underlying problem resided in our systems, not in our students. To identify the real equity issues in our school's data, we needed to initiate an open conversation about beliefs.

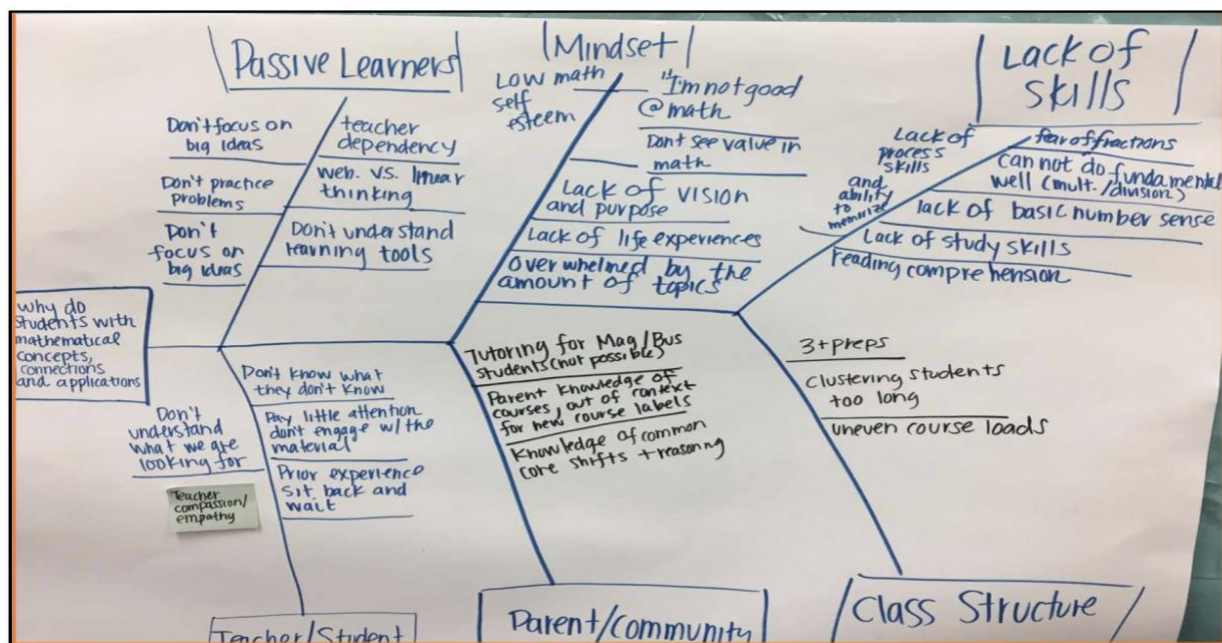
Digging Deeper: Disrupting Deficit Thinking

Surfacing and discussing beliefs began when the ILT convened for the first time in the new school year the following week. I designed the August 25th session to focus on naming and understanding deficit thinking. To begin this discussion, the team engaged in an analysis of students' school experience survey results, or what Safir and Dugan (2021) characterize as map data, using the fishbone diagram protocol from Rohanna (2024b). Provided in Appendix F, the fishbone diagram protocol prompts participants to individually brainstorm why a data pattern may be occurring and then categorize the reasons into different fishbones. Originating in improvement science, the protocol promotes root cause analysis, a key process for understanding a problem and surfacing the underlying equity issues. In this ILT meeting, participants used the fishbone diagram protocol to identify reasons why school experience survey results indicated trends like middle schoolers feeling a low sense of academic self-efficacy. Through this process, the team began to identify what might be an area of focus for the year's problem of practice.

Without attending to mindsets and beliefs, the fishbone protocol could result in locating root causes of inequities in students themselves. To preemptively address this issue, I wanted to introduce the concept of deficit thinking before the team began engaging in the protocol. After reviewing the purpose of the protocol and its steps, I showed the team a sample fishbone diagram that exemplified deficit paradigms. Shown in Figure 4.3 below, the diagram repeated negative words like “don’t” or “lack” to explain why students may struggle with mathematical concepts.

Figure 4.3

8/25/2025 ILT Meeting #1: Sample Deficit-Based Fishbone Diagram



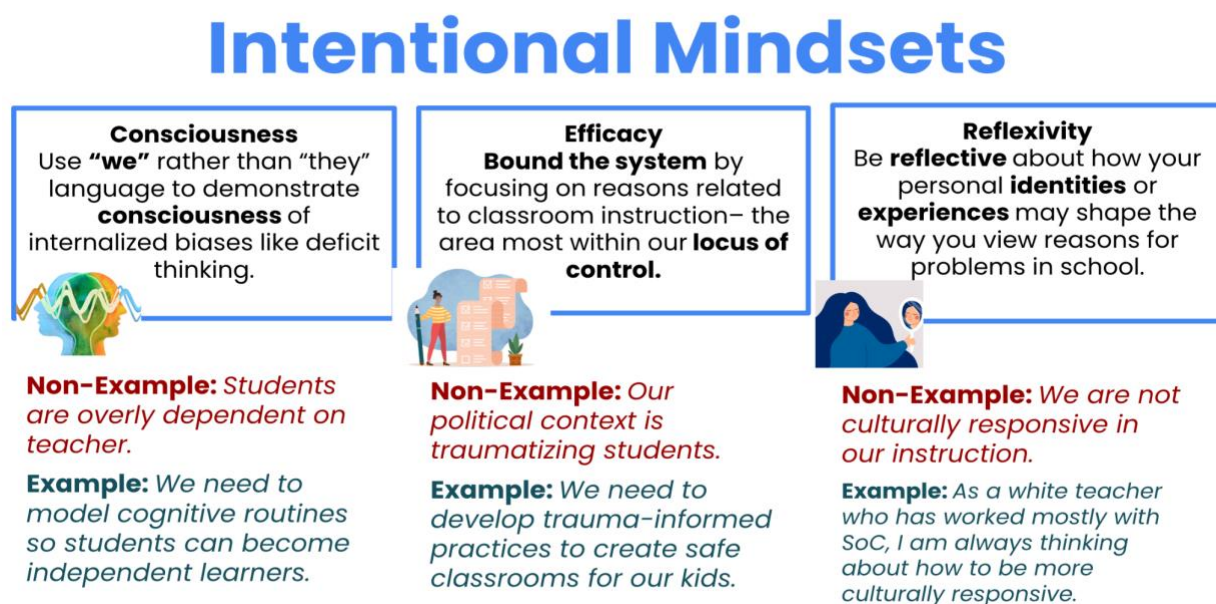
Source: Rohanna, K.L. (2024c). Sample deficit fishbone diagram. In K.L. Rohanna (Ed.), *EDUC 224: Leading change through evaluation: Methods of continuous improvement*. UCLA.

As the team took time to quietly review the diagram, I asked them to share what they noticed. At first the responses were superficial; “there are 6 bones” or “each fishbone has a title.” Then Leah pointed out, “I don’t know if this is right, but it seems really negative,” followed by Yolanda,

“it’s not really about what we can do to get better because it’s so focused on what’s wrong with students.” Eventually, Matthew named the responses as deficit based. Using definitions from Hinnant-Crawford (2020) and Seda and Brown (2021), I then defined deficit thinking as locating causes of inequities in students themselves. I followed up by asking the team what might happen if we were to define our problem of practice with a deficit-based root cause analysis. Together, the team discussed how deficit ideology could distract from the work educators could do to support students, and at worst, perpetuate harmful stereotypes of minoritized youth and their families. Noting the potential for deficit thinking to surface in the fishbone process, I then presented several alternative mindsets to bring instead: consciousness, efficacy and reflexivity. After reviewing the definition of each one as shown in the Figure 4.4 slide, I offered an example and non-example of how this mindset might show up in the fishbone process.

Figure 4.4

8/25/2025 ILT Meeting #1 and PLC Meeting #1 Slide: Mindsets



Note: Adaption of materials from Costa, A. L., Garmston, R. J., Ellison, J., & Hayes, C. (2016). *Cognitive coaching: Developing self-directed leaders and learners* (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield; Hinnant-Crawford, B.N. (2020). *Improvement science in education: A primer*. Myers Education Press; Rohanna, K.L. (2024b). Fishbone diagram protocol. In K.L. Rohanna (Ed.), *EDUC 224: Leading change through evaluation: Methods of continuous improvement*; and Wood, L., & Spirnak, B. (2022, February 3). *We, not they* [Video]. High Tech High Graduate School of Education. <https://hthgse.edu/videos/we-not-they/>

After this conversation, team members engaged in the first phase of the fishbone protocol: individually brainstorming reasons why middle school students reported low academic focus and future orientation on the previous year's school experience survey. When the team moved into the second phase of the protocol (sharing and discussing their ideas in rounds), I explained that I would observe and take notes as a process checker to provide the group with feedback. In the first round, team members had shared ideas like "classroom instruction focuses on busy work" rather than complex tasks or that "teachers overemphasize work habits" rather than conceptual understanding. After asking permission to share feedback, I asked the team how they might dig deeper into these ideas by asking "why" questions: Why might teachers focus more on busy work than conceptual understanding? Referring to the consciousness mindset, I pushed participants to consider what underlying assumptions might be informing this potential pattern. In the next round, Sean reflected this feedback by sharing how teachers' "preconceived notions" about students' abilities could be a root cause of the data pattern.

Upon completing and debriefing the protocol, I asked the team how they felt about facilitating this process with their PLC colleagues. They agreed to follow the same routine I had modeled in the ILT: reviewing the protocol, introducing and discussing the deficit-based sample,

adopting intentional mindsets, providing feedback throughout the process, and then debriefing. The resultant PLC fishbone diagrams, a sample of which is provided in Appendix G, mostly emphasized how teacher practices, rather than students or families, might need improvement. For example, categories in the diagrams included grading, lesson design, feedback, and teacher relationships with students. In contrast to the provided deficit-based example, the PLC fishbones exhibited “we” not “they” language, as well as a focus on classroom instruction. (Wood & Spirnak, 2022).

Developing a Problem of Practice

When the ILT reconvened on September 8th, we utilized the PLC fishbone diagrams to begin identifying a potential problem of practice. First, team members independently reviewed all the diagrams using the Adaptive School’s 3-2-1 protocol (Garmston & Wellman, 2017, pp. 8-9) to capture three insights into a problem focus area, two questions we might seek to answer, and one specific idea for a problem of practice. After some discussion, we decided to move forward with a focus on engagement, paying particular attention to emerging bilingual, special education, and middle school students. Team members then individually wrote possible problems of practice using a provided sentence frame. After sharing their individual ideas with their table group, each team then shared one statement with the rest of the group. As with the co-construction of the mission statement, we did some back-and-forth wordsmithing before agreeing to move forward with a preliminary problem statement:

Quantitative data from the 2025 SBA and School Experience Survey suggests moving from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning as an area of improvement in the classroom. In particular, we want to better understand why emerging bilinguals,

students in special education, and middle school students may feel disconnected and disengaged the classroom.

Using Safir and Dugan's (2021) framework, I then explained how collecting street data through student empathy interviews would help us better understand what exactly student-centered learning might mean.

Clarifying Our Problem Statement Through Student Empathy Interviews

The next day, ILT members led their PLC colleagues in designing a student empathy interview protocol using the Empathy Interview Planning Sheet in Appendix H and empathy interview resources from Nelsestuen & Smith (2020) and Caillier (2021). As described by Safir and Dugan (2021), empathy interviews provide experiential, ground-level data in how students experience schools and classrooms. The authors further emphasize how conducting empathy interviews not only provides valuable data for improving educator practices but also can be a critical opportunity to build relationships, trust, and understanding between teachers and their students. With this lens, the ILT's teacher-leaders explained the purpose of empathy interviews to their PLC colleagues and focused on designing a 15-30 minute, in-person interview protocol that would encourage students to tell descriptive stories of their school experience.

Each teacher in the PLC agreed to ask the same questions and interview different students from our focus subgroups of emerging bilinguals, special education, and middle school students. Teacher-leaders encouraged their colleagues to also select students with whom they had not yet developed strong rapport. Math and Science PLCs crafted questions like, "Think of a time when you were really excited to come to school. What was happening that day?" or "Have you ever had a time when learning felt fun in Math? Tell me about it." Over the following two

weeks, every teacher at the site conducted at least one student empathy interview, documenting notable quotations and wonderings in a shared Google Doc with their PLC.

When the ILT met on September 22nd, we revisited our draft problem of practice statement and reviewed a protocol for analyzing student empathy interview data. Using the Chalk Talk protocol from the Center for Leadership and Educational Equity (Smith & Wentworth, n.d.), ILT members first silently moved around the room and answered discussion questions about our current problem of practice on chart paper. The posted questions are listed in the Refining our Problem of Practice slide from the session in Figure 4.5. When the group reconvened to debrief, a key point from one of the posters prompted further discussion. In response to how we might calibrate the staff's understanding of our problem of practice, Ernesto had written how "two views of target students emerged" amongst the staff: One as "students who need the most help," with the other being "students who are most marginalized by our current teaching practices." As a group, we discussed how the empathy interviews were intended to move away from characterizing these students as "needing help" and instead promote reflection on how we might improve instruction to better reflect their assets and potential.

Figure 4.5

9/22/2025 ILT Meeting #3 Slide: Refining our Problem of Practice

Refining our Problem of Practice

What: Chalk Talk from [CLEE](#)

Why: To reflect, synthesize, and consider next steps



1. **Review** the **PoP Feedback**.
2. Silently **move** around the room and **respond** to the prompts on the chart posters.
3. **Write** your response to the question on the chart paper.
4. As you move around, **read and respond** to what other people have written using words or symbols.

- To what extent did the problem of practice generate **consensus**?
- How might we **calibrate** our understanding of our problem of practice?
- What **revisions** might we need to make to the problem of practice?
- What are some ideas for **effective solutions** to this problem of practice?
- What **insights** do you predict **empathy interview data** will provide around our problem of practice?

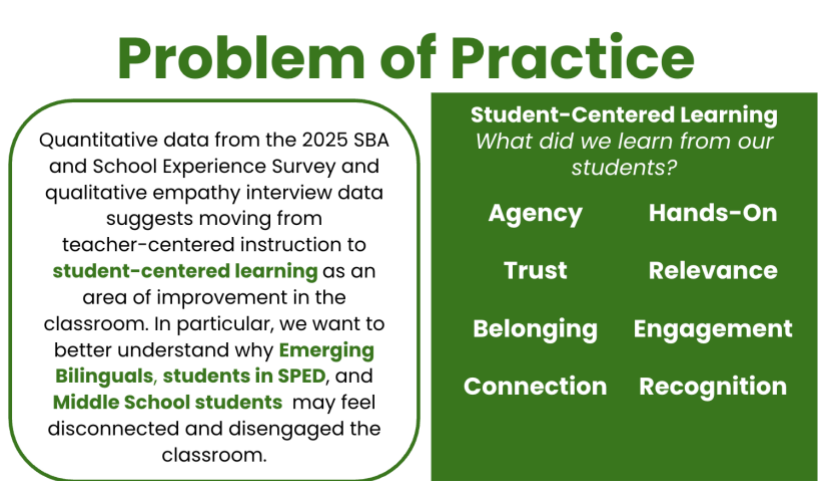
With this point in mind, the team reviewed Safir and Dugan's (2021) Street Data Analysis Protocol (pp. 180-181). Throughout the discussion, the team focused on aspects of the protocol that might disrupt any potential emergence of deficit thinking. For example, several teacher-leaders discussed how they might name some of their own assumptions about students to model vulnerability. Others emphasized the importance of starting with low-inference observations to center student voice and allow authentic patterns to surface. Using the provided protocol from Safir and Dugan, teacher-leaders facilitated their September 30th PLC's analysis of the collected empathy interviews and documented what the team might explore as possible shifts in instructional practices.

