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Publication Date

2024-05-02

Spring 2024

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Transformative Learning of School Leaders: The Role of Professional Community for Critical Reflection

Executive Summary

This study investigates the transformative learning process of school leaders for transformative leadership and the role of professional communities in their learning. Two bodies of knowledge—transformative school leadership and transformative learning theory—were used to frame this study. Eight school leaders who serve economically and socially marginalized communities in California were interviewed to explore their professional learning experiences and challenges around leading for equity. Our analysis of the interview data shows that critical reflection is the key to transformative learning, which is often motivated by school leaders' unmet assumptions while leading school communities. When leaders sought out others (who share similar professional experiences) to make sense of the unexpected experiences, the collective reflection generated transformative actions. All eight leaders emphasized the importance of the professional community for their professional learning, and how the professional communities formed this way become a supportive foundation for continuing transformative leadership. Formal and informal professional communities served different purposes in school leaders' professional learning, and most leaders belonged to more than a few communities (ranging from informal and small groups of close colleagues to formal and large professional organizations) at the same time to receive specific support from these communities. The professional communities provided three kinds of support: 1) social/emotional support, 2) professional/intellectual support, and 3) shared professional responsibilities. These supports are all essential as leaders interact together and develop further in professional communities. Leaders also valued the professional learning that addressed their self-identified needs (and not externally imposed topics). The findings of this study imply the importance of professional communities for educational leaders' learning where critical reflections are prioritized for self-identified issues.

Background

Transformative leadership is a type of school leadership that challenges the state of justice and democracy in society, critiques inequitable practices, and envisions better schooling for all students (Shields, 2010). Researchers have found that school leaders who engage in transformative leadership practices can develop schoolwide and systemic strategies that cultivate meaningful learning for their demographically changing student populations.

School leaders need to learn transformatively in order to become transformative leaders. According to Mezirow (1991, 1997), **transformative learning** challenges and changes the way learners see themselves and their world and helps explain how learners' expectations (likely framed within dominant cultural assumptions and presuppositions) directly influence the meaning they derive from the experience. In the case of school leaders, transformative learning helps those leaders realize that their preexisting assumptions about good leadership may not be accurate for all school communities. The more widely a perspective is shared in society, the more likely it reflects the values of the dominant cultural groups.

While the literature discusses what school leaders must do to engage in transformative leadership, we know less about how transformative learning supports them to become transformative leaders. This study aims to fill the knowledge gap by investigating and illustrating how school leaders learn transformatively and how the professional communities support such learning through school leaders' own voices.

Critical reflection is the key to transformative learning (DeMatthews, 2018; Furman, 2012; Mayger & Provinzano, 2020; Poekert et al., 2020; Ward et al., 2015). Reflection happens when

people question their assumptions given their own realities and experiences. Critical reflection helps learners see their world in new ways departing from prior assumptions. According to Mezirow (1997), critical reflection has two components. The first component is self-reflection (internal), when learners deeply examine personal assumptions, values, and beliefs. The second component is critical inquiry (external), when learners consciously consider the ethical consequences of their actions (based on assumptions) on others. Critical reflection will then loop back to the school leader's original experiences and assign new personal meanings to the experiences.

When people learn in a professional learning community, the nature of the group supports and accelerates their learning (van Oord, 2013; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). In a group, a learner will have multiple opportunities to collaboratively examine the situation that learner is facing. They are also supported socially in the professional learning community, where a sense of comfort is found in the company of peers (for school leaders, in shared professional culture and experiences of highly demanding work). Challenging personal beliefs and assumptions is not an easy process. A supportive community with others who share and understand the problems at hand make it possible to become vulnerable enough to truly examine existing assumptions and make changes together. This process requires deep self-awareness, careful planning, development of knowledge, and new skills, which (in a circular process) all then support the continued development of the professional community.

Research Context

In order to better understand how educational leaders learn to lead transformatively, we investigated their experiences and how professional

communities support their transformative learning. We interviewed eight school principals who had participated in the 21CSLA Community of Practice professional learning in 2021. All principals served in economically disadvantaged school districts¹ in the San Francisco Bay Area. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore these principals' professional preparation,

learning, and support as they continue to grow as leaders. We qualitatively analyzed the resulting data in multiple iterations. We identified different professional contexts for school leaders' learning, along with the means by which critical reflection happened and was supported in the process and the purpose of professional communities.

