## ABSTRACT

Johanna Parker, COLLABORATIVE SPACES FOR LEADERS: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH STUDY TO IMPROVE DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADER COLLABORATION (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2023.

When highly effective educators move into school leadership, their learning and growth are put on the back burner. Oftentimes, school leaders operate in silos within their school districts with little to no authentic collaboration with other school leaders or district administrators. The goal of this participatory action research study was to analyze the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of school leaders to improve the use of equitable practices. In this participatory action research (PAR) study, I created the conditions for school leaders from across a school district to collaborate and learn about equitable practices through a Networked Improvement Community (NIC; Bryk et al., 2015). Over ten months and three cycles of inquiry, three school principals and two district leaders met every 4-6 weeks as a School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC) to collaborate and learn together about equitable practices. The study findings are: (1) School district leadership sets the tone for school leader agency through modeling effective collaborative practices; (2) collaboration among school and district leaders about equitable practices occurs through enacting a collaborative meeting structure; and (3) school leaders transfer and sustain collaborative meeting structures in their schools with teachers when they have time to process and find value in the work. The study challenges the existing structures by proposing a framework that includes a District and School Leader Collaboration Continuum that builds leader agency. The study has national, state, and local policy implications for school and district leader collaboration and learning.

# COLLABORATIVE SPACES FOR LEADERS: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH STUDY TO IMPROVE DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADER COLLABORATION

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By
Johanna Parker
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Director of Dissertation: Matthew Militello, PhD
Dissertation Committee Members:
Lynda Tredway, MA
Lawrence Hodgkins, EdD
Sandra Garbowicz David, PhD
Karen Jones, PhD

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

## LIST OF TABLES

## LIST OF FIGURES

# CHAPTER 1: NAMING AND FRAMING THE FOCUS OF PRACTICE (FOP)

Far too often, when highly effective educators move into school leadership, their learning and growth are put on the back burner. School leaders (principals and assistant principals) spend their time creating and leading opportunities for teachers and less time collaborating with peers. Traditional school districts' structures do not prioritize the collaborative learning of school leaders due to a systemic top-down leadership approach. In addition to the lack of peer collaboration, current conditions in public education have school leaders sharply focused on achievement data and less so on the possible inequitable practices that contribute to student academic divide and varying experiences in the classroom (Honig & Coburn, 2008; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Rigby & Tredway, 2015).

In this participatory action research (PAR) study, I created the conditions for school leaders from across a school district to collaborate and learn about equitable practices. As a result of the collaboration, school leaders learned about equitable instructional practices and implemented them with teachers at their schools. I investigated how school leaders can collaborate and develop their knowledge and skills to help move their respective schools forward using equitable practices. The focus of practice (FoP) for the study was to analyze the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of school leaders to improve the use of equitable practices. This chapter explains the purpose, significance, assets, challenges, and PAR design of this study.

## The Focus of Practice

The FoP for the research is to develop school leaders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use equitable practices. A focus of practice (FoP) is a way to closely examine an issue that can impact change in the school organization and reach further into the field of education (Bryk et al., 2015). A team of school leaders from across a public school district collaborated to learn

about equitable instructional practices. Through the FoP, I explored what happened when district and school leaders worked together in a collaborative space focused on equitable practices.

The focus on collaboration and equity in tandem is needed in our current context locally and nationally. While students may face obstacles because of their race, language, or family socioeconomic status, they struggle primarily because they have not been offered sufficient opportunities in the classroom to develop the skills that teach them to be independent learners (Hammond & Jackson, 2015). Working with school leaders to learn about equitable practices, such as academic discourse, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, among others, can potentially shift practice. Hopefully, this shift contributed to a more positive school experience for students who are a part of traditionally marginalized groups by giving them more opportunities to participate and achieve.

Prioritizing school leader professional learning through a collaborative team approach can result in systemic change within school systems. I designed the study to challenge the traditional top-down leadership system within public schools. Many times, school leaders are invited to meetings with district leadership and told what to do. As decades of ineffective education reform have shown us, this method does not work. For substantial teaching and learning improvements to occur, central office administrators must lead boldly to build capacity for improvement in partnership with school leaders (Honig et al., 2010). Through team learning, we moved toward positive change by analyzing failures and successes with school leaders, this study shows a significant shift in how district and school leaders collaborate Next, I explain the rationale and reasoning for choosing this topic and describe the assets, challenges, and significance of the FoP.

## Rationale, Analysis, and Significance of FoP

I chose to focus on the development of school leaders to improve equitable practices because school leaders have the power to make systemic changes that matter for students. Addressing equity issues is an area in which school systems struggle; they are not successful in creating the conditions for success for all students. Addressing equity issues is an area in which I, like many school leaders, did not receive adequate training. I believe that learning to use effective data to address equitable practices can improve school leaders and, therefore, teacher practice. In my role as a district administrator, I worked with a team of school leaders from across one district to learn about equitable practices.

During the 2019-2020 school year, I used data-based observation tools with a principal, assistant principal, and small group of teachers. The team met regularly to learn about equitable practices. When using data, the school leaders and I saw a substantial shift in teacher mindset and coachability. As a result, teachers noticed and addressed inequitable practices, such as relying on hand raising, and substituted them with more equitable practices, using academic discourse strategies through coaching cycles. However, during these sessions, our team only scratched the surface. The principal, assistant principal, and I regularly collaborated about coaching conversations, use of data, and teaching strategies. The informal collaborative team was productive and felt like the missing piece in school and district leader professional learning. Setting aside time for peers (school leaders) to collaborate and learn together on a topic is an integral part of this project and study, however, I recognize that ensuring the time and space for collaborative, group learning among school leaders could be challenging due to school leadership's fast-paced, on-call nature. Next, I analyze the assets and challenges of the FoP.

## FoP Assets and Challenges

To consider the assets and challenges of the FoP, I used a modified fishbone diagram, which provided the structure for this analysis at the micro, meso, and micro levels. A fishbone diagram is a tool for working through a problem and visually representing the key factors and smaller contributing factors that may influence a specific outcome – in this case, not a problem of practice, but a focus of practice (Bryk et al., 2015). In analyzing the FoP from the point of view of one school district, Figure 1 represents the holistic assets and challenges.

### *Macro Assets and Challenges*

The public school system, Harbor County Schools, is a PreK-12 North Carolina School District located in eastern North Carolina. The school system location is a coastal community in which tourism drives the economy. The district and local community focus on ensuring teachers are of high quality and have what they need to succeed. Evidence of this focus is the annual financial support from the Harbor County Commissioners and that Harbor County Schools has one of the highest per-pupil spending allotments in North Carolina. In terms of equity, an asset of the project and study is the focus on equity on a national level. However, this focus has not become systematic at the state or local level. The district uses the North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System (NCEES) to evaluate teachers, which does not currently have a strong focus on equitable practices. The district has experienced significant cuts in Title II funding over the past two years, leaving less funding for school leaders' and teachers' professional learning.

### *Meso Assets and Challenges*

All school leaders received coaching training on the Getting Better Faster Scope and Sequence at the organizational level in 2018 and 2019. This coaching resource provided high-

| ASSETS | | |
|---|---|---|
| **MICRO**<br>**Classroom or School** level or a smaller unit within the school (grade level, department, or team)<br>**District** level unit or team | **MESO**<br>**Organizational level**: Full school level or district context, including all the district level programs or people who have primary influence or control on FoP. | **MACRO**<br>**Structural level:** social reproduction systems that affect the FoP.<br>*State or national policy*<br>*Research* |
| **ASSETS** | **ASSETS** | **ASSETS** |
| • Driven school leaders<br>• Learning by doing is preferred by the team<br>• Positive, collaborative school cultures<br>• Content experts in each department | • School Leaders were trained using the Getting Better Faster Scope and Sequence from Leverage Leadership 2.0 by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo in 2018 and 2019.<br>• Racial Equity Institute Groundwater Training in 2019<br>• Different school leaders have received a variety of training over time.<br>• District core values are equity-focused.<br>• CPR Group is all members of Project i4 Cohort 2. | • District and local communities are focused on ensuring our teachers are of high quality.<br>• The county values education.<br>• Focus on educational equity from a national level. |
| • Most veteran staff have not received coaching during their career, so they can be hesitant to engage.<br>• Some staff has had little exposure to equity practices. | • Some school leaders have not yet put the training and resources they've received into practice.<br>• Some school leaders have received very little coaching/observation training.<br>• Leadership turnover | • Lack of state focus on equity in the classroom in education.<br>• NCEES Teacher Evaluations lack focus on equitable practices.<br>• Funding cut from the federal level for professional learning (Title II). |
| **CHALLENGES** | **CHALLENGES** | **CHALLENGES** |
| **MICRO** | **MESO** | **MACRO** |
| **CHALLENGES** | | |

*Figure 1*. Assets and challenges: Improving the use of equitable practices.

leverage action steps and strategies for leaders to coach teachers in the areas of classroom management and rigor (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). Setting this groundwork is an asset to the focus of practice on teachers' use of equitable practices. School leaders participated in Ground Water Training from the Racial Equity Institute during the summer of 2019. The facilitators explained the history of racial inequity in the US.

At the district level, Harbor County Schools focuses on talent development as tenets of the current strategic plan that runs through 2023. The district's core values are equity-focused, an asset to the FoP. Leadership turnover is a potential challenge for the project. Over the past two years, staffing changes and new hires contribute to a lack of school leader continuity. Some newly hired administrators received limited training in coaching or equity. The lack of prior professional development can be an asset or challenge.

### *Micro Assets and Challenges*

Depending on the context, various areas could be assets or challenges at the school level. School leaders identified that they learn best by putting ideas into practice and coming back to the table to discuss and adjust; in other words, they have experiences and then debrief about the experiences. All three school cultures represented in the study are positive and collaborative, making them an excellent fit for this work; the schools have content experts in each department and grade level at each school. Due to a district culture prior to 2018, which was fragmented and lacked cohesion, many veteran teachers did not receive coaching earlier in their careers. A lack of coaching causes hesitancy among some teachers to change their practices and receive coaching feedback. In addition, many staff members lack exposure to equity practices; some use

equity practices and strategies but do not view them as promoting equitable access for all students.

**Significance**

In June 2018, I joined the district leadership team and entered a district where, in the past, school leader collaboration was not fully encouraged. With a new superintendent and administrative team, we analyzed what school leaders wanted and needed for professional growth. At the top of their list was the ability to work together and collaborate beyond a monthly grade-span, supervisor-facilitated meeting. Many veteran school leaders had not worked collaboratively with their peers, meaning that teacher and student experiences varied greatly from school to school.

Along with the lack of collaboration opportunities, being in a predominately white district (75% white students, 92% white teachers) was a significant consideration. School systems create expectations and analyze outcomes based upon ideas, beliefs, and values generally accepted by the dominant culture of the school and district (Douglas et al., 2008). Working with school leaders to coach teachers on using equitable practices is essential for dismantling the mindsets common when working in a white-dominant space. During this study, I analyzed the conditions that must be put in place for school leaders to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve the use of equitable practices. Next, I share the significance of this study to the context through a collaboration and equity lens; then, I outline possible practice ideas and policy and research implications.

### *Context*

The FoP is significant to the context in two ways: collaboration needs and equity support. Previously our schools relied on an extreme form of site-based management, rarely reaching out to peers (other school leaders) or the district for support. We worked to break down these barriers over time to create a more collaborative, safe atmosphere. This project furthered the collaborative work of bringing school leaders together from across the district.

Focusing on equitable practices is purposeful and needed. Harbor County Schools (HCS) staff is 92% white, and our student population is 75% white, 18% Hispanic, 4% Multi-Racial, 2% Black, and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander/American Indian. The number of minority students has increased in HCS over the past five years. While the number of minority teachers has risen slightly, the system is still predominately white. A focus on equity is new for many of our teachers, so creating a school leader group around this topic will help improve equitable practices and student experience.

### *Practice*

As a district leader, I see the gap between what our district team wants to be true for school leaders and the reality of what practices over time created. In years prior, school leader professional development meant doing a book read, discussing it, then leaving the ideas shared on the shelf. This attempted educational intervention was stagnant and did not substantially change practice. There was also a lack of collaboration between schools and the district team. The findings of this study have practice implications for the local, district, and state-level school leadership. The findings of this study share specific ways for district leaders to structure learning to best meet the needs of school leaders and create an environment of distributed leadership at

the highest level of a school systems leader team (Elmore, 2000; Spillane et al., 2001). This study impacted school leaders' professional learning by fostering a collaborative, co-learning environment with district staff.

***Policy***

Traditionally, school systems operate with a top-down approach that tends to inhibit collaboration and co-learning. School districts routinely attempt to reform by restructuring formal reporting hierarchies, adding or removing responsibilities, or editing standard operating procedures. While this is may be useful in rethinking how people in central office roles do their daily work, relationships with schools do not fundamentally change (Honig et al., 2010).

The findings of the study challenge this structure by proposing a framework that includes a District and School Leader Collaboration Continuum that builds leader agency and offers opportunities for district and school leaders to collaborate and build capacity of leaders and cohesion in the district. The study has national, state, and local policy implications for school and district leader collaboration and learning. Other public school units could use the framework to change how they serve and work with school leaders. Through examining practice and policy, the study can add to research knowledge or potential research projects.

***Research***

While there is existing research about central office transformation, school leader professional development, and equitable practices, the project can contribute to how we combine these factors to build cohesion and stronger leadership practices in a district (Elmore, 2004). The study could be significant to future researchers by shifting how we approach and examine school leader professional development. The use of action research to have school leaders work with

district leaders to impact teacher use of equitable practices offers a new take on coaching and professional learning. I hope that, ultimately, the study contributes to a more positive school experience for all students, no matter their gender, race, or socioeconomic status. As such, we can build and implement more equitable systems to influence outcomes for students.

## FoP Connection to Equity

The focus of practice is grounded in how equitable classroom instructional practices can become ingrained in school and district culture. School leaders want equitable practices to be a part of school culture, but the path for coaching teachers to do this is not always intuitive. High-stakes testing and accountability measures shift the focus from equity to student achievement data. Through the participatory action research project, school leaders collaborated to develop their knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve the use of equitable classroom practices. Two equity frameworks support the focus of practice. First, I discuss the psychological framework, specifically how stereotype threat and equity traps affect classroom instruction. Second, I share the sociological framework and structural implications of data-based teacher observation and instructional coaching for equity.

### Psychological Frame

All people have implicit biases and, to some degree, perpetuate stereotypes–this does not stop at the schoolhouse door. Steele (2011) explains that people of color can internalize stereotypes, affecting their performance in the classroom and on tests. Steele names the tendency to underperform due to pressures not to conform to stereotypes as stereotype threat, defined as "being threatened because we have a given characteristic" (p. 73)

My goal is for all students, no matter their race, gender, or socioeconomic status, have a high-quality experience in classrooms that are free from the stigmas and pressures of the outside world. Our team of school and district leaders collaborated and learned about equitable practices to move toward this goal. As a baseline, we discussed implicit bias and equity traps. Equity traps are assumptions that prevent educators from believing that their students of color can be successful learners (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Potential equity traps include deficit mindsets, racial erasure (ignoring color and expressing the idea that all students' experiences are the same), avoidance, and paralogical beliefs and behaviors (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

As the minoritized student population increased three years ago, the district introduced professional learning about equitable practices.

> For culturally and linguistically diverse students, their opportunities to develop habits of mind and cognitive capacities are limited or non-existent because of educational inequity. The result is their cognitive growth is stunted, leaving them dependent learners, unable to work to their full potential. (Hammond & Jackson, 2015, p. 13)

Through professional learning and traditional classroom observations, HCS district and school leaders noticed the need for coaching in equitable practices to ensure all students have the best possible educational experience.

**Sociological Frame**

The development of school leaders' equity frames while working together as a team was a cornerstone of the project. As Rigby and Tredway (2015) explain, school leadership plays a significant role in influencing teacher practice. Student outcomes and the traditional focus on instruction and accountability do not consider the impact of the leader's equity frame. An equity

frame is an intentional structure that school leaders use that systemically and intentionally guide decisions about leadership and professional actions when inequities are encountered.

Schools traditionally subscribe to a top-down leadership approach. When leadership shifts, school priorities and practice shift. Individual person-dependent change is not a long-lasting solution due to frequent leadership turnover; therefore, collaborative leadership throughout the organization is necessary to make durable equity changes (Leverett, 2002). In this study, a team of school and district leaders worked together in a collaborative space to learn about equitable practices.

Because "Americans have long been trained to see the deficiencies of people rather than policy" (Kendi, 2019, p. 42), we must shift the focus. Before reading Kendi's work, I was guilty of noting deficits in classroom instruction instead of the broader policies and practices that keep equitable practices from being a part of school culture. We hoped to move the needle toward equity by co-creating new practices and tools with like-minded school leaders so all students have a high-quality educational experience.

Thus, the psychology and sociology of how we view students, parents, and teachers in our systems tends to produce the same results for minoritized students. While a few student succeed in our systems, many do not. To address the deeper psycholofical and sociological factors, we need a deeper look at equity and concurrently, we need to change our classroom practices to reflect more equitable access and rigor (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Next, I outline the purpose of the FoP, the research questions, and the proposed timeline of the PAR project.

## Participatory Action Research Design

I designed the study using Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology. Grounded in the work of Freire (1972) and Whyte (1991), PAR involves participants and researchers collaborating to better understand an issue and act to improve practice and outcomes. Freire (1972) rejected the traditional research model with the dualisms of subject/object and research/teaching as dehumanizing and incomplete (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Qualitative research methodologies, specifically those is Participatory Action Research (PAR) are well-suited to assist me in answering the overarching research questions and sub-questions.

In the participatory action research (PAR) study, I created the space for school leaders from across a school district to collaborate and learn about equitable practices. An essential tenet of this study is creating the School Leader Networked Improvement Community (NIC). NICs are narrowly focused collaborative teams that address a specific task through cycles of inquiry. The school leader NIC (SL-NIC) in this study had a sharp focus on equitable practices. SL-NICs engage in rapid, iterative processes of starting bite-sized innovations, prototyping, failing, reporting, and adjusting based on failures before beginning the cycle again (Bryk et al., 2015; Scanlan et al., 2016). As a result of this collaboration, school leaders learned about equitable instructional approaches and implement them with teachers at their schools.

An essential methodology for the study is the use of Community Learning Exchange (CLE) protocol, which act as processes that produce qualitative evidence that supports the inquiry. The process of CLEs provide opportunities for people in a local context to collaborate and learn about a topic or goal. The SL-NIC sessions were grounded in the Community Learning Exchange axioms (CLEs)

## Research Questions

The overarching research question is: How can school leaders develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve the use of equitable practices. I will collect data on the following sub-questions:

1. How do school leaders across a school district collaborate to improve equitable instructional practices?
2. To what extent do school leaders use tools and processes to address equitable practices?
3. To what extent do school leaders replicate collaborative learning spaces around equitable practices in their schools?
4. To what extent does working with school leaders support my growth and development as an educational leader?

## Theory of Action

By collecting data on the sub-questions that address the overarching question, I addressed this theory of action: If district and school leaders work together in a collaborative space focused on equitable practices, then they will develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use equitable practices with teachers.

## Project Activities

The study took place in a small, public school district comprised of approximately 5,000 students in ten schools. Three school leaders (principals) and two district administrators (one being myself) were a part of the team. I further explain the setting in Chapter 3. Each of the potential team members participated in the Project $I^4$ Cohort 2 through East Carolina University.

I am a member of the first cohort of Project $I^4$, meaning we have all participated in using similar evidence-based observation tools, effective methods for having post-observation conversations, and equity learning experiences.

In Participatory Action Research (PAR), I used two cycles of inquiry to explore a societal problem – teachers creating equitable and rigorous classroom experiences for young people as a result of school and district leaders observing their classes and facilitating useful data-driven conversations. PAR counterbalances the expertise of the people closest to the issue such as the school leaders and teachers with the expert knowledge of researchers and academics (Herr & Anderson, 2014). The primary activities in each cycle consisted of SL-NIC meetings, CLEs, and interviews. The goal for each PAR cycle was to emulate Bryk et al.'s (2015) plan, do, study, act (PDSA) cycle of inquiry by having school leaders collaborate in NIC sessions, share their feedback and thoughts in the reflective memos and artifacts from the sessions. Then. I coded all data using a coding process (Saldaña, 2016) to determine themes. An outline of all three cycles is presented in Figure 2.

## Summary

Providing time and space for school leaders to collaborate is essential; however, due to many public-school districts' traditional top-down leadership approach, this is not always a priority. The use of equitable practices in classrooms has the potential to shift student experience and teacher development. Creating a space for school and district leaders to collaborate and learn about equitable practices has the potential to shift school leader professional development structures. This study utilizes the improvement science principles of seeing the system that shapes current outcomes and accelerating that learning through an improvement community of

school leaders (Bryk et al., 2010b). Through team learning I hope to make a significant shift in the practice of teacher coaching for equity.

In seven chapters, I provide information about each part of the study. In Chapter 2, I review the theoretical, normative, and empirical research surrounding data-based observation practices, school and district leader learning, and equitable practices. In Chapter 3, I explain the methodology of the PAR study in greater detail. In Chapter 4, I tell the story of our context and the learning from the PAR Pre-cycle. In Chapter 5, I detail PAR Cycle One and share emergent themes. In Chapter 6, I explain PAR Cycle Two and the study findings. Lastly, Chapter 7 summarizes the study and discusses the findings and implications.

| Project Timeline | |
|---|---|
| Fall 2021 | **PAR Pre-cycle**<br>• Analysis of assets and challenges.<br>• CLE with School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC) |
| Spring 2022 | **PAR Cycle 1**<br>• SL-NIC CLEs<br>• SL-NIC Member Individual interviews<br>• Data Collection and Analysis |
| Summer 2022 | **PAR Cycle 2**<br>• SL-NIC CLEs<br>• SL-NIC Individual interviews<br>• Data Collection and Analysis |

*Figure 2.* Project timeline.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

School reform initiatives revolve around ensuring that all students, no matter their gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, have access to a high-quality, equitable education. From my experience as a school and district leader, I have noticed a gap in the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of leaders when implementing equitable practices that serve all students. Furthermore, the research is clear -- next to teaching, school leadership is the next critical level in school reform (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood, 2020; Robinson et al., 2008) . Therefore, it is imperative to build the capacity of educational leaders specifically in the area of equitable instructional practices and in having collaborative, coaching conversations (Bryk et al., 2010a; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rigby, 2014; Supovitz et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003).

Coaching conversations between school and district leaders and school leaders and teachers rarely focus on equitable teaching practices. In my experience, collaborative conversations about equitable practices occur by happenstance during parking lot conversations or in the hallways; there is no intentionality or space given to district leaders to collaborate with school leaders about equitable practices. Less frequent are spaces for school leaders to collaborate about equitable practices within the same district. Instead, much time is given to how students are progressing. Rigby and Tredway (2015) found this as well, stating that constantly shifting expectations due to a sharp focus on student achievement data makes it difficult for school leaders to dig in on equitable instructional practices. Honig and Coburn (2008) and Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) recognize the distraction of top-down school district agendas that can detract from alignment and successful implementation at the school level.

By focusing on developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of school leaders to improve the use of equitable practices, this project challenges the traditional top-down leadership

system within public schools by utilizing school and district leader collaboration to address equitable practices. For substantial teaching and learning improvements to occur, central office administrators must lead boldly to build capacity for improvement in partnership with school leaders (Honig et al., 2010). Through team learning and iterating toward success by analyzing failures and successes with school leaders, I intend to make a significant shift in the practice of school leaders to bring equity to the forefront in classrooms successfully.

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature associated with the structures for district and school leader collaboration and equitable practices to not only form the foundation of research on the topics, but to show how this study fills a significant research gap. In the two sections, I outline structures and research for district and school leader collaboration by explaining the links to distributed leadership and collaborative learning structures. Then, I share areas that promote equity in the classroom, looking through the lens of learning theory, academic discourse, academic tasks, and culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy (CLRP). Figure 3 outlines the questions that guided the literature search and the outline for this chapter.

## Structures for District and School Leader Collaboration

Typically, district-level leaders work apart from building-level leaders in traditional public schools. A key component of this study is changing that paradigm. Learning more about the structure and nature of collaboration between educational leaders furthered my understanding of developing school leaders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Collaboration among school and district leaders can shift instructional practice and is a key lever in school and district transformation (Daly et al., 2015; Honig et al., 2010). Through this collaboration, there is potential to ensure all students have the best possible experience in school, no matter their race, gender, or socioeconomic status.