By the ILT's first meeting in October, the site's teachers had analyzed quantitative assessment data using the ATLAS protocol (McDonald & Allen, n.d.), analyzed root causes of student survey results with the fishbone diagram (Rohanna, 2024b), and collected individual empathy interviews with students from our designated focus subgroups. Having studied satellite, map, and street levels of data, the team was now ready to finalize our problem of practice focus with particular attention to empathy interview findings. In the first half of the October 6th session, ILT members reviewed the empathy interview analysis results from all PLCs using the Adaptive School's 5-3-1 protocol (Garmston & Wellman, 2017, p. 10). First, each participant individually studied PLC empathy interview notes and identified five key words that represented significant takeaways. In a small group, participants then shared words in rounds. After everyone shared, the team agreed upon three key terms to capture the essence of the student empathy interviews. In the whole group, members called out one word their small groups felt described the idea of student-centered learning in our problem of practice statement. Together, we used this initial list to finalize the student-centered learning descriptors shown below in Figure 4.6. This

problem of practice slide was used in every whole-group, PLC and ILT session from then on to frame our work.

Figure 4.6

10/6/2025 ILT Meeting #4 Slide: Problem of Practice



Testing Change Ideas Through Collaborative Inquiry

Having established a school-wide problem of practice and instructional focus, the ILT shifted its focus to facilitating PLCs’ collaborative PDSA cycles around changes in classroom practices. For the rest of the semester’s ILT meetings, the team reviewed different resources or protocols about facilitating inquiry by planning change ideas and collecting and analyzing data. In the second half of each ILT session, we collaboratively planned the following week’s PLC session to reflect new learning. For example, later in our October 6th session, we reviewed the Change Idea Checklist from New York City’s Department of Education’s *Continuous Improvement Handbook* (p. 104) to identify features of effective change ideas for classroom-level inquiry. Teacher-leaders then used the checklist to coplan their PLC’s first official PDSA cycle throughout the second half of October.

The ILT continued to support teacher-leaders in facilitating PDSA cycles by layering in additional resources that explicitly attended to issues of equity, culture, and bias. In the October 20th session, teacher-leaders gave each other feedback on the PDSA Cycle 1 plans using Khalifa's (2018) questions for culturally responsive PLCs (p. 144) in conjunction with the change idea checklist that had previously been introduced. Towards the end of the semester, we also read the Center for Leadership and Educational Equity's *About Learning from Looking at Student Work* (Buchovecky, n.d.) to discuss the role of bias and assumption in student data analysis. I intentionally selected such resources throughout the case study based on regular check-ins with teacher-leaders and my weekly review of the PLCs' PDSA plans. These resources helped us collectively recognize that continuous improvement tools alone could not tackle the complex issues of bias or equity often below the surface of school and classroom practices.

Every other week, teacher-leaders facilitated collaborative inquiry in their respective PLCs using the meeting agendas, objectives, and strategies we designed together in ILT. After the empathy interviews, PLCs completed two full PDSA cycles. Each cycle included two PLC sessions: In the first, teachers collaboratively planned a common change idea to implement in the classroom, made predictions about what they expected to occur, and determined what student data they would collect to better understand the change's impact. In the second meeting of each cycle, teachers analyzed the data they collected such as student writing samples, survey results, or conversation scripts, and determined adjustments they would make to the change idea. Below, Figure 4.7 shows a completed PDSA Cycle 2 plan from the science PLC. In this cycle, the teachers implemented student roles for cooperative learning and collected student data through student work, peer observations, and student conversation scripts. To support the site's teachers in identifying potential change ideas for classroom instruction, I also facilitated four monthly

whole-group professional development sessions. Each session centered on research-based instructional practices that reflected our school-wide focus on student-centered learning, as well as the specific assets of our focus subgroups.

Figure 4.7

Science PLC Artifact: PDSA Cycle 2 Plan

PDSA Cycle 2 Dates	Start: 10/14/2025 End: 11/17/2025 TLF Focus Standard: TLF 3b4		
Change Idea	Implementing student roles/collaborative groups/accountability roles		
Plan	Focus group, during instructional time, once a week minimum		
Predictions: What do you predict will happen as a result of your change idea?	Questions: What do you want to learn from this cycle?	Data: What data will you collect and how will you collect the data?	Results & Next Steps: What were the results? What did we learn? What will we do next?
Possibly a role won't get done Building community	We would like to see the effects of collaborative grouping structures on the participation and engagement of student groups.	Collecting data for ourselves, monitoring the conversations that students are having during collaborative groups. We will also collect student work.	Increase in student participation/engagement Increase in student discourse Increase in teamwork (helping each other, accountability and self efficacy). We will continue to move forward with the change idea. We will commit to peer data collection. We will keep track of student participation and all other relevant data.

Note: PDSA template adapted from Rohanna, K.L. (2024c). PDSA template. In K.L. Rohanna (Ed.), *EDUC 224: Leading change through evaluation: Methods of continuous improvement*.

A Key Pivot: Responding to an Emerging Conflict

The case study activities of West River Magnet's professional learning program generally unfolded as planned until a school-wide conflict emerged in mid-November. Several teachers had begun publicly voicing concerns that some staff members' recruitment practices were racially biased in favor of White and Asian students. The issue unleashed a variety of perspectives on the role of race and other demographic factors in the broader historical context of magnet schools. In the ensuing conversations, educators shared opinions as facts, often trying to convince one another that their perspective was right and others were simply wrong, or even

racist. Rarely did anyone share how their own identities or lived experiences might be shaping their point of view. The conflict spilled over its allotted meetings and into the staff's day-to-day interactions. In my research journal, I documented the awkward exchanges and palpable sense of tension in the days and weeks that followed. By the end of the month, the conflict felt tangible across campus, and I decided to no longer sweep the issue under the rug. Divergent perspectives were no longer conceptual, but tangible and consequential.

Given this study's attention to questions of race and bias, as well as educator relationships, I felt it necessary to give careful time and consideration to the emerging conflict. Instead of continuing the student-facing work of collaborative inquiry, I changed gears and chose to dedicate the December 3rd ILT meeting to a storytelling circle. As documented in my research journal, this decision was guided by conversations with Sasha, a former school leader and researcher on restorative justice practices with adults in K-12 settings. I had extensive experience with circle as a classroom teacher, using the agreements, talking piece, and open-ended prompts to build community and repair harm with my middle school students. However, I had never considered circles in developing the adult-facing activities of this case study despite their connection to my project's cornerstone of relational trust. As I wrestled with how to move forward in late November, Sasha encouraged me to facilitate a storytelling circle with my ILT colleagues and consider how it might reconfigure relational dynamics, surface underlying assumptions, and foster more humanizing interactions amongst the site's teachers (Raphael, 2026).

As I prepared to facilitate the December circle in ILT, I thought deeply about how to frame its purpose in relation to the divisive conflict that had emerged. As the ILT gathered in circle that week, I shared my reflections on the current state of our site and my conversations

with Sasha. While I named the race and recruitment controversy as the impetus for the circle, I explained that the day's prompt would not ask participants to share their perspectives on this topic. Instead, I had intentionally chosen to focus on recentring each other's humanity and shared purpose by inviting everyone to tell the story of how they became educators. In exchanging these stories, I hoped we, a group of multiracial educators passionately committed to serving our students, would better understand the origins of our own and each other's perspectives on complex, racialized topics—building a foundation of relational trust on which further, more difficult conversations could take place. At the conclusion of the circle, the team's teacher-leaders agreed to facilitate the same storytelling circle with the rest of the school staff via their respective PLCs. As I discuss further in my next chapter, the December ILT and subsequent PLC storytelling circles became a key part of this case study's exploration of how diverse educators come together to engage in professional learning that attends to issues of culture, race, and bias in schools.

Chapter Five: Interpretive Findings

Using robust data collection methods, this study explored what happened when a secondary school's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) collaboratively developed and implemented site-based professional learning designed to cultivate culturally sustaining mindsets and practices. While the previous chapter narrated the process through which West River's ILT codesigned and facilitated teacher-led and asset-oriented Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), I now report the more interpretive, thematic findings of my second and third research questions.

Through interviews, this chapter first explores what the ILT's teacher-leaders identified as facilitating or inhibiting critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust in site-based professional learning. Existing theoretical and empirical research has established these components as key tenets of transformative, asset-oriented professional learning (Hajisoteriou et al., 2019; Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014; Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Orange et al., 2019; Orange & Isken, 2021; Parkhouse, Lu, et al., 2019; Uribe-Zarain et al., 2025). In addition, it is also well documented that teacher-leaders are critical agents of school improvement (Berg, 2021; Cooper et al., 2016; Margolis & Huggins, 2012; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Yet, their perspectives on how exactly transformative, equity-centered professional learning might take place has been understudied (Jacobs, 2012; Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Jacobs & Rinck, 2024; Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Noting the challenge of cultivating relational trust, I then transition to the relational dynamics of this case study.² In answering my final research question, I utilize interview and observation data to detail how the identities and positionalities of diverse, multiracial participants

² To detail these findings, I will refer to figures presented in Chapter 4 as needed using the provided figure numbers.

emerged internally and externally throughout the ILT's and PLCs' processes. These findings expand current scholarship on equity-centered professional learning and school improvement by adding a more human, relational dimension to the predominant focus on effective strategies or enabling conditions (Biag, 2019; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Matschiner, 2023; Parkhouse, Lu, et al., 2019).

Authentic and Purposeful Work: Fostering Critical Reflection, Collaborative Inquiry and Trust in Professional Learning

In every interview, teacher-leaders articulated how the ILT cultivated a sense of authentic and purposeful work that fostered critical reflection and collaborative inquiry amongst colleagues. While critical reflection builds educator capacity to recognize how structural inequities and internalized biases shape daily decision-making and interactions with students, collaborative inquiry pushes reflection into action by empowering teachers to make, assess, and refine equity-focused changes in classroom practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Howard, 2003; Jacobs, 2012; Matschiner, 2023; Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2021). Several participants indicated that facilitating early conversations about deficit thinking promoted critical reflection and inquiry in their PLCs. As teacher-leaders further described, their PLCs' collection of student empathy interviews deepened peers' engagement with collaborative inquiry by centering the unique experiences, perspectives, and context of West River students. ILT participants thereby supported colleagues in making meaning of the classroom-based Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles that followed.

For some teacher-leaders, the semester's work also had a positive influence on peer relationships; leading reflective and inquiry-based learning cultivated trust amongst PLCs members through a willingness to share strategies, reflect intentionally on daily practice, and

collaborate around a shared problem. Yet, relational trust—a deeper, more vulnerable kind and the cornerstone of equity-focused work in schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Orange & Isken, 2021)—remained elusive. For many teacher-leaders, this distinction signified the more nuanced, dispositional conditions necessary for asset-oriented professional learning.

Developing an Asset-Oriented Mindset: Establishing a Purpose

Explicitly naming and discussing deficit thinking in the ILT’s August meeting and later with the rest of the staff in the fishbone PLC served as an important first step in the semester’s work. As teacher-leaders emphasized, these early conversations established a clear and authentic purpose for West River’s professional learning program: engaging in critical reflection to develop the asset-oriented mindsets and practices of student-centered learning. For teacher-leaders, this opening dialogue framed mindset development as the foundation of the semester’s work, rather than leaving it as an unaddressed undercurrent. While I later detail findings on how conversations about race and equity were facilitated, in this section I examine how teacher-leaders set the conditions for colleagues to engage in critical reflection and collaborative inquiry.

Interview data indicated how a conceptual grounding in deficit versus asset thinking prompted multiple teacher-leaders to facilitate a more deliberate approach to data analysis. Matthew, the math department chair, recalled reviewing the deficit-based fishbone diagram (Figure 4.3) in the ILT’s very first session: “You gave us the example where the responses written were...blaming the students for what the data showed.” In seeing and discussing the sample, ILT members like Matthew attached common statements about students and families, such as “lack of basic skills,” to the concept of deficit thinking. Matthew went on to describe how the subsequent introduction of intentional mindsets (Figure 4.4) highlighted the need to be

“very explicit in how we approach [data analysis] conversations with [PLC] colleagues.”

Without such attention to mindsets, Matthew recognized how data analysis conversations could proliferate deficit paradigms. For Matthew, centering underlying mindsets, not just classroom practices or behaviors, allowed him to facilitate the semester’s professional learning with a clear, asset-oriented purpose.

In the interviews, several teacher-leaders found that an examination and discussion of deficit thinking in PLC spaces moved their colleagues toward authentic reflection and inquiry, rather than just compliance. In recalling his PLC’s engagement with the fishbone protocol, Sean asserted that his colleagues “weren’t just doing it just to do it...It felt very genuine...[they] really questioned [their thinking], and I think really reflected.” For Sean, his peers “genuine[ly]” engaged with the fishbone activity because he had connected site-based data to broader issues of systemic inequities and bias. Sharon described a similar phenomenon when she facilitated the fishbone diagram with her PLC. As her colleagues entered the room that afternoon, the energy was palpably low. Yet, Sharon noticed a shift when she introduced the purpose of the protocol and initiated discussion of the deficit-based example. As she recalled, her peers thoughtfully leaned into the conversation as they brainstormed reasons for patterns in students’ school experience survey responses. As Sharon remembered, she “could really see the teachers in that moment making cognitive corrections to how they viewed their students.” Bolstered by the psychological safety of a clear protocol and a peer facilitator, Sharon’s recollections reveal that naming deficit thinking did not generate defensiveness. Instead, teachers in Sharon’s PLC engaged in authentic reflection and inquiry because the work felt meaningful.

Not From the Top: Student Empathy Interviews and Authentic Professional Learning

While the fishbone process generated genuine reflection around equity issues, the subsequent collection of student empathy interviews deepened staff engagement by grounding professional learning in site-specific and student-centered data. In the teacher-leader interviews, every participant highlighted conducting student empathy interviews as a key activity in the case study. For Tony, the empathy interview process demonstrated a significant shift from the usual professional development Thursdays:

We took hard data that we're typically accustomed to, but we're trying to unpack that.

And we don't have to, you know what I mean? And I told [my PLC colleagues] that the only reason I was interested in doing [ILT] is because that was something that's been missing.

From Tony's perspective, the PLCs' collection of empathy interviews departed from predominant approaches to continuous improvement work that value large-scale, and often deficit-focused, "hard data" over the daily experiences of students and teachers. As Tony described later in the interview, this shift in the site's professional learning approach drove his own decision to regularly attend ILT meetings and lead his PLC in their semester-long inquiry.

Other teacher-leaders suggested how conducting empathy interviews fostered a sense of authentic and purposeful work amongst their PLC colleagues. Sofia, for example, described how the school-wide problem of practice emerged from the entire staff's engagement with site-specific and student-centered data: "[the problem of practice] [was] not just coming in vicariously from someone at the top...it [felt] purposeful and really tied to what we [were] doing." Like Tony, Sofia reflected on how the collection of empathy interviews distinguished the site's professional development from top-down mandates typically focused on improving assessment data. Instead, West River's problem of practice evolved organically from what

teachers learned about student experience. Sharon described how the teachers in her PLC even met outside of the designated professional development time to plan empathy interview questions and identify focus students. Highlighting its collaborative effect, Sharon characterized the empathy interview process as a “communal project” amongst her PLC; it did not feel like an externally imposed task, but rather a shared endeavor that teachers felt ownership over. As Sharon summarized, the empathy interview process demonstrated how a collective sense of authentic and purposeful work naturally promoted, rather than mandated, teacher reflection and collaboration.

Indeed, teacher-leader interviews revealed how engaging colleagues in the collection and analysis of student empathy interviews generated notable shifts in teacher mindsets. For Sofia, slowing down to “actually talk to our students and listen to them and hear their stories and narratives” challenged preconceived assumptions. As Sofia recalled, the empathy interviews

Really set the stage and helped us be like, “wait a minute, [our students] are people, they’re human beings ...” A lot of people shared “I didn’t know this about this student,” a lot of teachers, including myself ... So [the empathy interviews helped with] even looking at our own assumptions and why did we make those assumptions about our students.