Key Finding 1: Critical Reflection is the Basis of Transformative Leadership

The data illustrates that a deeply reflective process supports the school leaders to transformative decisions and actions. Their voices were strong and clear in describing the process of critical reflection, including how they made sense of existing challenges, created changes, and developed new services and resources available to students and families. Here, we feature two examples of critical reflection processes.

Lynette,² an elementary school principal in a diverse California community serving low-income families, shares a story about how her sexual orientation made her critically reflect on her school leadership approaches. She became a teacher in the 1990s, when LGBTQ issues were sidelined from mainstream education conversations:

“...Being a lesbian, I would often engage myself in the workshop, I would ask about where LGBTQ issues fall into this work, and at that point, that was like, no, we don’t talk about that, I would usually get that reaction, like looks and people turning their heads. [In the professional community,] I wasn’t the only gay teacher and so it was what we had there. I felt safe, and we all kind of wanted to say the same things. So that’s where my activism came to be because I wanted to put in place for LGBTQ students and families and be able to teach about different family structures. So, along with other teachers, we started a “collaborative” to look at that and start writing a curriculum.”

When Lynette found that LGBTQ issues were not being addressed and experienced pushback in her efforts to include them in professional development opportunities, she sought out others to reflect on their experiences together. The reflection led them to push their work forward and develop inclusivity with regard to LGBTQ issues in their classrooms. In her collaboration with others, she realized her agency through increasingly expanding awareness of how she could be a part of the change. In this way, Lynette became a transformative leader for the school community through critical reflection in the professional community.

¹The schools with more than 75% of students receiving free or reduced-cost lunches.

²All names are pseudonyms.

Harriett, a new assistant principal at an urban elementary school, describes her transformative leadership experiences as the school returned to in-person instruction in fall 2021 after 18 months of pandemic remote teaching.

“I think teachers are just feeling the weight of that [returning from remote teaching], and you know with the district was like, “Oh, you know, our approach is going to be to weave in all the missed content from last year, in this great balance of remedial support.”...I sat through this [district] meeting thinking, like, this is so disconnected from reality. It is already so hard for teachers to teach, to get in and teach really well, the content of their normal year from beginning to end...[and] being expected to teach additional year’s content from the year before... . We’re just going to, like, pretend like teachers can just add in another unit, at the same time? I feel the stress for them. I know they’re all feeling it, and I think the reality is that, like, a lot of that is not happening...”

The district’s plans did not include concrete guidelines, and the district did not offer specific training for teachers, nor did district officials open up conversations with school leaders about how to accomplish the stated goals. Realizing the unrealistic expectations (external reflection), Harriett and the school’s principal decided to provide one-on-one coaching and group support for teachers, having numerous conversations to help form small student groups for differentiated instruction in the classrooms.

