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Authors

Dong, Quennie

Murata, Aki

Lin, Xueqin

et al.

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Prepared by:

Quennie Dong

Dr. Aki Murata

Xueqin Lin

Dr. Rebecca Cheung

Designing With Equity: How Communities of Practice Foster Educational Leaders’ Development Through Self-Determination Theory

Executive Summary

This project brief considers how self-determination theory (SDT) can support the design and facilitation of communities of practice (CoPs) with educational leaders to promote equity in schools by providing opportunities for autonomy, competence, and belonging. This study investigated how CoPs met the basic psychological needs that contribute to engagement and deeper learning through a sense of well-being and motivation. We collected data through in-depth interviews with nine CoP facilitators, revealing that effective CoPs foster autonomy by centering educational leaders’ contexts and interests, nurture competence through lifelong learning skills, and enhance relatedness while extending a sense of belonging by creating supportive environments. The findings emphasize the importance of designing CoPs that address these psychological needs to enhance engagement and promote learning for equity. Practical implications include strategies for facilitators to involve educational leaders in decision-making, provide ongoing support for continuous learning, and ensure diverse narratives within CoPs. This research underscores the significance of CoPs in developing equitable educational leadership and offers actionable insights for practitioners.

Background and Context

Educational leadership plays a crucial role in promoting equity within schools by ensuring fairness and justice in educational opportunities, processes, and outcomes for all students (Shields, 2010). While engaging in this important work, school leaders must also navigate structural and systemic barriers to ensure equitable education for all, particularly for historically marginalized students. Given the importance of equity, school leaders need to lead with equity. Professional learning and development programs can support leaders in the leaders’ deliberate efforts and commitments to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. In this study, we sought to understand how professional development through school leaders’ participation in CoPs meets their motivational needs, which are crucial for their success.

Communities of Practice

CoPs¹ offer a collaborative, context-specific approach to professional development. Defined as groups of individuals who share a common interest (Wenger, 2011), CoPs provide a holistic and effective learning experience for learners. They combine active engagement, a focus on practice, informal learning, and flexible dialogue to foster a strong community spirit conducive to collaborative practices (Roberts, 2006). CoPs facilitate mutual engagement,² joint enterprise,³ and shared repertoire,⁴ which is critical for learning and knowledge refinement (Wenger, 1998, 2011). The success of CoPs in educational settings hinges on the relationships, trust, and autonomy developed within these groups.

Conceptual Framework

In order to understand how CoPs can support educational leaders’ learning to lead for equity, we use SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2012) as a conceptual framework. SDT argues that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are basic psychological needs for well-being and integrity (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reeve, 2002; Ryan & Vansteenkiste, 2023). *Autonomy* refers to the sense of control an individual has over their actions and decisions within the community, while *competence* refers to the sense of mastery an individual has over the skills and knowledge required within the community. *Relatedness* refers to the sense of connection an individual has with others within the community (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESSFUL CoPs	
Work Relations and Trust	Trust and positive work relationships are foundational for effective CoPs. Roberts (2006) highlighted that the “ways of doing things” within a community can impact its ability to create and absorb knowledge, potentially leading to resistance to change. Trust is crucial for knowledge transfer among community members, shaping social interactions, and fostering a collaborative environment.
Sensitivity to Socio-Cultural Characteristics	Facilitators of CoPs must consider socio-cultural factors that influence how individuals and the broader community interact. Sensitivity to these characteristics, including learning styles, trust levels, and autonomy, is essential for effective facilitation (Roberts, 2006).
Power Dynamics	Facilitators should recognize structure and power dynamics within CoPs and avoid perpetuating hierarchical practices that hinder effective knowledge negotiation. Facilitators must be aware of these dynamics to ensure that the community operates on a more collaborative basis in order to challenge the traditional hierarchical structures in educational organizations (Roberts, 2006).

¹ For further information on CoPs and how they can be leveraged to center equity in school leadership, please see Esboldt et al., 2024.

² Mutual engagement is the sense of community that is generated within a CoP over time. This sense of community is cultivated through productive interactions where members support one another in addressing problems and contributing to the enterprise of the community.