In Sofia’s recounting, the empathy interview process empowered teachers to authentically reflect on their own beliefs about students. Notably, Sofia suggests such deep reflection resulted from teachers driving their own collaborative process for planning, conducting, and analyzing data from student empathy interviews. Sharon, who co-facilitated the same PLC as Sofia, offered a specific example of one teacher’s shifts in mindsets. As she recalled, this teacher had consistently complained about the work habits and attitude of a particular student in her class.

When the PLC began the empathy interview process, Sharon encouraged this teacher to do her empathy interview with the student. During the empathy interview analysis, Sharon noted how hearing more about the student's life and who he was had "really adjusted [the teacher's] opinion of him" and she began "put[ting] forth more effort to help him be successful." In uncovering more about her student's story, Sharon's PLC colleague humanized him, adjusting both her beliefs and practices as a result.

"We Trust Each Other ... As Professionals": Authentic Work and Trust Building

Through the empathy interview process, teacher-leaders cultivated a purpose for the remainder of their biweekly PLC meetings as developing more student-centered mindsets and practices. For many participants, this sense of authentic and purposeful work promoted a deeper sense of trust amongst PLC colleagues. In one instance, Sharon described how West River's problem of practice nurtured an openness amongst teachers to "hone their craft." As she described, "I [felt] like people [were] more open because it really [was] more about us being better teachers, and less about school business. It [was] about craft ... we [were] honing our craft." While Sharon's colleagues gathered each week in their PLC, the shared sense of purpose not only fostered participatory inquiry. In addition, the work spurred a different, relational sense of "openness" as teachers dialogued more honestly about their classroom practice.

For some teacher-leaders, authentic and purposeful work even repaired previously strained professional relationships. Matthew recalled a particularly difficult PLC meeting in Early October during which a colleague's negativity had "derailed" the group's planning process: "People were just shutting down, and I was trying my best to just really try to get back on track, and then I just got super frustrated ... we [weren't] really making any progress." For Matthew, the moment reflected a low point in the team's collaboration. Yet, as the PLC's work

continued, Matthew noticed a shift in how his colleague came to the space: “She was much more collaborative. She brought that document that we modified [as our change idea for PDSA Cycle 2], and it felt like it was then a very positive experience.” Matthew’s peer, whom he felt had previously derailed the group’s work, eventually contributed valuable expertise to the team’s inquiry process. As narrated by Matthew, the relational arc of his PLC highlights the trust-building potential of authentic and purposeful professional learning.

While authentic and purposeful work successfully built a degree of trust amongst colleagues, teacher-leaders like Diana drew an important distinction. Like several other participants, Diana described how grounding the semester’s work in student-centered inquiry had cultivated a sense of “professional” trust within her PLC. Emphasizing her team’s willingness to share strategies and reflect on lessons, Diana explained “I think that in our [PLC] there is trust as far as sharing strategies ... we trust each other with ‘how did this lesson go for you?’ ... I think as professionals, we do trust each other in our team.” However, Diana quickly noted the limitations of this professional trust: “But as far as being vulnerable ... I would say no [there isn’t that type of trust].” For Diana, meaningful and shared work had promoted professional collaboration, and yet, a deeper and more vulnerable type of trust had remained elusive. As I discuss in the following sections, Diana’s insight uncovers the more intuitive and dispositional nuances in how relational trust, a key component of transformative professional learning, might develop.

Facilitator Dispositions: Building Relational Trust Through Modeling of Storytelling, Asking and Holding

Protocols and strategies like the fishbone diagram and empathy interviews promoted a culture of critical inquiry and student-centered collaboration amongst the site’s teachers.

However, the ILT members consistently stressed the more “qualitative, invisible stuff” as what truly bolstered reflection, inquiry, and most notably, relational trust throughout the case study’s professional learning program. In particular, teacher-leaders repeatedly called out facilitation approaches and leadership decisions as key factors in the ILT’s effectiveness. As Ernesto asserted:

If this is supposed to be a model program for how to do [ILT] at other schools ... It’s not “Here’s the kit for ILT, do trust-building exercises.” Yeah, you have to do that, but the care you brought to it, the respect you have for teachers, the fact you can draw from your own experience as a teacher. Those are all signals ... I think all of that is, to me, the foundation of why [the ILT] was effective.

In this section, I summarize teacher-leaders’ characterization of effective facilitation as modeling the dispositions of storytelling, asking, and holding to illustrate the technical, as well as intuitive, nature of building relational trust in asset-oriented professional learning. Throughout, I detail examples of how the ILT members cultivated and refined their own instructional leadership to foster vulnerability and support PLC colleagues in developing asset-based mindsets and practices.³

Storytelling: An Offering to Exchange Vulnerability

Teacher-leaders repeatedly highlighted facilitator modeling of vulnerable and authentic storytelling as a key factor in promoting relational trust and critical reflection amongst the ILT members as well as the broader staff. In her interview, Sofia described how the literature and activities of the ILT promoted educational equity. She then paused and noted, “But I also think

³ As both this study’s researcher and the ILT’s facilitator, I acknowledge the potential for my positionality to shape the findings in this section. However, minimizing teacher-leaders’ consistent emphasis on facilitation would disregard the critical insight my participants sought to offer.

the most powerful thing has been your personal stories and how you actually put yourself in front.” Distinguishing this storytelling as “the most powerful thing,” Sofia signaled the pivotal role of how a facilitator models vulnerability to initiate conversations about race. As Sofia continued to describe, “when you ... talk[ed] about your experience in Colombia or about the school site that had primarily African American students, I feel like it [made] it easier because one person went through the door, [so] you re willing to go through the door.” Sofia’s reflection highlights how the stories a facilitator shares can invite others in the space to reflect on issues of bias, race, and culture in the classroom. In his interview, Tony elaborated on how effective facilitator modeling was “not modeling that’s just mechanical,” but “genuine.” Dependent on a more dispositional quality of authenticity, Tony’s distinction contrasts facilitator sharing of a scripted or generic story with spontaneity, sincerity, and vulnerability.

In her interview, Diana offered a specific example of how facilitator storytelling resulted in her own exhibition of vulnerability in the ILT space. In recounting a moment when she felt relational trust, Diana described sharing with a colleague how her upbringing with sisters might have contributed to gendered biases in the classroom. When I asked Diana what made her comfortable to share this reflection, she replied without hesitation— “It was having you go first.” She continued:

A lot of the time at ILT and Professional Development meetings—I know some teachers don’t like the idea that we’re the students—but we are the students. And I always go to ILT or [Professional Development meetings] as a student. Like, “what am I gonna learn?” And I feel that when you modeled what you ex ... maybe not what you expected us to, well maybe yeah, what you expected us to do. You modeled, and I felt that you were a little bit vulnerable. I think that was the first time I heard about the fires with your

family. So, I was like, “okay, I could share a little bit more.” I felt a little bit more comfortable to share with [an ILT colleague], to let her know my own biases, even though that’s not something you feel proud to share sometimes.

In describing the purpose of facilitator modeling, Diana hesitated to use the phrase “what you expected us to do.” Her careful consideration of this language potentially reveals a deeper reflection around facilitator power. Unlike mandating or dictating, modeling through storytelling signifies a different kind of facilitation choice in communicating expectations. As Diana’s story characterized, facilitator modeling can serve as an offering, rather than demand, to exchange vulnerability.

Asking Mediative Questions: An Invitation to Reflect and Change

Like storytelling, facilitation through meditative questions also invited—not required—participant reflection and openness to change. John, for example, explained how “honor[ing] people’s perspective and [meeting] them where they’re at” while at the same time asking thought-provoking questions, shifted thinking. As he described effective facilitator questions, John took time to distinguish them as different from “leading” or even “challenging.” Eventually, he landed on the adjective “thoughtful.” Leading or challenging questions assign power to the facilitator; leading questions might manipulate participants into providing a particular answer while challenging questions can be interrogative or accusatory (Costa & Garmston, 2016). Instead, “thoughtful” questions imply a curious and nonjudgmental disposition (Costa & Garmston, 2016). In his interview, Sean also noted nuances in learning how a facilitator might pose reflective questions. Describing a “layer of equity” that appeared “even in the simplest of things” during ILT, he offered an example involving thoughtful questioning: “There’s even a certain way to ask a question that allows people to be able to open up.” Sean

suggested thoughtful questioning as dispositional or intuitive. “Even in the simplest of things,” like posing questions, facilitators can intentionally foster reflection and build trust.

Through the capacity building work of the ILT, teacher-leaders transferred learning around storytelling and asking mediative questions to their own facilitation of PLCs with peers. John, for example, described a PLC meeting in mid-October that he felt had become unproductive and overly negative. To address the burgeoning tension as the team’s facilitator, John decided to get curious, rather than combative:

I just didn’t understand where they were coming from ... I remember thinking, “well these are the people I work with. I need to understand why they feel that way [about school]” ... So, I said, “Why do you feel that way? Tell me more.” And then that created a robust dialogue.

The resultant storytelling in John’s PLC helped him and his colleagues to surface how their own experiences in school colored their interpretation of an equity issue and bolstered a deeper level of trust. Later in the interview, John credited facilitator modeling of thoughtful questioning in the ILT with his own decision-making in this moment as a PLC facilitator.

Holding: The In-Betweens of Disposition and Intuition

For some teacher-leaders, learning about facilitation dispositions and approaches in the ILT conveyed a deeper understanding of an instructional leader’s ways of being. In his interview, Ernesto described how “in-between” the protocols and techniques in the ILT’s facilitation resided an “ethic of care.” Signifying more dispositional and intuitive attributes, such “qualitative, invisible stuff” underpinned the ILT’s development of asset-oriented professional learning. Ernesto continued to clarify, “protocols are just the result of the care, the ethic of care in implementing change.” Emphasizing the pivotal role of care, Ernesto then stated “I’ve been in

spaces where the same protocols are used, but they feel empty of care. So, I think that that's the harder thing to replicate, right?" While protocols and strategies can be easily reproduced, a facilitator's ways of being are more difficult to iterate across a system.

Despite the challenges of replicating intuition and disposition, some teacher-leaders indicated a greater capacity for enacting their own ethic of care in facilitating professional learning with peers. Most powerfully, Sofia spoke of how the ILT supported her in developing a dualistic disposition of care and criticality. As she talked about feeling cared for or "held" in the ILT space, Sofia discussed how her and other ILT members enacted a similar disposition in their PLCs:

There [were] people in the [PLC space] that also help[ed] people feel held. So, it was us [the ILT members] going in and being able to hold people where they're at, meet them where they're at. Not get mad at them or judge them, because they're being so negative. Like, "I understand, okay, I get why. Now, let's turn this around and let's kind of make a shift from that negativity to more of a ... focus on assets, and problem solving and leveling up." And so, I feel that all of that was modeled so well, and in such a strong way for us in ILT, that it really helped me as a facilitator, bring that into the room and into the PLCs.

Sofia's characterization of powerful facilitators as "holding people where they are at" indicates a temperament of love and compassion—a necessary precursor to fostering the heavy work of critical reflection and action. Further, her description stresses facilitator intuitiveness: An ability to see through colleagues' surface-level behaviors and detect underlying emotions, values, or beliefs (Aguilar, 2013; Costa & Garmston, 2016). For Sofia, the ILT thereby built both her technical and dispositional capacity to lead asset-oriented change.

Identity and Positionality Emergence of Diverse, Multiracial Educators

Teacher-leader insights around the facilitation of critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust highlight the deeply personal nature of this type of professional learning. Exploring the extent to which Black, Asian, White and Latinx educators brought forward lived experiences and personal histories can provide key insight as to how relational trust—the willingness to express vulnerable, personal reflections with colleagues—might deepen or stall. To offer such insights, my final research question subsequently sought to uncover how exactly ILT participants’ unique identities and positionalities emerged throughout the process of codesigning and facilitating asset-oriented PLCs.

In this section, I first discuss how teacher-leaders described the opening inclusion activities in each ILT meeting as bringing their identities and life histories to the foreground of the session’s work. Yet, as the meetings shifted into a focus on teaching and learning, teacher-leaders suggest that personal reflections became implicit—settling just below the surface of what participants chose to share. For most of the case study’s duration, emotional connections to lived experiences and personal identities—such as being an English learner in school or growing up as an African American kid in the Deep South—were felt but not said. As I discussed in the previous chapter, a school-wide incident in November exposed conflicting perceptions of a race-related equity issue. With this tension in the backdrop, a storytelling circle disrupted this pattern of suppression: Participants vulnerably brought forth past experiences and personal stories into the ILT and PLC spaces that both embodied their identities and revealed biases amongst colleagues. Together, these findings reveal the individualized, contextual, and relational nature of how identities and positionalities surface amongst diverse, multiracial educators.

Intentional Inclusions: Creating Space for Emotional Connections

ILT and PLC sessions typically focus on identifying instructional problems and discussing remedial strategies, rather than the emotional reasoning underlying the discussion of equity issues. To this point, Matthew, a veteran math teacher and department chair, described how “in school, time is limited and we just have to talk about what the challenges are and come up with solutions. It’s just not often where we get to really talk about the why and our emotional reasoning behind our actions.” Across teacher-leader interviews, participants distinguished our ILT sessions from their previous experiences with professional learning and instructional leadership spaces. Sean, a sixth-year African American teacher and science department chair, described the ILT space as “specifically created to be able to open up.” He later stated, “if that space wasn’t created, I wouldn’t give my personal background, I would just talk from a place of ‘okay this [student data] is what we see, this [student data] is where we are.’” As these teacher-leaders described, professional learning spaces typically keep collaborative conversations superficial. Instead, the ILT carved out space for educators to show up as their full selves and bring their emotional reasoning and personal background into the team’s work.

How this happened was particularly important to participants. All teacher-leaders emphasized each ILT meeting’s opening inclusion activities as emotional opportunities to share individual values, strengths, and lived experiences. In revealing assets amongst team members, these exercises also translated into how educators thought about students. Sofia, Marco, John and Sean emphasized the October 20th inclusion activity of Celebrating Strengths (Aguilar et al., 2021, p. 16). In this protocol, participants identified and shared one strength they brought to the team. After, each person described how they saw a teammate’s strength show up in the ILT space. Participants remarked on how this exercise informed the session’s subsequent development of a strengths-based protocol for analyzing student work.

Diana, on the other hand, highlighted the identity map activity during which educators created and shared specific identities or experiences that shape their approach to teaching. In reflecting on this exercise, Diana noted its connection to setting aside biases and assumptions when we later discussed conducting and analyzing student empathy interviews. As the data suggests, inclusion activities were not just check-ins. Rather, each exercise served as a critical opening for bringing personal stories and emotional connections to the ILT's student-facing work.

Felt, But Not Said: Identities and Positionalities Emerge Implicitly

Such initial foregrounding of identities and lived experiences at the start of each ILT or PLC meeting did not continue to be fully expressed as the sessions progressed into conversations about teaching and learning. Instead, participants thought about their identities and lived experiences throughout the semester's work yet rarely shared those reflections openly with colleagues. In this subsection, I trace this key finding by synthesizing observation and interview data to explore key moments when participants felt, but did not share, the emergence of personal identities and histories.

In the Back of Mind: Thinking About Identities

Despite the intentional alignment of inclusion exercises to the ILT's work, participants said personal or emotional connections emerged more transparently through these opening activities than in later discussions about classroom instruction. In his interview, Sean, for instance, described how the inclusion exercises elicited personal reflections that then settled into the "back of [ILT members'] minds" as the meeting progressed:

To me, [the ILT inclusions] felt more intentional. It was like, “Okay we’re opening up conversation about background ...” And I feel that put people in the mind space that whenever we did talk, in the back of our mind, we were thinking about our [identities]. As Sean emphasized, the intentional design of the ILT space prompted participants to think about how their identities or life experiences might shape their perspectives. Likewise, Sofia recounted how “in all our discussions, [identities] have been at the forefront,” later describing several moments in the ILT when she thought about her own experiences in school as a young Latina girl and English learner. Even though participants like Sean and Sofia told me how they often *thought* about their personal histories in the ILT space, I observed that they rarely *shared* these reflections with others outside of the opening inclusion exercises.