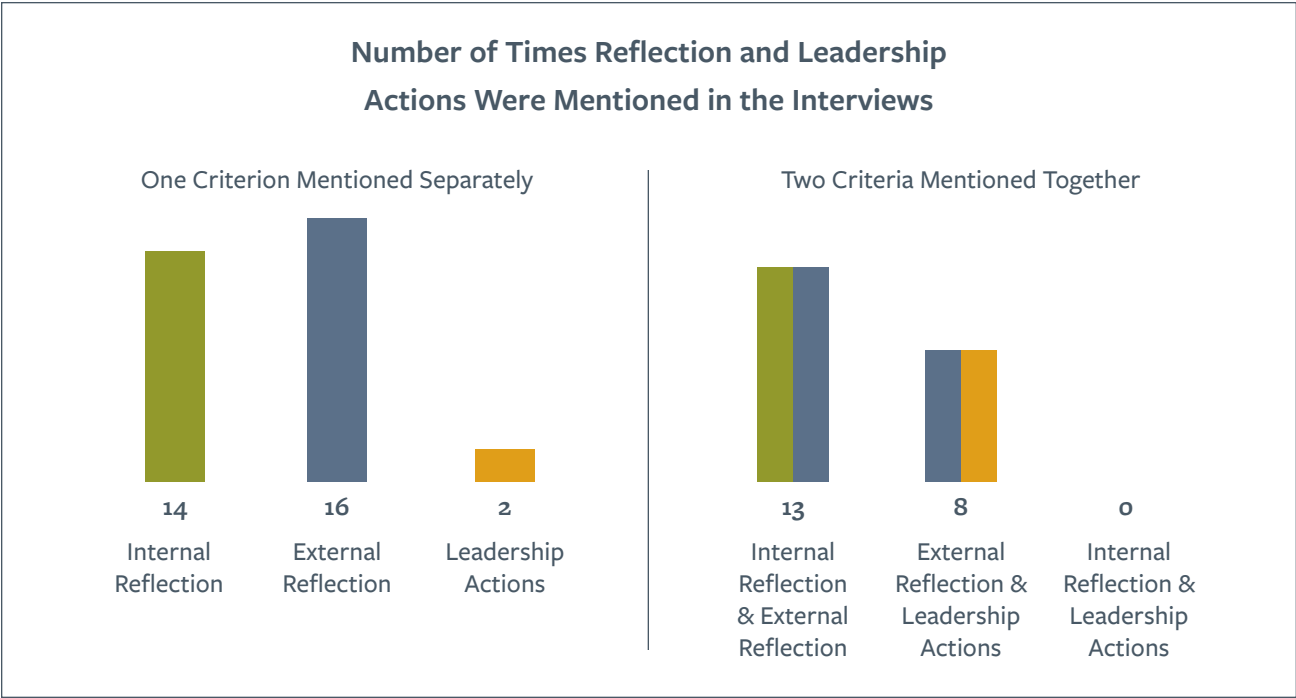
Key Finding #2: Unmatched Assumptions/ Experiences + Reflection = Transformative Actions

The school leaders’ critical reflection process was often triggered by unexpected experiences, which caused them to pause and reflect internally on why and how their assumptions did not match reality. Thus, the external experience led them to internal critical reflection (self-reflection), making sense of the mismatched reality, resulting in transformative leadership actions. At the point of confusion, many school leaders also engaged in external critical reflection (critical inquiry), by reaching out to their peers and colleagues for reality checks,

turning to each other for reflective conversations and sense-making, assessing the situation collaboratively and thereby more objectively, and ultimately coming to more-equitable solutions.

In this analysis, external reflection was not only mentioned most frequently, but it was also often discussed in relation to internal reflection and/or leadership decisions. Sometimes, external reflection led school leaders to reflect internally, and that internal reflection led them to leadership actions. Internal reflection alone was never mentioned in relation to leadership actions. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between criteria mentioned during interviews.