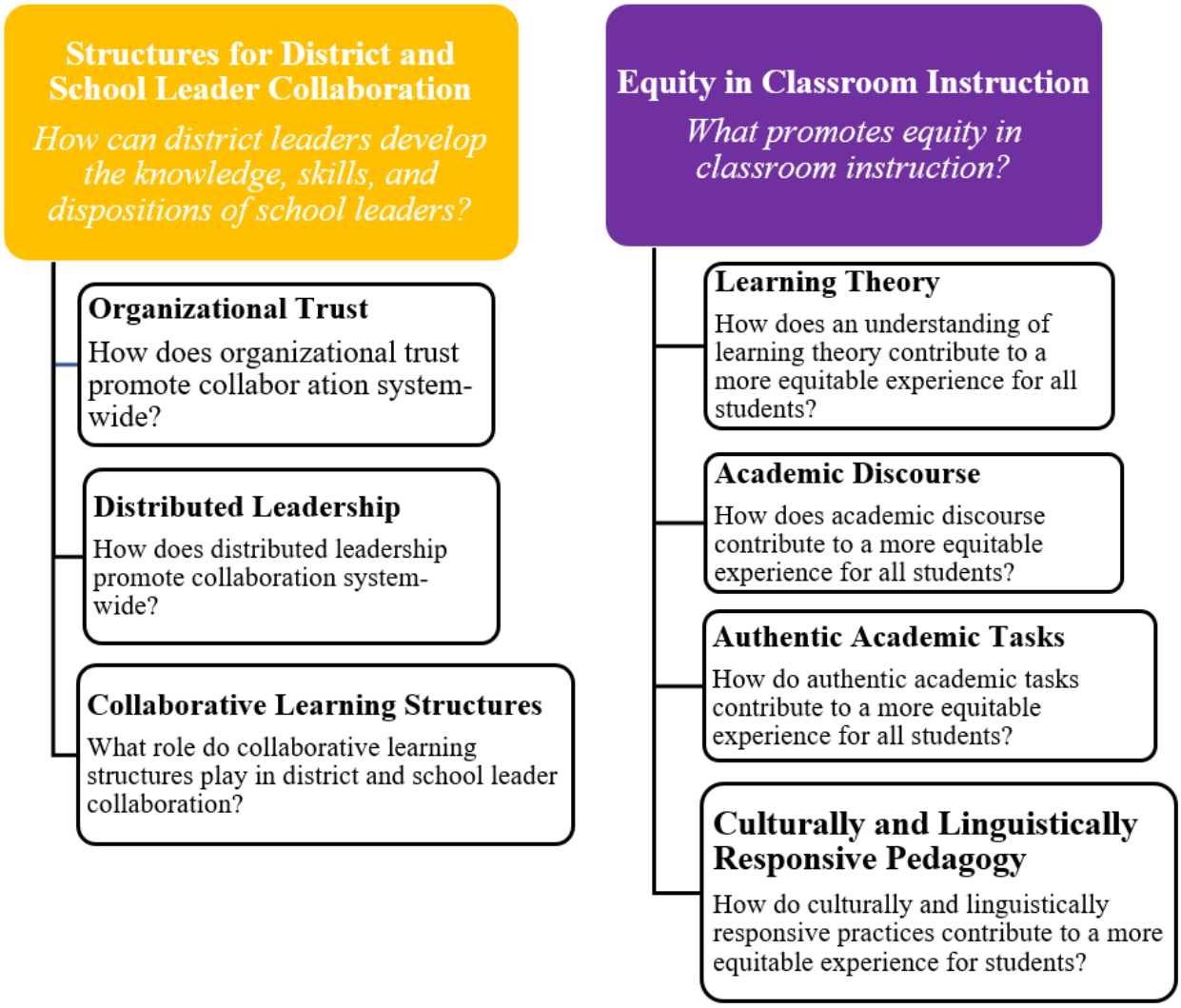


*Figure 3*. Literature review outline.

A national qualitative study focusing on the collaboration between district and school leaders in three large urban districts found that positive change occurred with direct, collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals. These relationships focused on helping every principal become an exceptional instructional leader (Honig et al., 2010). Similarly, Daly et al. (2015) conducted a study of 78 school leaders in an underperforming school district on their perceptions of trust, efficacy, and collaboration among themselves and district leaders. Daly et al. (2015) found that school and district leaders must build a shared vision through positive relationships and trust. Daly et al.'s findings suggest that leaders build social capital through learning together, and districts should provide opportunities for them to do so.

Traditionally, the distribution of leadership in school systems is hierarchical. Central office administrators make decisions and inform school-level leaders; school leaders are supposed to inform teachers and ensure that they implement the curricular and pedagogical decisions made in the district office without input from teachers or leaders. However, because schools and school districts are complex systems, they are often not understood simply through a hierarchal chart or list of job responsibilities. Instead, central office administrators and board members need to move beyond a hierarchy organizational chart (Weiss, 1995). The traditional "heroic leader" archetype—where one person performs all essential leadership functions—should be eliminated and replaced with a model in which leadership we fully recognize how leadership is cognitively distributed among various members of an organization (Spillane et al., 2001; Yukl, 2002). Next, I explore areas that promote collaboration between school and district leaders. Specifically, I outline how trust, distributed leadership, and collaborative learning structures affect the district and school collaboration.

## Organizational Trust

Trust is a critical foundational element in all human learning (Rotter, 1967). In schools, organizations where learning is the goal, trust is a key factor in fostering collaboration between teachers, students, families, and school leaders (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Trust is the willingness to be vulnerable within a network. Trust within organizations is a way to reduce uncertainty by having confidence that others will meet our expectations. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) build on this to say that this confidence—trust—maintains order within the organization and plays a role in positive cooperation and communication, which are foundational for productive relationships within organizations.

Defining organizational trust is difficult. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) created the faces of trust after reviewing four decades of research and over 150 articles about trust. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran's (1999) faces of trust are common themes that emerged across the literature and include:

1. Willingness to risk: A throughline in all definitions of trust is the willingness to be vulnerable. Where there is no vulnerability, there is no need for trust. Willingness to risk is the amount of confidence one has in a situation of vulnerability.
2. Benevolence: The most common of the faces of trust, benevolence is the confidence that the trusted person or group will protect your wellbeing. Another way to look at this is that those being trusted have positive intent in the relationship.
3. Reliability: Combining predictability and benevolence, reliability is the extent to which you can count on another person to deliver on commitments. Reliability applies to the tangible (i.e., deliverables) and intangible (i.e., willingness to participate or listen).

4. Competence: Competence is the ability to do something effectively and efficiently. Competence is a facet of trust because good intentions aren't enough. When a person is dependent on someone or an organization, they must have the skill to deliver to be trusted.
5. Honesty: Integrity, character, and authenticity make up honestly. To trust a person or organization, they must deliver on commitments and agreements in a truthful way.
6. Openness: Transparency, or openness, is the process by which individuals make themselves vulnerable by sharing information. Openness signals reciprocal trust. Being guarded does the opposite and can cause suspicion instead of trust.

A lack of trust often results in people being cautious and unwilling to take risks, creating an uncollaborative environment. In a qualitative study that analyzed negative relationships among educational leaders, Daly et al. (2015) discovered that a common understanding of trust between school and district leaders reduced difficult relationships and increased collaboration. Another finding was that district leaders should model risk-taking and exploration with school leaders and encourage these practices. Daly's work supports sharing leadership, and moving away from the formal leadership hierarchy.

**Distributed Leadership**

Distributed leadership (Spillane et al., 2004) is when responsibilities are "stretched over" people in different roles rather than neatly divided among them (p. 5). The duties are based on the nature of expertise among school members; leadership is cognitively distributed among adults, and they have skills and abilities to take on leadership responsibilities – if they trust the school environment. Because school and district leadership, directly and indirectly, correlate to teacher performance and student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Rosenholtz et al., 1986;

Spillane et al., 2004), the way that school and district leaders work together and collaborate impacts teacher and student performance. Distributed leadership is one educational practice and theory that could rely on the collective knowledge, skills, and dispositions of all adults in a school to better serve the learning outcomes.

For research purposes, distributed leadership includes both theoretical and normative definitions. According to Spillane et al. (2004), leadership is inherently distributed among multiple people in an organization, whether formally named or not. Distributed leadership is a theoretical framework in which members of an organization take on shared leadership roles (Elmore, 2000). In schools and school districts, people specialize in areas and topics depending on prior knowledge, skills, or interests. According to Elmore (2000), specialization naturally happens. Still, the glue that holds the organization together is the "common task or goal—improvement of instruction—and a common frame of values for how to approach that task—culture—that keeps distributed leadership from being another form of loose coupling" (p. 15). This theoretical framework considers the social context and relationships with the organization and names them as a part of school leadership (Harris et al., 2007).

Spillane et al.'s (2001) distribute leadership study defined distributed leadership practice in schools. The four year longitudinal study in schools in Chicago was designed to take an in-depth look at school leadership practices and how school leaders create learning environments for teachers and students. A central finding from this study is that a distributed approach, when intervening to improve school leadership, is more effective than focusing solely on the development of one individual. The distribution of expertise and knowledge benefits the school, rather than only the individual leader (Spillane et al., 2001). Because distributed leadership engages all adults in taking responsibility for outcomes, the leader as a solo actor has more

support; however, undoing long-standing expectations and ways of functioning in schools and districts is a complex process that requires trust and facilitation.

Rosenholtz et al. (1986) examined teachers' perceptions of organizational structures and conditions in 78 elementary schools, surveying 1,213 teachers. Through this work, they discovered that school cultures and climates fall into two distinctly different buckets—collaborative culture or a culture of autonomy. The characteristics of a collaborative culture are collaboration, continuous improvement, and skill acquisitions to achieve school-created goals. There are agreements and a shared vision created among teachers and school leadership. On the other hand, in a culture of autonomy, there are no shared agreements, vision, or common language, school leaders are less likely to practice the tenets of distributed leadership. In addition, Rosenholtz et al. (1986) found that, in collaborative settings in which school leaders who are confident about teachers' abilities to teach effectively and student's ability to learn, school leaders and teachers have a tighter or more cohesive alignment of goals, norms, and behaviors. Furthermore, teachers' confidence manifested as school leaders empowered teachers to make collective decisions.

Timperley's (2006) research builds on the need for tight alignment towards common goals for distributed leadership to impact. She conducted a four-year mixed methods study that focused on leadership processes in elementary schools in New Zealand. Thirty-five school staffers, including school leaders and teachers from across seven schools, participated in the study. Timperley (2006) concluded that increasing the distribution of leadership is only desired if the quality of the "leadership activities contribute to assisting teachers in providing more effective instruction to their students" (p. 417). The findings show that for teachers to enact

distributed leadership practices, they must see the direct correlation between the practices and outcomes for students.

Expanding to the school district perspective, district leaders play an essential role in implementing distributed leadership. Evidence suggests a correlation between distributed leadership practices and positive change in schools, including increasing student achievement and a collaborative environment (Bryk et al., 2015; Elmore, 2000; Harris et al., 2007; Leverett, 2002; Park & Datnow, 2009; Spillane, 2005). Central office administrators play a vital role in implementing distributed leadership practices (Harris et al., 2007; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012; Park & Datnow, 2009). Spreading leadership across roles can create the conditions for collaboration to occur, but it does not automatically result in school improvement. Harris et al. (2007) suggest that the empirical evidence for distributed leadership is "encouraging but far from conclusive" (p. 345) and that further research studies are required to dive into the potential and limitations of distributed leadership models in school systems. Despite the many thoughts surrounding distributed leadership and its implementation, the framework provides an anchor for promoting collaboration throughout a system, especially one as complex as a school district.

**Collaborative Learning Structures**

As the old adage goes, two heads are better than one; in the same vein, one could surmise that the sum of educators working together is better than many educators working in isolation. Drago-Severson and Pinto (2006) support this adage; they share that school systems are most effective when school and district leaders find ways for teachers to establish collegial relationships, share resources, and collaborate. In the same line of thinking, collaborative structures between school and district leaders are necessary, but sometimes hard to achieve (Honig et al., 2010). While studies confirm the effectiveness of collaborative learning structures

at the school level, more research regarding collaboration and conversation between school and district leaders is warranted.

Collaboration is a term that has different meanings depending on the context or a person's previous experience working alongside others. Because of this, a structure for collaborating to build capacity for teaching and learning is helpful. Communities of practice (COPs; Lave & Wenger, 1991), professional learning communities (PLCs; Dufour & Eaker, 1998), Networked Improvement Communities (NICs; Bryk et al., 2015), and coaching conversations (Aguilar, 2013) are collaborative learning structures that have gained momentum across all levels of education. Next, I explain the history of the four structures, the research behind their use, and their application to school and district leader collaboration.

### *Communities of Practice*

COPs is group of individuals who share a common purpose and learn how to pursue this purpose from each other (Scanlan et al., 2016). Based on social learning theory, Lave and Wenger (1991) studied apprenticeship among tailors in Liberia in the late 1980s to develop their concepts of communities of practice (CoPs). They learned that the core knowledge is relational, not individual. The primary way people learn is through shared experiences and interactions with others. Wenger (2000) defines three characteristics of CoPs: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

A nationwide qualitative study about implementing CoPs in two-way immersion Catholic schools discovered school and district collaboration implications. This study included 51 school leaders, teachers, and mentors (Scanlan et al., 2016). The study suggests the importance of school leaders from different sites and contexts working together in COPs to build their capacities for meeting the needs of students, especially those from culturally and linguistically

diverse backgrounds. Scanlan et al. (2016) also shared that the need for more specificity in CoPs intersects with the following collaborative learning structure–networked improvement communities.

### *Networked Improvement Community*

Grounded in improvement science, Networked Improvement Communities (NICs) are narrowly focused CoPs that address a specific task through a cycle of inquiry. NICs engage in rapid, iterative processes of starting bite-sized innovations, prototyping, failing, reporting, and adjusting based on failures before beginning the cycle again (Bryk et al., 2010a, 2015; Scanlan et al., 2016). Like other collaborative structures and improvement methods, NICs focus on addressing the gaps between the "aspirations of an education system and its capacity to deliver high-quality education to all communities in every classroom, for every child (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 6). High-functioning NICs are:

- focused on a specific, common aim;
- guided by a deep understanding of a targeted problem and the system that produces the problem;
- disciplined by improvement science principles/methods;
- coordinated to facilitate rapid testing and diffusion into the field (Bryk et al., 2015).

When it comes to district and school leaders operating in the community, Spillane et al.'s (2004) work shares that it's essential to move beyond the analysis of individual knowledge and consider what leaders know and do together.

### *Professional Learning Communities*

Dufour and Eaker (1998) are the originators of the PLC model. A PLC is "educators committed to working collaboratively in an ongoing process of collective inquiry and action

research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (Dufour et al., 2012, p. 14). PLCs are a framework where school faculty shift their school's culture to build capacity and sustain change (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improving learning experiences for students is continuous, authentic, job-embedded learning for educators (Dufour & Fullan, 2012). The essential tenants of the PLC model are all sharply focused on student learning (Dufour et al., 2012; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The tenets include:

- Shared mission, vision, values, and goals,
- Collective inquiry,
- Collaborative teams,
- Action-orientation and experimentation: learning by doing,
- Continuous Improvement, and
- Results Orientation (Dufour et al., 2012; Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Since the inception of PLCs over 20 years ago, the framework has become very popular, and the term is now a common part of school vernacular (Dufour & Fullan, 2012). Dufour and Eaker (1998) shared that PLCs were the "primary engine for our school improvement efforts" in an already high-achieving school district near Chicago where Dufour served as superintendent. Dufour and Eaker (1998) noticed that the schools with strong PLCs were four times more likely to improve academically than those with more fractured teams. Therefore, strong collaboration improves student performance (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Schmoker, 2004). A three-year case study conducted by Thessin and Starr (2011) in Stamford, Connecticut Public Schools found that district leaders play four key roles in the implementation of PLCs:

1. Ownership and support – District leaders must involve teachers and school leaders in developing and leading the PLC process;
2. Professional development – District leaders must teach school leaders and teachers how to work together effectively in PLCs;
3. Straightforward improvement process – District leaders must show how PLCs fit into the district's continuous improvement process;
4. Differentiated support – District leaders must support schools accordingly to their unique needs to help them move to the next step.

Numerous studies highlight effectiveness of PLCs among teachers and at the school level, but there is a gap in research about school district structures that allow for authentic PLCs between school and district leaders. This is not unique for PLCs but includes CoPs and NICs as well. When analyzing studies, a majority put schools as the key lever in school transformation. Significantly fewer studies highlight the key district role, instead of individual schools, in school reform (Rorrer et al., 2008).

### *Coaching Conversations*

The final collaborative structure I explored in the literature review is coaching conversations. Differing from PLCs, CoPs, and NICs, coaching conversations are a collaborative structure that relies on a reflective dialogue between the coach and the person receiving coaching (Houchens et al., 2017). Blended coaching (Bloom et al., 2005), coaching stances (Glickman & Gordon, 1995), and cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2006) are all collaborative coaching models that include using coaching conversations to help school leaders grow their instructional practice. Aguilar (2020) brings the model of transformational coaching to the mix, which adds three goals for coaching conversations: increasing the leader's emotional resilience, reflective

abilities, and skills. Furthermore, Aguilar (2020) discovered that the most important factor in the success of coaching conversations is the coach's disposition, their attitude and emotional state, or "way of being" during the conversation. The coach's way of being was the deciding factor between a weak or powerful conversation, a conversation that drove a change to impact learning or not. Transformational coaching conversations consider the behavior, beliefs, and ways of being of the coach and person being coached (Aguilar, 2013, 2020).

During the literature review, I noticed extensive research on coaching conversations between school leaders and classroom teachers. Fewer studies specifically address the use of coaching conversations between the district and school leaders. Houchens et al. (2017) studied the use of executive coaches working one-on-one with four principals. A dimension of this study was group coaching conversations. A finding was that the collaborative nature of these sessions helped foster a stronger leadership culture throughout the district (Houchens et al., 2017). In addition the research on shared leadership and collaboration, if school and district leaders foster better collaboration to improve the public school experience for all, they need to engage in coaching conversations and promote collaborative structures.

## Equity in Classroom Instruction

Public schools across the United States serve students from a variety of cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. One of the magical things about public education is that students and teachers come together to learn, no matter their race, gender, identity, culture, or socioeconomic status (Eubanks et al., 1997; Hammond & Jackson, 2015). Many people believe that schools in a democratic society should educate everyone well (Eubanks et al., 1997). However, though students from different backgrounds sit in the same classrooms with the same teachers, student experiences within those classrooms differ significantly. Eubanks et al. (1997)

explained that acceptance and utilization of a dominant set of values, norms, and beliefs often support the success of the privileged minority and hinders that of the majority. Therefore, I want to better understand what promotes equity and ensures all students have the support they need to succeed in classroom instruction. As cited by Hammond in a February 2021 interview, The National Equity Project defines educational or instruction equity as the reduction of the predictability of who succeeds and who fails through disrupting common practices that negatively impact students. The goal is to cultivate the gifts and talents of every child.

The person who holds the key to providing an equitable classroom environment for all students is the teacher (Hammond & Jackson, 2015). School leaders have the potential to impact the practice of an entire school of teachers, and a team of school leaders collaborating has the potential to impact an entire school system. Building the capacity of school leaders in equitable instructional practices is an important part of school reform (Rigby, 2014). Next, I outline how learning theory, academic discourse, and authentic performance tasks apply to equitable classroom instruction. I share the importance of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy and its role in the school leader, classroom teacher, and student experience.

**Learning Theory**

Decades of research in cognitive and development sciences have provided a foundation for the science of learning theory (Bruner, 1960; Vygotsky, 1978; Driscoll, 1984). School leaders and teachers need to have a strong grasp on learning theory to best design and create effective learning experiences for all learners. To ground the study in what we know about how adults learn, I share views and information about cognitive and developmental science to explain the importance of learning theory, specifically constructivism, when employing equitable practices in the classrooms and in adult learning. My goal is to answer the question: How does an

understanding of learning theory contribute to a more equitable experience for all students? For the purposes of this research, I focus on constructivism and its link to providing an equitable learning experience for all students because adults and students make meaning through dialogue.

Bruner (1960), the father of constructivist learning theory, proposed that learners construct their knowledge based on categorizing and coding information. He believed that cognitive growth is growing from the outside in as much as from the inside out and suggests that high-level instruction must bring together the content knowledge, prior knowledge of the learner, and the nature of the learning process (Driscoll, 1994; Greenfield & Bruner, 1966). Building on Bruner's work, Donovan and Bransford's (2005) book *How People Learn* shares three important findings:

1. Students come to classrooms with preconceptions about how the world works.
2. To develop complete understanding, students must have a foundation of factual knowledge, understand the facts and ideas in context, and organize the knowledge in ways that facilitate retrieval and application.
3. Metacognition—the understanding of one's own thought process—as a step in instruction helps students take control of their learning by self-monitoring their progress. (p. 10)

Furthermore, according to Driscoll (1994), educators need to create experiences for students that promote metacognition and dispel misconceptions. Discovery and inquiry-based activities help learners acquire concepts by thinking through and testing out their hypotheses. He further poses that problem-solving through discovery learning promotes a sense of self-reward in which learners become motivated to learn because of the intrinsic value of holding knowledge.

In addition, he suggests that working with other people to solve problems and acquire new knowledge adds another layer to the learning process.

It is important to recognize that educators who employ equitable practices use constructivist methods to bridge students' prior knowledge and academic skills (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Social interaction among learners is another essential component of constructivism. Vygotsky (1978) argues in his cognitive development theory that learning occurs through social interaction. Human beings are innately social. People working together to problem-solve must have a mutual understanding of the task, which Vygotsky terms intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity is a partnership of shared authority and power in which the peers in dialogue bridge the student's current zone of proximal development to a new level of understanding (Driscoll, 1994; Wertsch, 1984). As such, the interactions of the subjects, usually student peers, facilitated by a teacher, supports learners to co-construct meaning. Furthermore, according to Green et al. (2018) in their study evaluating teacher preparation programs' effectiveness, providing opportunities for students to construct knowledge with peers actively and reflect on the real-world connections is meaningful for learners. In the same vein, adults learn by working with their peers, mirroring student intersubjectivity and authentic learning experiences to make meaning through dialogue.

**Academic Discourse**

Academic discourse is students talking in a classroom setting that fosters critical thinking and rich content understanding. I want to understand better how academic discourse contributes to a more equitable experience for all students. As a school and district leader, I noticed that teachers praise students for being quiet, so compliant classrooms are silent. This silence doesn't

necessarily mean learning is happening. According to Zwiers and Crawford (2011), academic conversations are a cornerstone for literacy and learning. Furthermore, students need opportunities to interact and talk about what they are learning in order to deepen their understanding and dispel potential misconceptions.

Conversation promotes the development of academic language. People discuss the material in purposeful ways to encourage the encoding of information into long-term memory at the highest level of learning. A cluster of classroom structure studies from the 1970s and 1980s found that students need social interaction to participate fully in classroom activities (Doyle & Carter, 1984; Mehan, 1979). Fully immersing people, especially children, in language helps them develop and internalize it. The processes of listening, talking, and negotiating meaning are vital for developing academic language (Krashen, 1985; Swain, 1995; Zwiers & Crawford, 2011).

Academic discourse is the scarcest in classrooms with high numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse students (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). According to Zwiers and Crawford, observers see more quiet, isolated practice and less academic discourse in classrooms with higher numbers of linguistically and culturally diverse students. More independent, quiet practice is due to the testing and accountability culture and the belief that this isolated practice will increase student achievement. Similarly, minority children are viewed as needing more structure and discipline. Therefore, there are often fewer opportunities for open discussion in these classrooms (Eubanks et al., 1997). An example of this is when lessons are primarily direct instruction for groups of students who are viewed as low achieving according to traditional standardized formative assessments.

According to Zwiers (2007), "teachers, texts, and tests expect all students to process and produce knowledge in certain ways" (p. 96). Students who have grown up in English-speaking,

mainstream environments have an advantage because they share the knowledge bases and communication cues of traditional U.S. public schools, while non-mainstream, minority students placed in traditional classrooms may experience the pedagogy of entrapment. The pedagogy of entrapment is when schools require learners to know and understand specific academic discourse skills that are not explicitly taught (Macedo, 1994; Zwiers, 2007).

Simply giving opportunities for discussion in classrooms is not enough. The structure and intent of conversations and how it contributes to learning is critical (Zwiers, 2007). Eubanks et al. (1997) divided discourse structure into two categories, Discourse I and II. Discourse I focuses on one story or viewpoint as truth, while Discourse II holds space for multiple perspectives. Discourse I conversations are limited to the familiar, reproduction, symptoms of issues, and often place blame. On the other hand, Discourse II conversations are often uncomfortable, push for transformation, dig deep for causes, and look at what could be. Generally speaking, Discourse I conversations are easier for teachers to facilitate because they are surface-level and guided by retrieval questions with clear right and wrong answers.

School leaders and teachers can set the stage for purposeful Discourse II conversations in classrooms while explicitly teaching conversation skills to foster academic language. One example is creating and planning activities that give students multiple opportunities to express and refine their ideas using new vocabulary. In whole-class situations, students can lose focus, so opportunities to work in pairs where they can listen to one other person and try out more challenging words and structures are helpful (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). When teachers in the Zwiers and Crawford (2011) study compared words used in only assessments to those purposefully used in authentic classroom conversation, students were more likely to commit the vocabulary to long-term memory. Therefore, working in pairs before whole class discussions and

ensuring academic vocabulary is used in classroom academic discourse provides equitable classroom environment for all students.