The Emotional Baggage Just Below the Surface

Teacher-leaders frequently cited an ILT discussion on November 17th as a key moment when they felt, but did not share, personal connections to the team’s work. A close examination of the discussion in conjunction with interview data reveals underlying emotions. Participants sat in a circle engaging in dialogue around the Center for Leadership and Educational Equity’s *About Learning from Looking at Student Work* (Buchovecky, n.d.). Ernesto had just commented on how educators are trained to view students from a deficit perspective. After a few seconds of silence, Luis, a veteran Latino English teacher, waved his hand: “Can I ask a question? Because you made me think. I don’t want to go counter to everything, but don’t we need to be somewhat deficit-based? Because I’m looking at their writing, and I’m like I need to correct it.” Instead of letting the moment pass, Luis felt the urge to reveal his divergent viewpoint around the mindsets we should bring to analyzing student writing. The excerpts below represent the discussion that ensued:

Leah: I think you're seeing a skill deficit, but you should reframe it with "What are the students able to do that I can use to help them advance?"

...

Sean: I think a lot of students respond better to "You don't have this right, this is wrong, this is wrong. How do I fix it?" Instead of just going the other route of saying, "Oh yeah, you're doing well in this, you're doing well."

...

Sharon: You may see a deficit in the work, in the product, [but] you're going to look at that not as a "This kid is doing a crap job at writing." You're going to look at that as "What can I bring into my classroom?" Which is what [you] have control over.

While the above data reveals an impassioned dialogue encompassing diverse perspectives, it also indicates that educators did not bring forward their identities or lived experiences into the conversation. Nowhere in the November 17th meeting transcript did participants name how their personal backgrounds may have been informing their viewpoints.

Interview data reveals just how close to the surface lived experiences really were. In reflecting on the conversation, Sean, for example, explained his internal thinking: "I'm not Latino, but I guess in my own upbringing [that was] majority White ... I think I was more used to [deficit thinking] than maybe an asset-based approach. And not being used to it can also affect how you receive it." As Sean advocated for clear and direct student feedback in the ILT discussion, his own experiences with deficit thinking as a Black student shaped his views in the team's dialogue about responding to student work. Though not explicitly shared, his lived experiences served as subtext to his contributions in the team's discussion.

Other teachers revealed more emotional connections that surfaced during the deficit thinking conversation. In his interview, Luis made clear that his personal identities and background floated just below his question in the November 17th meeting:

In the space of [the deficit thinking] conversation, I didn't bring up all my past, but—look, I see these kids a lot with the same background as me. I see a lot of them in me ...

When I was saying that I was saying it with all this baggage. I didn't go into a whole thing about my history, but all the baggage was in that question.

Defining his past as “baggage,” Luis indicated strong emotions about his own experience in school that he pushed beneath what he shared in the discussion. Even though this personal history weighed heavily on him, Luis chose to hold back and not bring forward all his past. Sofia, the reading interventionist, also referenced the discussion as a moment when she recalled painful memories. As she described, the conversation prompted Sofia to reflect on “what was it like for me to be in a classroom with all these insecurities that I had? Because I was made to feel less than because I was an English language learner.” Sofia's firsthand experience with the harm of deficit thinking also lingered in the backdrop of the team's conversation. In recounting her own school experience, Sofia notably explained how such unresolved wounds caused her to stay quiet during the discussion.

In other contexts, even more personal experiences surfaced in the thoughts of participants as they discussed diverse viewpoints with colleagues. Diana, a sixth-year Latina teacher, brought not just her time in school, but also her childhood and home life into professional learning conversations. In her interview, Diana vulnerably detailed the origins of her views on homework:

I've voiced to other teachers that not all students have a quiet space to do their work. Just because I remember it was the six of us in our household, and we had a two bedroom. It was my parents and my grandparents who stayed with us for a while, and they slept in the living room. It was super crowded ... So, I know that some of our students also sleep like that. They don't have a quiet space to do their homework.

As she describes, Diana struggled to complete assignments from her teachers because of a crowded home environment. Navigating such challenges as a young person informed Diana's passionate advocacy for her current students. Later in the interview, I asked Diana if she ever shared some of her personal story in the ILT or PLC meetings. She replied, "That's a good question. I never shared, no. I never have ... I'm really getting emotional [*starts crying*]. Oh my god, did anybody else cry? I don't know. I'm not really one to share like that." In reflecting on expressing vulnerability with colleagues, Diana was overcome with emotions. Her response indicates the sensitivity and complexity of bringing one's full self into spaces typically coded as professional and impersonal.

Choosing to Share: Gender and Discretionary Decision Making

Given these findings, I asked why participants may have felt, but did not share, emotional and personal connections to the ILT or PLC's work. Notably, the responses varied sharply by gender. Male teacher-leaders uniformly said that any absence of named identities or experiences was primarily due to time constraints. When I asked Luis why he chose not to share his "baggage" during the ILT discussion, he clarified, "It really was just an aspect of time." Sean also explained how he did not give "too much personal background" because he "[didn't] want to dominate the conversation" and ensure there was adequate time for others to share. In contrast, the ILT's three female teacher-leaders described emotionally and internally reflecting during the

ILT or PLC meetings but then using discretion when sharing these reflections out loud with colleagues.

In their interviews, the female ILT participants—Sofia, Diana, and Sharon—recounted how they actively made decisions about what to share and with whom. When reflecting further on why she may not have detailed her personal story in the conversation about homework, Diana stated, “I think just as humans you know, we don’t feel comfortable to share something private with just anybody.” Sharon also indicated that her decision to share depended on who else was in the room: “If one person asks me something, I may give them one answer because I don’t want to argue with them. Whereas if another person asks me something, I’m gonna tell them honestly about my cultural background and things like that.” Similarly, Sofia discussed how she chose to share some identities and experiences, but not others because “it’s gonna take more time and more trust building.” For these women, sharing personal stories depended entirely on the level of relational trust in the professional learning space.

A Storytelling Circle: Surfacing Emotional Reflections and Renegotiating Relationships

The data thus far suggests identity emergence was primarily an internal phenomenon amongst participants throughout much of the case study. However, the school-wide conflict in November disrupted this pattern by recentering my own focus on the adult-facing work of building trust. As I recounted in Chapter 4, I decided to have the ILT engage in a storytelling circle in early December as tensions escalated across the campus. At the conclusion of the circle, teacher-leaders agreed to facilitate the same circle in their own PLCs on December 9th. Across nearly every interview, participants consistently highlighted the ILT and subsequent PLC circles as transformative moments in the semester’s professional learning. While inclusion activities and reflective questions invited participants to share such reflections throughout the duration of the

case study, the December circle was the only time when team members shared their underlying personal background and emotional reasoning with the entire group.

In the designated time and space for a storytelling circle, participants vulnerably expressed a diverse range of socioeconomic, racial, cultural and other identities. The following excerpts from the ILT circle's transcript embody this key change as participants shared deeply personal background and life experiences:

Sean: I always knew that in my cultural background, being from Louisiana— the Bible Belt, Deep South—I understand that knowledge is power and knowledge is a tool ... and I care enough for the students that I'm going to ... bestow some knowledge ... so that they cannot be a victim to what the world has to offer them.

...

Ernesto: I come from a family of educators. So, my uncles are educators, my cousin is an educator, my *tías* are educators. My father was an educator ... he was a third-grade teacher for his whole career, and it was spent at one school. So, I grew up with that teacher as a parent and seeing how much time and effort it took.

...

Yolanda: I remember my mom dropping me off at daycare. We used to take the bus at four am to get dropped off. She did housekeeping and I remember teacher Darlene was so kind ... I'm now 40 years old and I can remember this beautiful woman who just showed kindness and love and ... I want to do that for our students.

Within each educator's story, a distinct understanding of equity surfaced. Sean's story suggests equity means empowering marginalized students with the knowledge they need to be successful in a system designed to harm them. From a family of educators, Ernesto's understanding of

equity centers on honoring the time, effort, and dedication of teachers like his father who modeled this commitment across an entire career at a single school. Yolanda's story characterizes equity as showing up with the love and compassion that comes with truly knowing one's students. These narratives, now verbally shared with others, made visible the personal, emotional backstories of each educator's perspective and, as a result, began to reshape how they understood one another.

In the ILT and subsequent PLC circles, educators not only shared their own personal histories but also heard those of others. Across the teacher-leader interviews, participants repeatedly recognized the value in exchanging moments of vulnerability, especially in the context of the November conflict. For Ernesto, the circle "help[ed] me understand a person across the table." Luis further shared how the circle "addressed [the school-wide equity issue] in ... the reasoning of why we're all educators" and that "it was good mediation that we needed ... People cried during that thing, it was good to see people's humanity." From Diana's perspective, the circle "[let us] understand why some people, not in a negative way, but 'oh now I get why you're like this.' Not in a negative way, just kind of like, 'oh, that makes sense.'" As the ILT's teacher-leaders suggest, the storytelling prompt and circle format allowed the identities and positionalities of its participants to emerge. As these participants further described, bearing witness to one another's fuller selves initiated a renegotiation of how West River's staff related to one another.

A Notable Sub Arc: Joy Participates in the Storytelling Circle

While my study focuses on teacher-leadership, the story of Joy, West River's principal, and her participation in the December PLC storytelling circle offers key insight as to how diverse educators' identities and positionalities emerged in this project's professional learning program.

Joy's racial identity and positionality as the only Asian American educator on the ILT, and one of very few Asian American staff across the site, makes her story particularly salient to the findings of this study. Documented in my own research journal and teacher-leader interviews, Joy's decision to exhibit vulnerability in the PLC circle reconfigured her relationships with the site's teachers. This finding affirms teacher-leaders' previously discussed characterization of the storytelling circles as humanizing and transformative.

When I first told Joy that I was planning on leading a storytelling circle with the ILT, she told me she had another meeting and would not be able to attend. The following week, I documented a brief exchange with her the morning of December 9th. I told her the ILT circle had gone well and that the team had decided to facilitate the same process with their PLCs that afternoon. "I think you should go and participate," I prodded, "it would mean a lot to the teachers for you to share your story, and to hear theirs." In my research journal, I noted her hesitant response: she felt the teachers would not want her there because she was the principal. I remembered thinking, "That's the point! They need to see your fuller self."

After the PLC circles ended, the staff had to gather for another meeting in the library. I stood outside the entrance, greeting teachers as they came in. When I saw Sofia, the reading interventionist and ILT team member, I could see her eyes were watery. It was not until my January interview with Sofia that I learned what had made her emotional that afternoon. In recounting her PLC's circle, Sofia elaborated:

Our principal, in our circle, oh my gosh...That completely and totally changed [everything] for me. Hearing everyone's stories, I [felt] like it's humanity. Humanity should be at the center of everything we do as human beings. But for me, [Joy] sharing in that circle was

super powerful. Just understanding where people are coming from, what their experiences are, and the why helps us stay in a place of empathy and compassion.

As Joy later shared with me, she had, in fact, chosen to participate in the December circle and told a vulnerable story of her time as a student. For Sofia, hearing Joy's emotional backstory completely altered her perceptions of the West River principal. While Sofia may have previously seen Joy solely through her hierarchical position of power, knowing Joy's story seemingly revealed a shared background in navigating the dominant culture of schooling. Transcending differences in role, race, and culture, Sofia was subsequently better able to understand Joy's perspective on equity issues, even if their viewpoints remained fundamentally different.

As a broad assessment of this project's examination of bias, identity, and culture, the December community circles embodied a critical shift in the case study's professional learning program. With classroom inquiry on hold, the final ILT and PLC sessions centered on educators themselves and their relationships with one another. Drawing upon her own experience in the storytelling circles, Sofia poignantly summarized the ILT's work that semester: Together, we had sought to address "a lack of focus and knowledge of our own personal biases ... not only with our students, but with our colleagues also." While the ILT worked to identify, understand, and address student-facing equity issues, the December circles also began to sift through biases and assumptions amongst the site's educators and bring forward a new, more relational way of being in professional learning spaces.

Conclusion

From the perspective of this case study's teacher-leaders, cultivating a sense of authentic and purposeful work facilitated critical reflection, collaborative inquiry and relational

trust. By taking the time to discuss deficit thinking, engage in root cause analysis, and collect asset-oriented qualitative data, teacher-leaders created the conditions for colleagues' engagement with critical inquiry and reflection. Even though several participants indicated that these processes also generated deeper trust amongst colleagues, the more vulnerable type of relational trust resulted from a facilitator's dispositional modeling of storytelling, asking, and holding.

Highlighting the challenges of cultivating relational trust in professional learning spaces, this study also found that participant identities and positionalities most often emerged implicitly in the work. Vulnerable and personal reflections were not openly expressed until the final weeks of the case study; amidst a school-wide conflict, educators sat in a circle and made visible the lived experiences that resided below the surface of their divergent viewpoints. For many teacher-leaders, the circles were transformative as they came to understand their colleagues' perspectives as well as their own assumptions and biases.

The thematic findings of this study suggest the benefits, nuances, and challenges of codesigning and facilitating equity-centered PLCs within the complex system of a public secondary school: Such an endeavor is inherently contextual, relational, personal, and dispositional. While a formula for piloting this type of work is, therefore, difficult to extract, the following discussion chapter explores several themes and key considerations for how schools might initiate and sustain teacher-led and asset-oriented professional learning.

Chapter Six: Discussion

Despite decades of research on culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, cultivating asset-oriented mindsets and practices in schools serving minoritized youth has remained a stubborn challenge. Top-down approaches to instructional improvement often neglect a focus on race, equity, or culture and can subsequently proliferate, rather than mitigate, deficit paradigms (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Parkhouse, Senechal, et al., 2023). Research on educator development of asset-based pedagogies has predominantly examined teacher preparation programs or professional development initiatives external to school sites (Hajisoteriou et al., 2019; Kose & Lim, 2010; Mellom et al., 2018; Rose, 2023). Less is known about how site-based professional learning might be designed and implemented to nurture more culturally responsive classrooms and schools (Hambacher & Ginn, 2020; Matschiner, 2023; Nelson & Guerra, 2014).

Existing theoretical frameworks suggest teacher-led Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), grounded in critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust, may be an effective approach (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Berg & Parad, 2024; Orange & Isken, 2021). Yet, few empirical studies have explored how such professional learning might unfold at urban school sites with diverse faculty. The purpose of this study was to explore a bottom-up model of professional learning designed to foster more asset-oriented mindsets and practices. In particular, I utilized a qualitative case study design to build on the existing literature and investigate the following research questions:

1. What is the process through which an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) codesigns and facilitates teacher-led and asset-oriented professional learning with fellow educators of minoritized students?

2. From the perspective of participating teacher-leaders, what facilitates critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust in professional learning with colleagues? What challenges emerge?
3. In what ways do diverse participants' identities and positionalities emerge through the process of codesigning and facilitating teacher-led and asset-oriented PLCs?

Overall, my research questions sought to examine how transformative professional learning might occur within the complex system of a secondary public school. As a practical framework, improvement science offered key tools and procedures for this case study's initiation of such change, like root cause analysis and Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles of inquiry. Yet, improvement science alone could not account for the ways power, identity, and relationships shaped all stages of equity work at a school site with multiracial faculty and a marginalized student population. In designing this study and analyzing its findings, I therefore found it necessary to move towards a framework that theorizes such dynamics. Hence, I utilized Reciprocal Learning Partnerships (RLP) as the principal conceptual framework for my project. RLP's tenets of centering equity, engaging in reciprocity, and building relational trust seek to foster the conditions for transformative, asset-oriented professional learning. In addition, RLP's attention to educator identities and positionalities illuminate how the unique lived experiences and personal histories of a school's teachers permeate professional learning. RLP thereby situates equity as not merely an outcome of educator collaboration and inquiry, but also as an integral component of the processes through which diverse teachers come together and engage with one another.