³ A joint enterprise describes how members of a CoP take initiative to center learning and maintain a spirit of inquiry. A CoP and its members should learn to recognize gaps in knowledge as well as remain open to emerging directions and opportunities.

⁴ A shared repertoire refers to a shared practice among members of a CoP that may include experiences, stories, tools, and/or ways of addressing recurring problems.

SDT provides a framework and lens to explore qualities that facilitate equity learning among educational leaders within CoPs. SDT builds on human motivation theory in social contexts and delves deeper into the significance of human experiences, the meaning of social conditions, and the interplay of inherent needs that facilitate individual motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Most importantly, SDT provides a framework to predict conditions under which developmental processes occur as the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied. In the context of CoPs, SDT proposes that individuals are more likely to engage and learn in a community of practice when they feel a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Reeve & Halusic, 2009). Overall, SDT suggests that CoPs can foster a sense of well-being and motivation in individuals by providing opportunities for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Overview of the Study

This project brief shares key findings from a larger study examining how CoPs support educational leaders in their journey to promote equity (Dong et al., under review). In the larger study, we investigated how CoPs are facilitated and their design features that promote learning to lead toward equity among educational leaders. Utilizing SDT as a conceptual framework, this project brief seeks to share how CoPs can meet the basic psychological needs of educational leaders and provides insights for practitioners facilitating these communities.

Methodology

For the larger study, we used a qualitative methodology, with convenient sampling and in-depth interviews, to collect data from nine CoP facilitators (participant information below). We conducted semi-structured interviews to explore how participants facilitated their CoPs in

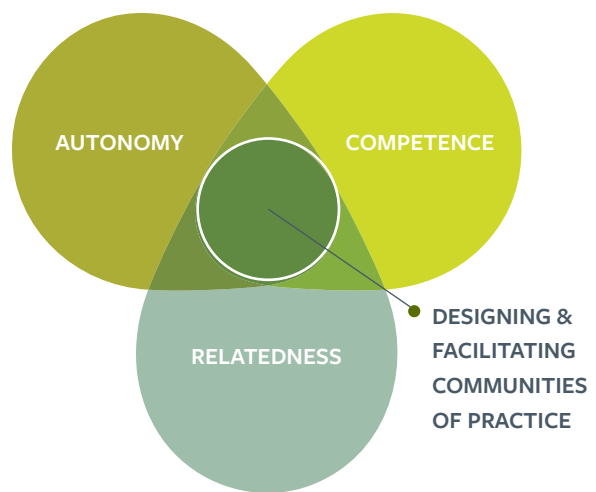


Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for Community of Practice Situated within Self-Determination Theory

promoting equity among educational leaders. We then thematically analyzed the data and applied the lens of SDT to examine how CoPs addressed the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and what strategies the CoP facilitators utilized to cultivate conditions to meet educational leaders' psychological needs.

Demographic Information of Facilitators

This study was conducted with the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA), which provides no-cost, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. We purposefully selected participants ($n = 9$) who were facilitators of CoPs designed to provide professional learning for educational leaders (e.g., teacher, site, and district leaders) in one geographic region of California. Topics that these facilitators covered included special education, continuous improvement, instructional teacher leadership, early childhood

education, charter schools, improvement science with teacher leaders, and leaders of color. The participants' (CoP facilitators) professional backgrounds include decades of experience in the field (ranging from 18 to 46 years), sharing moral values that education can make a difference, and educational commitments to equity. They served in various educational roles, such as teachers, school principals, district personnel, director of the county office of education, and professor of education at a college. They were interviewed about the facilitation of their respective CoPs.

Findings: How Facilitation of Communities of Practice Meets Three Basic Psychological Needs

Deci and Ryan (2012) found that people are motivated to learn when they have the three essential experiences in the learning process: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Our findings suggest that autonomy is fostered when facilitators position and center their educational leaders' context and interests in the professional learning environment. In addition, facilitators nurtured competence by building knowledge and providing opportunities for leaders to make sense of their current experiences, as well as by encouraging leaders to engage in continuous learning in response to the changing educational landscape. Lastly, relatedness was elevated toward a sense of belonging when facilitators provided opportunities to share leadership stories; during these structured opportunities, individuals were heard, understood, and acknowledged for their work by others in the CoPs.