Figure 1

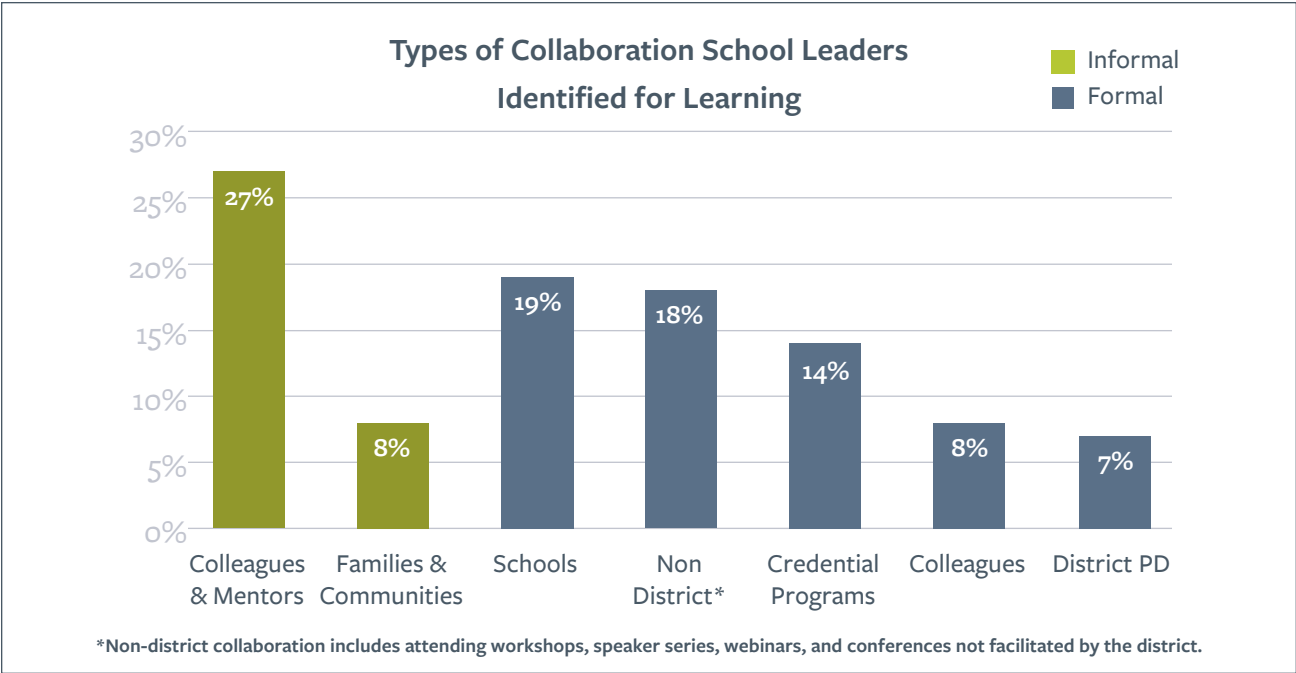


Key Finding 3: Professional Communities Deepen Transformative Learning for School Leaders

All participants discussed their work as transformative school leaders, and they emphasized at length how crucial it is to have professional communities to support their work. Thus, these communities played a critical foundation in their learning. Participants described the process of seeking out colleagues who would understand the specific challenges of their jobs (e.g., pandemic leadership), in order to form a community to ask questions, share solutions, challenge and be challenged, and keep reflecting further on making leadership decisions. Some leaders in this study went so far as to say they would not be able to do their work without community support. One leader highlights the importance of the communal nature of this work:

“...I’ve been really lucky to be surrounded by great mentors or great peers. I think that’s so vital to nurture the collaboration among administrators, because I feel like so many [administrators] leave early because there isn’t that. Frankly, in our district, there’s not a lot of that, so we do it on our own. People absolutely form [their] own community. The way we actually joined the group [community of practice] came out of a need of us to feel hopeful and inspired...If you nurture people right, then they’re going to work harder. And I think I am lucky to have my colleagues even if sometimes it’s just venting...” —Tiffany, site leader

Figure 2



The school leaders also discussed different types of communities in their professional lives. Figure 2 shares the different types of collaboration school leaders identified.

The school leaders discussed their experiences with formal collaboration more than informal collaboration (65% vs. 35%). We also found that formal and informal professional communities served different purposes for the school leaders. Formal communities provided a networking platform, whereas informal communities provided deeper interpersonal connections that served the individual and daily needs of school leaders.

Overall, the school leaders most frequently mentioned informal collaboration with colleagues and mentors (27%) out of various types of collaboration. In comparing formal and informal collaboration with colleagues, we also see a large difference (8% vs. 27%). Informal professional

communities with colleagues could mean, for example, a community of principals formed within the district. Other examples include a community of school leaders that meet outside of district-led professional development (PD), a peer group formed in a credential program, a few like-minded educator colleagues who met at a formal/informal workshop or conference and continue to meet regularly, and/or former mentors whom leaders check in with occasionally to share experiences. While varied in nature, all school leaders discussed the importance of such informal professional communities for their learning.

We also found that school leaders who participated in this study typically belonged to multiple informal professional communities. Often, they described different communities as meeting different professional needs. Having multiple professional communities seems particularly important as they serve different purposes for the school leaders.

For example, local communities helped the school leaders to discuss and make action plans for area-specific problems and situations. On the other hand, a distant colleague could provide a more objective and broader perspective on certain situations. These multiple layers and levels of professional communities are integral to participants' ongoing work as transformative school leaders. One leader described his communities in the following way:

“...I would say, first five to seven years in the role, I feel like a lot of support just came from a few folks [who] served as unofficial mentors to me, maybe like one person who works within my school district that comes to mind that worked in a central office role, I felt was like really helpful and supportive. I feel like I still, I have a few other individuals, colleagues, that you know I really rely upon, that I feel like support me, challenge me, and help me develop and grow.”

Key Finding 4: School Leaders Value Professional Learning That Addresses Their Needs

The school leaders discussed what made their informal professional communities different from other PDs. Many reported that their communities addressed the problems they felt were important, instead of a district-imposed agenda. Their communities provided space for the school leaders to gather and work on the issues they wanted to work on. The school leaders valued their self-made and informal communities because they felt their own agency in making decisions about their self-identified issues. It was important for them to feel the issues that are important to them were addressed centrally in the collaborative work.