Summary and Interpretation of Key Findings

Through the lens of RLP, the findings of this study affirm how difficult, adult-facing work anchors professional learning actively seeking transformation, equity, and social justice. In this chapter, I drew on RLP to interpret the key findings of my study through four themes: (1) how resisting urgency created conditions for transformative learning; (2) how relational trust and identity emergence interdependently shaped one another; (3) how facilitator dispositions cultivated trust and reciprocity across lines of difference; and (4) how circles generated a new way of learning together. These themes emerged inductively as I analyzed the data and noted patterns across my findings. Spanning across all my research questions, the themes highlight how the processes of this case study entwined the facilitation of critical reflection, collaborative inquiry and relational trust with the emergence of educator identities and positionalities.

Resisting Urgency: Creating Conditions for Transformative Learning

In answering my three research questions, the findings of this study suggest that transformative professional learning requires time, a commodity in schools that the dominant focus on fixing and improving rarely affords (Aguilar, 2020, 2024; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Parkhouse, Senechal, et al., 2023; Picower, 2015). Indeed, the most meaningful shifts in teacher mindsets and beliefs took place only when the ILT resisted the urgency to start solving problems rather than first understanding them. Activities like co-constructing a mission statement, defining educational equity, engaging in root cause analysis, and conducting empathy interviews were time-consuming, yet critical precursors to the PLCs' engagement with continuous improvement. In addition, the fullest emergence of identities and positionalities only took place when I paused the case study's normal activities. Instead of pushing through the November conflict and continuing with classroom-based PDSA cycles, we altered course and engaged with one another in an entirely different format. Such findings suggest the value of resisting the all-too-common

urgency in professional learning that can result in superficial rather than transformative change (Aguilar, 2020, 2024; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Parkhouse, Senechal, et al., 2023; Picower, 2015). Instead, this case study demonstrates the importance of slowing down and intentionally designing spaces that center equity, foster inquiry, and build community.

My findings about the ILT's processes and the facilitation of critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust sharpen the merit of resisting urgency in the context of equity-centered professional learning. In detailing the origins of the RLP framework, Orange and Isken (2021) assert how jumping into a coaching conversation or PDSA cycle without establishing a common language or intentional mindset can proliferate deficit-based perspectives. The small amount of empirical research on teacher-led and equity-centered professional learning also confirms that transformative teacher-leaders first cultivate an "equity lens" by expanding an understanding of equity and building awareness of biases or beliefs (Jacobs & Rinck, 2024). In this case study, the ILT and its teacher-leaders evaded the pitfall of reproductive deficit paradigms by developing an equity mindset through the explicit naming and discussion of deficit ideology. Early activities like the fishbone diagram and student empathy interviews empowered teacher-leaders to engage colleagues in what Jacobs, Burns, et al. (2023) describe as "active learning opportunities that promoted dissonance" (p. 136). By facilitating root cause analysis and the collection of qualitative street data, Sharon, Sean, Matthew, Tony and Sofia supported their PLCs in surfacing internalized biases and assumptions that would have otherwise derailed the later improvement cycles. In dedicating time to raising individual and collective consciousness about deficit paradigms, teacher-leaders created the conditions for asset-oriented inquiry.

Resisting urgency also created the conditions for relational trust and a fuller emergence of individual educators' identities and positionalities. Slowing down to exchange personal stories and lived experiences embodies RLP's tenet of reciprocity— "a mutual understanding that participants come to the table with lived experiences, knowledge, and skills that can be leveraged to improve student outcomes" (Orange & Isken, 2021, p. 9). In this case study, the ILT and PLC storytelling circles created an opportunity for educators to share lived experiences across differences in race, culture, years of experience, and position. As teacher-leaders like Sofia, Ernesto, Luis and Diana reflected, hearing the stories of peers—and even the site's principal—built mutual understanding and an ability to see the origins and assets in one another's perspectives. These findings suggest storytelling circles may be a foundational and replicable practice for addressing what Jacobs, Burns, et al. (2023) identified as a key challenge for teacher-led and equity-centered professional learning—initiating difficult conversations with colleagues encompassing a broad spectrum of critical consciousness. Given its significance to study participants, I explore the storytelling circle more fully as its own theme in a later section.

Interdependent and Bidirectional: Relational Trust and Identity Emergence

The culminating vulnerability of the December storytelling circles made clear how much had remained unspoken throughout most of the case study. Indeed, I found that the personal reflections of diverse educators often stayed internal. Even when lived experiences weighed heavily in the background of their perspectives, participants of Color like Sofia, Luis, Diana, and Sean did not get personal. This finding reveals an interdependent and bidirectional relationship between trust and identity emergence: While the exchanging of personal histories built relational trust, educators' individual lived experiences simultaneously constrained how this trust manifested and developed within professional learning spaces.

This finding on the relationship between identity or positionality emergence and the cultivation of relational trust is particularly significant considering the multiracial composition of its ILT. Teachers of Color are more likely to embody asset-oriented pedagogies than their White colleagues, and yet, professional learning spaces typically neglect educators' racialized lived experiences that bolster their transformative leadership potential (Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021). In the field of equity-centered and teacher-led professional learning, empirical research has predominantly examined homogenous populations of White female participants (Jacobs, 2012; Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Jacobs & Rinck, 2024). In discussing how relational trust and identity emergence unfolded amongst Black, Asian, White, and Latinx educators across a range of ages, genders, and years of experience, this project aimed to detail the understudied complexities of this process.

The November 17th deficit thinking conversation most clearly illustrated how personal histories were often left unspoken. In the session, participants' lived experiences and emotional backstories—as a Black student in the Deep South, as an English Learner, as an “F up” Latino highschooler—came to the foreground of their minds. Yet, the dialogue quickly snowballed into offering solutions and making suggestions. RLP suggests that had participants brought forward the origin stories of their perspectives, the dialogue may have moved beyond trying to fix each other's practice and into what Orange and Isken (2021) describe as a “critical third space” of disruption and creativity. Such a conversation might have stretched and contorted each educator's lens, allowing them to better hold the tensions, complexities, and multiplicities that transformative learning demands. Instead, the session ended neatly: Everyone's preexisting perspectives were intact, stagnant, unchallenged. Stuck below the surface, the personal, and often

racialized, school experiences of participants like Diana, Sofia, Luis, and Sean could not reach their transformative potential.

In this case, my study further uncovered that the development of relational trust—the willingness to vulnerably express one’s personal stories and lived experiences with colleagues—differed by gender. Female teacher-leaders recounted weighing who was in the room and what might be the consequences of sharing their emotional reasoning or personal background. This distinction suggests that relational trust may not develop equally amongst diverse educators. Rather, it is experienced, navigated, and cultivated differently based on one’s unique identities and positionalities (Hoerricks, 2025). For this study’s female teacher-leaders, and particularly its women of Color, vulnerability in professional learning spaces carried a level of relational risk or emotional labor. Identities and positionalities, therefore, did not emerge neatly, but selectively, partially, and implicitly based on each participant’s own assessment of relational trust. Such findings point to the need for equity-centered professional learning to not only assess the presence of trust but also examine how it may be experienced differently depending on one’s gender, race, culture, and other identities (Hoerricks, 2025).

Facilitator Dispositions: Generating Trust, Reflection, and Reciprocity Across Difference

While relational trust was cultivated unevenly throughout the semester’s work, this study also uncovered how a facilitator’s dispositional modeling could foster conditions for vulnerability and reflection. Even though Sofia, for example, noted limitations on the level of relational trust she felt in professional learning spaces, she also recalled how I, as the ILT’s facilitator, shared personal stories about my experiences as a White educator working with Students of Color. As she described, hearing my stories enabled Sofia to reflect on her own racialized experiences as a student and educator. Indeed, teacher-leaders of color like Sofia,

Diana, Ernesto and Tony consistently highlighted how facilitator modeling of storytelling and care cultivated relational trust, and even the emergence of their own identity and positionality reflections.

Notably, this dynamic occurred even though I did not have identity markers in common with my ILT colleagues: My life experiences as a White middle-class woman who grew up in suburban Altadena and attended private school surfaced key differences that needed to be acknowledged and worked through. Aware of my positionality in sharing the ILT space with predominantly teachers of Color, I made intentional decisions to model my own vulnerable storytelling first rather than asking team members to begin by sharing their personal stories. For Diana, “having [me] go first” was the direct cause of her own decision to share a vulnerable reflection with a colleague. These findings convey how a facilitator’s dispositional modeling of vulnerability and care—carefully nurtured through their own practice of critical self-reflection—may be able to generate trust and reciprocity across lines of difference.

The stories I shared in the ILT space drew from my experiences working and developing as an educator in communities where I was a racial and cultural outsider: from my year of teaching English at a small university in rural Colombia to my time as the only White student in the Ethnic Studies cohort of my teacher education program. As I shared with colleagues, these experiences helped me analyze how my identities biased my understanding of equity issues in schools. For example, I described unlearning the alleged neutrality of teaching and learning from my own educational experiences and began to recognize classroom instruction as a political act. As a result of such reflections, I discussed developing a pedagogy that reflected the complexities of my positionality as a White educator serving communities of Color: I needed to equip students with the skills and language of the culture of power, while simultaneously cultivating and

sustaining the assets they already had (Delpit, 1995). Tony described the stories I shared in modeling such reflections on race and culture as “not mechanical, but genuine,” derived from my own racialized experiences. For Sofia, this dispositional authenticity made it easier for her and other members of the ILT to more openly exchange reflections on issues of race, bias, and identity.

Such findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of facilitators in professional learning, a largely understudied phenomenon in the existing literature (Kennedy, 2016). Even professional learning explicitly designed to address race or racism has focused on its pedagogies and outcomes rather than the nuances of who facilitates this type of work and how they might navigate their own positionalities (Matschiner, 2023). Recent research on restorative justice and school leadership suggests that the stories a facilitator shares can shape the vulnerability others choose to bring to collaborative learning spaces (Raphael, 2026). Paralleling this literature, Diana portrayed my storytelling as a way of communicating an expectation. Her characterization signifies how a facilitator’s modeling of vulnerability implies reciprocity, not a one-way demand. In sharing my own personal stories, I signaled—but did not enforce—the expectation that participants would do the same; the choice of what to share and with whom was always theirs to make. Facilitator modeling thereby served as an offering, rather than mandate, for diverse participants to exchange vulnerability and engage in critical reflection with one another. This notion speaks to the centrality of reciprocity in RLP as it calls on educators to equally share vulnerable reflections about identities and positionalities. In this way, facilitators can disrupt power dynamics and navigate differences in lived experiences.

Reflecting the origins of RLP, the findings of this study thereby push back against traditional coaching and professional learning models that suggest facilitators should merely

pose questions or delineate discussion protocols (Costa & Garmston, 2016). Costa and Garmston's model of Cognitive Coaching, for example, designates coaches as neutral entities who intentionally withhold personal narratives to make space for the self-directed development of a coachee. While such a model can be effective for supporting teachers in refining their pedagogy and practice, it does not account for the inherent manifestations of power when educators with a diverse range of identities and positionalities work together. As RLP advocates, race-conscious and equity-centered professional learning requires a different approach that engages all participants in an equal and reciprocal exchange of vulnerability.

Circle: A New Way of Learning Together

Even though facilitator dispositions generated opportunities for expressing vulnerability throughout the case study, participants did not bring their personal and emotional histories most fully forward with one another until the December storytelling circles. RLP's emphasis on educator identities and positionalities suggests the exchange of personal stories and lived experiences may allow educators with differing perspectives to work through conflict. When the November race-related equity issue emerged, RLP thus guided my decision to facilitate an initial storytelling circle with the ILT—a choice the team's teacher-leaders then extended to their own PLCs. As discussed in Chapter 4, I framed the purpose of the circle around the November conflict but did not directly prompt team members to share their views on the issue. Instead, I asked everyone to share the story of how they became an educator. With RLP in mind, I hypothesized such storytelling would allow participants to better understand the possible origins of each other's perspectives on the November issue, but also how their own identities and positionalities might be shaping their interactions with one another.

My in-depth analysis of the ILT's work over the course of the semester reveals how conflict can be a pivotal moment to more explicitly bring forward lived experiences and, in turn, build relational trust. This finding offers an important contribution to existing scholarship on teacher-led and equity-centered professional learning. Often conducted by outside researchers or in external contexts, the current literature has paid minimal attention to the nuances of a particular school site (Hajisoteriou et al., 2019; Parkhouse, Gorlewski, et al., 2021; Picower, 2015; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Rohanna, 2022). As West River's instructional coach, I was able to narrate the ILT's process of codesigning and facilitating professional learning with knowledge of the school's unique historical and relational dynamics. Most pertinently, I witnessed how the emergence of a race-related equity issue in mid-November—a key incident outside the scope of the case study's activities—strained and reshaped the site's professional development in the final weeks of the semester.

The resultant findings of this study suggest site-based conflicts can be opportunities to express vulnerability and deepen relationships amongst educators. Well documented in transformative professional learning literature, such exchanges are a necessary precursor to equity-focused collaboration and inquiry in schools (Leonard & Woodland, 2022; Nelson et al., 2010; Parkhouse, Lu, et al., 2019). Yet, existing empirical research on site-based and teacher-led professional learning has noted that educators often evade engagement with divergent perspectives, particularly around issues of race or culture (Cooper et al., 2016; Grimm, 2024; Nelson et al., 2010). Despite educators' tendency to avoid conflict, theoretical frameworks emphasize that relational trust—the foundation of equity-driven continuous improvement and professional learning—is cultivated through tension, rather than around it (Bryk & Schneider,

2002; Orange & Isken, 2021). The findings of this study indeed indicate that leaning into conflict, rather than avoiding it, facilitated greater relational trust.

Storytelling circles can also enact the RLP tenets of deconstructing hierarchies and engaging in reciprocity (Raphael 2023, 2026). By design, the ILT and later PLC storytelling circles situated the site's principal, coordinators, and teachers as equals in the reciprocal exchange of vulnerability and trust. In passing the talking piece and sharing stories of how they became educators, West River's staff could—literally and figuratively—see each other more fully. For several teacher-leaders, learning how colleagues entered the teaching profession clarified why they might approach site-based equity issues like race and recruitment differently. Every teacher-leader I interviewed highlighted the December storytelling circles as the moment when relational trust felt most tangible and identities felt most visible. As the teacher-leaders described, the reciprocal exchange of vulnerability allowed educators to witness each other's humanity and reconfigure their relationships with one another—a shift with implications not only for how the site's adults might work together, but also for how they may show up in the classroom with students (Raphael, 2023). The storytelling circles thereby transformed the November conflict from a deviation in the site's professional learning program to more of a revelation: To truly embody humanizing pedagogy with students, educators first had to enact these mindsets with one another.

Recommendations

In the following section, I offer recommendations for K-12 educators seeking to develop asset-oriented professional learning at their school sites. These recommendations integrate my own findings in this case study with pre-existing empirical research, theory, and policy. The first set of recommendations is for site-based facilitators of professional learning. These individuals

include instructional coaches who lead ILTs or oversee school-based professional development programs. I also define professional learning facilitators as ILT members or teacher-leaders who plan and facilitate PLCs and other collaborative learning spaces with colleagues. For the second set of recommendations, I focus on site administrators, like school principals or assistant principals, and district leaders, such as those overseeing professional development or continuous improvement programs.

Facilitators of Professional Learning

This case study affirms how site-based facilitators of professional learning, like instructional coaches and teacher-leaders, play a critical role in nurturing more asset-oriented schools and classrooms. In this section, I offer five recommendations that are applicable for any K-12 educator who plans or facilitates ILT meetings, PLC sessions, or whole-group professional development. These recommendations reflect both my findings and the existing literature. They are also intentionally flexible and can be tailored to each individual facilitator's unique context, identities, and positionalities.