Key Finding 1: Centering Leaders' Learning Needs for Autonomy

The following quote from a facilitator illustrates specific instances where autonomy was

fostered. Jasmine described the participant-driven curriculum development process:

Jasmine: We spent time in the curriculum instruction area, but based on their [the leaders] wants and needs, that was something that we [as facilitators] saw great [value in] serving them [by allowing educational leaders to choose the topic] I wanted them to feel like they were really directing [the learning] I wasn't just choosing, or Michelle [the co-facilitator just] choosing for them ... really making it a CoP that they could say, "This is what I'm really interested in, and yeah, we're gonna infuse this little piece of professional learning, so it is 100% ... a CoP."

By involving educational leaders in the decision-making process and tailoring the CoP to their interests and needs, Jasmine empowered leaders to take ownership of their learning journey. Each leader was recognized for their own unique professional context, needs, and decision-making. This autonomy allowed leaders to shape the direction of the CoP and make it personally meaningful.

Key Finding 2: Fostering Lifelong Learning and Competence

Facilitator Sawyer emphasized the development of lifelong skills, recognizing the importance of preparing leaders for ongoing growth and development beyond the CoP. By providing leaders with skills beyond the immediate context, Sawyer aimed to foster competence and equip leaders with the tools necessary for continuous personal and professional growth.

Sawyer: What I learned in working with this [CoP] is that when they're done with this community, what I needed to make sure that was clear is that we give them skills that are going to be lifelong ... in the sense of their ongoing movie ...

Sawyer communicated that leaders' learning would continue. Competence was not something developed in the CoP and checked off a list; it was a continuous improvement process. With this message, the leaders left the CoP not only with a sense of competence but also with the expectation of continuous growth.

Key Finding 3: Beyond Relatedness and Cultivating Belonging

Facilitators reflected that they had nurtured belonging beyond relatedness by establishing an open and supportive community environment and cultivating opportunities for leaders to share their stories with the intention of fostering meaningful relationships among individuals. For example, Miguel and Jasmine discussed the importance of building trust among individuals and the importance of relationships within a CoP.

Miguel: ... then within that [CoP], how am I building trust and relationship and that foundation for vulnerability and risk-taking that has to happen for growth to happen?

Jasmine: ... you can be yourself, and I think I try to make it where people really see it as like a conversation in your living room.

By considering the importance of facilitating trust, relationships, and openness, Miguel and Jasmine highlighted the critical role of belonging, which extends beyond simply fostering connections into

deepening relationships so that everyone feels they are an integral part of the whole. This deep sense of belonging is essential in equity work, as it involves actively creating a space where every individual feels valued and empowered to contribute (Toit-Brits, 2022). Facilitators described engaging in practices that went beyond cultivating surface-level relatedness by working toward building profound, inclusive bonds that recognize and honor each person's unique experiences and perspectives. This approach ensures that all members feel truly seen and heard, promoting a shared commitment to equity and collective growth within the community.

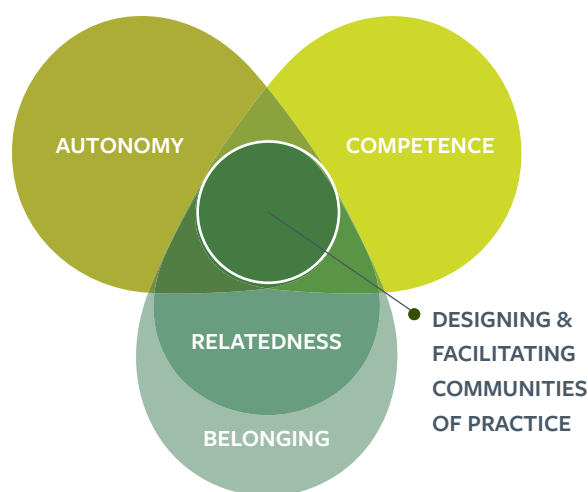


Figure 2

Expanded Conceptual Framework Illustrating Enhanced Relatedness and Belonging within a Community of Practice Guided by Self-Determination Theory