**Authentic Academic Tasks**

There is growing evidence that students learn best when given high-quality, cognitively demanding tasks that focus on reasoning and problem solving (Kilpatrick et al., 2001). According to the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2014), the Levels of Cognitive Demand is a spectrum that puts academic tasks into categories based on the level of cognitive demand required of the learner. Lower-level demands include memorization of facts, rules, and formulas that have no connection to underlying concepts. Learners using procedures or algorithms without connections and focusing on a singular correct answer are other characteristics of activities with low cognitive demand. Tasks that require high cognitive demand require complex, nonalgorithmic thinking. These tasks connect to underlying concepts, big ideas and require active examination of many potential solutions (Doyle & Carter, 1984; Smith & Stein, 1998). These characteristics are based on mathematics but are applicable across subject areas (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2014).

Academic tasks are defined by the requirements for student products (i.e., an essay), the resources available for student use (i.e., an exemplar essay), and the skills or operations used to create the product (i.e., classifying and sorting data to use in the essay; Doyle & Carter, 1984). As teacher and school/district leader, I noticed that when students understood how tasks applied to their context, engagement and outward excitement for learning were higher. In creating this literature review, I wondered if authentic academic tasks could be considered an equity strategy. This section aims to answer the question: How can authentic academic tasks contribute to a more equitable experience for all students?

Implementing and intentionally teaching curriculum standards is best done through cognitively demanding tasks that require students to think, reason, and problem-solve (Tekkumru-Kisa et al., 2020). McCormick (2016) did a quantitative analysis of the levels of demand used in tasks in primary grades classrooms in Australia. Through surveying 108 teachers, McCormick found that students have "limited opportunities to solve challenging and unfamiliar problem-solving tasks" in the classroom (McCormick, 2016, p. 461). Furthermore, just 24% of the teachers surveyed used tasks requiring high cognitive demand. Discovery and inquiry-based activities, which require a high level of cognitive demand, help learners acquire concepts by testing their hypotheses (Driscoll, 1994). Assessment of student learning through their performance with specific, targeted tasks is an ongoing process (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Creating authentic academic tasks starts with the curriculum design process. Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) Understanding by Design (UbD) is a framework for improving student achievement through backward planning. Backward planning asks educators to begin with the essential question students should understand by the end of a unit of study. The teachers design lessons and units for student understanding first, then for knowledge and skills. Embedded in the UbD process is starting with the end in mind and designing backward.

The UbD framework includes six facets of understanding that should be evident in teacher planning: explaining, interpreting, applying, shifting perspective, empathizing, and self-assessing. UbD is a three-stage process that includes design standards and teacher training to help educators design, edit, share, and improve their lessons (McTighe & Willis, 2019; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Based on cognitive psychology and learning theory, the UbD principles and practices shift views on effective learning from drill and approach to understanding, synthesis,

and application (Alhamisi et al., 2014). The UbD framework is a potential way for district and school leaders to generate and create authentic tasks with teachers.

Increasing task cognitive demand is just as important as students can relate to and see the value in the task. Authentic learning comes from solving problems that arise out of "conflict-generating dilemmas" (Driscoll, 1994, p. 235). Considering student backgrounds and prior knowledge when developing learning tasks helps students initially relate to the material (Alhamisi et al., 2014). There are ways to ensure students can connect to the content and consider multiple perspectives and backgrounds. One way is Muhammad's (2018, 2020) HILL learning goals, which include designing lesson plans with tasks that outline the identity, skills, intellect, and criticality for learners to promote instructional equity through considering multiple perspectives. Muhammad's (2018, 2020) HILL model is outlined below.

1. *Identity*: Does the lesson plan have the potential to advance my student's understanding of their multiple identities and the identities of others? What will students learn about themselves?
2. *Skills*: Does the lesson plan have the potential to advance my students' literacy skills and proficiency in the content? What skills will my students learn?
3. *Intellect*: Does the lesson plan have the potential to advance intellectual development? What topics/ideas will my students learn more about?
4. *Criticality*: Does the lesson plan have the potential to advance my students' thinking about power, privilege, oppression in the materials and society?

Muhammad (2018, 2020) created the HILL model for use in secondary education. However, there are pieces that educators could consider at any grade level. Specifically, the reflection process that educators can use to evaluate resources utilized for academic task creation. The

HILL model is a potential equity strategy that school leaders could learn about to then share with their teachers.

**Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy**

Beginning over 30 years ago, research and literature about culturally responsive education became widespread in education circles. Ladson-Billings' (1995) landmark work about culturally relevant pedagogy and Gay's (2000) research about culturally relevant teaching is at the heart of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy (CLRP). CLRP is an approach that leverages the assets that minority students and students with home languages other than English bring to the classroom. Ladson-Billings (1995) shares the importance of revising teacher education programs to prepare teacher candidates in ways that support just and equitable experiences for all students. Gay's (2000) seminal work primarily focuses on competency-based teaching practices for educators to be culturally responsive. Since Ladson-Billings' (1995) and Gay's (2000) research, there has been a substantial shift in public education to add language and linguistics to culturally relevant pedagogy, hence CLRP. Paris (2012) advocates for a change from culturally responsive to culturally sustaining pedagogy since the goal is to foster and celebrate cultural and linguistic differences among students.

Students bring a variety of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds with them into the classroom. The ability for one teacher to effectively instruct diverse learners requires an understanding of students' backgrounds and experiences. Members of different cultures and groups have specific and unique experiences depending on their context (Driscoll, 1994). In this section of the literature review, I explain the role CLRP plays in equitable instruction for all learners. I also share information about implementing CLRP, and its effect on teacher and school leader development, and the struggles facing implementation.

### *CLRP Curriculum and Instruction*

Successfully teaching students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds requires more than surface-level lessons on flags, festivals, and food. It means placing instruction within the larger sociopolitical context and developing the sociopolitical lens of both teachers and administrators (Hammond & Jackson, 2015). According to Gay (2000), culture is multidimensional and continually changing, and influenced by time, setting, age, economics, and social circumstances. In addition, expressing the cultural perspectives of one group does not nullify the existence of other viewpoints. Prior educational experience, age, socioeconomic status, religion, and language can lead to conflicting cultural frames between teachers and students. Standardization and accountability policies in schools prioritize achievement and "homogenize educators and students" (Neri et al., 2019, p. 201).

Teachers are faced with the challenge of navigating state and national standards while in tandem working to implement culturally sustainable, equitable practices (Muhammad, 2018; Neri et al., 2019). Ladson-Billings' (2009) study *The Dreamkeepers* follows eight transformative teachers who had success working with students of color. While their methodologies varied, each teacher had a "strong focus on student learning, developing cultural competence, and cultivating a sociopolitical awareness within their students" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. xi). Student learning does not simply mean scores on assessments but also tasks that encourage student creation through speaking, writing, and performing. Students in these classrooms were encouraged to examine various perspectives and ways of thinking. The sociopolitical lens of content was also a focal point. Students linked material to the broader world through community, state, national, and global connections (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

### *Warm Demander*

Teachers having expectations for high grades and perfect behavior is not enough to move the needle towards equitable instruction for all students. According to Delpit (2012), warm demanders require students, especially those from low-income, minority backgrounds, to perform. Kleinfeld (1975) created the phrase warm demander to describe the type of teacher who effectively taught Athabaskan Indian and Eskimo high school students in Alaskan schools. Warm demander educators have high expectations of students, convince students of their brilliance every day, and scaffold supports to be successful (Delpit, 2012). Becoming a warm demander is an essential lever in creating equity in the classroom (Alexander, 2016).

Alexander (2016) and the June Jordan School for Equity staff in San Francisco developed a four-part framework for becoming a warm demander:

1. *Believe in the Impossible*: The belief that all children have unlimited potential is imperative. Warm demander teachers understand the cultural strengths of all students from all backgrounds and push them to see beyond their current reality.
2. *Build Trust*: Listening and learning about what matters to students is a cornerstone in building trust. Warm demander teachers share their true selves and model making mistakes and learning from them.
3. *Teach Self-Discipline*: Warm demander teachers have firm boundaries about things that matter. They demand students learn self-discipline, but not just for mere compliance. Warm demander educators teach that discipline and high standards demonstrate respect.

4. *Embrace Failure*: Create norms to celebrate mistakes and acknowledge that real learning comes from failure. However, it's important to remember that it must happen in a safe environment with guidance from a teacher for failure to result in learning.

Students have told researchers that they want teachers who communicate that they are "important enough to be pushed, disciplined, taught, and respected" (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 88). Through the outlined approaches, warm demanders hold their students to high standards and provide the building blocks to get there, creating an equitable classroom (Alexander, 2016).

### *CLRP in School and District Leadership*

Culturally responsive school and district leaders create conditions so that CLRP is an integral part of school culture. Influential instructional leaders are a key lever in school reform, and a substantial body of research verifies the importance of school leadership influencing teacher practice and student outcomes (Branch et al., 2013; Bryk et al., 2010b; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Rigby & Tredway, 2015). Khalifa (2018) explains that cultural responsiveness is an essential component of effective school leadership. Furthermore, culturally responsive school leadership is made of a core set of leadership behaviors that include: (a) being self-reflective; (b) developing and sustaining culturally responsive teachers and curriculum; (c) promoting an inclusive school environment; and (d) engaging with student's community context (Khalifa, 2018).

A mindset and practices that promote equity are a cornerstone of CLRP. Rigby and Tredway (2015) examined how ten urban school principals enacted an equity frame to enact school transformation. An equity frame is a systematic and intentional structure to guide decisions when encountering inequities. Rigby and Tredway (2015) further identified the importance of leaders facilitating conversations about race, class, and equity, so that decision

making through an equity frame becomes a norm with the school and district context. Sleeter (2012) recommends that school and district leaders have a deep understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy and what it looks like in the classroom. Though there are helpful descriptions in literature, Sleeter (2012) advocates that a lesson and unit bank with video examples would help move instructional leaders beyond simplistic ideas about CLRP.

### *CLRP Implementation Barriers*

It is far from controversial that all teachers should have practical pedagogies to work with learners of different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds (Neri et al., 2019). Multicultural education scholars insist that teachers should be "knowledgeable of cultural diversity and develop pedagogical skills to combat racism and promote social justice" (Neri et al., 2019, p. 222). Since the inception of culturally relevant education in public schools, the implementation and naming of multicultural education, and therefore CLRP, has been met with resistance in some spaces. Though professional learning for educators about multicultural education is not political initially, it involves tensions between competing value systems (Gay, 2005; Neri et al., 2019). CLRP names and teaches practices for ensuring all students, no matter their race, gender, ethnic group, or socioeconomic status, cultivate their gifts and talents at school. This can be viewed as "promoting a redistribution of power between the defenders of the status quo and advocates of change" (Gay, 2005, p. 221).

Due to standardization and accountability policies that aim to treat all students the same, teachers face navigating the conflicting and oversimplified rhetoric and practices about CLRP. Young (2010) studied five classroom teachers and two school administrators working on unpacking the connections between race, student achievement, and culturally relevant pedagogy at an urban school in the northeastern United States. Though all seven educators felt they

understood the pedagogical importance of CLRP, each had very different understandings of CLRP. In the study, educators shared well-intentioned strategies about building relationships with students when discussing the importance of CLRP. None of the participants referenced academic success or the need to address sociopolitical consciousness (Young, 2010).

School leaders and teachers implementing CLRP may view it as another change effort in a continually shifting educational landscape. Change efforts, or innovations, have a varied rate of success depending on the audience and implementation goal. Rogers (2003) explains that the most powerful force for an innovation to be adopted is the relative advantage of the proposed change. The relative advantage is the perception of the innovation being better than existing practices. If teachers do decide to implement CLRP, they are often isolated from peers and excluded by their colleagues who think of CLRP and issues of race and culture as unimportant or even as a threat to the current norms of schooling (Esposito & Swain, 2009; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Neri et al., 2019).

There is often a mismatch between a teacher's cultural frames and those of their students. This gap results in a lack of "sufficient racial/cultural knowledge and know-how" and requires a greater amount of effort from teachers to learn about CLRP and the principles behind how and why it works (Neri et al., 2019, p. 201). Critics of CLRP implementation are not persuaded that cultural responsiveness is needed when teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students (Gay, 2005). Sleeter (2012) claims that there is simply too little research tying culturally responsive practices that promote equitable instruction to student achievement.

## Summary

School leaders are the lead learners in schools. Public schools serve all students. However, there is a gap between what school leaders know and what they practice when

implementing equitable practices with teachers. Constantly shifting expectations caused by the accountability culture and the focus on student test scores make it difficult for school leaders to hone in on equitable practices (Rigby & Tredway, 2015). This chapter discussed literature associated with the structures for district and school leader collaboration and equitable practices. Equity in classroom instruction was shared by looking through the lenses of learning theory, academic discourse, academic tasks, and culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy (CLRP). The literature review demonstrates that more research is needed on the implementation of CLRP and its effect on the student experience (Sleeter, 2012). This body of work highlights the need for more research about collaborative learning structures where districts and school leaders are at the center of school reform (Rorrer et al., 2008). The FoP for this project addresses both areas by developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of school leaders to improve equity in classroom instruction. Creating a space where school leaders can collaborate with district leadership to promote equitable practices for all students is, as Honig et al. (2010) states, an opportunity for district leaders to lead boldly with school leaders to increase the capacity for improvement.

# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

In the participatory action research (PAR) study, I analyzed the conditions necessary for school leaders and district leaders to collaborate and learn about equitable practices. I investigated how school leaders collaborate and develop their knowledge to help move their respective schools forward using equitable practices. The focus of practice for this study was to analyze the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of school leaders to improve the use of equitable practices in their schools. The context of this study was a public school district in North Carolina with approximately 5,000 students and ten schools.

Over ten months and three cycles of inquiry, three school principals and two district leaders met every four-six weeks as a School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC) to collaborate and learn together about equitable practices. I chose a qualitative research design and participatory action research approach because these processes allowed me to act as a practitioner researcher with other school administrators to support school leaders in their development. I intentionally focused on school leadership team learning as an essential tenet of this study. We investigated what learning is necessary for school leaders to foster more equitable practices to benefit all learners.

As previously stated, the theory of action asserts: If a district leader works with school leaders, then they will develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use equitable practices with teachers. Ultimately, in turn, teachers use equitable practices with students. Specifically, as the district leader, I worked with a team of school leaders to learn about equitable practices through collaborative learning sessions. At the center of this study is a collaborative learning space for school leaders that increases their knowledge, skills, and dispositions about equitable practices.

In this chapter, I explain the methodological approach to this study -- a qualitative participatory action research design (Herr & Anderson, 2014; hunter et al., 2013) that uses community learning exchange methodology and protocols (Guajardo et al., 2015). First, I provide an overview of the study's qualitative research process and methods, then outline the cycles of action research, research questions, and participants. I conclude the chapter with an overview of data collection and analysis and the potential limitations of the study.

## Qualitative Research Process

Qualitative research is an approach of research exploration in which I sought to understand the meaning participants attributed to a social problem. The social problem is inequitable access and rigor in classrooms. The qualitative research process involved questions and procedures, data collected in the participant's setting, data analysis of categories and themes, and I, as the researcher, making meaning from the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although many different qualitative research designs are possible, in this study, I used participatory action research (PAR). As the field of education is inherently social and embedded in society (Mertler & Morales, 2019), the participatory action research (PAR) design is best suited for this study and helped me answer the research questions. Next, I outline the PAR, which is grounded in improvement science and community learning exchange axioms and methods, and share the methodologies used during this study. I outline the research questions, action research cycles, and context.

### Participatory Action Research

PAR harnesses the expertise of the people closest to the issue, in this case the school leaders who had expert knowledge (Herr & Anderson, 2014). The study focuses on the collaboration of school leaders from three schools with their district administrators. Because of

the focus, the PAR methodology, the persons in the study acted as co-practitioner researchers (CPR). PAR methodologies employ inquiry conducted with people in an organization or community, but never to or on them (Cohen et al., 2007). Therefore, I, as a district leader, worked with a team of school leaders from different schools to collaborate, learn, and share equitable practices and their use in each school's context.

### *Improvement Science*

An essential tenet of this study was to create the school leader networked improvement community (SL-NIC). NICs are narrowly focused collaborative teams that address a specific task through cycles of inquiry. The school leader NIC (SL-NIC) in this study had a sharp focus on equitable practices and engaged in rapid, iterative processes of starting bite-sized innovations, prototyping, failing, reporting, and adjusting based on failures before beginning the cycle again (Bryk et al., 2015; Scanlan et al., 2016). As Bryk et al. (2015) explains, PDSA means plan-do-study-act, and the planning and doing requires rapid cycles of inquiry. The SL-NIC worked together to accelerate their learning and learn and improve as a whole team (Bryk et al., 2015).

### *Community Learning Exchange*

Another essential methodology of this study is the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms and processes. CLEs are opportunities for people in a local context to collaborate and learn about a topic or goal. SL-NIC sessions were intentionally planned using processes and protocols based on five CLE axioms:

1. *Learning and leading are dynamic social processes*. All participants have a voice to share and something to learn. All contributions are welcome through questions, conversations, and storytelling. Relationships build learning.

2. *Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes.* Relationships are at the core of social learning theory, so creating a safe space to share is critical to the process. Safe spaces support vulnerable, honest conversations and relational trust.
3. *The people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns.* Listening to people closest to the issue or topic allows all groups to have power and a voice in decision-making. In addition, having people from a variety of roles and schools can generate new ideas and perspectives.
4. *Crossing boundaries enriches the development and educational processes.* Border crossing increases inclusion, and it forces leaders to leave their comfort zone. Encouraging curiosity about alternative approaches can shift from the status quo to addressing the root of issues.
5. *Hope and change are built on the assets and dreams of locals and their communities.* Allowing people to have meaningful participation in sharing and proposing solutions is empowering. This empowerment can help shift systems and people with deficit mindsets to growth mindsets. (Guajardo et al., 2015)

### *Role of Praxis*

In addition, school leaders and I were engaged in praxis—reflecting to act on behalf of others to create social change (Freire, 1972). Freire was distrustful of people coming into communities and situations with more answers than questions. He believed that the process of co-learning through participation is central to any attempt to work alongside others. Evidence suggests that school leaders need skills and knowledge and the capacity to reflect on their practice (Day et al., 2009; Kolb, 1984). Throughout the PAR, school leaders and I engaged in praxis through reflection. School leaders and I reflected at the start and close of each SL-NIC

session. We used a reflective memo process grounded in the Kolb cycle of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

**Research Questions & Theory of Action**

The overarching question and three sub-questions guided the PAR. The overarching question was: How can school leaders develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve the use of equitable practices? The sub-questions included:

1. How do school leaders across a school district collaborate to improve equitable instructional practices?
2. To what extent do school leaders use tools and processes to address equitable practices?
3. To what extent do school leaders replicate collaborative learning spaces around equitable practices in their schools?
4. To what extent does working with school leaders support my growth and development as an educational leader?

And finally, the theory of action is: If district and school leaders work together in a collaborative space focused on equitable practices, then they will develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use equitable practices with teachers. Next, I explain the action research cycles and how their design aims to gather data to answer the overarching question and sub-questions.

**Action Research Cycles**

Constructivist learning theory frames the PAR activities in this study (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). The activities are outlined in Table 1. Keeping learning theory and the tenets of PAR in mind, the cycles of inquiry include many conversations, team learning, and reflective practices. The primary activities in each cycle consist of SL-NIC meetings, reflective

Table 1

*PAR Cycle Timeline of Activities*

| Goals | Activities | Key Personnel |
|---|---|---|
| PAR Pre-cycle: Fall 2021 (September – December 2021) | | |
| • Getting to know each school leader and the school communities, their hopes and dreams for their teachers and students.<br>• Preliminary interviews with school leaders about goals about school leader collaboration and equitable practice implementation | • Analysis of assets and challenges.<br>• CLE with School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC) | • District Leader researcher<br>• School Leader participants |
| PAR Cycle One: Spring 2022 (January – April 2022) | | |
| • Facilitate School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC) collaborative sessions | • SL-NIC sessions<br>• SL-NIC Individual interviews | • District leader researcher<br>• School and district Leader participants |
| PAR Cycle 2: Summer 2022 (May – August 2022) | | |
| • Facilitate School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC) collaborative sessions | • SL-NIC sessions<br>• SL-NIC Individual interviews | • District leader researcher<br>• School and district leader participants |

memos, and interviews. The goal was for each PAR cycle to emulate the Bryk et al. (2015) PDSA cycle of inquiry by having school leaders collaborate in NIC sessions and then share their feedback and thoughts in the reflective memos and artifacts from the sessions. Then I coded each memo using initial coding (Saldaña, 2016) to determine categories and emergent themes that informed the study findings.

## Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

Qualitative studies involve collecting multiple data types, including observations, interviews, documents, and digital materials. I collected data over time by talking directly to people to see how they behave and act within the context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this PAR study, I used multiple qualitative data collection methods in collaboration with the participants. Action research is done best in partnership with those who have a role in the investigated problem (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Next, I outline in detail the study participants, data collection, and analysis methods.

### Participants

The participants in this study are three school principals and two district leaders that work in Harbor County, North Carolina. In this PAR study, I am one of the district leaders and the lead researcher working in partnership with one other district and the three school leaders. Through purposeful sampling of a pool of district and school leaders who participated in the Project $I^4$ Cohort 2 through East Carolina University, I chose four persons. While six people participated in Project $I^4$ Cohort 2 from HCS, I invited the four current school leaders or district leaders. I am a member of the first cohort of Project $I^4$, meaning we have participated in similar observation/ feedback and equity learning experiences. This shared understanding served us well during this study as we formed our school leader NIC (SL-NIC).

The SL-NIC functioned as the co-practitioner researcher (CPR) group for this study. We met every four to six weeks to collaborate and learn about equitable instructional practices. Having school leaders from different schools coming together to learn provided an excellent opportunity for cross-pollination of sharing and broadening their perspectives. The hope was that the learning of the leaders is transferred to school sites and shared with teachers. In Figure 4, I provide a visual of the SL-NIC and their interaction with the other participants in this study. Members of the SL-NIC were required to fill out consent forms to participate in this study, a sample of which can be found in Appendix C.

## Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative research is focused on the experiences and perceptions of the participants. During this study, I used multiple data sources to make sense of the data and draw conclusions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research included several forms of qualitative data directly related to my role as a district leader and researcher: (a) document collection, (b) CLE artifacts, (c) interviews (d) reflective memos (see Table 2).

### *Document Collection*

I created a variety of documents and collected data during this study. Qualitative document collection is written evidence that allows researchers to obtain the language and words of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During this study, I collected public and private documents, including school leader NIC (SL-NIC) meeting agendas, minutes, chatbox documentation from virtual meetings, and materials created by the SL-NIC during sessions. I recorded each SL-NIC session and sent them to a transcription agency.

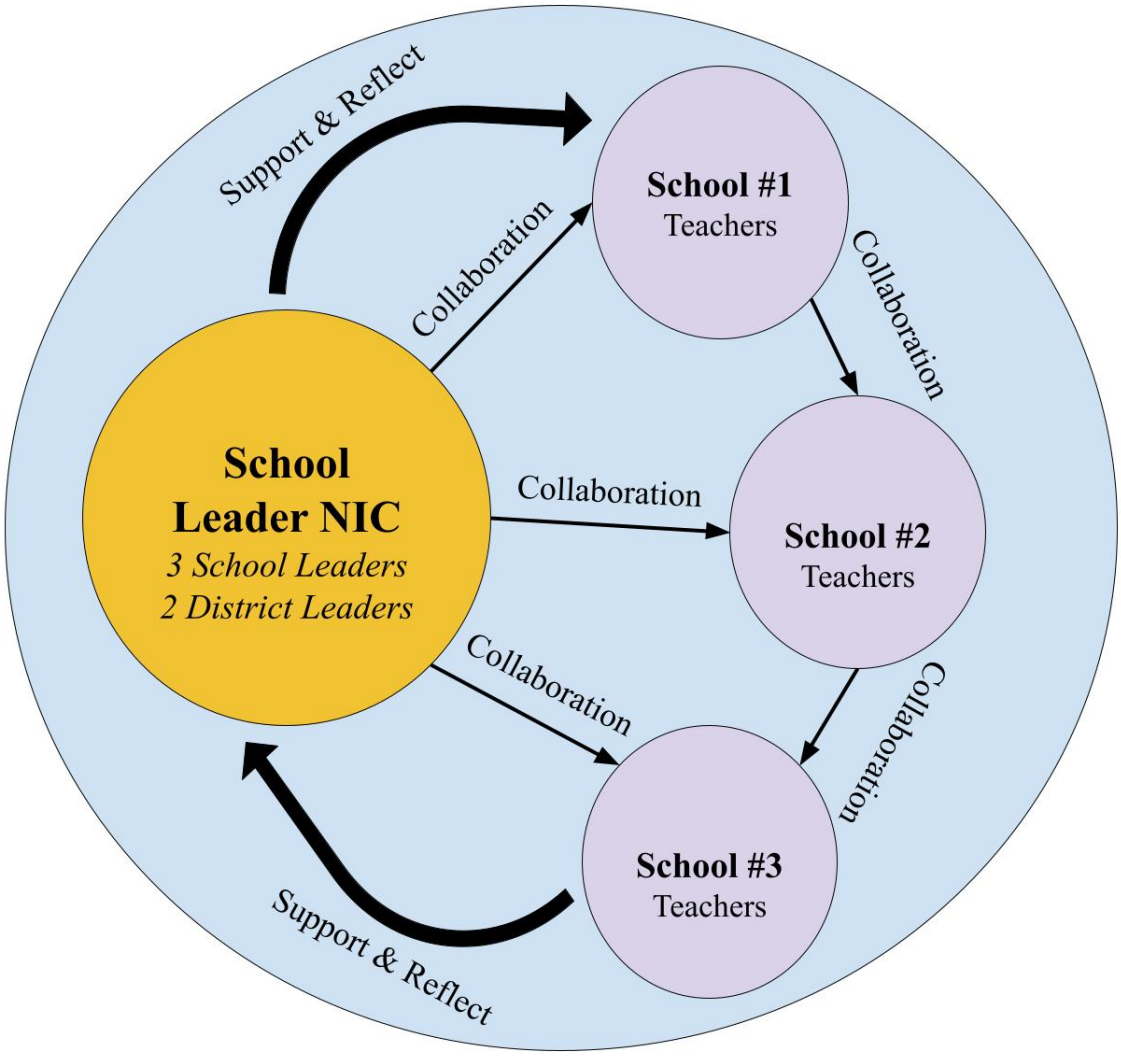


*Figure 4*. NIC Interaction Cycles.