Key Finding 5: Three Critical Supports of Professional Communities

Synthesizing the findings above, the study suggests that professional communities served three critical supports for school leaders' transformative learning and leadership. Table 3 summarizes the findings. These types of support interact with each other to foster school leaders' overall transformative learning.

Table 3

Characteristics and Purposes of Three Supports Professional Communities Provide for School Leaders' Transformative Learning

TYPES OF SUPPORT	CHARACTERISTICS AND PURPOSES OF SUPPORT
Social and Emotional Support	▶ Feeling safe enough to become vulnerable and share concerns that might not have been readily understood elsewhere. ▶ Nonjudgmental space where they can be honest and not pretend that they know everything. ▶ The sense of belonging motivated them to keep reaching out to each other and continue the challenging work which could be otherwise impossible.
Intellectual and Professional Support	▶ Intellectually pushing each other, asking questions, creating/revising their plans, and sharing ideas and practices together through deep conversations. ▶ Focusing on the issues which are important to them. ▶ Space to ask questions, share ideas that are not completely formed, and talk about new practices that they want to try out. ▶ Continuously pushing each other's thinking and creativity.
Shared Professional Responsibilities	▶ Working individually would create efficiency, but limited in experiences and thinking capacities; professional communities help us go further. ▶ When school leaders commit to one another to make a difference for their students together, they hold themselves responsible for the work as a collective. ▶ Knowing they are not alone and their work being worthwhile (valued in the communities). ▶ Finding critical values in working together, prioritizing the collaboration, sense of community, and sharing ongoing progress.