Facilitator Recommendation 1: Cocreate and Calibrate a Shared, Equity-Centered Purpose

Instead of complying with institutional urgency to begin the school year with data-driven improvement cycles, asset-oriented facilitators should take the time to calibrate a shared, equity-centered purpose for classroom-based inquiry. In leading their site's ILTs, facilitators can initiate this process by defining educational equity and co-constructing a mission statement at the beginning of the school year (Biag, 2019). Facilitators of professional learning should also engage their entire school staff in developing and understanding a problem of practice over the course of several weeks (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Through the collection and analysis of

multiple levels of data (Safir & Dugan, 2021), facilitators can promote shared leadership and reflective action as the groundwork for a year of transformative professional learning.

In addition to addressing key findings from this case study, this recommendation also responds to increasing state and district demands for a focus on data-driven continuous improvement in educator professional development (Biag, 2019). However, dominant approaches to evidence-based PDSA cycles often neglect the structural or historical causes of racialized disparities in student learning outcomes (Biag, 2019; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). Institutional urgency to fix problems can thereby reinforce deficit-based thinking by evading the deeper root causes of inequities in education (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). Despite such critical pitfalls, there has been little guidance for professional learning facilitators on how to identify equity issues below the surface of large-scale quantitative data (Biag, 2019). The findings of this case study claim that slowing down to build a shared, equity-centered purpose for classroom-based inquiry can yield shifts towards more asset-oriented pedagogies as well as deepen educator engagement with professional learning or collaboration.

In this project, engaging in root cause analysis to discuss deficit thinking and centering marginalized student voices through the collection of empathy interviews fostered a collective understanding of asset-oriented inquiry and pedagogy. Through such processes, facilitators can disrupt remedial, deficit-based approaches to PDSA cycles and engage colleagues in dialogue about what kind of data should be collected and how (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). Professional learning facilitators can also utilize protocols like the fishbone diagram and empathy interview analysis to promote what Jacobs, Burns, et al. (2023) characterize as “dissonance.” As this case study revealed, these activities can empower teachers to recognize incongruences between their own values and behaviors. Instead of leading an abstract discussion, facilitators can utilize the

fishbone protocol and empathy interview process to surface concrete biases and systemic inequities. Such facilitation strategies empower educators to more authentically engage in critical reflection and collaborative inquiry.

Facilitator Recommendation 2: Cultivate Facilitator Identity and Positionality Awareness

Facilitators of asset-oriented professional learning should cultivate a practice of critical self-reflection on their own identities and positionalities—naming how race, class, gender and other identities as well as their own educational experiences shape their views on equity issues and inform their interactions with diverse colleagues (Aguilar, 2020, 2024; Biag, 2019; Khalifa, 2018). Practically, this means surfacing identity or positionality reflections when preparing for a professional learning session or team meeting by identifying who will be in the room, naming their intentions for the session, anticipating points of tension, and considering what stories they may want to share to model reflection or vulnerability (Aguilar & Cohen, 2022). Facilitators should also build in time after each meeting to reflect on their in-the-moment decision-making or moments where their own identities or positionalities shaped how conversations or collaboration unfolded (Aguilar & Cohen, 2022).

This recommendation reflects one of this case study’s central findings: While strategies and protocols were an integral part of the ILT’s and PLCs’ processes, teacher-leaders consistently emphasized facilitator dispositions as a pivotal factor. Facilitator modeling of vulnerability and storytelling generated deeper participant engagement with critical reflection and relational trust. Through an awareness of their own identities and positionalities, facilitators can effectively model these dispositions in professional learning spaces (Khalifa, 2018). Even though existing research and theory has well-established the importance of teacher self-knowledge and critical consciousness in the classroom, little attention has been given to how

facilitators of professional learning—the teachers of teachers—engage with and reflect upon how their personal histories or lived experiences may shape their work (Khalifa, 2018). In collecting data for this case study, I reflected after every meeting I facilitated, a practice that clarified how I could continue to navigate my own identities of privilege and difference in relation to my multiracial colleagues. Facilitators of professional learning should treat this type of reflection as a deliberate and sustained practice, rather than an occasional or informal occurrence. In regularly engaging with identity and positionality reflections, facilitators can recognize opportunities to thoughtfully model vulnerability.

Facilitator Recommendation 3: Assess Relational Trust on an Individual Level

Facilitators of professional learning should assess relational trust with team members on an individual level. Site-based facilitators are uniquely positioned to attune to the contextual and relational dynamics that shape collaborative work at a school. In practice, professional learning facilitators can enact this recommendation by conducting individual check-ins with colleagues outside of formal meeting spaces. Coupled with a consistent practice of reflection, facilitators can recognize moments of tension or emotion and the individual team-members that may benefit from a private conversation. Through individual check-ins, facilitators can also model emotional intelligence, build relational trust, and nurture a positive school culture.

Foundational research on trust in schools affirms that building relationships amongst diverse colleagues is an on-going, slow, and individualized process (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hoerricks, 2025). Personal experiences of trust are historical and contextual: Previous tension, harm or conflict shape how teachers express vulnerability or experience trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hoerricks, 2025). In the context of professional learning for equity, the individualized nature of trust-building is particularly salient. Conversations about topics like bias, race, or

deficit thinking can elicit strong and varied responses from teacher to teacher (Jacobs & Rinck, 2024). Jacobs and Rinck (2024) argue that facilitating this type of dialogue requires additional skills for navigating resistance or attuning to emotions. Such individualized complexities highlight how facilitators of asset-oriented professional learning need to build relational trust beyond formal meetings spaces.

Assessing trust on an individual level reflects this case study's findings on how relational trust was not cultivated evenly amongst participants. For some teacher-leaders, expressing vulnerability carried more emotional labor or relational risk based on their lived experiences and personal backgrounds. These participants openly shared such reflections with me during our interviews. Although the interviews were conducted for data collection, they also served as individual check-ins that revealed the uneven ways trust had developed across the team. I also met individually with the ILT members throughout the case study to build trust and understand their assessment of our work together. These conversations revealed relational dynamics that I would have not otherwise recognized. Facilitators should accordingly treat individual check-ins as a key practice for assessing trust before its uneven cultivation can proliferate tension or dysfunction. With insights from individual conversations, facilitators can better adapt their approach to the specific individuals and unique group dynamics present in professional learning spaces.

Facilitator Recommendation 4: Be Flexible

To model responsiveness, facilitators of professional learning should also be flexible and willing to shift meeting agendas and objectives. As members of a school community, site-based facilitators can anticipate how contextual, relational, and even broader societal factors might inform what participants bring to professional learning spaces. Facilitators could prepare opening

inclusion questions or quotations to draw out colleagues' reflections on a site-based conflict or political event. With thoughtful planning, facilitators could make professional learning responsive to such contextual factors. At other times, there may not be a clear connection to make. Instead, facilitators can give participants time for a check-in at the beginning of a meeting or even an entire professional development session to discuss their feelings on a recent issue within the school or larger community.

Research on teacher-led and equity-centered professional learning emphasizes the key role of contextual factors in the successful implementation of this type of work (Kohli, Picower, et al., 2015; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Matschiner, 2023; Picower, 2015). Responding to the particularities of a school and its community's context is thereby a key skill for facilitators of asset-oriented professional learning. Further, responsiveness to site-based conflict, political climate, or community-based injustices reflects what research on equity-centered and social justice leadership identifies as a critical disposition: Modeling that teaching and learning are not neutral acts but occur within a political and social context (Kohli, Picower, et al., 2015; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Matschiner, 2023; Picower, 2015). Ignoring or glossing over issues that shape educator or student experience can uphold the status quo, proliferate inequities, and silence critical dialogue necessary for humanization and justice in schools (Kohli, Picower, et al., 2015; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Matschiner, 2023; Picower, 2015).

This recommendation mirrors my case study's findings on how the November conflict informed my facilitation decisions and reshaped the trajectory of West River's professional learning. Instead of pushing through controversy, I decided to pivot and engage the site's teachers in the radically different format of a storytelling circle. In addition, the stories and quotations I chose to share in professional learning sessions throughout the entire case study

were also intentionally selected to reflect upon current events or site-based tensions. These moments of pivoting emphasize how flexibility is a key practice for facilitators dedicated to social justice, emotional intelligence, and relational trust. When planning professional learning, facilitators should name contextual factors that will shape the dynamics of the space and willingly revise agenda items to include thoughtful opportunities for collective reflection and dialogue.

Facilitator Recommendation 5: Cultivate a Practice of Storytelling Circles

To exchange vulnerability and surface divergent perspectives, facilitators of professional learning should cultivate a practice of storytelling circles with their school's educators. On a monthly basis, facilitators could invite staff to participate in a circle that elicits personal stories related to a site-specific equity issue. For example, a magnet school's mission to bring together a diverse student body might inspire a storytelling prompt like "Tell a story of when you became aware of racial or cultural differences as a student." Facilitators would lead each circle by connecting it to indigenous practices of reciprocity, introducing circle norms, and modeling vulnerability by sharing their own story first (Raphael 2023, 2026). In concluding each circle, facilitators could invite participants to engage in a witnessing round during which they share something they heard from a colleague (Raphael 2023, 2026).

Existing research confirms that storytelling circles "allow [diverse] participants to be both affirmed and challenged" (Raphael, 2026, p. 30). In accordance with this study's findings, sharing lived experiences can foster connections, while also highlighting differences that may reveal assumptions or biases amongst colleagues (Raphael, 2026; Salazar, 2020). More specifically, storytelling circles can center the experiential knowledge of teachers of Color that challenge deficit-based thinking and embody asset-oriented pedagogies (Kohli, Pizarro, et al.,

2021). In the context of this case study, the personal stories of educators of Color like Joy, Diana, Sofia, and Sean reveal how their lived experiences with marginalization informed impassioned perspectives on issues of equity. Proponents of circle epistemologies suggest how exchanging such stories amongst multiracial colleagues could transform beliefs and practices more radically than a PDSA cycle or professional development workshop (Raphael 2023, 2026; Sherrod, 2020).

Regularly engaging a site's educators in storytelling circles can also more broadly shift school culture towards a focus on relationships, empathy, and communication (Raphael, 2026; Sherrod, 2020). When adults strengthen their relationships with one another, this way of being together can transfer to their students (Raphael, 2026; Sherrod, 2020). With regular practice, the relational dynamics of a circle can iterate across school systems (Raphael, 2023). In this case study, I utilized circles only as a response to conflict. Yet, analyzing my findings alongside scholarship on circles in school reveals a broader potential. Rather than using them reactively, facilitators of professional learning should use storytelling circles regularly to sustain vulnerability and emotional connection amongst adults in schools. Instead of seeing circles as merely a conflict-response tool, facilitators should view circles as “a specific pathway for disrupting [patterns] that feed a culture of white supremacy” (Raphael, 2026, p. 30). Practiced consistently, storytelling circles can reimagine ways of learning together to better sustain asset-oriented mindsets, practices, and systems well-beyond the scope of a single meeting or workshop.

Site Administrators and District Leaders

Site administrators and district leaders play a key role in cultivating the conditions necessary for facilitators of professional learning to engage in transformative work at their

school sites. Indeed, the work of this case study was made possible only through the school and district's pre-existing systems for weekly professional development and regular, paid ILT meetings. In addition, the principal's support of shared leadership allowed for my own facilitation of the ILT as well as its teacher-leaders' facilitation of their respective PLCs. While such conditions were unique to West River, they can be replicated in diverse schools and districts that are committed to equity-centered professional learning.

Leadership Recommendation 1: Protect Time and Space for ILTs

To cultivate the conditions for transformative and teacher-led professional learning, site administrators and district leaders should dedicate consistent, protected time and space for ILTs to meet. In overseeing school calendars, budgets, and contracts, school principals and district administrators can mitigate logistical roadblocks that limit teacher-leaders' ability to collaboratively plan and facilitate professional learning with colleagues (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Practically, site administrators and district leaders can (1) create an ILT and professional development calendar for the school year with regular meeting times and locations that would ensure busy teacher-leaders have received advanced notice and can reliably attend most sessions; (2) plan school budgets to secure adequate funding for paying ILT members to attend meetings after work hours; and (3) ensure labor contracts include protections for weekly teacher professional development sessions during the work day as well as biweekly or monthly ILT meeting times (Berg & Parad, 2024). Establishing these conditions is the most basic first step for providing a site's teacher-leaders with the collaborative time needed for discussing complex equity issues, building relational trust, and cultivating skills for facilitating professional learning with peers (Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014).

Several extensive literature reviews identify school and district systems as either critical facilitators or inhibitors of effective teacher leadership (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). This research suggests that the simple delineation of teacher-leader roles does not assure meaningful work; without systems and structures for collaboration and learning, teacher-leaders may be unable to foster change (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). In the context of teacher-led and asset-oriented professional learning, teacher-leaders need even more time to build relational trust, work through conflicting perspectives, and develop a common language for recognizing and mitigating deficit paradigms (Berg & Parad, 2024; Biag, 2019; Jacobs, Beck, et al., 2014; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023) As Jacobs, Beck, et al. (2014) assert, facilitating equity-centered professional learning with colleagues requires the cultivation of particular skills, like designing inquiry cycles that foster critical reflection, that cannot be developed through irregular or brief meetings. Consistent time and space for ILTs is thereby a critical precondition for teacher-leaders to meet their transformative potential.

In this case study, regular adequate meeting time ensured the ILT could develop an asset-oriented and teacher-led model of professional learning. At West River, Joy (the school's principal) secured a full-day ILT retreat and paid biweekly 1.5-hour ILT meetings throughout the school year. With this frequency, the ILT was able to co-construct its mission statement, establish a calibrated, equity-centered focus for professional learning, and cultivate teacher-leader capacity to facilitate cycles of inquiry using diverse data collection methods. The 1.5-hour length specifically guaranteed time for inclusion activities, open discussion (like the November 17th deficit thinking conversation), and collaborative planning of PLC meetings. In addition, the district-wide model of weekly 1-hour professional development for all staff guaranteed adequate collaboration time for teacher-leaders to enact the ILT's work. Through these regular PLC

meetings, teacher-leaders led their peers in defining and analyzing a problem of practice, as well as carrying out two full classroom-based PDSA cycles. At both site and district levels, the consistency and sufficiency of protected time ensured asset-oriented professional learning could begin to take place. Site and district leaders committed to transformative professional learning should treat ILT time and space as a necessary component of school budgets, calendars, and systems.

Leadership Recommendation 2: Adopt Shared Leadership Models for Professional Learning Design and Facilitation

With a system for regular ILT meetings established, site principals and district leaders need to ensure teacher-leaders have the autonomy to design and facilitate professional learning with colleagues (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Instead of utilizing an ILT's teacher-leaders to translate district messages or implement top-down reforms, administrators need to authentically engage ILTs as a shared leadership model for developing site-based and asset-oriented professional development (Khalifa, 2018; Picower, 2015; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). From an equity stance, site administrators should also intentionally recruit teacher-leaders for their ILTs with attention to diversity across race, gender, roles, years of experience and other identities (Berg & Parad, 2024). By including and empowering educators with a broad range of lived experience, principals can better utilize ILTs as mechanisms for more asset-oriented schools and classrooms (Kohli, Picower, et al., 2015; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021).

Research suggests that fostering transformative change through equity-driven professional learning requires a shared leadership approach (Berg & Parad, 2024; Biag, 2019; Picower, 2015; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Providing teacher-leaders with greater autonomy contrasts with earlier conceptualizations from the 1980s and 1990s that positioned teacher-

leaders as enactors of top-down reforms or enforcers of state accountability mechanisms (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). More recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of shared leadership models for equity-driven school improvement (Biag, 2019; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Picower, 2015). Instead of situating teachers as passive receivers of policy, shared leadership encourages principals and district leaders to authentically spread power across schools and engage teachers with leadership opportunities (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Equity-focused school reform further pushes administrators to transfer power to marginalized voices (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Khalifa, 2018). Specifically, Kohli, Pizarro, et al. (2021) stress the importance of centering and cultivating the leadership potential of teachers of Color whose lived experiences often translate into a fuller embodiment of asset-oriented mindsets and practices (see also Picower, 2015). Such contemporary research and policy illuminates how shared leadership in schools can be a critical equity-driven strategy if decision-making power is distributed authentically amongst diverse community members.