Table 2

*Research Questions and Data Sources*

*Overarching Research Question: How do school leaders develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve the use of equitable practices?*

| Research Sub-Questions | Data Source | Triangulation |
|---|---|---|
| How do school leaders collaborate across a school district to improve equitable instructional practices? | ● Document Collection<br>● Interviews<br>● Community Learning Exchange Artifacts | ● Reflective Memos (school leader NIC)<br>● Member checks |
| To what extent do school leaders use tools and processes to address equitable practices? | ● Document Collection<br>● Interviews<br>● Community Learning Exchange Artifacts | ● Reflective Memos (school leader NIC)<br>● Member checks |
| To what extent do school leaders replicate collaborative learning spaces around equitable practices in their schools? | ● Document Collection<br>● Interviews<br>● Community Learning Exchange Artifacts | ● Reflective Memos (school leader NIC)<br>● Member checks |
| To what extent does working with school leaders support my growth and development as an educational leader? | ● Reflective Memos (self)<br>● Community Learning Exchange Artifacts | ● Member checks |

### *Community Learning Exchange Artifacts*

The use of Community Learning Exchange pedagogies is an essential part of the PAR's inquiry cycles. Each SL-NIC session used CLE pedagogies. CLE pedagogies provide artifacts that include visual and written data from the participants' experiences, attitudes, and understandings (Guajardo et al., 2015). I used CLE protocols (circle, storytelling, and world café) to build and sustain relational trust, shift power dynamics, and gather evidence for analysis. During each SL-NIC session, I collected artifacts that include photos, poems, drawings, lists, and other items generated by SL-NIC members.

### *Interviews*

Qualitative interviews are typically a conversation between a person asking open-ended questions, the interviewer, and a person giving answers to those questions, the respondent (O'Rourke, 2008). Interviews provide the opportunity for respondents to share the complexities of their experience and offer multiple perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the PAR study, I conducted informal individual interviews during check-ins with each member of the SL-NIC during each cycle. I used an interview protocol, presented in Appendix E, to ask targeted, open-ended questions that addressed the overarching research question and sub-questions. I recorded each interview and used secure transcription software to assist with coding.

### *Reflective Memos*

Reflective memos are notes written during the research process that assist in the coding process to determine emerging themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Since this study focuses on developing school leaders, each SL-NIC member completed a reflective memo based on Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning after each SL-NIC meeting. This practice helped with studying what knowledge, skills, and dispositions are in place and develop over time

within the school leaders during the PAR cycles. Participants used Google Form to input their memo for ease and organization. Appendix F contains the reflective memo format and details.

**Data Analysis**

Creswell and Creswell (2018) compare data analysis in an action research study to peeling the layers of an onion. For this PAR study, the data analysis process included organizing the information, coding, generating descriptions of the data, identifying patterns and themes that emerge from coding and displaying the data in tables and other visuals as appropriate (Saldaña, 2016). Each research question is associated with data sources and triangulated by other sources as was outlined in Table 2.

I analyzed the data from reflective memos, CLE artifacts, meeting notes, and interviews within each PAR cycle. I coded the data first using initial and attribute coding (Saldaña, 2016). I organized all data and used attribute coding due to the various sites and participant roles involved in the study. Ensuring protocols and templates are all set up using attribute codes will make initial coding go smoothly. I analyzed data from multiple data sources, such as CLE artifacts and meeting notes and agendas. Then I used axial coding to create, categorize, and link codes to themes, then later to assertions and claims (Saldaña, 2016). Axial coding is appropriate for studies that use a wide variety of data sources. In essence, axial coding is a process where "the code is sharpened to achieve its best fit" (Glaser, 1978, p. 62). In each PAR cycle, the SL-NIC and I conducted an initial coding process and then completed the axial coding of each data set. During our SL-NIC meetings in each PAR cycle, I discussed the emerging categories and themes with the SL-NIC members to help inform any needed shifts going into the next cycle. Figure 5 presents a visual representation of the coding process from Saldaña (2016).

## Study Limitations

There are limitations present during all studies. In this section, I discuss my role as a researcher, study size, and potential validity issues. As the primary researcher for this PAR study, I partnered with leaders from different schools, contexts, and experiences. The organization provided multiple perspectives and points of view for enacting each cycle of inquiry. I was aware of my role as a district administrator and the perceived influence over the school leaders in the SL-NIC. I was aware of my positionality and its potential to influence the research outcomes (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Because of this power perception, I took extraordinary measures to ensure all participants give informed consent without any coercion or sense of obligation; a copy of the informed consent form is presented in Appendix C. Any participant could decide not to take part at any time without any fear of retribution.

I was aware of the biases as a former teacher and school administrator. I hold personal values and beliefs about education; through this work, I did my best to remain neutral in all situations and pay particular attention to potential biases in my reflective memos. Another limitation is the small sample size. The SL-NIC included five school or district leaders (including myself) from one school district, potentially limiting replication to larger districts in different contexts.

I completed the Institutional Review Board Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (IRB CITI) certification in January 2021, shown in Appendix B. I sent my formal request to conduct the study to my direct supervisor and the district for approval in August 2021, a copy of these permissions are available in Appendix C. Even with these safeguards in place prior to the start of the study, I understand that termination of the study could take place at any time.

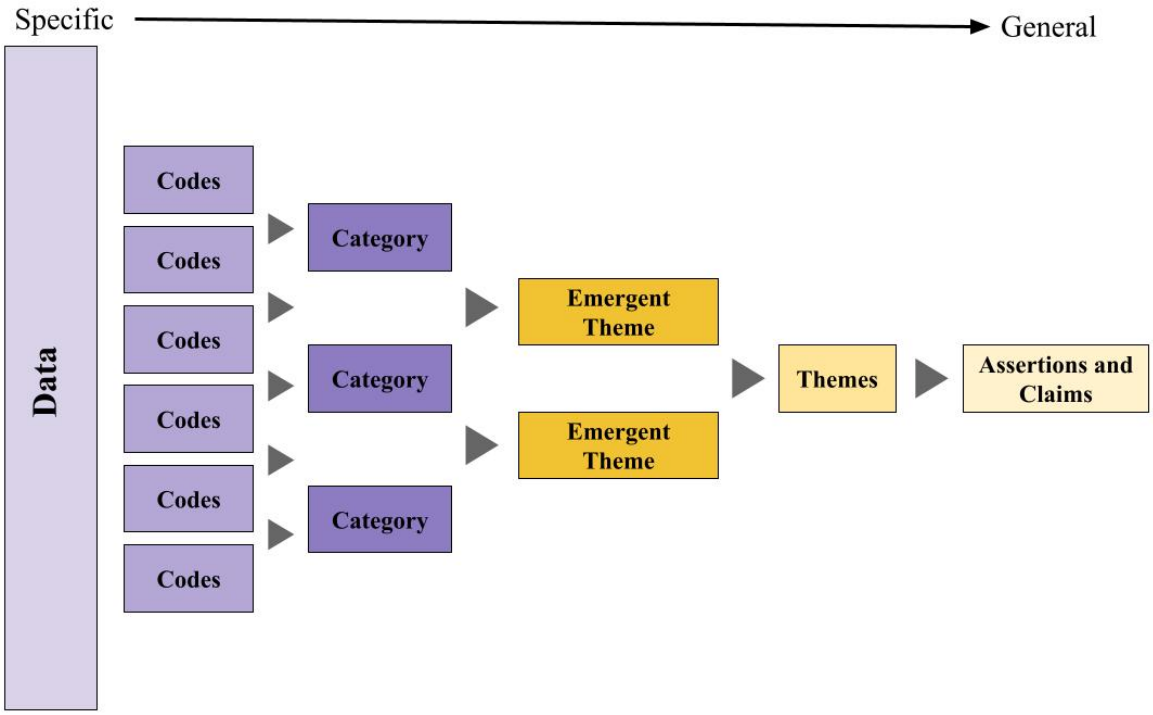


*Figure 5*. Visual representation of the coding process.

## Internal Validity

In qualitative studies, issues with data collection and analysis can cause concern. During this study, I worked to ensure the techniques used established creditability and trustworthiness. I conducted member checks and triangulated the data to ensure the validity of data collection and analysis (Gerdes & Conn, 2001). Throughout the process, during all forms of data collection (document collection, reflective memos, interviews, CLE artifacts), I had an ongoing dialogue with the SL-NIC members regarding my interpretations of the information shared. The use of member checking helps ensure the truth value of the data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

During this study, I used peer debriefing (Gerdes & Conn, 2001). Peer debriefing is a process to discuss potential themes and findings in the data with the East Carolina University instructors, dissertation coach, and Project $I^4$ Research Group. I met with these people regularly, both individually and as a support team. This study took place over an extended time in a district where I have worked for three years. I had prolonged engagement and was actively involved, which contributed to internal validity (Gerdes & Conn, 2001).

## External Validity

This PAR study is within the confines of Harbor County Schools. The findings may be generalized to Harbor County, and caution should be taken when applying the findings to other schools or districts. This is one study in one small, rural school district with a small group of school leaders. Thus, the process may not be dependable if replicated exactly in other contexts. Qualitative research is dependent on the description and themes developed in context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

I obtained consent forms from all participants, as shown in Appendix D, before starting the study. Approval to conduct the study was granted by East Carolina University's Institutional Review Board; a copy of this approval is presented in Appendix A. Participation is entirely voluntary. At any time, a participant can choose to withdraw consent and stop participating without reprisal. As a district leader, I am aware of my positionality and the potential for that to effect outcomes (Herr & Anderson, 2014). I took intentional steps to develop a research plan that balanced the power dynamic between participants and myself, such as forming a CPR team and relying on democratic methods of sharing knowledge and information.

Data security and confidentiality were a priority for this study. Important documents were stored in Google Drive, which requires two-factor authentication. I stored hard copy forms in a locked cabinet. I shared data and copies of documents with the school leader NIC for transparency and reflection purposes. I gave pseudonyms to all participants, and any sensitive information that could reveal identities was removed.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided the research design and methodology for the qualitative PAR study to answer the overarching research question: How do school leaders develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve the use of equitable practices? The school leader NIC (SL-NIC) participated in PAR methodology by engaging in three cycles of inquiry. Throughout each cycle, I collected and analyzed data to find patterns and then collaborated with the SL-NIC to determine our next steps. This chapter detailed the process for data collection and analysis and the role of the lead researcher and SL-NIC, potential limitations, and ethical considerations.

# CHAPTER 4: PAR PRE-CYCLE

This participatory action research (PAR) project aimed to create a collaborative space for school leaders from across a school district to learn about equitable practices. By creating a School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC), a team of school leaders came together to learn about equitable practices and implement specific practices within their schools. In this chapter, I describe the context of this study and the project activities of the pre-cycle process. Then, I explain the coding process and explore the emerging categories. Finally, I explain how the findings from the pre-cycle informed the next cycle of inquiry.

## PAR Context

Prioritizing school leader professional learning through a collaborative, team approach can cause systemic change within a school system. This project challenges the traditional top-down leadership system within conventional public schools. School and district leaders came together through the SL-NIC to learn about equitable practices and move their schools forward in equity work. In addition, the focus on collaboration and equity in tandem is needed in our current context locally and nationally due to the current polarized political climate.

### Context (Place)

This study took place in a licensed PreK-12 North Carolina public school district with 5,000 students enrolled in the district in ten schools. The district is in a rural, coastal community. Spread across barrier islands, the schools cover a breadth of more than 60 miles. As of December 2021, the student racial demographics are 73% white, 19% Hispanic, 6% Multi-Racial, 2% Black, and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander/American Indian.

Over the last five years, the district has undergone significant change in leadership with the hiring of a new superintendent by the local board of education. Before 2017, leadership

collaboration across the district was not a priority. The only collaboration between school leaders primarily focused on the managerial aspects of leadership. The culture has gradually shifted to value school and district leader collaboration. This study was an opportunity to further this work and create conditions for collaboration about equitable practices and instructional strategies among school and district leaders.

The district demographics have shifted over the last several years. In 2018, the student racial demographics were 75% white, 18% Hispanic, 4% Multi-Racial, 2% Black, and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander/American Indian. Compared to current data, the number of racial and ethnic minority students has increased district-wide. This increase of minority students, with percentages rising between 3-5% annually, aligns with similar trends across North Carolina according to the 2020 Census. While the number of minority teachers and those familiar with culturally responsive practices has risen slightly, the system is largely unfamiliar with educational equity work. A focus on equity is new for many of the teachers, so creating a school and district leader group around this topic has the potential to improve equitable classroom practices and student experience.

**Context (People)**

The primary tenet of this study is the creation of the School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC). The SL-NIC is the co-practitioner researcher (CPR) group in this study. The SL-NIC is three school leaders (principals) and one district leader ($n$=5). Each of these schools is in a rebuilding phase with relatively new school leaders. Each school leader in the study has been in principalship for fewer than five years. Each member in the SL-NIC was a member of Project $I^4$ Cohort 2 through East Carolina University, while I was a member of the first cohort of Project $I^4$.

Project $I^4$ is a graduate credential program for public school and district leaders to engage in professional learning experiences to learn how to use evidence-based observation practices, revitalizing school leader conversations with teachers about improving instructional practices and creating meaningful professional learning for teachers. Project $I^4$ is a part of the College of Education at East Carolina University. The program teaches cohort members to use improvement science to guide cycles of innovation and inquiry and improve observation and equitable classroom practice knowledge and skills. Each SL-NIC member completed Project $I^4$, so all have participated in similar observation/feedback and equity learning experiences.

**Participants of the SL-NIC**

Ellen is the principal of a middle school in the district, with close to 650 students. She was a fourth-year principal, previously serving as an assistant principal at middle and high school levels. Ellen was an elementary school teacher before entering administration. This is her $28^{th}$ year in public education. She is an exceptional relationship builder and lead learner, a strength she brought from the classroom into school leadership.

Stephen was the principal of an elementary school in the district, with close to 700 students. In his second year as principal, he previously served as a middle and elementary school assistant principal. Stephen was in his $9^{th}$ year in public education at the time of the study. Before entering administration, he served as a middle and high school teacher at nearby schools. During the 2020-2021 school year, Stephen became a principal during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. He is an optimistic and outgoing person by nature, and he brings this strength into his role as a school leader.

Laura was the principal of one of the smaller elementary schools with nearly 300 students. She was in her second year as principal, previously serving as an assistant principal,

teacher, and teacher assistant in a neighboring district. Like Stephen, during the 2020-2021 school year, Laura became a principal during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Laura grew up in the small community and attended her current school. She is a forward thinker and leads with her heart. During the trying times of the pandemic, this has served her well with building connection and community among staff.

Olivia was the director of the district instructional technology department. This was her second year in this position. Previously she served as an instructional technology facilitator at the school level and a middle and high school science teacher. Olivia was heavily involved in school improvement and instructional coaching efforts in her previous role. Olivia moved into district leadership during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. She was in her 25th year in education at the time of the study, having served in independent and public schools.

At the time of this study, I led the district's innovation and professional learning work. This was my fourth year in this position. Previously, I served as a school leader at the elementary and middle school levels and as a middle school science teacher. Throughout my career, I have worked on a leadership team in some capacity working with strategic planning, visioning, and school improvement. At the time of the study, I had been in education for eleven years.

The SL-NIC team represented different perspectives and experiences; however, at the core, we all believe that school should provide an excellent educational experience for all students. Each principal was in a different place on the spectrum of equitable practices; two schools were in the early phases while another school was farther along in the journey, having implemented a school equity team during the 2020-2021 school year.

## PAR Pre-Cycle Process

The PAR Pre-cycle took place during one academic semester in the Fall of 2021. In September 2021, after receiving IRB approval, I talked with each participant and invited them to be a part of the SL-NIC. Each team member verbally agreed to be a part of the study, and I asked them all via email and gave date options for our first SL-NIC session in October 2021. The SL-NIC meets every four to six weeks during each cycle with a sharp focus on collaborating about equitable practices. Since the school leaders were co-practitioners in this study, the PAR pre-cycle focused on getting to know each school leader, their school community, and their hopes for the teachers and students. The PAR Pre-cycle included two SL-NIC Sessions in which we used Community Learning Exchange (CLE) protocols. Each session included several constructivist elements designed to encourage dialogue and reflection. Next, I explain the PAR Pre-cycle activities and processes in detail.

### SL-NIC Sessions

On October 18th, 2021, we held our first SL-NIC session. Each study participant signed and submitted their consent form at the start of our first SL-NIC session in October. Due to logistics and the geographic locations of school sites, we conducted our first SL-NIC session virtually using Google Meet. The goal of this session was to cultivate relational trust among the five team members, establish agreements and the purpose of the SL-NIC, and explain the research questions. Our agenda format was the template used by Project $I^4$, shown in Appendix G, and started with dynamic mindfulness (Bose et al., 2017) by one of the team members to ground the team before getting started. According to Bose et al. (2017), dynamic mindfulness is a mindful action of breathing and movement to calm our nervous system and regulate emotions

and stress. Next, we spent time narrowing our agreements for our time together. The agreements we decided on are:

1. Listen to one another's voices and perspectives.
2. Speak your truth to your level of comfort.
3. Assume best intentions first.
4. Take risks in engaging in conversations.

After putting our agreements in place, we started with a personal narrative. A personal narrative uses a text, such as a poem or piece of artwork, for individual reflection which each person then shares either in pairs or with the whole group (Tredway et al., 2020). During this session of the SL-NIC on October 18, 2021, the team read and reflected on a poem about leadership. Each person chose a line that resonated with them at that moment. As a group, we decided to share as a whole. This started a discussion about leadership and our core values related to administration. This flowed into the core activity of the session, creating an Emulation Poem, a sample of which can be found in Appendix H. Each person took ten minutes to write their poem then each team member shared their poetry with the group. Next, I shared the research questions for the study and a broad project timeline. Lastly, I shared the team's reflective memo template, available in Appendix F. After each session, each team member completed a reflective memo based on Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning via a Google Form that aided in collecting data about school leader development and reflection.

Before our second SL-NIC session, I polled the SL-NIC members to choose dates and times that worked for their schedules. During the October 2021 session, the team shared that they wanted our next session to be in-person instead of virtual. The second SL-NIC session of the PAR pre-cycle took place on November 18th, 2021. This session was in-person in a conference

room at our district office building. I printed all materials needed for the session so that participants didn't need to depend on their devices. Hard copy materials made the process of collecting artifacts after the session smooth. During this session, all participants agreed for me to audio-record the session. I recorded the conversation of our November 2021 session for coding purposes. I sent the recording to a secure transcription agency.

Our agenda framework was the same as the first October 2021. Our goals for the second session were to cultivate relational trust in the SL-NIC and explore the meaning of the terms *equity* and *equitable practices*. I started the meeting with dynamic mindfulness (Bose et al., 2017) which included seated stretching. Next, our personal narrative was a poem about gathering people together. Each of us read a stanza of the poem and reflected in silence about what line or section resonated with us in the moment. We shared our stanza choices and why we chose them. This started a rich discussion about the purpose of gathering different people together, why we gather, and the responsibility of planning time well.

We transitioned into the focus of our time. For this SL-NIC it was the "4$^{th}$ Box Activity" from the Center for Story-Based Strategy (2019). It was used to guide our learning about defining equitable practices by addressing the research question: How do you use tools and processes to address equitable practices in your role? This activity involved looking at images depicting equality, equity, and liberation through the analogy of watching a baseball game. Participants reflected and wrote about where they feel their school or department is on the spectrum of equality, equity, and liberation. Then the four participants worked in pairs to create an image showing what they wanted to be true for public schools beyond liberation. Figure 6 illustrates an example of the images created. Next, we debriefed the activity and discussed how processes and tools address equitable practices in our roles. We discussed the word "equity" and

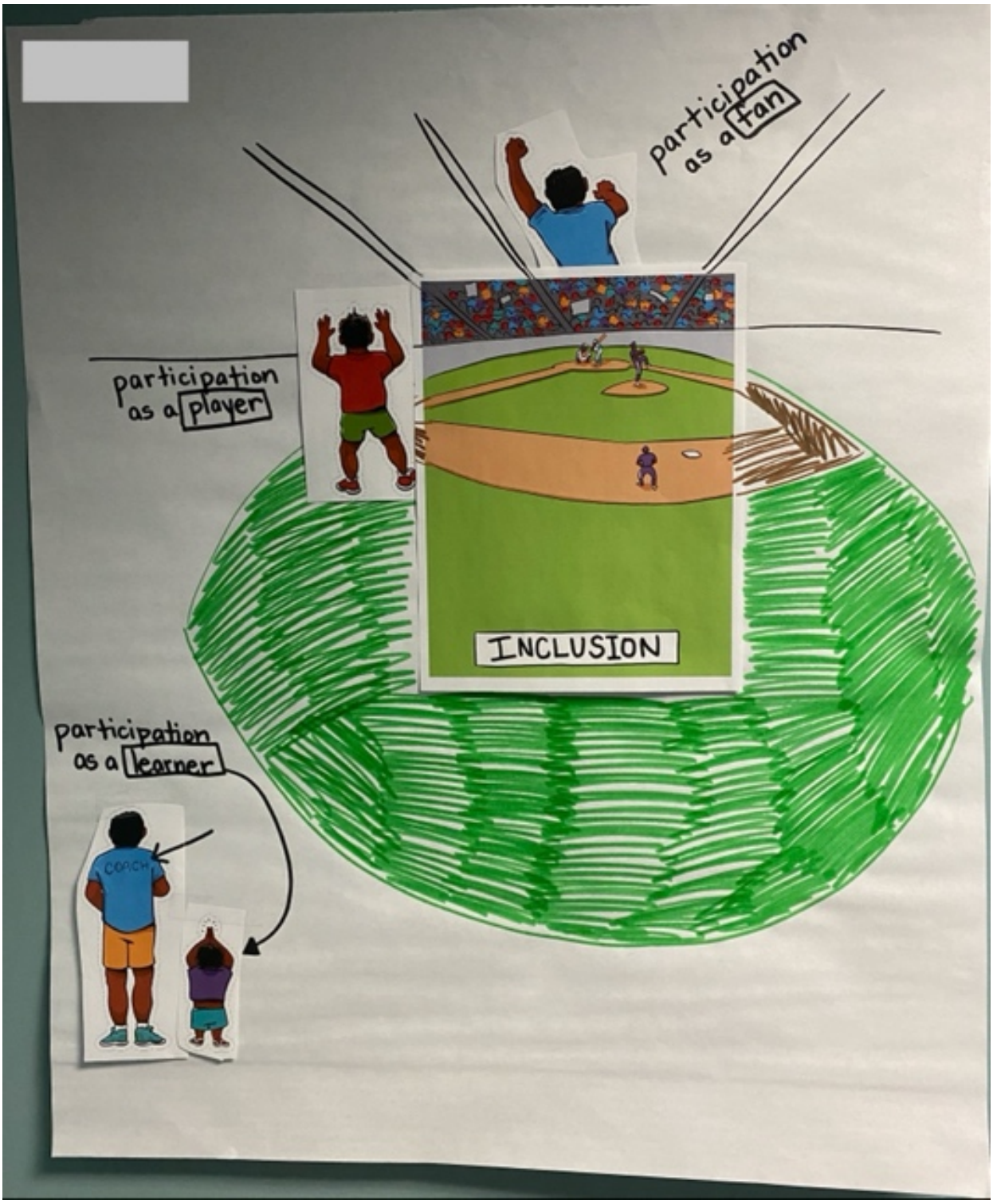


*Figure 6*. Participant created image for public schools beyond liberation.

how highly politicized it has become in our context. Then we talked about where we want to go with our future sessions and focused on the scope of equity in schools. Lastly, we each shared appreciations and had time to reflect and submit a reflective memo about the session.