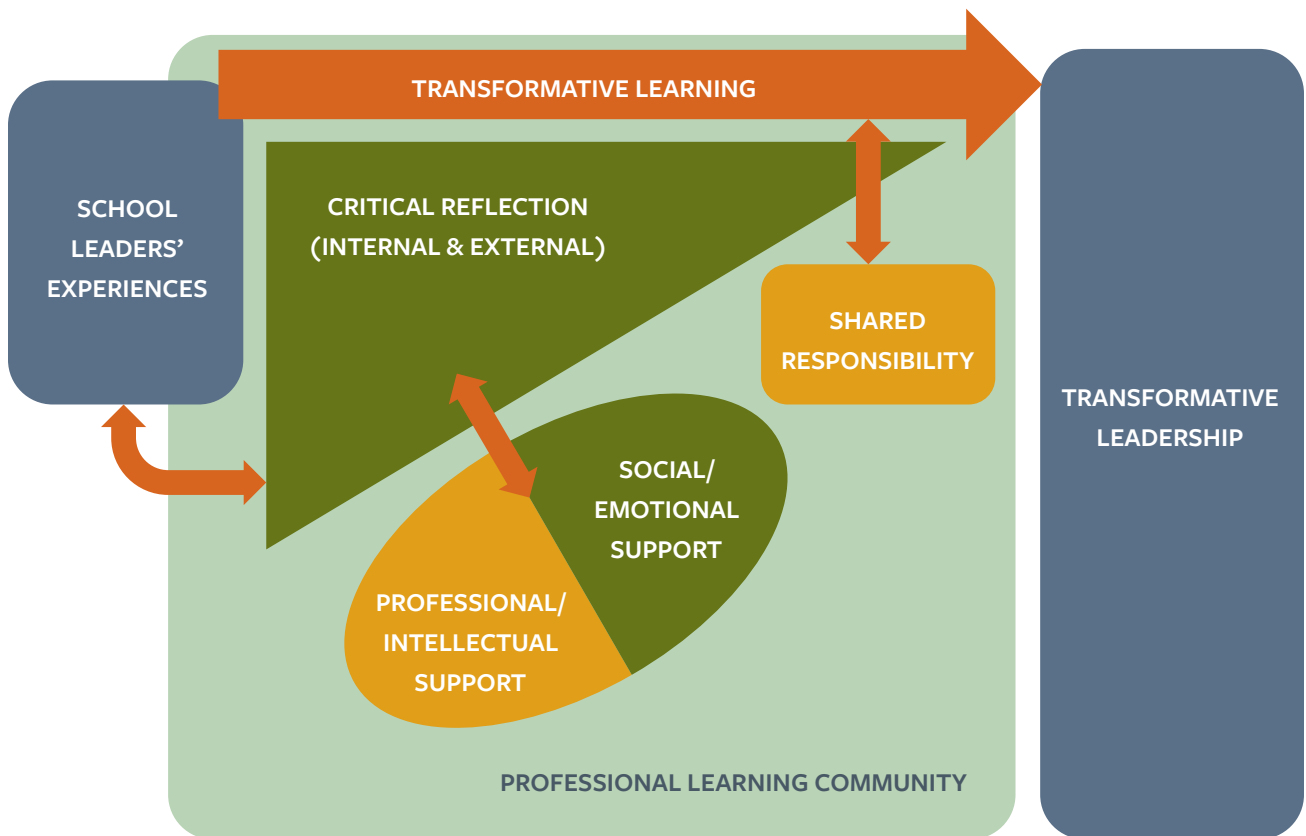
Summary and Conclusion

In this study, we were able to identify and describe a common process by which school leaders learn to lead transformatively through critical reflection, and how professional communities support that learning process. Figure 4 illustrates the learning process.

Our data shows that critical reflection was often generated from school leaders' unmet assumptions (external reflection). When leaders experienced these unmet assumptions, they sought out other colleagues to make sense of and generate ideas for transformative actions through reflective conversations. The school leaders in the study

served socially marginalized communities, and they were aware of their agency in making changes and creating space for students given mismatched assumptions. The professional communities formed this way, in turn, became a supportive foundation for cultivating ongoing transformative leadership for the school leaders, providing social-emotional and professional-intellectual support, and nurturing shared professional responsibilities. We also found that leaders often engage in multiple layers of these professional communities in order to thrive professionally through mutual support and shared responsibility.

Figure 4



Implication 1: Fostering Transformative Leadership Learning in Professional Communities

School leaders value informal professional communities they form on their own more than the formal professional development experiences typically provided by school districts. Formal and informal professional communities serve different purposes for the school leaders: leaders use formal PDs to find networks, then form separate informal communities for deeper and interpersonal reflection. The study's findings suggest school districts and leadership educators could further explore ways to support the growth of the formally created network for more-critical work, since the initial connections are made there. Since the school leaders' experiences are an important foundation of transformative learning, the mismatch between district-led PDs and leaders' own circumstances can hinder opportunities for that transformative learning. This finding suggests the importance of nurturing conditions for sustaining professional communities by creating opportunities for critical reflection on the issues school leaders self-identify.

Implication 2: Shifting the Culture of School Leadership to Be More Community-Based and Supportive

School leaders value a professional community where they can be vulnerable and discuss honestly what they do not know. They grow and learn by having honest conversations and showing imperfections to one another. The "superhero" image of school leadership, where leaders are assumed to solve problems single-handedly and save their school communities (Sutton & Gong, 2021), is dangerous because it can keep school leaders from seeking help from the districts in fear of being evaluated poorly by the district. As apparent in the

school leaders' voices in this study, school district cultures would better support school leaders by assuming leaders' learning process to be lengthy, and by providing ongoing support for that learning process.

When designing and facilitating formal professional learning experiences, such as communities of practice or professional coaching, leadership educators must know how social-emotional and professional-intellectual supports work together to help school leaders learn transformatively. Existence of one type of support but not the other can result in unsatisfying professional learning experiences with limited engagement. Purposeful identification of where these two supports are interacting in the learning space will help develop the sense of shared professional responsibility which fuels the ongoing transformative learning,

We have discussed in this paper how the participating school leaders developed a sense of shared responsibilities in professional communities that became the fuel for transformative learning and leadership. It may be a counter-cultural move to focus on shared responsibility rather than individual accountability, which is more broadly discussed in U.S. TK-12 education. District and school leaders benefit from creating a set of collaborative practices for increased learning, moving us toward equitable schools. The voices of school leaders, such as the ones shared in this study, should be elevated broadly so that other school leaders, district personnel, and leadership educators can embrace how crucial it is for school leaders to have community support. The shift toward shared leadership responsibility has the potential to make a significant difference in principal retention and more equitable education in our schools, potentially minimizing the opportunity gap between high-achieving and low-achieving students.

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

About 21CSLA

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

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

Bridging Research and Practice

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

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