In alignment with existing research, my findings also emphasize the merits of empowering diverse, multiracial ILTs with real autonomy and leadership. Instead of treating the site's teachers as passive recipients of generic district-wide professional development, the ILT led West River staff in the collaborative process of identifying, analyzing, and addressing a site-specific problem of practice. As interview data revealed, this process generated a sense of authentic, purposeful work and fostered PLC engagement with reflective inquiry. Further, the teacher-leaders of Color in this case study brought their lived experiences and personal histories to our work together. This not only empowered them to lead their PLCs with purpose and authenticity but also helped surface assumptions and biases amongst colleagues. My case study thereby suggests that the diverse identities and positionalities of ILT members may inform the

depth of equity work at a school site. Therefore, school and district leaders should not only grant ILTs the real authority and autonomy to shape site-based professional learning, but also ensure ILT members embody a range of lived experiences.

Leadership Recommendation 3: Invest in Instructional Coaches as Equity-Centered Leaders and Facilitators

To plan and facilitate ILTs, district administrators should invest in instructional coaches as peer mentors for equity-centered teacher leadership (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Positioned as equals rather than supervisors, instructional coaches do not have daily teaching responsibilities but serve as expert teachers with recent classroom experience (Aguilar, 2013). Without the workload of classroom teaching, instructional coaches have the time to plan and facilitate ILTs and oversee their site's professional development and teacher leadership programs (Rohanna, 2022). Districts can allocate funding for school-based instructional coach positions and provide regular district-wide training in coaching and facilitation techniques that attend to the complexities of promoting equity, mitigating deficit thinking, and fostering asset-oriented pedagogies. Through such training programs, districts can create networks of equity-centered instructional coaches who can draw on one another for support and guidance and can practice the critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust they are tasked to cultivate at their respective school sites (Wenner & Campbell, 2017).

Research demonstrates that teacher-leaders who have daily classroom responsibilities may not have the time for the extensive leadership required of leading ILTs or developing professional learning programs (Rohanna, 2022; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Instructional coaches can function as a key intermediary between classroom teachers and administration or district leadership. Indeed, facilitating equity-centered professional learning and cultivating

equity-centered teacher leadership requires rigorous training and preparation, as well as the resultant networks of program colleagues, resources, and mentors (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Such support is particularly important in the complex work of planning and facilitating ILTs and professional development that attends to issues of equity, race, culture and bias (Jacobs, Beck et al; 2014; Jacobs, Burns, et al., 2023; Jacobs & Rinck, 2024). As Berg and Parad (2024) emphasize, “instruction is the core interaction between adults and children in schools. As such, instruction itself will either critically examine and disrupt inequitable practices or reinforce them” (p. 24). The work of instructional coaches and teacher-leaders is not neutral—instruction and equity are entwined, and leaders must be equipped with the skills, strategies, and dispositions to engage colleagues in the complexities of equity-focused conversations and professional learning.

The findings of this case study confirm how facilitating professional learning that addresses issues of race, culture or bias requires certain skills and dispositions, as well as on-going mentorship and collaboration. In my own development as an equity-centered instructional coach and professional learning facilitator, I completed extensive programs, workshops, and coursework that I drew upon throughout my planning and facilitation of the ILT. For example, many of the inquiry strategies and protocols I used came from a course I took on equity-driven continuous improvement. In addition, the dispositions I modeled resulted from various training sessions I attended around coaching for equity. I also consulted with mentors like Sasha—whom I connected with through my doctoral program—in pivoting to the December storytelling circles and creating its prompts. My utilization of formal training and personal mentors in real time suggests that systems of support and investment play a key role in equity-centered leadership and facilitation. Through district-wide mentorship networks and equity-focused leadership or

coaching training, district administrators can empower instructional coaches with the capacity to cultivate and sustain other asset-oriented teacher-leaders across their school sites.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As a qualitative case study of an initiative that was significantly dependent on my own decisions and thinking, this project was not without limitations. My dualistic role as the site's instructional coach and principal researcher may have biased its findings. Teacher-leader interview data, for example, may have social desirability bias as participants may have overemphasized the positive aspects of my facilitation or the ILT's work. My own personal experience of the case study's process may have also biased its findings about key activities. The findings of the case study may also be limited in their generalizability due to its context-specific nature. My personal identities and lived experiences, as well as those of the teacher-leaders on the ILT shaped the findings of this study about how identities and positionalities emerged over time. In addition, the setting of West River and its unique pre-existing structures, history, and school culture informed how critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust unfolded in the school's professional learning program. Given the centrality of this case study's particular participants and context, its findings may not be generalizable to other individuals or settings (Maxwell, 2013). Finally, this case study's 18-week duration was too short of a time frame to assess measurable shifts in teacher mindsets or practice that may have resulted from West River's professional learning program. Below, I offer suggestions for future research that reflect this study's limitations and could extend its findings.

Comparative Case Studies on ILTs and Instructional Coaches Across School Sites

The findings of this case study were contextual and reflective of its individual participants' unique identities and positionalities. To assess the generalizability of this case

study's findings, future research could conduct comparative case studies on the work of ILTs and instructional coaches across multiple school sites. Minimal existing research has studied site-based ILTs or instructional coaches in relation to asset-oriented or equity-centered professional development (Berg & Parad, 2024; Jacobs & Rinck, 2024). Such research would provide new data on how the unique context, staff, and history of schools shape equity-focused professional learning and continuous improvement work.

Ethnographic or Narrative Inquiry Studies with Teacher-Leaders of Color on ILTs

Teacher-leaders of Color remain an understudied population despite existing research demonstrating their deeper embodiment of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies as compared to their White colleagues (Kohli, Picower, et al., 2015; Kohli, Pizarro, et al., 2021; Picower, 2015). While the findings of this case study began to uncover how the lived experiences of teachers of Color shaped their work on an ILT, more research is needed to better support the cultivation and sustainment of their leadership. Ethnographic studies with teacher-leaders of Color in ILTs could further uncover how these educators navigate and negotiate their identities and positionalities in collaborative spaces. Narrative inquiry approaches could also give deeper insight into how the life histories of teacher-leaders of Color shape their approach to addressing equity issues at schools or engaging with colleagues in equity conversations.

Longitudinal Studies on Asset-Oriented Professional Learning

The purpose of this study was to examine how a school site piloted a model of professional learning designed to deepen the asset-oriented mindsets and practices of its educators. However, the short time frame of this project made it difficult to assess what, if any, shifts towards asset-based pedagogies occurred in the classroom. In general, literature has understudied the impact of equity-focused professional learning on teacher practice and student

experience (Kohli, Picower, et al., 2015; Matschiner, 2023). Longitudinal studies could examine how asset-oriented professional inquiry—grounded in critical reflection, collaborative inquiry, and relational trust—influenced teacher thinking or behavior over the course of one or several school years. While this study only observed ILT meetings and PLC sessions, such longitudinal research could include qualitative and quantitative classroom observation data as well as classroom teacher interviews. Over time, such data sets might offer new findings on the extent to which professional learning models like the one in this case study can foster more asset-oriented schools and classrooms.

Conclusion

“[The equity issue the ILT sought to address was] a lack of focus and knowledge of our own personal biases ... not only with our students, but with our colleagues also”

(Sofia, Literacy Interventionist and ILT Teacher-Leader).

As I reflected on what I learned from this study—about professional learning, teacher collaboration, educational equity, and my own development as a leader—I kept returning to how Sofia captured the essence of our work together. Her words, “... but with our colleagues also,” clarify that shifting our paradigm from a deficit to asset orientation not only means reconfiguring how we relate to our students, but also how we, as adults, relate to one another.

After writing my findings and discussion chapters, my omission of this key observation became glaringly apparent as I reread the problem statement I had written for this study well over a year ago. My own biases shaped an earlier conceptualization of deficit thinking as primarily an individual problem, rather than a systemic or relational one. They also underpinned my belief that professional learning could and should fix each teacher’s mindsets and practices. With gratitude to the diverse, passionate, and transformational educators who participated in this study, I now recognize with greater clarity that deficit paradigms cannot be resolved by focusing

solely on individual teachers. Embedded in the systems and structures of schooling, the assumptions and biases of deficit ideology are reproduced and sustained relationally through our daily interactions with students and each other. Educators, therefore, cannot be expected to cultivate humanizing and responsive classrooms if school systems do not first model and nurture these ways of learning together amongst adults.

In the context of my own leadership work, I am reminded of the intentionality required for designing and facilitating professional learning or collaboration spaces capable of disrupting deficit paradigms and manifesting shifts towards more asset-oriented pedagogies across larger systems. Yet, the findings of this study also suggest that such intentionality can only realize its transformative potential when it extends beyond formal spaces and into our very ways of being. In *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown (2017) articulates a theorization of systems change that is both daunting and liberating: every interaction we have with one another, no matter how small, has the power to either reproduce the status quo or catalyze transformation.

Sofia's words, then, encapsulate this study's most central finding: While carefully designed protocols or facilitation approaches are necessary for structuring and organizing asset-oriented professional learning spaces, it is ultimately the way we are with each other that drives this transformational work forward. Perhaps this finding offers hope. We can still advance justice and equity every day in schools by seizing the iterative power and opportunity of each moment we share with one another—or, as Sofia reminds us, attending to our students, and to our colleagues also.

Appendix A: Case Study Events Table

Date	Event	Facilitator	Activities
6/11/2025	ILT Retreat	Bryant	Inclusion: Core Values (Aguilar & Bright Morning, 2026) Co-constructing a Mission Statement
8/19/2025	Whole-Group Professional Development Session #1	Bryant	Overview of Continuous Improvement Safir and Dugan (2021) 3 Levels of Data ATLAS Protocol (McDonald & Allen, n.d.): Satellite Data Analysis
8/25/2025	ILT Meeting #1	Bryant	Inclusion: Reflections on June Mission Statement Mindsets for Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement Work Fishbone Diagram Protocol (Rohanna, 2024b): Map Data Analysis
9/2/2025	PLC Meeting #1	ILT Teacher-Leaders	Fishbone Diagram Protocol (Rohanna, 2024b): Map Data Analysis
9/8/2025	ILT Meeting #2	Bryant	Inclusion: Reflections on Fishbone Process 3-2-1 Protocol (Garmston & Wellman, 2017, p. 11): Synthesizing Fishbone Analysis and Drafting a Problem of Practice PLC #2 Planning: Empathy Interview Purpose & Resources

9/9/2025	PLC Meeting #2	ILT	Problem of Practice Feedback PDSA Cycle 1: Empathy Interview Planning
9/22/2025	ILT Meeting #3	Bryant	Inclusion: Identities & Experiences Bubble Map Co-constructing Community Agreements Chalk Talk Protocol (Smith & Wentworth, n.d.): Refining our Problem of Practice PLC #3 Planning: Empathy Interview Analysis Protocol (Safir & Dugan, 2021)
9/30/2025	PLC Meeting #3	ILT	PDSA Cycle 1: Study Empathy Interview Data (Safir & Dugan, 2021)
10/6/2025	ILT Meeting #4	Bryant	Inclusion: Photo Story Refining our Community Agreements 5-3-1(Garmston & Wellman, 2017, p. 10): Synthesizing Empathy Interviews & Refining our Problem of Practice PLC #4 Planning: Change Ideas for Student-Centered Learning
10/7/2025	Whole-Group Professional Development Session #3	Bryant	Asset-Based Strategies for Student Discussion and Participation
10/14/2025	PLC Meeting #4	ILT	PDSA Cycle 2: Planning Strategy for Student-Centered Discussion

10/20/2025	ILT Meeting #6	Bryant	Inclusion: Celebrating Strengths (Aguilar et al., 2021, p.) PDSA Plan Feedback with Change Idea Checklist (New York City Department of Education, 2018) & Khalifa (2018) Subquestions for Culturally Responsive PLCs PLC #5 Planning: ATLAS Protocol (McDonald & Allen, n.d.) Data Analysis Questions
10/28/2025	PLC Meeting #5	ILT	PDSA Cycle 2: Studying Student Work to Assess Change Strategy
11/3/2025	ILT Meeting #7	Bryant/Lee	Principal's Update: District Data Update & Observation Feedback
11/4/2025	Whole-Group Professional Development Session #4	Bryant	Pausing & Processing: An Asset-Orientation to Students with Disabilities
11/17/2025	ILT Meeting #8	Bryant	Inclusion: Quotation Response 3-2-1 Protocol (Garmston & Wellman, 2017, p. 11): Reflections on Facilitating PDSA Cycles Text-Based Discussion: About Learning from Student Work (Buchovecky, n.d.) PLC #5 Planning: Questions for Studying Student Work
11/18/2025	PLC Meeting #6	ILT	Re-do PDSA Cycle 2: Studying Student Work

12/3/2025	ILT Meeting #8	Bryant	Community Circle: How I Became an Educator Stories PLC #6 Planning: Community Circle
12/9/2025	PLC Meeting #7	ILT	Community Circle: How I Became an Educator Stories
12/15/2025	ILT Meeting #9	Bryant	Inclusion: 2 Truths & a Lie Whole Group Reflections: A Powerful Learning Moment

Appendix B: ILT Observation Protocol

- ILT Session #: _____ / Date: _____
- Members Present: _____
- [Link](#) to Google Drive Folder with Session Artifacts

Seating Chart Diagram and Setting Description:

Theme	Field Notes
<i>Critical Reflection</i>	
<i>Collaborative Inquiry</i>	
<i>Relational Trust</i>	
<i>Identities & Positionality</i>	

My Reflections

Appendix C: Teacher-Leader Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. As you know, I am a graduate student in UCLA's Educational Leadership Program. My research is about how our school's ILT, and particularly its teacher-leaders, designed and facilitated professional learning with colleagues. In this interview, I will ask you questions about your understanding of trust, inquiry, and critical reflection in professional learning as well as asset-based mindsets and practices in the classroom. The first series of questions will center on the ILT, while the second half of the interview will be more about your PLCs.

Please know that detailing specific stories or moments will be most helpful and appreciated. For your reference, I am sharing a chart of the ILT, PLC and Whole Group meetings this semester that lists activities for each. There are no wrong answers! Honest responses are what will be most appreciated.

This interview will be approximately 1 hour. It is a confidential conversation, and I will not share the recording or transcript with anyone. In writing my findings for my dissertation, I will anonymize your name and any other identifying information.

With your permission, I will audio record once we begin to help me transcribe this interview later on. I will use the Zoom recording (video will be deleted) as it automatically transcribes our conversation. I will also do a backup recording on my cell phone. If you would ever like to stop the recording, feel free to let me know at any time. You can also decline to answer any question. All recordings and transcripts will be deleted at the end of my study.

While I will maintain your confidentiality to the fullest extent possible, there are legal limits to confidentiality. As public school employees, we are mandated reporters. If information is shared that indicates suspected child abuse or neglect, imminent harm to self or others, or other legally reportable situations, I am required by law to report this information to appropriate authorities. This may include Child Protective Services, law enforcement, or school administration as required by [state] law and district policy.

What questions might you have?

Opening

1. Tell me about your role in ILT this semester.

Part I: The ILT

Critical Reflection (RQ #3)

2. How, if at all, do you think ILT's work supported educational equity at our school site?
3. Was there ever a time during ILT when you felt like a particular equity issue related to classroom instruction surfaced?
 1. What supported the surfacing of this issue?
 2. What do you remember about how the group discussed the issue?