**Data Collection and Analysis: Coding and Developing a Codebook**

During the Pre-cycle, I analyzed several forms of data. First, I reviewed my reflective memos. Some of these memos were from class assignments, while others were my memos after facilitating SL-NIC sessions. These memos served as my personal debrief and reflective process moving into the next SL-NIC session and PAR cycle. After the SL-NIC sessions in October and November 2021, each participant completed a reflective memo using the same format, shown in Appendix F, in a Google Form. I also collected artifacts for data analysis during each SL-NIC session. The artifacts included agendas, participant notes, individual Emulation Poems, and visuals. During the November 2021 SL-NIC session, I gave each participant a packet in which to write and reflect. This streamlined the process of collecting artifacts at the close of the session. During the November CLE, I audio recorded the session and transcribed the data analysis.

The Pre-cycle was the first experience with coding various forms of data. Learning to code was challenging due to the variety and volume of data. I started by open coding the data using exploratory, or descriptive, codes (Saldaña, 2016). I completed the first round of descriptive coding on all the data then examined the codes to collapse similar ones into a single code. I started a codebook, shown in Figure 7, with the list of codes and notated each time the codes were used. I created the codebook in Google Sheets and added filter options to help quickly sort the data. Next, I did a second round of deductive coding to see if any new information arose. I began to make more sense of my findings and to collapse or expand codes

| CATEGORY | CODE | *SUBCODE* | DEFINTION | Memos (Self) | Memos (SL-NIC Members) | SL-NIC Nov. 2021 Meeting (Audio) | SL-NIC Meetings (Artifacts) | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Conditions for Collaboration** | Worthy of time | *Value, investment, productivity* | Leaving feeling something was worthy of time, investment, helpful for the future. *"If youre the only one invested in gathering then it's exhausting." "Aren't our kids worthy of our time?"* | | 3 | 8 | 2 | 13 |
| **Conditions for Collaboration** | Joyful, Energized Leader | *laughter, joy* | vitality, enthusiastic, joyful leader | | 3 | 8 | | 11 |
| **Conditions for Collaboration** | Leading together | *inclusion, team learning, school leader collaboration* | school and district leaders working and leading together, unified front, "leader is only as good as those they work with" "lead with them not for them" | 2 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 11 |
| **Conditions for Collaboration** | Pandemic Leadership | *current events, COVID-19 schools, "right now", media influence* | Leading during the COVID-19 pandemic, lots of change, difficulty managing staff mindsets | 3 | | 7 | 1 | 11 |
| **Conditions for Collaboration** | Leader Mindset | *growth mindset, power of mindset, habits* | positive thinking can move us forward, give time to things that are positive. Habits can help or inhibit. | | 1 | 5 | 4 | 10 |
| **Conditions for Collaboration** | Reflection space | *reflective practioner* | Time to reflect, time away from the outside world, then process with others in similar roles | 1 | 4 | | 3 | 8 |
| **Conditions for Collaboration** | Big picture discussions | *hot button issue, awareness, grapple, identify barriers* | Discussing big picture, politically-charged topics | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| **Conditions for Collaboration** | Reassurance | | Removing doubts, fears<br>Leaders feeling validated | | 3 | 1 | | 4 |
| **Discourse Pattern** | Equity facade | | The use of language in education (jargon) to make it appear as if a practice is in place, when in actuality it is not. Doing something "in name only".<br>Say we are in equity...actually in equality. | | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 |
| **Discourse Pattern** | Discourse 2 | *radical candor* | Use language of hope and possibility, questions and interupts normative behavior of status quo and does not see life as binary (either/or), helps undo social reproduction of inequity and move toward language of transforming our reality. (Eubanks, et al) | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 7 |
| **Discourse Pattern** | Discourse 1 | | Use of deficit language, blaming and sharing, making assumptions, focus on hegemony, accept status quo thinking and relies on societal class standards (Eubanks, et al) | | 1 | 4 | | 5 |
| **Meeting Struture** | Right Timing, Context | | Choosing specific time to use a certain protocol, reading, etc. Look at audience, time, politics, etc. | 1 | 3 | 4 | | 8 |
| **Meeting Struture** | Team Norms | *Common agreement* | Creating norms for our time together, common goals | 1 | 3 | 3 | | 7 |
| **Meeting Struture** | Sharing | | Time to hear a variety of perpectives | 1 | 3 | 3 | | 7 |
| **Meeting Struture** | Resource replication and use | | Use resources, protocols that the leaders can easily take and use in their context. | | 5 | | | 5 |
| **Meeting Struture** | Building relational trust | | strategically and purposefully setting up gatherings/meetings to build relational trust among the team | 2 | 1 | 1 | | 4 |
| **Meeting Struture** | Connections to Texts | | Connections to something read recently or an oral story from someone else | | 3 | | | 3 |
| **Meeting Struture** | Dynamic mindfulness | | breathing, body movement during formal meeting | | 3 | | | 3 |
| **Meeting Struture** | Personal Narrative | | Use of a piece of artwork (poem, visual, etc.) to make a personal connection then share with a group | | 1 | | 2 | 3 |

*Figure 7*. Pre-cycle codebook.

during this process using axial coding (Saldaña, 2016). I added an area for subcodes and a description to my codebook. Some of the descriptions include short quotes I noticed iterations of during the coding process. As I completed the second coding round, I saw three emergent categories. In the next section, I'll explain these in detail.

## Emergent Categories

After coding all Pre-cycle data and then looking at connections between the codes, some initial categories emerged. Coding my memos, participant memos, a transcript of a session, and artifacts from each session helped me see a broad picture. The coding process revealed three emergent categories: conditions for leader collaboration, discourse patterns, and meeting structures.

### Conditions for School Leader Collaboration

The first category that came to light is Conditions for School Leader Collaboration. The codes in this emergent category are primarily traits and characteristics needed for school leaders to collaborate. Three participants shared that the October 2021 SL-NIC session felt worthy of their time in their reflective memos. This expanded in November 2021 SL-NIC session through the transcripts and artifacts to the idea that gathering people must include investment from the participants. When talking about bringing teachers together to collaborate, one participant said, "They [the teachers] have to see the value. Over time, seeing the value will change their mindset." School leaders, along with teachers, needing to feel that a gathering or meeting is worthy of their time also came through. This came through in every data form except my memos. One school leader also shared during a discussion in our November SL-NIC session, “Nothing makes me more miserable than gathering for fruitless reasons and feeling like a meeting is a

waste of my time if it’s not something deeper. I want all gatherings to be impactful, meaningful, and focused on a purpose. We don’t have time to waste.”

Other codes that came to the surface in this category were joyful, energized leader; leading together; leader mindset; pandemic leadership; reflection space; and big picture discussions. The Pre-cycle data mentioned each of these codes 8-11 times. In one participant's reflective memo, they stated, "I love laughing and comparing story with other principals.” During the SL-NIC sessions, leaders laughed and made connections during different parts of the agenda, specifically the personal narratives and discussions. The participants' reflective memos shared appreciation for having big picture discussions about topics that are "hot button" and highly politicized right now with a group of colleagues they trust.

Similarly, participants shared that they appreciated the reflective space available during the SL-NIC sessions. Another part of this category was reassurance being a condition for collaboration. In reflective memos and during our SL-NIC session, a few school leaders shared that the sessions help them feel that they are doing a "good job." They shared that working with other principals and district leadership removed their doubts before the session, and they left feeling validated. “Being able to hold discourse about educational topics with others I trust is hugely beneficial.” I used these data when entering PAR Cycle One to guide code and category creation.

**Discourse Patterns**

Specific discourse patterns emerged while coding the Pre-cycle data. The idea of an "equity façade" or doing something “in name only” came through quite a bit in all forms of data. Participants referenced a theme in public education of using education jargon to make it appear that something is in place (i.e., equitable practices) when, in reality, the method is not

implemented. During coding, I labeled this phenomenon equity façade. During the 4th Box activity on November 18, 2021, the equity façade came up six times. “We say our schools are in an equity space, but there are all these ghost boxes everywhere that are still there, and we don’t talk about them.” Another SL-Member said, “In education, we say we do everything. We talk about something for a long time. We learn how to talk the jargon, and it sounds like we’re doing it, even if we’re not.”

Another discourse pattern I noticed was the idea of Discourse 1, which includes deficit language, blaming, and assumptions, versus Discourse 2, which is the language of hope and possibility and thinking outside of the binary, from Eubanks et al. (1997). Discourse 2 was present in each data type during the pre-cycle. Participants talked about Discourse 1 being present in their schools, especially in the current conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, during discussion and reflective memos. “There’s a lot of negativity among staff right now. The media isn’t helping either.” The Pre-cycle data was not conclusive enough to make any claims in this area, but the discourse patterns were kept in mind moving into PAR Cycle One.

**Meeting Structures**

The agenda for each SL-NIC session was modeled after Project $I^4$. The importance of timing and context for specific activities while meeting as a group and then with teachers at their schools came up in my memos and the participants’ memos. The importance of timing, audience, and context when deciding to use a specific protocol or reading came through during the November SL-NIC session as well. Ensuring that the meeting norms structure was in place was also heavily present in participant memos and during the November 2021 session.

Participant memos referenced using specific readings and protocols with staff members at their schools or within teams of people they manage. Two team members used articles and

activities shared during SL-NIC sessions with teams they work with or manage. It seems like the participants need to gain something tangible during our sessions to take and use in their leadership role.

## Reflection and Planning

I'm thankful for the school and district leaders that are a part of this study. The Pre-cycle solidified the need for a collaborative space for school leaders to discuss and collaborate about equitable practices. Moving forward, I decided to record all our SL-NIC sessions. Recording these sessions, sending them to be transcribed, then coding the conversation helped me better capture everything shared during the session. I could tell the difference between the data I captured from our first session in October when I did not record and the second session in November when I did. From the first to the second session, I adjusted the time of day of the meeting. The first thing in the morning was not conducive to collaboration among participants. Our November 2021 session was mid-morning and at a time that all participants agreed on.

Meeting in person was something that the team enjoyed. Participants appreciated a break from using their devices and meeting in person. One participant stated in her November 2021 reflective memo, "The fact that Jo created a paper packet of materials for us allowed us to close our laptops and, for me, this action, although simple, carved a way for me to fully invest in this time together." Before and after each SL-NIC session, I debriefed with my dissertation coach to process what went well and what to change for the next session. This, along with writing reflective memos, helped me adjust between each CLE and before PAR Cycle One.

### Reflection on Leadership

The fall of 2021 was challenging for school and district leaders because it was the district's first entire semester of in-person learning following the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm

thankful that the study participants were excited to be a part of this study during this trying time. After facilitating our first SL-NIC session in October, I quickly learned that less is more when planning for school leaders. I adjusted the agenda for the second session to be 90 minutes instead of 60 minutes and did fewer activities. This worked well and allowed for rich discussion without anyone feeling rushed.

Another area I needed to improve going into PAR Cycle One is coding. After a fishbowl with my research group, coach, and committee chair during the pre-cycle, I realized my emergent themes were too broad. I also discovered that I had a misconception going into the Pre-cycle that I needed to make my codes fit into no more than three emergent themes. When looking at my Pre-cycle codebook, my emergent themes are too large and enter more of the themes category. The data under "codes" in Figure 7 are more emergent themes, and my subcodes are codes. Because I started collapsing similar codes too early in the coding process, I created a situation where my data was not granular enough. In PAR Cycle One, I adjusted this and coded in a more specific, granular way without collapsing codes too early.

**Planning for PAR Cycle One**

The SL-NIC started learning together about equitable practices through our PAR pre-cycle work and narrowed our focus for PAR Cycle One. Participants voiced during the November 2021 SL-NIC session that they want to focus on educator awareness of meeting student needs. Specifically, school leaders talked about coaching teachers to use small group instruction, including student voice in lessons, and practices that prioritize student-to-student discussion.

During PAR Cycle One, we dove into learning about what practices can be put in place to increase educator awareness of equitable practices. In January, at the start of PAR Cycle One, I

interviewed each SL-NIC member individually using the interview questions (see Appendix E). I planned two SL-NIC Sessions. The first one was in mid-February and the second in mid-March. Then in early April, I interviewed each SL-NIC member again using the same interview questions. Chapter 5 discusses PAR Cycle One in depth.

## Conclusion

In this study, I was formalizing what school leaders had used on the sidelines and in parking lot conversations for a long time. In the past, instead of collaborating about equitable practices formally with other job-alike peers, they talked about topics after district meetings which were mostly on managerial topics. I hoped learning together about equitable instructional practices changed the scope of work for school leaders and helped them be more grounded and inclusive in their work with teachers and students. I wanted all people—school staff, students, and families—to feel that they have a seat at the table in their school community.

Short-lived, radical change efforts within public education sometimes do more harm than good. The theory of action for this study—if district and school leaders work together in a collaborative space focused on equitable practices, then they will develop the knowledge skills and dispositions to use equitable practices with teachers – was designed to deepen their practices for the long run. Through making small, iterative changes over time, sparked by our SL-NIC sessions, my hope was that school leaders could work to make their schools more inclusive places for all. Through this research, I learned how to support school leaders to learn together in a way that brings value and change.

# CHAPTER 5: PAR CYCLE ONE

This participatory action research (PAR) project aimed to create a collaborative space for school and district leaders from across a school district to learn about equitable practices. Through the School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC), a team of school leaders came together to learn about equitable practices and how to create the conditions for authentic district and school leader collaboration. In this chapter, I describe the events and process of PAR Cycle One. Then, I present categories that support the emergent themes from the data. Lastly, I explain how the findings from Cycle One informed PAR Cycle Two and reflect on how my leadership shifted during this cycle.

## PAR Cycle One Process

PAR Cycle One took place over one academic semester in the Spring of 2022. This cycle included two SL-NIC sessions and two individual interviews with each participant. Like the PAR Pre-cycle, the SL-NIC met every four to six weeks during the cycle. At the close of each SL-NIC session, the SL-NIC members completed Reflective Memos as they did in the PAR Pre-cycle. Additionally, during PAR Cycle One, I conducted individual interviews using a script aligned with the research questions, shown in Appendix E) Since the participants are all co-practitioners in this study, the interviews provided targeted, individual data aligned with the research questions. After each SL-NIC session, each person completed a reflective memo using the same format as the Pre-cycle. Table 3 gives an at-a-glance visual of all the activities with their dates in PAR Cycle One. In the next section, I explain the Cycle One activities and processes.

Table 3

*Activities: PAR Cycle One*

| Activity | January 2022 | February 2022 | March 2022 | April 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SL-NIC Sessions (Learning Exchange) | | February 26 SL-NIC Session (n=5) | March 24 SL-NIC Session (n=4) | |
| Individual Interviews with SL-NIC members | Olivia 1/19<br>Ellen 1/20<br>Stephen 1/26 | Laura 2/4 | | Ellen 4/5<br>Olivia 4/6<br>Laura 4/6<br>Stephen 4/7 |

**SL-NIC Sessions**

During PAR Cycle One, we held two School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC) sessions. Like the PAR Pre-cycle, the design of each session included constructivist practices to encourage dialogue and discussion. After getting feedback during the Pre-cycle that SL-NIC members preferred hard copy materials to avoid the potential distraction of their devices, I continued using hard-copy materials, such as agendas, articles, and activities. I also recorded both SL-NIC sessions and sent the recording to a transcription agency.

Before our first session on February 26th, 2022, I sent all SL-NIC members a poll to select dates and times they were available to meet in person. This session took place in a conference room at our district office building, the same space we used for the SL-NIC sessions during the PAR Pre-cycle. All four SL-NIC members were present for this session. Our goal for this session was to continue cultivating relational trust within the SL-NIC and explore strategies for creating educator awareness and shifting practice. Our agenda format, agreements, and norms for the session remained the same as the PAR Pre-cycle. We started with a member check. Member checks are when study participants review the information and data that pertains to them to ensure accuracy. Member checks also help researchers avoid biases. To verify data during this member check, each participant read their biography, as presented in Chapter 4, to ensure authenticity and clarity.

Next, we participated in dynamic mindfulness, led by a short video. Next, we conducted a personal narrative (PN) to ground the meeting. A personal narrative uses a text, such as an article or piece of artwork, for individual reflection and then each person shares their thoughts or reaction to the text in pairs or whole groups (Tredway et al., 2020). During this personal narrative, we read “4 Simple Rules for Pedagogy of Student Voice,” an excerpt from Safir et al.

(2021). I chose this text for the PN after reflecting on conversations I had informally with members of the SL-NIC and other school leaders about student engagement and compliance in schools. SL-NIC members read the text and chose a section or line that resonated with them at the moment. This activity led to rich discussion and sharing of specific areas individual school leaders wanted to work on for elevating student voice, along with ways they could weave the outlined practices into their messaging to teachers.

Next, we transitioned into the focus of our time, using a protocol to share a specific strategy used by the leader to increase educator awareness. I asked each SL-NIC member to come prepared to share a strategy they used to increase educator awareness of student needs before the session. We used an edited version of the *What? So What? Now What?* McDowell et al. (2017) protocol to have each person share their equity strategy. Each person created a visual to address the questions below using a large piece of chart paper.

1. What? *Explain what you did and how it worked.*
2. So…what? *Why did it matter?*
3. Now What? *What's your next step? What do you hope to gain moving forward? Did the strategy have the intended effect? Did the strategy cause a shift in practice?*

Each person had time to create a visual independently and then present their thinking to the group, as shown in Figure 8. After each person shared their educator awareness strategy, other team members asked clarifying questions. Lastly, I asked the group to think about all the strategies shared and if they could be considered equitable practices or put equity at the forefront. This started an enlightening conversation about the word equity and what we consider equitable as school and district leaders. This discussion contributed to the team coming to a common understanding of the word equity. The last activity during February SL-NIC session was

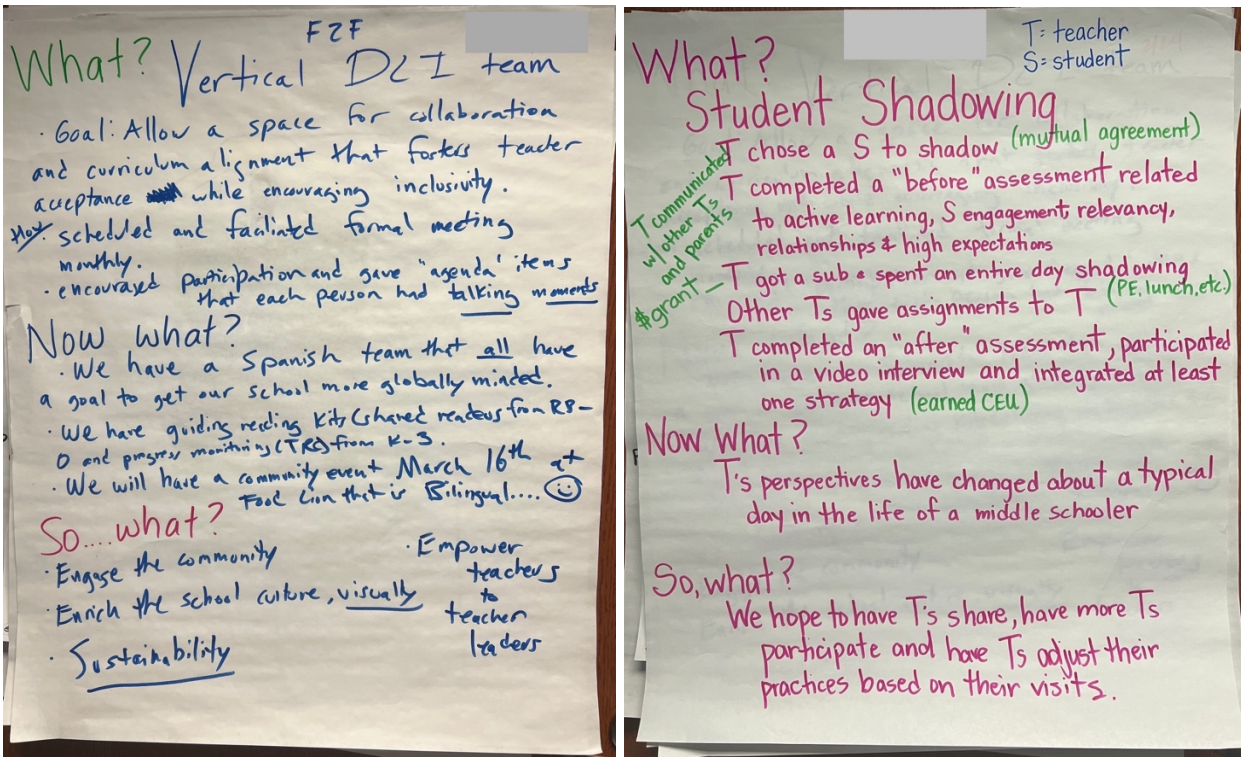


*Figure 8*. Participant created visual of practices for educator awareness.

completing a reflective memo about our time together. Although we had time in the meeting to complete the memo, most participants waited to complete the memo until after the session, giving them more time to reflect.

Our second SL-NIC session occurred about four weeks later, on March 24th, 2022. Our agenda format and agreements remained the same from the previous sessions. A change during this session is that one participant, Stephen, was missing due to an emergency at his school site. The agenda included dynamic mindfulness, but all participants wanted to jump right into the Personal Narrative, so we skipped dynamic mindfulness. The Personal Narrative was reading an excerpt from Chapter 3 in Fullan's (2001) book *Leading in a Culture of Change* and choosing a line or section that related to their work at that moment. This section of Fullan's (2001) work goes in-depth about understanding the change process through the following six areas:

- "The goal is not to innovate the most.
- It is not enough to have the best ideas
- Appreciate the implementation dip
- Redefine resistance
- Reculturing is the name of the game.
- Never a checklist, always complexity" (p. 34).

This activity jump-started an in-depth discussion about change management and leadership. The topics of equity and equitable practices surfaced as everyone shared a situation with which they were currently grappling. All members of the SL-NIC were, at that moment, working through challenging situations with staff members where staff attitudes and behaviors didn't align with the school or district vision and goals. Next, we shifted to an activity about asset framing. We watched a YouTube video of social entrepreneur Trabian Shorters (2019)

explaining asset framing and the importance of defining people by their aspirations, not their challenges. Our discussion question was: As an educational leader, why is asset framing important? How does it relate to our work? SL-NIC members shared their thoughts and continued to discuss the various descriptions of equity and equitable practices. Lastly, SL-NIC members completed their reflective memos.

**Individual Interviews**

Before the first SL-NIC session during this cycle, I interviewed each participant using scripted interview questions aligned with the research questions, this protocol is presented in Appendix E. Interviewing each co-practitioner before the first SL-NIC session was a helpful recap of the Pre-cycle and helped center my thinking for topics to explore during the February SL-NIC Session. I conducted all the January 2022 interviews in person at the SL-NIC member's school sites or individual offices. I audio-recorded the interviews and sent them to a transcription agency after the interviews. I also took notes during the interviews to keep track of significant points and consider any external factors, such as body language or eye contact.

After the February and March 2022 SL-NIC sessions, I interviewed each SL-NIC member again in April. During these interviews, I focused on each leader's development and asked varying questions based on areas I wanted to learn more about. For example, I asked each participant question 7 in the interview protocol: How do you feel the SL-NIC fostered or inhibited their growth as a leader? Then depending on the person, I asked them how they could see the conditions created by the SL-NIC scaling across the district and/or how they address equitable practices with their teachers. I interviewed three participants virtually and one participant in person.

## Data Collection and Analysis

During PAR Cycle One, I analyzed five forms of data: (1) transcriptions of SL-NIC Sessions, (2) individual interviews, (3) SL-NIC artifacts, (4) my reflective memos, and the (5) reflective memos of each SL-NIC member. Using what I learned during the Pre-cycle, I began open coding using exploratory, descriptive codes taken from the transcript or document itself (Saldaña, 2016). This style of open coding the data for the first cycle helped me analyze the data in a way that helped me make meaning. For the second coding cycle, I switched to axial coding to look for specific patterns within the data. When I noticed similarities, I used some of the same codes from the PAR Pre-cycle. I used the same Google Sheets-based codebook from the PAR Pre-cycle to keep track of all codes, sub-categories, categories, and later emergent themes. Appendix H contains the complete codebook. The following sections outline the emergent themes in detail.

## Emergent Themes

After coding all the PAR Cycle One data, then analyzing the connections between the categories, several initial themes emerged. The coding process revealed three emergent themes: (1) leader agency, (2) collaborative meeting structure, and (3) trust within the team. In this section, I explain all three emergent themes and the categories that led to them in detail. The visual in Figure 9 shows each emergent theme and the categories that support it.