Conclusion and Implications

In summary, the ways in which CoPs are facilitated can effectively cultivate autonomy, competence, and belonging among leaders learning to lead for equity. The three examples above provided a glimpse of the complex facilitation processes with which the facilitators motivated educational leaders. While topics and foci differed across CoPs, the equity focus was central for all of them. Leading for equity is not an easy task, and educational leaders need to experience autonomy (their context, ideas, and effort matter), competence (they are developing the knowledge and skills to make a difference), and belonging (they are a part of the community who share goals and support one another). These findings highlight the importance of designing CoPs that address educational leaders' psychological needs, enhance their engagement, and promote learning to lead for equity.

This section discusses practical implications for facilitators and educational leaders who design and lead CoPs. Drawing from this study's findings, we provide some actionable insights and strategies to enhance CoPs' effectiveness in promoting equitable educational leadership and reflective questions to consider while creating supportive, inclusive, and dynamic learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of educational leaders.

Psychological Perspective and Orientations for CoPs

Understanding the psychological underpinnings of CoPs is crucial for creating environments that support and motivate educational leaders to learn. SDT emphasizes the importance of meeting three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Facilitators should consider designing CoPs that foster these needs to enhance engagement and learning. Integrating psychological orientations, such as intrinsic motivation and

beyond social relatedness toward belonging, can further support educational leaders' growth and development within CoPs.

Leadership Implications

Effective CoPs require facilitators who are skilled in creating inclusive, supportive, and collaborative learning environments. Facilitators must be adept at facilitating discussions, managing group dynamics, and promoting equity. This involves understanding the content and the process of learning within a community. Facilitators should also strive to create spaces where all voices are heard and valued, and where leaders feel empowered to take ownership of their learning.

Strategies for Facilitators

Facilitators should actively involve participants in decision-making to foster autonomy by incorporating collaborative planning, regular feedback loops, and participant-led sessions to ensure the curriculum and activities are tailored to their needs. To support continuous learning, facilitators can provide follow-up workshops, online resources, and communities for ongoing professional development beyond the CoP. Additionally, facilitators should create a safe space for sharing by encouraging storytelling, practicing inclusivity, and building trust through transparent communication and authentic engagement, fostering a sense of belonging among participants.

Reflective Questions for Facilitators

Autonomy: Center Leaders' Learning Needs

- ▶ How can we ensure that leaders' learning needs and interests are consistently centered in the professional learning environment?
- ▶ What strategies can we employ to involve participants in content/curriculum development decision-making within a CoP?

- ▶ How can we balance providing necessary professional learning content while allowing participants to direct their own learning journeys?

Competence: Fostering Lifelong Learning

- ▶ What ongoing support mechanisms can be put in place to encourage leaders to engage in continuous learning in response to the ever-changing educational landscape?

Belonging: Nurturing Relationships and Community

- ▶ How are we actively creating an environment where every member feels valued, seen, and integral to our community?
- ▶ What actions can we take to deepen our connections and foster a sense of belonging and mutual respect?
- ▶ How can we build understanding, empathy, and genuine connections among participants?

General Reflections

- ▶ How can we balance the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and belonging to create holistic and motivating learning environments in CoPs?
- ▶ What potential challenges might arise in trying to meet all three psychological needs within a CoP, and how can they be addressed?

The findings of this study highlight the importance of designing CoPs that address educational leaders' psychological needs, enhance their engagement, and promote learning to lead for equity. Facilitators can create effective, motivating, and equitable learning communities by centering leaders' learning needs, fostering lifelong learning, and nurturing relationships. These strategies support individual leaders' development and contribute to the broader goal of promoting equity within educational systems.

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21CSLA Equity Statement

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

About 21CSLA

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

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

Bridging Research and Practice

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

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