3. During this discussion, did you feel like you or others verbally reflected on how one another's identities or positionalities influenced how we saw the issue?
 1. [if yes] How was this facilitated?
 2. [if no] Why do you think that type of reflection didn't take place in the discussion?
4. [If not discussed in the previous question - *You did discuss an equity issue related to ____, I am wondering...*] Was there ever a time when an issue specifically around race or culture surfaced?
 1. What supported the surfacing of this issue?
 2. What do you remember about how the group discussed the issue?
 3. During this discussion, did you feel like you and/or others verbally reflected on how your/our positionalities influence how we saw the issue?
 1. [if yes] How was this facilitated?
 2. [if no] Why do you think that type of discussion didn't take place?

Identities and Positionality (RQ #2)

5. Was there ever a particular moment in ILT when you thought a lot about your identities (race, gender, class, role, etc) in relation to others in the space?
 1. [if yes] Tell me about what was happening at that moment.
 1. Did you share some of these reflections with others?
 1. [if yes] What made you feel comfortable to do so?
 2. [if no] What might be some reasons you chose not to?
 2. [if no] Why do you think such a moment didn't occur for you?

Relational Trust (RQ #3)

6. Do you feel like there was trust amongst ILT members?
 1. How do you know?
 1. Can you tell me a story about a time when you felt trust was/was not present?
 2. What supported or hindered the cultivation of trust?

Part II: PLCs

7. Tell me about how the ILT supported your facilitation of your PLC.
 1. Was there ever a time when you took something from ILT and tried it with your PLC?
 1. [If yes] Tell me about one that really stood out to you.
 2. [If no] What prevented you from doing so.
 2. What went well?
 3. What was challenging?

Collaborative Inquiry (RQ #3)

8. Tell me more about your PLC this semester. How would you describe its purpose and the work you did together?
 1. What did you investigate?

2. How did you engage in inquiry around this topic?
3. To what extent did you feel like your PLC's inquiry addressed an issue of equity?
9. How collaborative were the teachers on your PLC?
 1. What supported this level of collaboration?
 2. What might have hindered collaboration?

Identities & Positionality (RQ #2)

10. Did you think about your own identities and positionality in facilitating your PLC with colleagues?
 1. [if yes] Can you give an example of a particular time when you thought about your own identities and positionality?
 2. How did thinking about your own identities and positionality shape the decision(s) you made?

Relational Trust (RQ #3)

11. How would you describe the level of trust amongst your PLC members?
 1. What specific moments indicated the presence or absence of trust?
 12. What, if any, activities did you feel like built trust amongst team members?
 1. Tell me more about what you remember happening during this activity.
- [If not addressed previously] Was there ever a particular moment in your PLC when you felt like your beliefs about students or school were in tension with someone else's?
2. What caused this tension to surface?
 3. What decisions did you make at the moment?
 4. What were the outcomes of these decisions?

Critical Reflection / Shifts in Mindsets & Practices (RQ #3, #4)

13. Was there ever a time when you heard or observed a shift towards more asset-oriented mindsets or practices in how your PLC colleagues spoke about students or teaching?
 1. What do you think led to that shift?

OR

2. What are some reasons you think shifts did not occur?

Appendix D: PLC Observation Protocol

- PLC Session #: _____ / Date: _____ - Participating Teachers Present: _____ - Participating Teacher-Leader Facilitators: _____ Link to Google Drive Folder with Session Artifacts			
Seating Chart Diagram and Setting Description:			
Theme	Time Stamp	Teacher-Leader Words/Actions	Participating Teachers Words/Actions
Critical Reflection			
Collaborative Inquiry			
Relational Trust			
Identities & Positionality			
My Reflections			

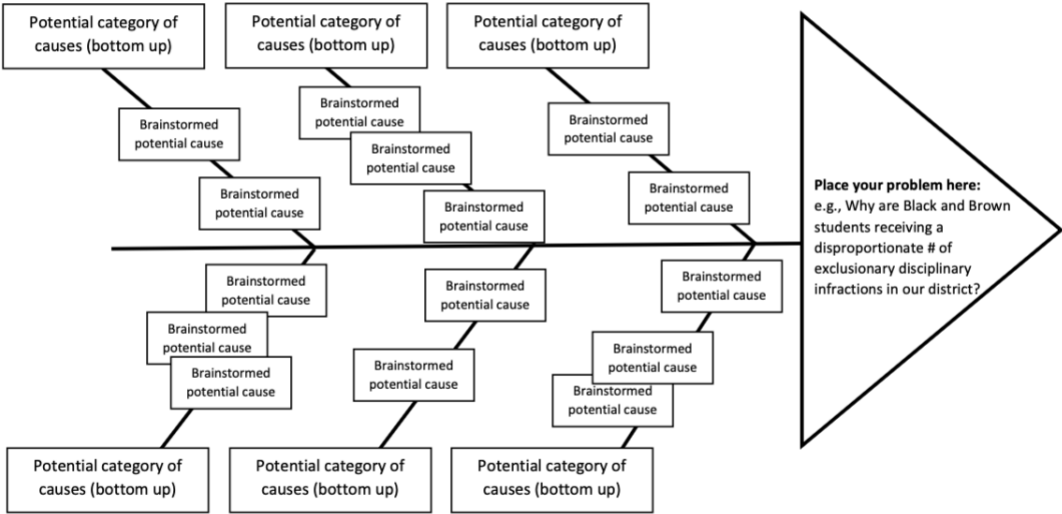
Appendix E: June ILT Retreat Mission Development

Schoolwide Mission 	Schoolwide Vision 
<<Removed to protect anonymity of site>>	<<Removed to protect anonymity of site>>
Small Group Mission Brainstorm	
• “The mission (goal) of the ILT for the 2025-2026 school year is... to facilitate and promote collaboration with a focus on social justice and <u>equity</u> with the aim of enhancing a [teacher] community of critical thinkers in the pedagogical practices that reflect personal integrity and growth in all academic areas.” • “The mission (goal) of the ILT for the 2025-2026 school year is... iteratively codesign and facilitate school wide <i>professional learning</i> that empowers all teachers to provide student-centered instruction for <u>equity</u> and excellence.” • “The mission (goal) of the ILT for the 2025-2026 school year is... to support and develop teachers by providing meaningful <i>professional development</i> opportunities based on a variety of data sources to facilitate <u>equitable</u> opportunities for all students.”	
Final ILT Mission	
• The mission of the ILT for the 2025–2026 school year is to codesign and lead professional learning that is informed by multifaceted data and promotes cross-curricular collaboration, equity, and student-centered instruction, while also fostering a reflective community of educators committed to growth and social justice.	

Appendix F: Fishbone Diagram Template & Protocol from ILT Meeting #1 and PLC Meeting #1

Fishbone Diagram Template

Facilitating the Fishbone Diagram
(aka Cause and Effect Diagram)



Fishbone Diagram Protocol Steps

Facilitating Your Fishbone Diagram (Bottom-Up Approach).

The whole activity can take approximately 45 – 90 minutes.

Materials: Poster paper, post-its, marker/pens

Step 1: Establish your focal question (e.g., “Why are Black and Brown students receiving a disproportionate # of exclusionary disciplinary infractions in our district?”)

Step 2: Individually brainstorm reasons why on post-its for 5 - 10 minutes. One per post-it.

Step 3: Each person read out loud one reason and set down on the fishbone. Go around the group and take turns

reading one reason/cause at a time. If someone said something you had, stack on top of theirs. If you have something

different, lay down on a different “bone.”

Step 4: Ask the group, are there any systemic/structural causes that we’ve missed. Add.

Step 5: When done reading all potential causes, rearrange the fishbone and group causes into categories. Label the

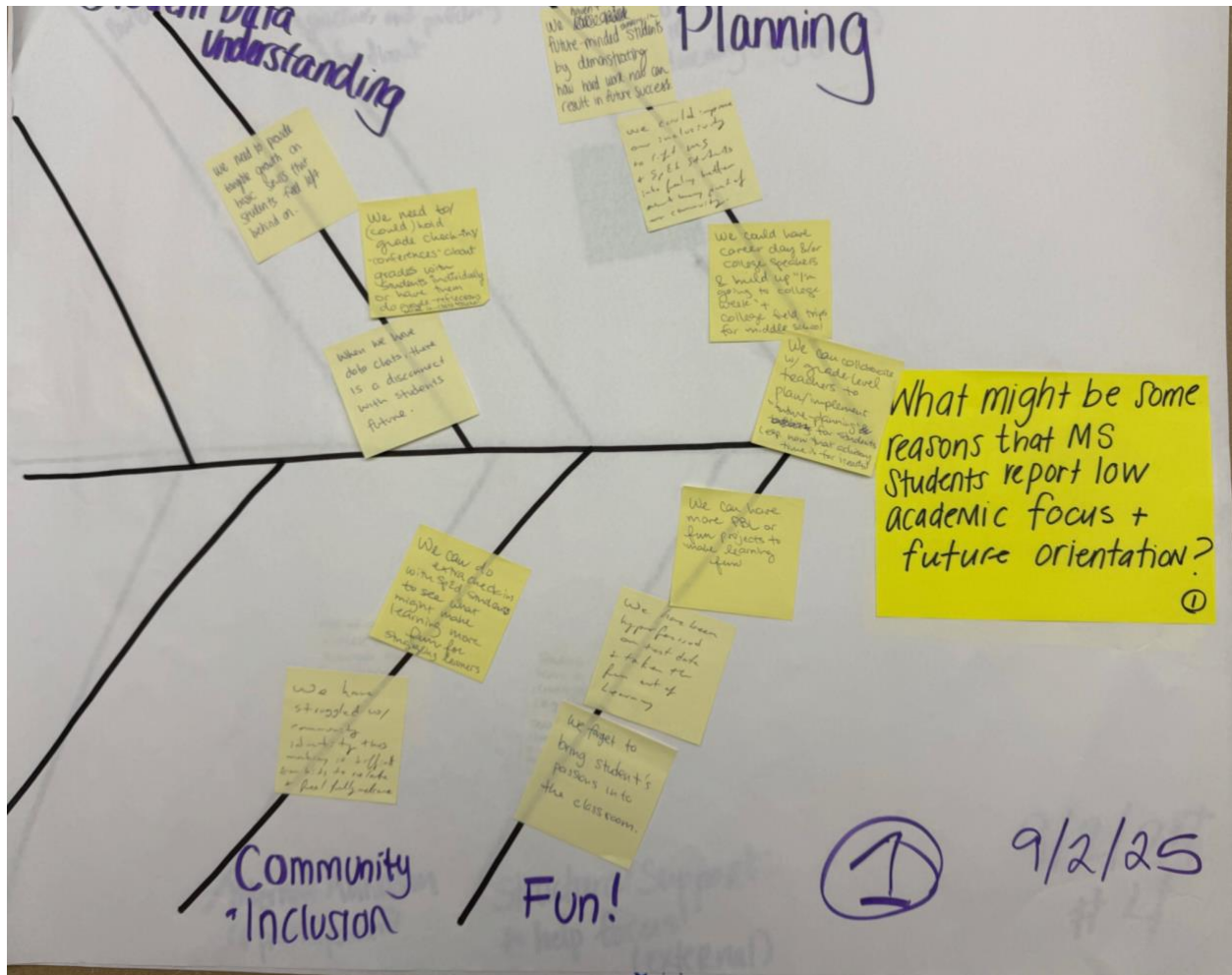
categories at the top of each bone.

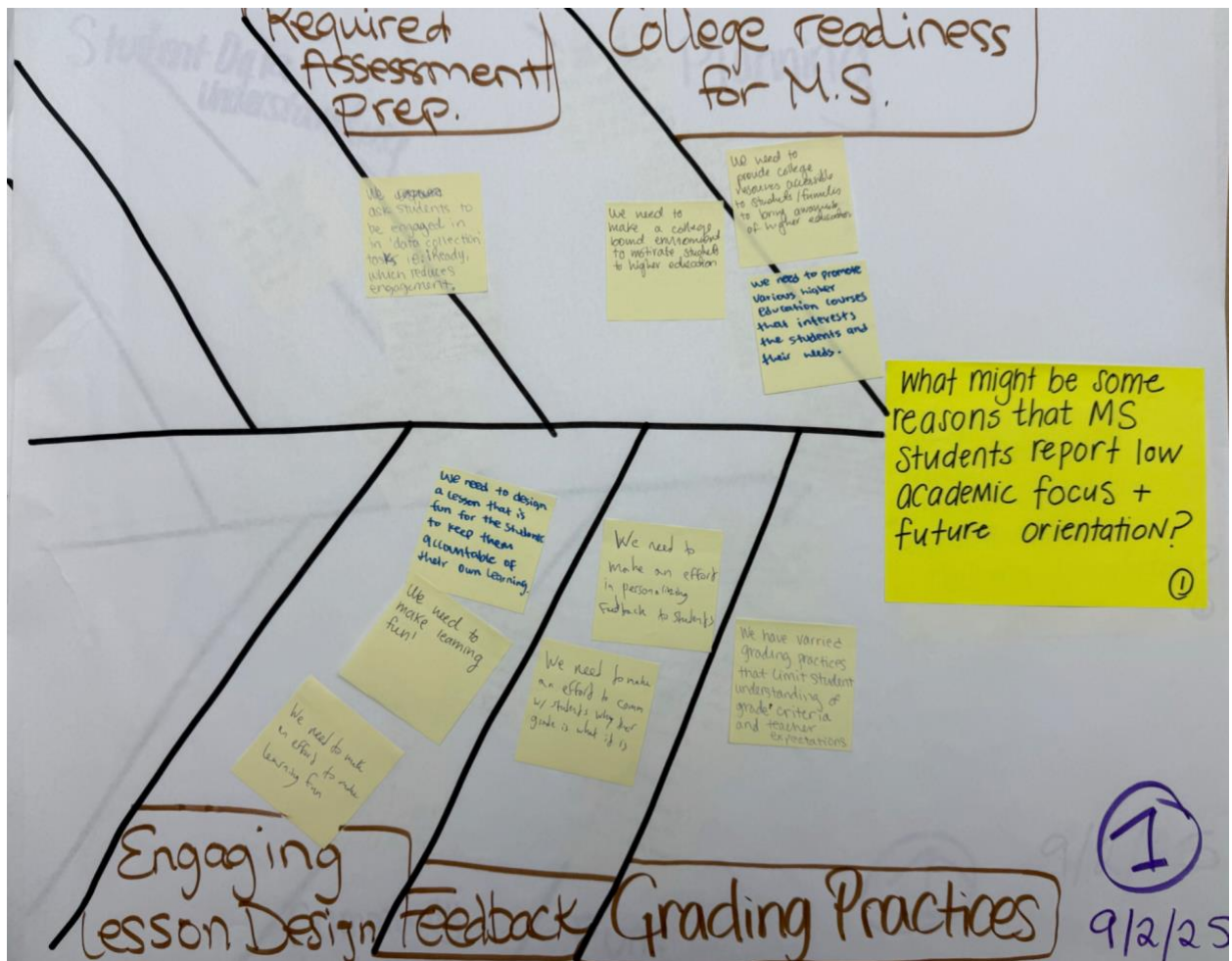
Step 6: Identify what is in your locus of control and one or two high leverage areas to focus your initial improvement

efforts. (Can you go deeper with 5 Whys?)

Source: Rohanna, K.L. (2024b). Fishbone diagram protocol. In K.L. Rohanna (Ed.), *EDUC 224: Leading change through evaluation: Methods of continuous improvement*. UCLA.

Appendix G: Sample Fishbone Diagrams from PLC #1





Appendix H: Empathy Interview Protocol Planning Sheet from PLC Meeting #2

Empathy Interview Protocol: Planning Sheet

Use the provided resources and template below to plan your team's Empathy Interview Protocol.

Team Members:

Planning

Who will each of you interview? Why did you select these students?

Opening

Interview Questions

Open-Ended and Plural (What/How Questions)

Ex: *What are some activities you enjoy in math class?*

Promote Story Telling

Ex: *Tell me about a time when...*

1.

2.

3.

Closing

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