### Leader Agency

While this study's focus of practice (FoP) centers on creating a space for school leaders to collaborate, the most prevalent emergent theme, Leader Agency, centers on the leaders themselves. During PAR Cycle One, data surfaced through reflective memos, interviews, and SL-NIC session discussions that center on the ideas of leader self-efficacy and leaders as

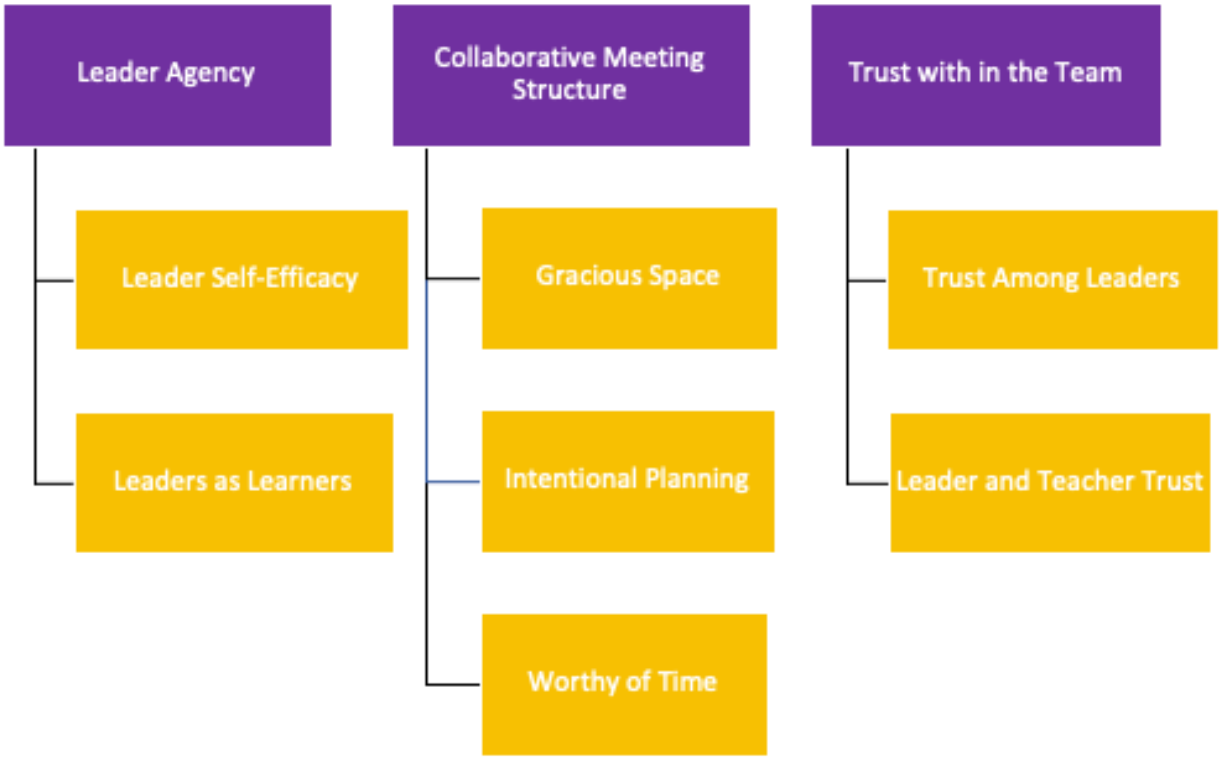


*Figure 9*. Three emerging themes with categories.

learners. I grouped these categories under the emergent theme: Leader Agency. This theme is derived from the extensive body of research on student agency and human agency in general. Student agency focuses on a student's ability to manage his or her learning within a classroom to impact academic performance. Fostering agency depends on teachers and administrators' intentional efforts and a school culture that supports agency (Zeiser et al., 2018). Translating this idea to school leaders, Leader Agency focuses on a leader managing their own learning to impact their personal performance along with the performance of the teachers and students within their schools. The conditions for leader agency are created when intentional efforts are made by district leadership to create a culture where leaders are empowered within a culture of care. Figure 10 shares the categories that lead to the emergent theme of Leader Agency. In Table 4, I outline the categories and subsequent codes associated with this emergent theme. Then, I explain the categories that informed these emergent themes: Leader Self-Efficacy and Leaders as Learners.

### *Leader Self-Efficacy*

Psychologist Albert Bandura originally proposed the concept of self-efficacy in 1977. According to Bandura (2009), self-efficacy is the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. Put simply, self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a specific situation. In the realm of school and district leadership, the mindset of a leader and their self-efficacy contribute to their success. During the March 24, 2022, SL-NIC session, there were 118 instances of leaders using affirmative, encouraging language with each other. After that session, one leader shared that the SL-NIC gave her the confidence to keep pushing ahead through adversity.

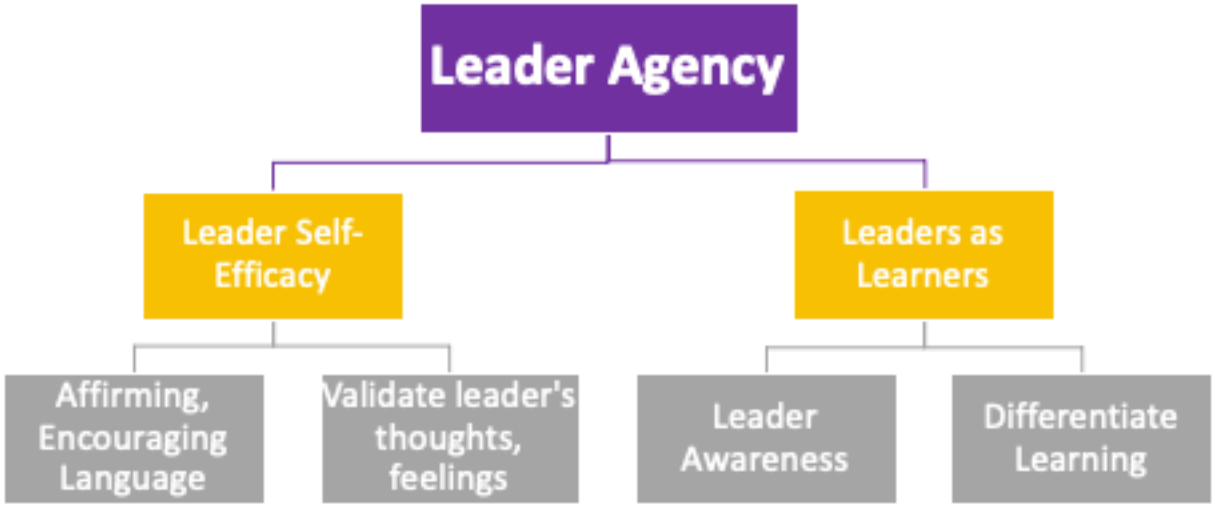


*Figure 10*. Factors that contribute to leader agency.

Table 4

*PAR Cycle One - Emergent Theme 1: Leader Agency*

| Category | Code | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| Leader Self-Efficacy (total 149) | Affirming, encouraging language | 118 |
| | Validate leader's thoughts, feelings | 11 |
| | Growth, confidence as a leader | 11 |
| | Feeling empowered, renewed | 9 |
| Leaders as Learners (total 32) | Differentiate learning for leaders | 9 |
| | Leader awareness of inequity | 9 |
| | Model equitable practices | 7 |
| | Opportunity for leaders to learn together | 7 |

An area that contributes to leader self-efficacy is personal confidence. All participants in the study shared that the SL-NIC sessions contributed positively to their growth as a leader. Similarly, validation of thoughts and feelings appeared in the data 11 times, with one participant stating, “This space gives me the confidence to express my thoughts.” Leading during the COVID-19 pandemic and a polarizing political landscape contributed to many educational leaders questioning themselves and facing new and difficult situations. The SL-NIC provided a space for leaders to share and give reassurance, reinstalling confidence. Laura said, “That’s the big thing as a principal; you really need the support of other principals who understand what you’re going through and experiencing. Giving each other advice and sometimes just listening.” All four participants referenced feeling empowered and renewed after each SL-NIC sessions. These codes appeared 9 times total in PAR Cycle One.

### *Leaders as Learners*

A significant difference that emerged through the SL-NIC was the purpose behind gathering leaders together. Two participants shared thoughts about how generally, leaders gather to solve a problem or to plan something specific; rarely do they gather to simply learn together. Codes relating to leaders as learners appeared 17 times in the data. Traditionally, school principals and district directors meet monthly to review managerial tasks and distribute information. The SL-NIC goal was to learn together about equitable practices, this was a different dynamic for all participants compared to monthly managerial meetings for school principals or district directors. When referring to the group's conversations on equitable practices, one member shared, “These are conversations that wouldn’t normally happen.”

**Model Equitable Practices.** During the SL-NIC sessions, leaders modeling equitable practices appeared directly five times in the data. A middle school principal said this best during

an interview, “leaders have to model every chance they get.” Stephen, an elementary school principal, compared a meeting agenda to a lesson plan for a teacher in the classroom. He also said that “we [as leaders] must always model and pre-plan for adult learning. Show teachers, don’t just tell them.” This idea stretched to the district level when one participant, a district leader, shared how all school or district leaders should participate and be a part of all activities in an adult learning session.

**Differentiate Learning for Leaders.** Knowing the adult learner's personalities and preferences and then differentiating the learning to meet their needs was a code that emerged from a few participants. Data around differentiation for teachers and leaders appeared in the data 4 times. A middle school principal tied differentiation to equity when she said, “Equity doesn’t just apply to students, but to our teachers as well. Different teachers have different needs.” Some participants shared that differentiating for teachers is more important now than ever to avoid educator burnout. This is due to the increased level of compliance and mandated learning required by the state after the COVID-19 pandemic. Returning to in-person learning and dealing with the effects of long-term remote learning during the pandemic has created conditions where teachers and school leaders require more professional development.

***Summary***

The emergent theme of Leader Agency included the categories of Leader Self-Efficacy and Leaders as Learners. This study's theory of action (TOA) is that if district and school leaders work together in a collaborative space focused on equitable practices, they will develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use equitable practices with teachers. The data presented in this theme help me draw connections to the TOA as SL-NIC members made connections between the SL-NIC sessions and how they created learning experiences for teachers in their

schools. Looking through the lens of the research questions, this theme connects closely to two of the four questions:

- Question 3: To what extent do school leaders replicate collaborative learning spaces around equitable practices in their schools?
- Question 4: To what extent does working with school leaders support my growth and development as an educational leader?

I designed the interview questions to align directly with the research questions. I asked school leaders during each interview how the SL-NIC fostered or inhibited their growth as a leader. The leaders' reflections helped solidify this emerging theme through PAR Cycle One. I noticed from this data that leader agency is important for creating the conditions for collaboration among leaders. In the SL-NIC, I modeled the skill of creating a space for leaders so that they could create a similar learning space for teachers. The emerging theme addressed the "who" behind the SL-NIC; the following theme dives into the "how." Next, I explore the emergent theme of collaborative meeting structures.

**Collaborative Meeting Structure**

I focused the study on creating a space for district and school leaders to collaborate on equitable practices. The theme of collaborative meeting structures emerged through collecting and analyzing data from reflective memos, SL-NIC session discussion audio, and individual interviews. This emergent theme focuses on the "how" of the TOA. According to Honig et al. (2010), collaboration between school and district leaders is necessary for district-wide teaching and learning improvement. One participant said, "Leadership can be lonely at this level, [the SL-NIC] makes me feel like I'm not alone." In this section, I outline each category that led to this emergent theme. The categories are intentional planning by facilitators, NIC structure, worthy of

time, space for hope and joy, and space for vulnerability and clarity. Figure 11 explains the theme, categories, and prominent codes. In Table 5, I outline the codebook section for this emergent theme.

### *Gracious Space*

The gracious space category encompasses codes that refer to the structure of the collaborative meeting and how the meeting environment contributed to vulnerability, hope, and joy. Gracious space, created by the Center for Ethical Leadership, is built on four tenets necessary for learning: spirit, setting, inviting the stranger, and learning in public (Hughes & Grace, 2010). The juxtaposition of joy with deep conversation category has the highest number of instances under the Collaborative Learning Structures emergent theme. During the March 24, 2022, SL-NIC session audio, laughter occurred 42 times. One participant reflected, “Our discussions are always really good, where we can laugh but also dig deep into the life of an administrator to make sure we're making a positive impact on our students. I also enjoyed that we left with some neat ideas of what to implement at our school.”

The idea of sharing school stories that bring laughter and hope for the future appeared in the data at least 12 times, with one participant sharing that “We compared war stories, but even better, we share strategies that have worked and are helping us move in the desired direction.” Perpetual hope also comes through in the data. Olivia, a district leader, said this best on April 4, 2022, “I feel like in some leadership spaces, whether that’s building or district level, gatherings lean themselves towards solving a problem. Those are important…but they can lead to a deficit mentality. Even when we have those moments in the [SL-NIC] group, we identify the barriers, but the focus is almost always what's on the other side of the barrier. A barrier is just that; it’s never insurmountable.”

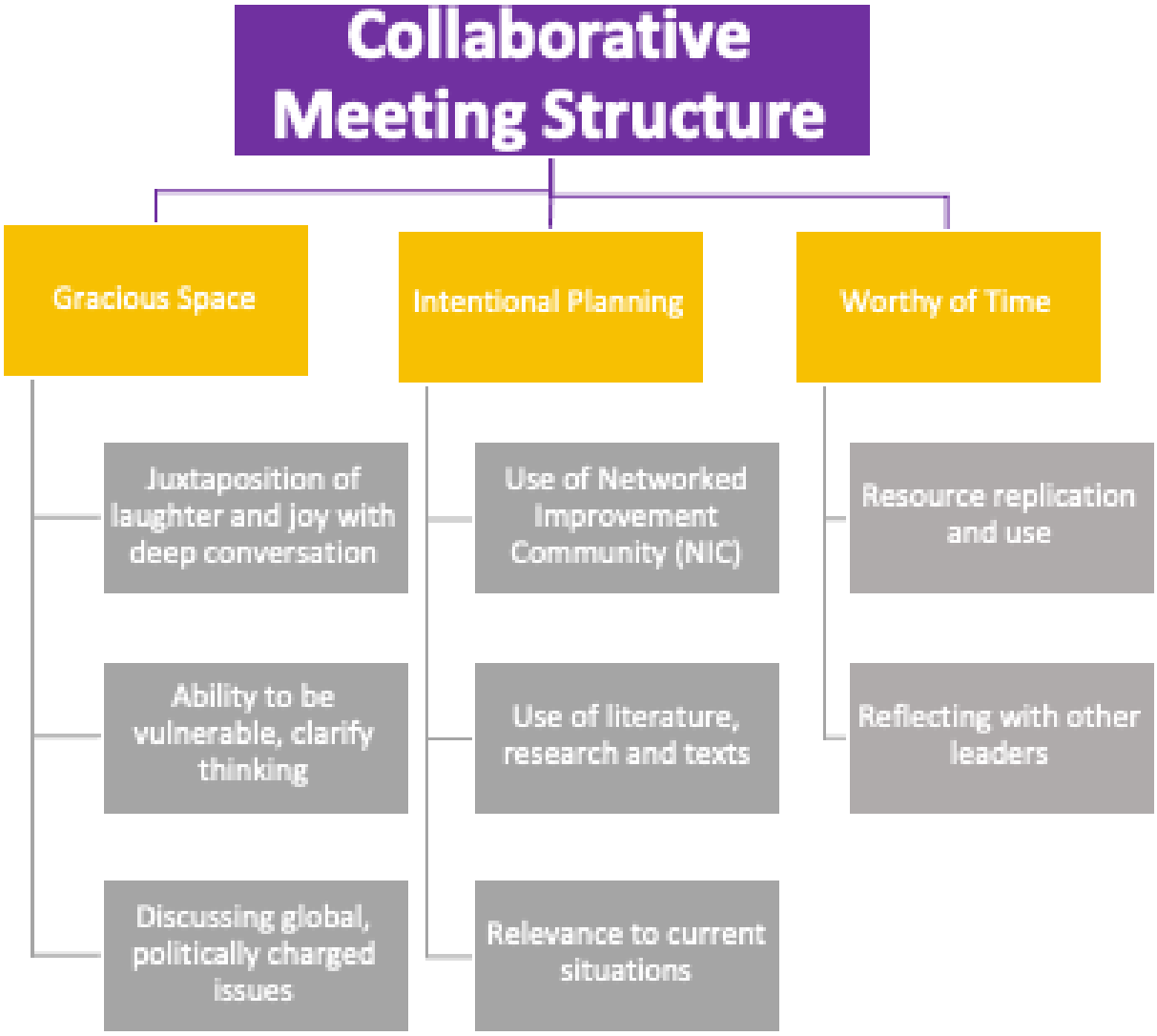


*Figure 11*. Collaborative meeting structure factors.

Table 5

*PAR Cycle One - Emergent Theme 2: Collaborative Meeting Structure*

| Category | Code | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| Gracious Space (total 89) | Juxtaposition of laugher/joy with deep conversation | 42 |
| | Ability to be vulnerable, clarify thinking | 18 |
| | Discussing global, politically charged issues | 12 |
| | Sharing school stories | 12 |
| | Perpetual hope | 5 |
| Intentional Planning (total 63) | Use of Networked Improvement Community (NIC) | 21 |
| | Relevance to current situations | 12 |
| | Use of literature, research, texts | 16 |
| | Purposeful, flexible agenda | 8 |
| | Planning for conversation, questions* | 6 |
| Worthy of Time (total 40) | Resource replication and use* | 24 |
| | Reflecting with other leaders* | 16 |

During January individual interviews, all 4 SL-NIC members mentioned needing a space to feel safe being vulnerable as leaders, with Olivia saying, “There needs to be a space where leaders can be messy for a minute.” A safe place for leaders to clarify their thinking within the SL-NIC has been beneficial, especially during the polarizing political climate surrounding public education at the time of Cycle One. All four SL-NIC members shared that discussing equitable practices has helped them better understand the rhetoric surrounding the term equity in the different political circles that affect public education, with Stephen adding that “It’s helped me to work with other leaders to create a better understanding of these topics.” Appreciation for having a safe space to discuss polarizing topics appeared in the data. During the March 24, 2022, SL-NIC session, Laura stated that everyone, including leaders, needs safe people to talk to and clarify their thinking.

### *Intentional Planning by Facilitators*

The first category that became apparent through coding reflective memos, SL-NIC session audio, and interviews is intentional planning by the session's facilitator. Codes relating to intentional planning appeared 61 times in the data. On March 4th, 2022, I shared in a reflective memo that “I worked to align all the pieces of the agenda to the goal of increasing educator awareness about equitable practices.” SL-NIC members shared in their reflective memos and individual interviews that they noticed the intentional planning of the agenda items. They also shared that they appreciated each SL-NIC session having purpose and flexibility. Olivia shared in her February 25th reflective memo that “facilitating a meaningful gathering takes a lot of time and cognitive capacity,” and she shared her plans for replicating an activity used during the recent SL-NIC session during an upcoming instructional staff meeting.

**Relevance to Current Situations.** The importance of ensuring learning is relevant to current situations leaders are facing appeared 12 times in this data. Ellen shared that "the section that we read from Leading in a Culture of Change was so spot on to what I've been feeling and experiencing the last four years [as a school leader]." The use of relevant literature and research to ground discussion appeared in the data nine times. An elementary principal said this best, "I enjoyed how we started with a deep scholarly article discussion to get us thinking and talking." The intentionality of the specific literature chosen for each SL-NIC session also appeared in the data 8 times, with a comment that "I'm amazed how the articles and videos that are chosen to discuss are so relevant to all of us [SL-NIC members], even though we're in different buildings and contexts." Olivia, a district leader, shared in a reflective memo on April 9th, 2022, that she wants to work on including research and articles in meetings with the instructional coaching staff she supports so that current trends in education surround the "team so they can positively influence educators in their environments."

**Timing of Topics.** The intentional timing of when reflective or activities took place in SL-NIC sessions came through in the data in a few spots. Ellen shared in her reflective memo on March 4th, 2022, that she facilitated a difficult conversation with a grade-level team just before the February SL-NIC session and that the "4 Simple Rules for Pedagogy of Student Voice" excerpt from *Street Data* by Safir et al. (2021) reaffirmed many talking points shared with teachers. I plan to dig deeper into the timing of specific activities and strategies during PAR Cycle Two.

**Use of NIC.** I used Spillane et al.'s (2004) Networked Improvement Community (NIC) structure during this study. Through our school leader NIC (SL-NIC) sessions, we focused narrowly on the terms of equity and equitable practices. We did this through the lens of educator

awareness about equitable practices and the conditions needed to ensure practices and policies in schools promote equity for all. Codes relating to the NIC structure appeared 32 times in the data. Codes relating to the NIC structure encouraging discussion, questions, and reflection appeared nine times. In a March 4, 2022, reflective memo, I shared that I try to think through each session and create a welcoming space, ready for vulnerability and focused on the goal. School leaders even related this to their role in schools. Stephen shared during an SL-NIC session on February 26, 2022, "We [school principals] want confident teachers and students who are encouraged to ask questions and speak up, so we need to structure meetings to do that."

### *Worthy of Time*

The SL-NIC sessions being worthy of time appeared 40 times during Cycle One. During each individual interview, when asked how the SL-NIC has fostered or inhibited their growth as a leader, all four leaders stated the sessions have only fostered their growth and not hindered it. Laura reflected, "Every time I leave our SL-NIC sessions, I feel renewed. It sometimes feels that we are fighting an uphill battle, and it is a tremendous help to be given some time to collaborate with others fighting similar battles." The feeling of sessions being a productive and good use of time for school leaders came through clearly in the data, with Stephen stating, "The session was engaging from start to finish."

A prominent code in this category is instances of resource replication and use. Instances of resource replication and use from SL-NIC sessions appeared 24 times in the data. This code is one that was also prominent in the Pre-cycle. Principals and district leaders shared that they made plans to use specific protocols or articles shared in SL-NIC sessions with direct reports and other staff. This is an area I plan to dive into even more during PAR Cycle Two. Another code that contributed to this category is reflecting with other leaders. The time to reflect with other

school and district leaders away from the school environment was mentioned 16 times in the data, with Ellen saying, “Reflection is building in through questions at specific times.” Creating an agenda with specific time to reflect as a group was meaningful to participants. In a reflective memo on February 24th, I stated that I wondered how more ritualized reflection among school and district leaders could affect schools.

***Summary***

In this emergent theme, I shared categories that shaped the conditions for leaders to collaborate through collaborative meeting structures. When it comes to district and school leaders operating in the community, Spillane et al.'s (2004) work shares that it is essential to move beyond the analysis of individual knowledge and consider what leaders know and do together. This study's theory of action (TOA) is that if district and school leaders work together in a collaborative space focused on equitable practices, they will develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use equitable practices with teachers. The data presented in this theme draw connections to the TOA as SL-NIC members made connections to how the intentional structure of the SL-NIC sessions helped them as they worked with groups of teachers and contributed to their growth in facilitating collaboration. Looking through the lens of the research questions for this study, this theme connects closely to all four research questions:

- Question 1: How do school leaders across a school district collaborate to improve equitable instructional practices?
- Question 2: To what extent do school leaders use tools and processes to address equitable practices?
- Question 3: To what extent do school leaders replicate collaborative learning space around equitable practices in their schools?

- Question 4: To what extent does working with school leaders support my growth and development as an educational leader?

Using the collaborative meeting structure of the SL-NIC, I modeled the skill of creating a space for leaders to be vulnerable, ask questions, share stories, and look beyond the barriers to change educational practices. The emerging theme addressed "how" of creating the conditions for collaboration. The data support a district leader can create conditions for collaboration among school leaders by establishing collaborative learning structures among school and district leaders. These structures should create space for hope, joy, clarity, and vulnerability among leaders. Thus, facilitators must be intentional and think about the timing of topics to ensure relevance and connection. Next, I explore the emergent theme of trust within the team.

**Trust within the Team**

The third emergent theme is Trust within the Team. During PAR Cycle One, data surfaced through reflective memos, interviews, and SL-NIC session discussions that center on the ideas of trust among leaders, leader and teacher trust, and mixed messages about equity; I grouped these categories under the theme: Trust within the Team. Daly et al. (2015) found through a study of 78 school leaders and their perceptions of trust, efficacy, and collaboration among themselves and district leaders that leaders must build a shared vision through positive relationships and trust. They found that building social capital through learning together is important for building leader trust. Figure 12 explains the theme, categories, and prominent codes. Table 6 outlines the categories and subsequent codes associated with this emergent theme. In the following sections, I explain the categories that led to the creation of this emergent theme: Trust among Leaders and Leader and Teacher Trust.

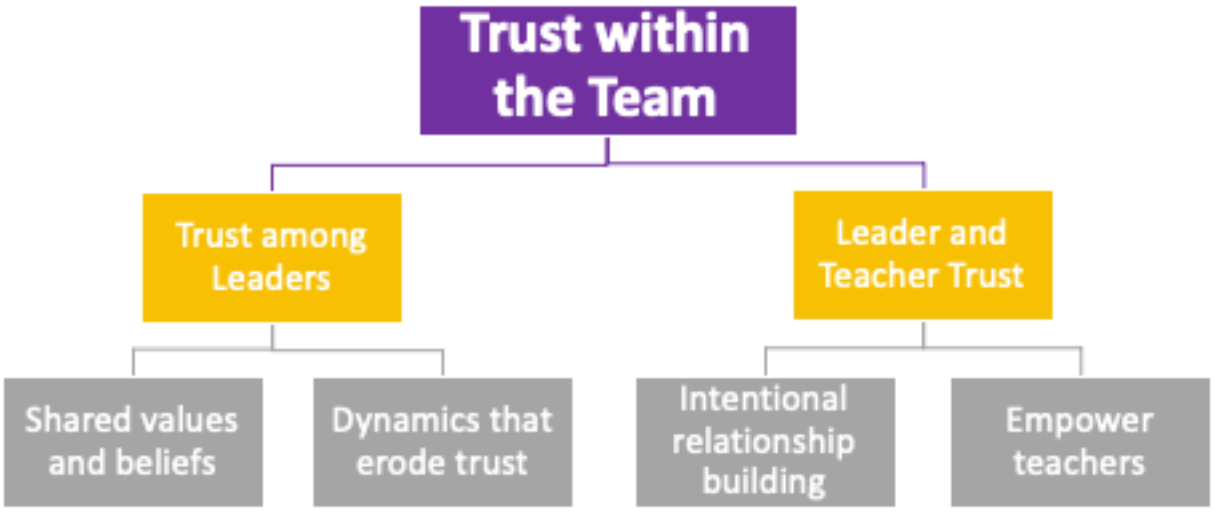


*Figure 12*. Factors that influence trust within the team.

Table 6

*PAR Cycle One - Emergent Theme 3: Trust within the Team*

| Category | Code | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| Trust among Leaders (total 24) | Shared values and beliefs | 10 |
| | Dynamics that erode trust | 9 |
| | Collaboration depends on who sits at the table | 5 |
| Leader and Teacher Trust (total 13) | Intentional relationship building | 8 |
| | Empower teachers to observe, ask questions, lead | 3 |
| | Create an environment where it's ok to make mistakes | 2 |

### *Trust Among Leaders*

The tie between collaboration among school and district leaders and trust emerged in the PAR Cycle One data. Codes relating to trust among leaders appeared 24 times. Ellen shared that collaboration depends on who is "at the table" and the relationship between each leader, stating "It all comes back to trust and who is in the group." A shared philosophy and similar core values and beliefs came through as a part of trust among leaders. When asked about the role of the SL-NIC, Stephen shared that he appreciated the "camaraderie of equity-minded folks." SL-NIC members enjoyed having time set aside to collaborate on equitable instructional practices with other leaders; this appeared in the data directly five times with Ellen adding. "The best part of this [SL-NIC] is that I'm with people who are just as passionate as I am."

Conversely, leaders shared that certain dynamics can erode trust among district and school leaders. While this only appeared in the data nine times, during interviews, three of four SL-NIC members referenced that they want to feel supported by district leaders without fear of retribution or attack. Two leaders referenced feelings of having to be careful around leaders they do not trust and that perceived competition between school leaders can contribute to a lack of trust.

### *Leader and Teacher Trust*

The trust between school leaders and teachers appeared in the data 13 times. SL-NIC members shared working to build trust among leaders and teachers by creating an environment in which they can ask for help and learn from mistakes. A good representation of this sentiment was Laura stating that "the first thing you have to build is trust in the whole [school] building so that teachers feel safe." Codes about empowering teachers to ask questions and lead appeared in the data, with Stephen pointing out that "the goal for me is to empower teachers to be teacher

leaders." Building trust with teachers so they are comfortable taking risks is a concern, and teachers have fears of trying something new that feels out of their control until they know have trust with their school leader.

### *Summary*

In this section, I discussed the emergent themes of leader agency, collaborative meeting structure, and trust within the team. The data presented draw connections to the TOA as SL-NIC members shared the importance of trust within the team members as a condition for collaboration among leaders. Looking through the lens of the research questions for the study, this theme connects closely to the first research question: How do school leaders across a school district collaborate to improve equitable instructional practices? From the emergent theme, trust among the leaders in the space is important for creating conditions for collaboration. This aligns with Hoy and Tschannen-Moran's (1999); in all organizations in which learning is the goal, trust is a key factor in fostering collaboration between teachers, students, families, and school leaders.

## Leadership Reflection and Action Steps for PAR Cycle Two

During PAR Cycle One, my leadership shifted both formally and informally. In March 2022, I was promoted to a position in which I formally supervised members of the SL-NIC. Before this, I served in a coaching role. I was cognizant of this change and how the positional power perception could affect the study. One of my reflective memos stated that

> I must keep in mind how this shift in my role may affect the dynamic of the SL-NIC and the fact that I supervise someone that is a part of the group. I'm hopeful I've built enough relational trust that we can continue as we always have with open dialogue, sharing, and the willingness to be vulnerable.

As a research practitioner, my skills in qualitative coding improved during Cycle One. I coded more expeditiously. During the Pre-cycle, I condensed codes down to categories too quickly; I kept that front of mind during Cycle One. I had some data that did not fit with the research questions; therefore, I did not factor that data into the emerging themes or potential findings. Not using all the data was tough for me to grapple with at first when I thought about all the time spent coding as I wanted to be able to use all of it. Through reflection with my coach and research group, though, I realized this is a normal thought pattern of researchers. Thinking about the relationship between the Pre-cycle and PAR Cycle One, I used some codes in both cycles. Those codes were primarily around collaborative meeting structures or conditions for collaboration—The "how" of collaboration among leaders. I want to understand more about timing specific learning and literature over a school year to make the learning the most relevant for school and district leaders.

## Conclusion

Through this study up to this point, I learned a great deal about what is needed to create the conditions for collaboration among school and district leaders. The emergent themes from PAR Cycle One, including Leader Agency, Collaborative Meeting Structure, and Trust within the Team, have both broadened and deepened my understanding. During the final research cycle, I met with the SL-NIC and conducted one individual interview with each SL-NIC member. I also wrote reflective memos, especially at pivotal times and after SL-NIC sessions. The first SL-NIC session for Cycle Two included a member check that SL-NIC members reviewed and reflected on the emergent themes, categories, and codes from Cycle One.

# CHAPTER 6: PAR CYCLE TWO AND FINDINGS

Although school and district leaders are in the business of learning, traditionally, the time and space for adult learning and collaboration is limited, especially for school leaders. Traditionally, leadership in school systems is hierarchical. The decisions are made at the top by central office administrators, and information moves “down” to school-level leaders and then into classrooms for the teachers to implement, leaving little space for collaboration. Yukl (2002) advocates for changing the traditional "heroic leader" archetype, in which one person performs all essential leadership functions to a model in which we recognize that leadership is distributed among various members of an organization (p. 4). Collaboration among school and district leaders has the potential to shift instructional practice and is a key lever in school and district transformation (Daly et al., 2015; Honig et al., 2010).

Through my experience as a school and district leader, I noticed a lack of focus on high-quality collaborative experiences for leaders. In the participatory action research (PAR) project and study, I examined the conditions for creating a collaborative space for school and district leaders from across a school district to learn together about equitable practices. This team, the School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC), was a team of school leaders who came together to learn about equitable educational practices.

Over the course of ten months, three school principals (Stephen, Laura, Ellen) and two district leaders (Olivia and I) met regularly as an SL-NIC to collaborate and learn together about equitable practices. Before these sessions, school and district leaders collaborated mainly through traditional monthly principals' sit-and-get informational meetings. The context of this PAR was ripe for change since each leader went through a doctoral credential program together that focused on equity and high-quality adult learning. This study took place during the return to

in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, which challenged leaders to be reflective and think about improving learning for leaders and teachers.

The study began with an overarching research question and sub-questions. The research question was: *How can school leaders develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve equitable practices?* The sub-questions included:

1. How do school leaders across a school district collaborate to improve equitable practices?
2. To what extent do school leaders use tools and processes to address equitable practices?
3. To what extent do school leaders replicate collaborative learning spaces around equitable practices in their schools?
4. To what extent does working with school leaders support my growth and development as an educational leader?

In Chapter 5, I analyzed data to reveal a set of emergent themes: Leader Agency, Collaborative Meeting Structures, and Trust within the Team. In this chapter, I begin with the process from the final inquiry cycle, PAR Cycle Two. The analysis of this final PAR Cycle, combined with the PAR Pre-cycle and Cycle One, generated a robust set of data that generated a set of findings.

## PAR Cycle Two Process

PAR Cycle Two took place over one academic semester in Summer 2022. This cycle included one SL-NIC session and one individual interview with each participant. Like PAR Cycle One and the Pre-cycle, each SL-NIC member completed a reflective memo at the close of the SL-NIC session. After the SL-NIC session, I conducted an individual interview with each

participant using a script aligned with the research questions. Since the participants are all co-practitioners in this study, the interviews provide targeted, individual data aligned with the research questions. After the SL-NIC session, each of the five participants completed a reflective memo using the same format as the Pre-cycle and PAR Cycle One. During this cycle, I added a Data Reflection, which served as a final member check of this study. Table 7 shows an at-a-glance visual of all the activities with dates in PAR Cycle Two. Next, I explain PAR Cycle Two activities and processes.

**SL-NIC Session**

During PAR Cycle Two, we held one School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC) session. Like the PAR Pre-cycle and Cycle One, the design of the session included constructivist practices to encourage discourse. I recorded this session and sent the recording to a transcription agency. All four SL-NIC members were present for this session. Our goals for this SL-NIC session were to continue cultivating relational trust, review and reflect on PAR Cycle One data, and discuss the next implementation steps. Our agenda format, agreements, and norms for this session remained the same as the PAR Pre-cycle. Throughout the study, participants volunteered to lead dynamic mindfulness, and Laura always came with well-timed, powerful DM strategies. Then we participated in a personal narrative (PN) in which each person shared their thoughts or reaction to the text in pairs or whole groups (Tredway et al., 2020).

During this PN, participants read the quote, "The true strength in our classroom lies in the collaboration of learners, not in the knowledge of one expert." The author of this quote is unknown. I added a prompt for participants to think about what resonated with them from the quote and to think about the impacts of adjusting the word "classroom" to "school" in the quote.

Table 7

*Activities: PAR Cycle Two*

| Activity | July 2022 | August 2022 |
|---|---|---|
| SL-NIC Sessions (Learning Exchange) | July 7<br>SL-NIC Session (n=5) | |
| Individual Interviews with SL-NIC members | Ellen 7/13<br>Olivia 7/13<br>Laura 7/15<br>Stephen 7/28 | |
| Reflective Memos | July 7<br>(n=5) | |
| Member Check | | August 8<br>Data Reflection<br>(n=3) |

After solo reflection, each participant shared their perspective on the quote concerning their current leadership context. This launched a rich, 30-minute discussion about the conditions for collaboration between school and district leaders and between school leaders and teachers. I captured the conversation via an audio recorder and took notes to pick up the nuances of the conversation.

Next, I shared emergent themes and prominent categories from the PAR Pre-cycle and PAR Cycle One. Each participant reviewed the data independently using reflection questions:

- What story is coming up for you as you look at the data?
- What resonates with you?
- What do you wonder about?
- What do you question or disagree with?
- What is missing?

Each SL-NIC member shared their thoughts on the emergent themes. In general, participants felt affirmed in their school transformation work while reviewing the data. The focus on leader agency, collaborative structures, and trust were themes the team had suspected would show up in the data. However, seeing the raw numbers was validating for participants. We ended the session by completing a reflective memo about the session and what had been discussed. This process was the same in the Pre-cycle and PAR Cycle One.

Knowing this SL-NIC session was the last of the study, participants discussed ways they could continue meeting and divide up facilitation of the agenda items. During the study, participants volunteered to do DM, and I planned and modeled the remainder of the agenda. The shared ownership of the SL-NIC session embodied a learning community all educational leaders hope to create.

### Individual Interviews and Member Check

A few days after the SL-NIC Session in July 2022, I conducted a final interview with each participant using interview questions aligned with the research questions. I took notes during the interviews to keep track of significant points and account for body language, eye contact, and other nuances. Since all participants were co-practitioner researchers in the study, the interviews provided targeted individual data. The final interview provided an opportunity to clarify information shared during the last SL-NIC.

At the close of data collection in August 2022, I conducted a final member check. Participants provided member checks to ensure accuracy of the data analysis when they review the information and data that pertains to them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I added a final member check after working with East Carolina University faculty during the 2022 Summer Learning Exchange (SLE). During the SLE, I refined the language of the emergent themes. I conducted the member check virtually via Google Forms and included spaces to share reflections on finalized emergent theme language. I asked each participant to finish some final reflective statements:

- In this research study, we aimed to…
- My favorite part of being in this study was…
- In the future, I plan to…

Three out of four participants (removing myself from that count) completed the member check.

### Data Collection and Analysis

During PAR Cycle Two, I analyzed four forms of data: (1) transcriptions of SL-NIC Sessions, (2) individual interviews, (3) reflective memos of each SL-NIC member, and (4) member check reflections. Table 8 shows PAR Cycle Two data collection and the data collected

in the Pre-cycle and PAR Cycle One. I used the same coding process for all the PAR Cycles. I began by open coding using exploratory, descriptive codes taken from the transcript or document (Saldaña, 2016). For the second coding cycle, I switched to axial coding to look for specific patterns within the data (Saldaña, 2016). Axial coding is appropriate for studies that use a wide variety of data sources. In essence, axial coding is a process where "the code is sharpened to achieve its best fit" (Glaser, 1978, p. 62). When I noticed similarities to codes in PAR Cycle One, I used the same codes for consistency. I used the same Google Sheets-based codebook from the PAR Pre-cycle and PAR Cycle One to keep track of all codes, sub-categories, categories, and emergent themes. Appendix H contains the complete codebook used in this study. After three PAR Cycles of coding data from codes to categories to emergent themes, the culmination of this research is the findings.

## Findings

The PAR study took place over ten months and included five SL-NIC sessions, three individual interviews per participant, and 20 reflective memos. Table 8 shows all the data collected over the three cycles. I aligned data collection with the research question and sub-questions. In this project, I brought together school and district leaders to collaborate on equitable practices and how to apply them in their school context. The aim of this study was complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, during a time when leaders were working through a variety of new situations. The design of this study bucked the traditions of professional development experiences for school leaders.

Three findings, and promising practices, from this PAR study have the potential to contribute to empirical research. First, school district leadership sets the tone for school leader agency through modeling effective collaborative practices. District leadership must make

Table 8

*Data Collection from All Three PAR Cycles*

| | PAR Pre-cycle Fall 2021 (Sept – Dec 2021) | | | | PAR CYCLE One Spring 2022 (Jan – Apr 2022) | | | | PAR CYCLE Two Summer 2022 (May - August 2022) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Sept. | Oct. | Nov. | Dec. | Jan. | Feb. | March | Apr. | May | June | July | Aug. |
| SL-NIC Sessions (Learning Exchange) | | 10/18 n=5 | 11/18 n=5 | | | 2/26 n=5 | 3/24 n=4 | | | | 7/7 n=5 | |
| Reflective Memos n=5 | | * | * | | | * | * | * | | | * | * |
| Individual Interviews n=5 | | | | | * | * | | * | | | * | |
| Member Checks | | | | | | * | | | | | | * |

purposeful, collaborative moves to build the capacity of school leaders to lead boldly and collaboratively (Honig et al., 2010). Second, collaboration among school and district leaders about equitable practices occurs through enacting a collaborative meeting structure. My analysis established three essential parts: intentional strategies that build relational trust, holding gracious space, and a grounding in the research literature. Lastly, school leaders transfer and sustain collaborative meeting structures in their schools with teachers when they have time to process and find value in the work. Processing time to clarify thinking, especially with other leaders, significantly contributed to finding value in the work. The coded data occurrences in the Pre-cycle, PAR Cycle One, and PAR Cycle Two that contributed to the findings (see Figure 13).

All three findings are interconnected, starting with district leaders and moving to school leaders and teachers, beginning with the highest-level district leaders creating the conditions for intentional collaboration and moving to school leader and teacher collaboration in schools. A visual representation of the findings in Figure 14 shows how the findings relate to each other and to the Emergent Themes from PAR Cycle One shared in Chapter 5. Next, I explain each finding in detail.

**District Leadership Collaborative Moves**

District leadership matters. The district office leaders hold positional authority and serve as instructional leaders for all leaders in the school system. The way they lead learning for leaders is important and has ripple effects. In this study, the data revealed specific elements necessary for effective district instructional leadership. The first finding of this study is that district leadership sets the tone for school leader agency through modeling effective collaborative practices using strategic, collaborative moves. As Honig et al. (2010) states, district leadership must lead boldly to build capacity for improvement in partnership with school leaders. District

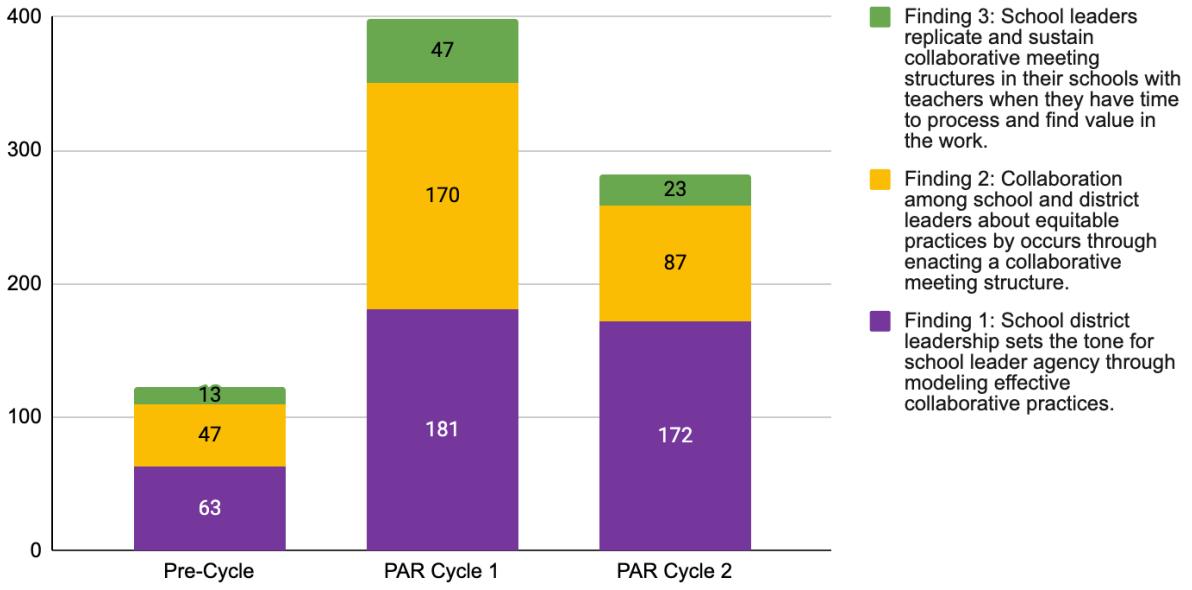


*Figure 13*. Coded data occurrences over three PAR Cycles.

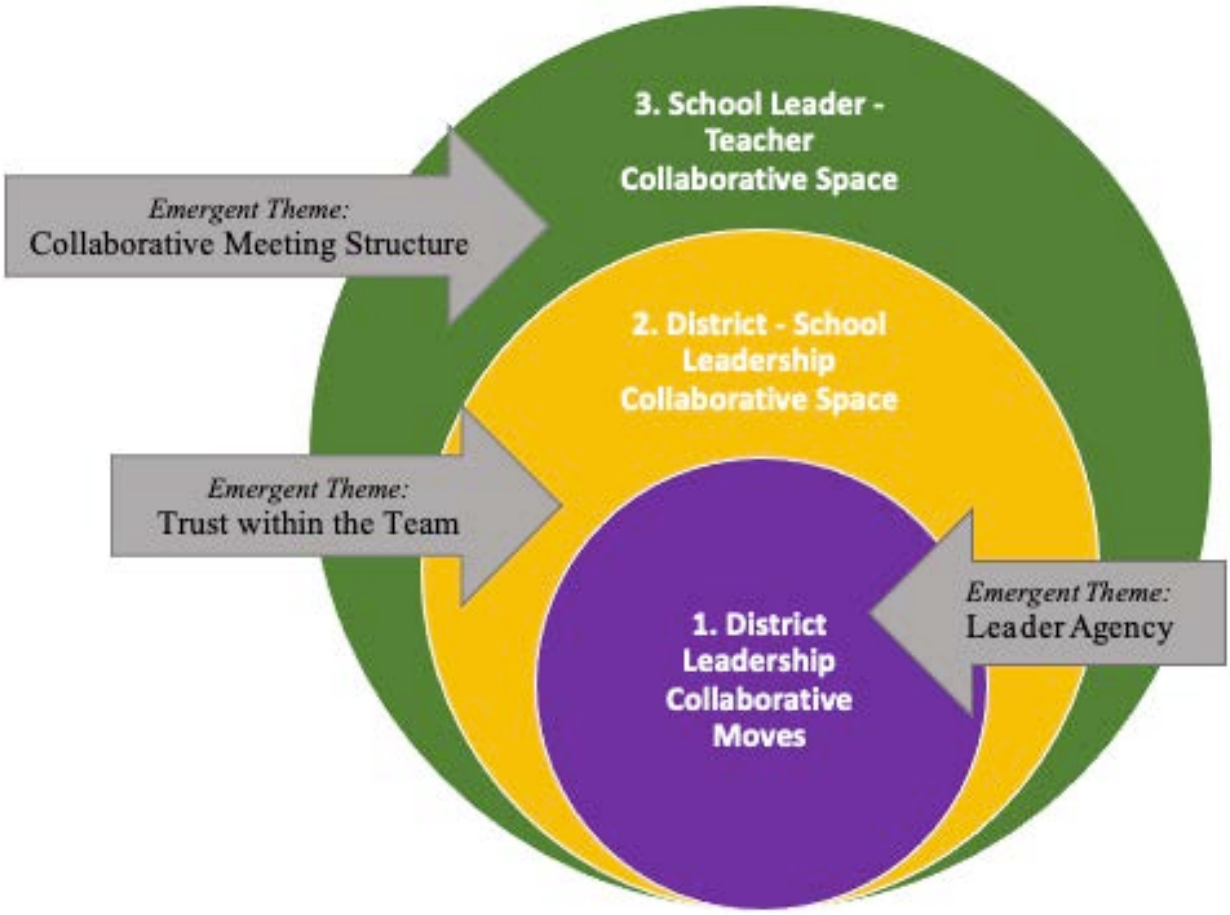


*Figure 14*. Three findings with connections to Emergent Themes.

leaders being an example for school leaders is not a new idea. However, the addition of how district leaders can purposefully use specific collaborative moves can impact the way school districts structure learning for leaders. Olivia, an SL-NIC participant, best summarized this finding, "The district [leadership] sets the tone for collaboration. Credibility and relationships are lost when there's no follow through or modeling from the district." The collaborative moves for district leaders include: (1) prioritizing leader agency, (2) purposefully designing learning for leaders, and (3) serving as a model and coach for school leaders.

### *Prioritize Leader Agency*

The first collaborative move is ensuring that district leaders prioritize the agency of school leaders. Data relating to the Leader Agency theme was the most prevalent during each PAR Cycle, with 36 occurrences in the Pre-cycle, 149 in PAR Cycle One, and 145 in PAR Cycle Two, as shown in Figure 15. Leader Agency focuses on a leader managing their learning to impact their performance along with the performance of the teachers and students within their schools. Leader Agency encompasses Leader Self-Efficacy, a prominent category from PAR Cycle One. Bandura (2009) originally proposed the concept of self- efficacy in 1977. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. Put simply, self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a specific situation. In the realm of school and district leadership, the mindset of a leader and their self-efficacy and agency contribute to their success.

Participants referenced the role of the district through each cycle although the connection between the district setting the tone for leader agency became clear during PAR Cycle Two. District leadership should make intentional efforts to empower leaders within a collaborative space create the conditions for leader agency. Leading districts and schools are hard work.

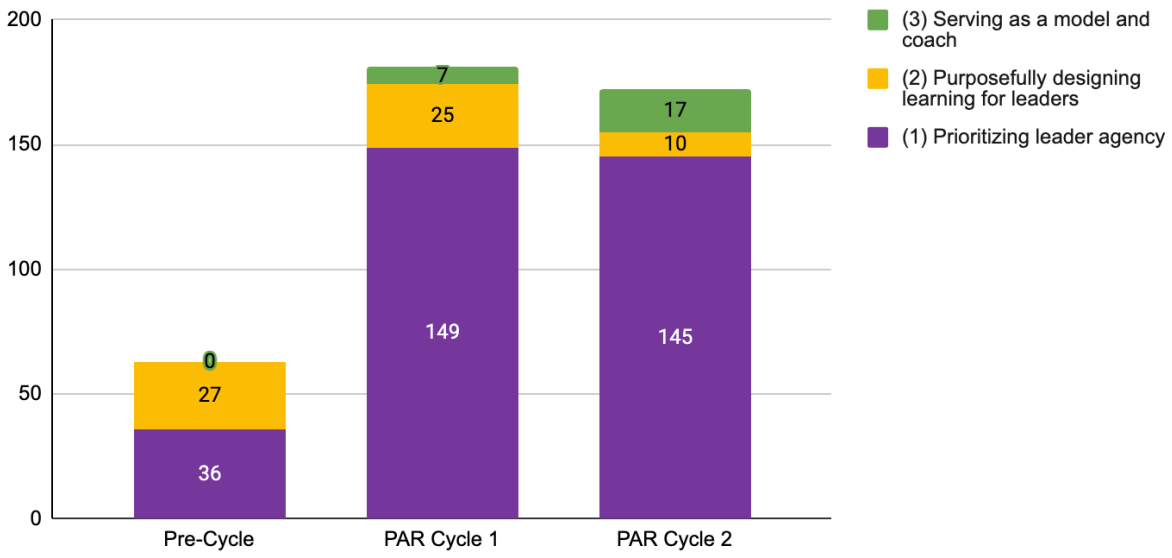


*Figure 15*. Code distribution related to district leadership collaborative moves.

Creating space where leaders can share their experiences led to school and district leaders feeling validated and renewed, with 37 instances in PAR Cycle One and Two. In a reflective memo, Olivia shared, “Together we are better and I leave these gatherings [SL-NIC Sessions] with a renewed sense of purpose.”

***Design Learning for Leaders***

The School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC) was the cornerstone activity for this PAR study, creating a collaborative space for district and school-level leaders. Our SL-NIC convened over ten months, creating a collaborative space for district and school leaders to learn about each other and equitable practices. An undercurrent during each PAR cycle was the role of the district leader in designing, organizing, and facilitating the SL-NIC sessions. District leaders prioritizing learning design for leaders was best explained by Olivia in a reflective memo, "For school leaders to engage, they must find high value in the time with [district level administrators]. It takes a skilled, strategic district leader to create that environment [SL-NIC]." The intentionality in planning by district leaders is essential for creating an authentic, long-term, collaborative space.

Codes relating to designing learning for leaders occurred 62 times over all three PAR cycles. The category of Leaders as Learners from PAR Cycle Two was prominent in this finding. The importance of differentiating instruction, giving structured time for discourse, and keeping the context of school leaders at the front of mind when planning is important when designing learning for leaders. Ellen explained this best in her member check data collection reflection on August 20th, “Just as we want our teachers to differentiate for our students, the type of learning we [principals] do for our teachers needs to be differentiated.” Many district and school leaders were once teachers in classrooms designing learning for students, this finding reinforces the

importance of keeping great learning design at the front of mind when designing learning for school and district leaders.

### *Modeling for and Coaching School Leaders*

District leaders must be flexible, strategic thinkers who serve as models and coaches for school leaders. The district's focus should be making the space for coaching other leaders through situations versus telling information and always treating leaders as true learners first. One participant expressed that just telling information can cause leaders to lose their confidence and causes a spiral of being unsure, which negates leader agency. Through our work in the SL-NIC, school and district leaders were affirmed, empowered, and challenged in their work. Figure 15 reinforces this with data directly relating to modeling for and coaching school leaders appearing in PAR Cycle One and Two a total of 24 times, with the most occurrences in PAR Cycle Two. District leaders need to be aware that they are always modeling, especially when they work with school leaders who have impacts on specific schools, teachers, and students. Laura summarized the importance of modeling and coaching best when she said, "If we really want to build transformational leaders in a district, we have to support them and help them process through experiences that change their thinking—not simply tell people what to do." Finding two dives deeper into the "how" for creating a collaborative space for school leaders to learn about equitable practices.

### District & School Leadership Collaborative Space

After the district leadership sets the tone for collaboration, enacting the collaborative meeting structure is the next step. The next finding is that school and district leaders collaborate about equitable practices by enacting a collaborative meeting structure. This structure has three

essential tenets: (1) intentionally focusing on building relational trust, (2) holding gracious space, and (3) grounding activities and content in research.

Each SL-NIC session followed the same agenda format, including a Personal Narrative to open the meeting, reviewing outcomes and goals, diving into our core activity, and a closing activity. A Networked Improvement Community (NIC) is a narrowly focused collaborative team that addresses a specific task through cycles of inquiry (Bryk et al., 2015; Scanlan et al., 2016). This study's school leader NIC (SL-NIC) focused on equitable practices. SL-NICs engage in rapid, iterative processes of starting bite-sized innovations, prototyping, failing, reporting, and adjusting based on failures before beginning the cycle again. The predictability and flexibility of the agenda structure used in the SL-NIC contributed to the team's synergy and collaboration.

The intentional planning of each activity, aligning with the three essential tenets in each piece of the agenda, was pivotal to creating a collaborative environment. Throughout each PAR Cycle, the importance of a collaborative meeting structure came through clearly, with 304 total instances represented over all three PAR Cycles: Pre-cycle (*n*=47), PAR Cycle One (*n*=170), and PAR Cycle Two (*n*=87). In Figures 16, I analyze the data for each the essential tenets of collaborative meeting structures. The intentional design of the meeting structure was evident. Olivia shared during an SL-NIC session that "the design of the SL-NIC allows leaders to have discourse and talk in a structured way" (Olivia, SL-NIC audio, July13, 2022). The essential tenets of the collaborative meeting structure became clearer through each cycle of inquiry. Next, I explain the crucial tenets of collaborative meeting structures among leaders.

### *Intentional Focus on Building Relational Trust*

The first essential tenet is an intentional focus on building relational trust through the design of the meeting structure. Codes about relational trust occurred in all three cycles of data,

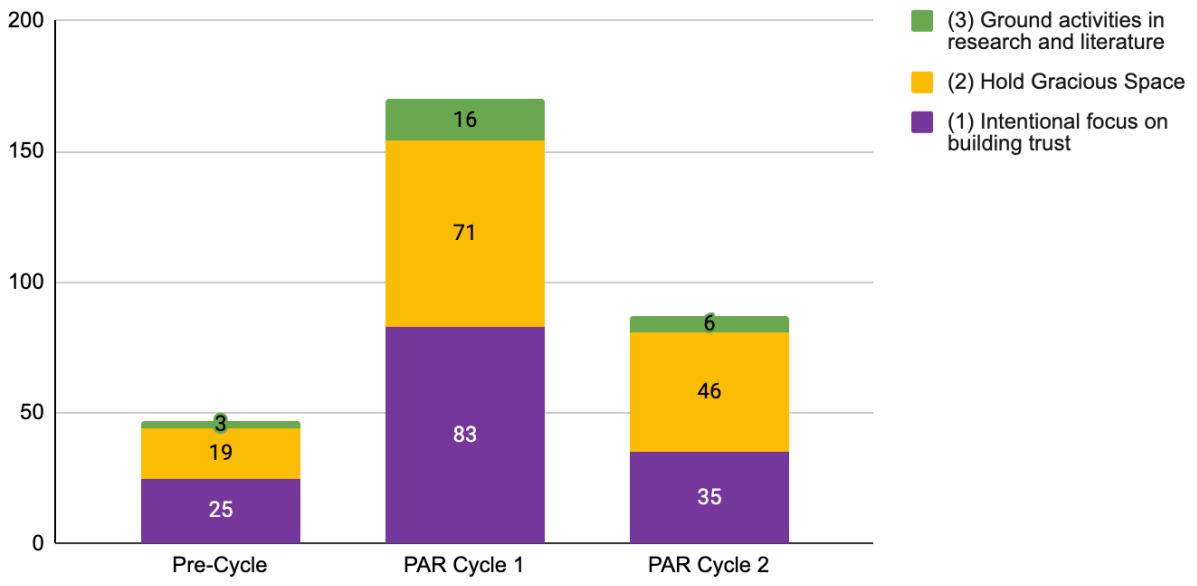


*Figure 16.* Code distribution related to district-school leader collaborative space.

most prominently in PAR Cycle One at 83 instances. Figure 16 shows the breakdown of the code distribution for intentionally focusing on building relational trust. A vehicle for building relational trust is the Personal Narrative (PN). Each session started with a Personal Narrative. A Personal Narrative uses a text, such as an article or piece of artwork, for individual reflection; then, each person shares their thoughts or reaction to the text in pairs or whole groups (Tredway et al., 2020). I chose specific activities that built trust and aligned with the academic purpose of the meeting session. Learning occurs through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), and the targeted PN at the start of each session was both social and provided a bridge between the leader's prior knowledge and the new learning coming during the session.

The goal of the PN was to encourage sharing and to create connections between those in the session. We spent 15-30 minutes on PN each time we met; this targeted, intentional time helped the team to know each other more deeply, resulting in sustained relational trust and rapport. Participants referenced noticing a change in their level of participation and engagement in the SL-NIC compared to their participation in other district meetings. Ellen said this best when she shared in her data reflection, "I noticed that I fully participated in the SL-NIC where it was obvious that everyone wanted to be there learning together." Participants knew we would use a trust building PN during each session, which helped leaders build relationships and have a chance to talk and process at the start of the session. Each participant referenced the feeling that the team had a greater momentum and ability to collaborate. During our July 13, 2022, SL-NIC session, Ellen shared with the group, "We're moving beyond the surface-level professional learning of the district in the past. Our time together has been reflective and analyzing what it is we do and why we do it."

### *Hold Gracious Space*

Holding gracious space is the second essential tenet for collaborative meeting structures for leaders. Gracious space creates a meeting environment that encourages vulnerability, hope, and joy by building on four tenets for learning: spirit, setting, inviting the stranger, and learning in public (Hughes & Grace, 2010). In each SL-NIC session's environment, we had deep conversation and moments of joy and vulnerability. Data collected in all three cycles of research stated that for school and district leaders to authentically and effectively collaborate, they have to move beyond the surface-level norms and into a space of shared vulnerability. Codes related to gracious space occurred 136 times over all three PAR cycles: Pre-cycle (19), PAR Cycle One (71) and PAR Cycle Two (46).

Throughout each research cycle, participants referenced that the SL-NIC was one of the first times they felt they authentically collaborated with other school and district leaders. They left sessions feeling affirmed in their work and with new information and perspectives to apply in their leadership context. Laura shared during an interview that "Leadership can be lonely. This [the SL-NIC] makes me feel like I'm not alone."

### *Grounded in Literature and Research*

The third essential tenet for collaborative meeting structures for leaders is grounding the collaborative session in literature and research. Including relevant literature and research in collaborative sessions increased leaders' engagement, learning, and collaboration. Participants referenced that in spaces that lacked a focus on some sort of data or research, personal experience and stories would dominate. Data each cycle of research demonstrated that the intentional use of research and literature in collaborative sessions made learning authentic by neutralizing the session, especially when discussing topics that could be considered

controversial. Codes directly related to the use of relevant literature and research appeared in all three PAR Cycles 24 times. Olivia said this best during an SL-NIC session, "Using literature or research neutralizes the session and helps people take the personal opinion out of it while still bringing a personal reflection about what you read." Leaders reflected on the research or literature shared and presented personal reflections while remaining focused on the information. During each session, leaders could see the literature and research through various lenses and see that, many times, there is no one "right" answer.

**School and Teacher Leadership Collaborative Space**

The theory of action of this study is that if district and school leaders work together in a collaborative space focused on equitable practices, they will develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use equitable practices with teachers. During each PAR cycle, leaders referenced replicating strategies and emulating the collaborative meeting structure at their school site or within the teams they lead. The final finding is that school leaders transfer and sustain collaborative meeting structures in their schools with teachers when they have time to process and find value in the work. Codes relating to this finding surfaced in all three PAR Cycles: Pre-cycle (18), PAR Cycle One (71), PAR Cycle Two (33). Figure 17 breaks down the distribution of codes relating to the last finding (1) replicating and sustaining collaborative meeting structures, (2) time for leaders to process, and (3) leadership finding value in the work.

Instances of school and district leaders replicating activities of collaborative meeting structures from the SL-NIC were in the data 39 times over all three PAR Cycles: Pre-cycle (5), PAR Cycle One (24), PAR Cycle Two (10). Olivia and Laura directly shared that they changed how they structured the Professional Learning Community sessions they facilitated going into the new school year because of their time working in the SL-NIC. Laura stated, "The work of the

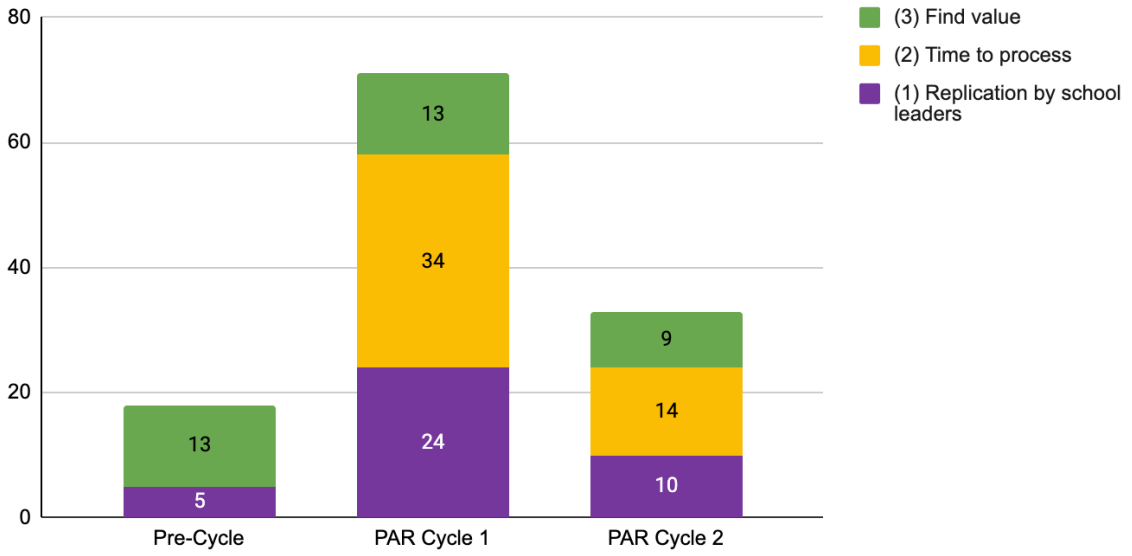


*Figure 17*. Code distribution related to school leader-teacher collaborative space.

SL-NIC has changed a lot about what I do. It's changed the way I lead staff meetings and how I collaborate with other school leaders." Olivia, a district leader, shared during our July 7, 2022, SL-NIC session that the district professional learning community she leads is going through a pedagogical shift. She adjusted their meeting structure due to the work of the SL-NIC. Ellen and Stephen both shared in their reflective memos that they could see ways to scale the pieces of our SL-NIC across the district to promote more collaboration. “I see so many opportunities to scale this [collaborative meeting structure] at the principal and district level.”

Leaders having space to process their thinking with other leaders was present in PAR Cycle One and Two. Codes relating to leaders having time to process occurred 34 times in PAR Cycle One and 14 times in PAR Cycle Two for a total of 48 occurrences. Stephan shared during his final interview that "It's helped me to work with other leaders to create a better understanding of these topics." The emergent theme of Trust Within the Team contributed to this finding through the continual references to trust being an essential component for leaders and teachers to feel safe to discuss challenging topics. Finding value in and appreciation for having a safe space to discuss polarizing topics appeared frequently in the data. Codes relating to finding value in meeting as a SL-NIC appeared in the data 35 times over three PAR Cycles, with the Pre-cycle and PAR Cycle One each coming in with 13 occurrences. During our March 24, 2022, SL-NIC session, Laura stated that everyone, including leaders, needs safe people to talk to and clarify their thinking. Olivia said this perfectly during an interview in PAR Cycle One when she said, "There needs to be a space where leaders can be messy for a minute." Throughout each cycle, leaders referenced noticing the intentionality, timing, and replicable nature of each activity we engaged in as an SL-NIC. Laura shared, "We provide the experiences all the time, but we don't provide the space to process through the experience, and this is where the real learning happens."

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the PAR Cycle Two process, data collection, analysis, and the study's findings. In PAR Cycle Two, through our collective work and analysis, the SL-NIC participants surfaced three results with significant impact on creating collaborative spaces for school leaders to improve equitable practices. First, we found that school district leadership sets the tone for school leader agency by modeling effective collaborative practices. District leaders taking ownership of their role in collaboration about equitable practices is an essential piece of the collaboration puzzle. Second, collaboration among school and district leaders about equitable practices occurs through enacting a collaborative meeting structure. This structure has three essential tenets: intentional strategies that build relational trust, holding gracious space, and a grounding in research/literature. Lastly, school leaders transfer and sustain collaborative spaces in their schools with teachers when they have time to process and find value in the work. The findings build upon each other, with the district setting the tone, then moving to a district and school leader collaborative space, and finally building to a school leader and teacher collaborative space at school sites. This interconnected scaffolding is represented in Figure 18.

The design of this study to answer the research questions brought forth new findings and information that contribute to empirical research. Though the content of our SL-NIC sessions was equitable practices, practitioners can apply these findings to district and school leader learning and collaboration in general. The collaboration of teachers is widely studied; however, this study fills a gap in research about the collaboration of school and district leaders. In my final chapter, I reflect on my leadership journey and how the PAR process has influenced how I have altered my leadership approach and will continue to do in the future.


*Figure 18*. Interconnection of the three findings.

# CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

*If we really want to build transformative leaders in a district, we must work on supporting them and helping them to process through experiences and change their thinking. Not tell them what to do.*
(Laura, Interview, July 15, 2022)

In my experience, when teachers leave their classrooms and move into school or district administrative positions, they forget how to teach. That is, they abandon the techniques they used in their classroom to and resort exclusively to direct instruction or presentation versus creating a learning experience. School district administration systems are often built in a set of silos with little to no authentic collaboration between school leaders or district administrators. For example, principals may meet monthly with district leaders, who, based on my experience and from the literature, primarily share information and focus on managerial tasks. These meetings are not purposefully designed collaborative learning experiences but rather simply items to check off on the agenda. Because of this design, school administrators do not focus on being teachers first, and often lack the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to translate equitable practices into their schools. This participatory action research (PAR) project study aimed to flip the narrative of how district and school leaders traditionally collaborate, both as individuals and as a system. It challenges the traditional top-down leadership approach of many school districts. Furthermore, this study evokes a return to effective teaching strategies and learning exchange anchors to create the leadership spaces our school and district leaders need and deserve.

The study occurred during the return to in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and 2022. This unprecedented event challenged leaders to be reflective and think about improving learning for leaders and teachers. Over ten months and three cycles of inquiry, three school principals (Stephen, Laura, Ellen) and two district leaders (Olivia and I) met every four to six weeks as a School Leader Networked Improvement Community (SL-NIC)

to collaborate and learn together about equitable practices. The members of the SL-NIC functioned as the study's Co-Practitioner Researcher (CPR) group. A school district located on the North Carolina coast was the study context, which was ripe for change since each school leader in the SL-NIC completed a micro-credential program that focused on equity and high-quality adult learning. Stephen, Laura, Ellen, and Olivia are school leaders focused on making changes in public education. Their commitments to equitable learning for all set the stage for this research.

During each cycle of inquiry, I conducted activities, collected data, and analyzed codes that focused on learning how school leaders develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve the use of equitable practices. I anchored the PAR design on this theory of action: If district and school leaders work together in a space focused on equitable practices, then they will develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use equitable practices with teachers. The overarching question was: How can school leaders develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve equitable practices? To respond to this question, I investigated these sub-questions:

1. How do school leaders across a school district collaborate to improve equitable practices?
2. To what extent do school leaders use tools and processes to address equitable practices?
3. To what extent do school leaders replicate collaborative learning spaces around equitable practices in their schools?
4. To what extent does working with school leaders support my growth and development as an educational leader?

In Table 9, I share an overview of key PAR activities, data sources, dates, and coding data from the ten-month PAR study. The SL-NIC sessions were the cornerstone of the PAR and occurred five times throughout the study: October 2021, November 2021, February 2022, March 2022, and July 2022. During each SL-NIC session, I used constructivist practices grounded in Community Learning Exchange (CLE) axioms and protocols to engage participants in dialogue and trust-building activities.

As part of each CLE, we began with personal narratives to reflect on a text (Tredway et al., 2020). We read and discussed texts to increase participants' knowledge about equitable practices. Participants completed a reflective memo after each session; together we completed 35 total reflective memos during this study, which I analyzed. During PAR Cycle One and Two, I interviewed four participants (n=16 interviews), which allowed me to peel back the layers of the participant knowledge, skills, and dispositions and address their needs as school leaders in our learning exchange meetings. At the end of each PAR cycle, I conducted two rounds of coding to develop categories and emergent themes that provided responses to the research questions. Next, I summarize the three study findings and make connections to the research literature and respond to the research questions. I then address the implications of the study through the lenses of policy, practice, and research. I conclude the chapter with a reflection on my growth and development as an educational leader.

## Connecting Findings to Literature

Throughout the PAR, I was aware of the overarching question: *How can school leaders develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve equitable practices? And three sub-questions.* Through the SL-NIC sessions, reflective memos, and individual interviews with the four study participants, I learned about what leaders must know, be able to do, and understand

Table 9

*PAR Key Activities and Data Sources*

| | Pre-cycle Fall 2021 | | | Cycle One Spring 2022 | | | | | Cycle Two Summer 2022 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Activity and Data Source | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Total |
| SL-NIC Sessions (Learning Exchange) | 5 | 5 | | | 5 | 4 | | | | 5 | | 5 |
| Reflective Memos n=5 | * | * | | | * | * | * | | | * | * | 35 |
| Individual Interviews n=4 | | | | * | * | | * | | | * | | 16 |
| Member Checks | | | | | | | | | | | * | 2 |

to implement equitable practices. As a result, the findings from the PAR study revealed how to effectively structure school and district leader collaboration to support equitable practices. District leadership sets the tone for collaboration by enacting a collaborative meeting structure with district and school leaders.

When analyzing the PAR findings in relation to the literature, I reviewed sources from the original literature review in Chapter 2 and added new sources. I respond to the research questions within this section by sharing the intersection between the findings and the literature. The PAR findings are: (1) School district leadership sets the tone for school leader agency through modeling effective collaborative moves; (2) collaboration among school and district leaders about equitable practices occurs through enacting a collaborative meeting structure; and (3) school leaders transfer and sustain collaborative meeting structures in their schools with teachers when they have time to process and find value in the work. After I intersect and support these findings with literature, I present a continuum for changing collaborative practices between school and district leaders to increase leader agency.

**District Leader Collaborative Moves**

District leadership is key. District leaders are the administrators in each school district who hold positional authority and serve as the instructional leader for all leaders in the school system, such as Assistant Superintendents, Directors, and Coordinators, among others. The number of district leaders in each district varies; however, the way they lead learning for the other leaders in the district is essential and has a ripple effect down to the student level. As Honig et al. (2010) state, district leadership must lead boldly to build capacity for improvement in partnership with school leaders. In this study, the data revealed specific elements necessary for effective district instructional leadership.

As a result of the data analysis, I focused on leader agency and developed a continuum for enhancing leader agency through an essential collaborative practice between school and district leaders. District leadership sets the tone for school leader agency through modeling effective collaborative practices using strategic, collaborative moves. This finding addresses the overarching research question and sub-question 1: *How do school leaders across a school district collaborate to improve equitable instructional practices?* The collaborative moves for district leaders include: (1) Prioritizing leader agency, (2) purposefully designing learning for leaders, and (3) serving as a model and coach for school leaders.

### *Prioritize Leader Agency*

The term leader agency means to embody the intersection of self-efficacy and leaders as learners. Leader agency focuses on leaders managing their learning to impact their performance and the teachers and students within their schools. Leader agency encompasses self-efficacy. Bandura originally proposed the concept of self-efficacy in 1977. According to Bandura (2009), self-efficacy is the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. Put simply, self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a specific situation. In the realm of school and district leadership, the mindset of a leader and agency contribute to their success.

The term leader agency is parallel to student agency and the body of research associated with student agency. Student agency primarily focuses on students' ability to manage their learning within a classroom to impact academic performance (Zeiser et al., 2018). Through exerting student agency, learners take an active role in their learning (Jääskelä et al., 2020), command their own choices and actions (Bandura, 2009), and believe knowledge can grow over time (Zeiser et al., 2018). This is the same for leaders. Leaders must take an active role in their

learning, not a passive banking method approach that is the norm in hierarchical organizations and district meetings (Freire, 1972). Leaders must believe they have command of their choices and actions. Leader agency is key to leaders being able to grow over time and influence those around them (Frost, 2006). School leaders are still students, and school district leaders must design for leader agency. District leaders must be intentional in empowering leaders within a collaborative space create the conditions for leader agency.

### *Designing Learning for Leaders*

Creating a collaborative space for school and district leaders to learn together is essential. The learning design of the SL-NIC was a critical aspect of the study. Daly et al. (2015) found that school and district leaders must build a shared vision through positive relationships and trust and provide opportunities to build social capital through learning together (Daly et al., 2015). This PAR project expanded on their work and provided the space for leaders to learn together through the SL-NIC. The SL-NIC relied on a belief in distributed approach to leadership in which all school and district leaders worked together to learn versus using the banking method (Freire, 1972; Spillane et al., 2004). District leader shared information and all the school leaders listened. As a district leader, I purposefully operate from a place of distributed leadership, and the design of this study was no different.

Distributed leadership is a theoretical framework where members of an organization take on shared leadership roles (Elmore, 2000). Spillane et al.'s (2001) four-year longitudinal study in schools in Chicago was designed to take an in-depth look at school leadership practices and how school leaders create learning environments for teachers and students. A central finding from that study is that a distributed approach, when intervening to improve school leadership, was more effective than focusing solely on the development of one individual. The distribution of expertise

and knowledge benefits the school rather than only the individual leader (Spillane et al., 2001). Depending on prior knowledge, skills, or interests, people specialize in areas and topics in schools and school districts. According to Elmore (2000), specialization naturally happens. Still, the glue that holds the organization together is the "common task or goal—improvement of instruction—and a common frame of values for how to approach that task—culture—that keeps distributed leadership from being another form of loose coupling" (Elmore, 2000, p. 15). The common task in this PAR project focused on equitable practices and learning about them as a team of leaders. Distributed leadership practices, modeled in the SL-NIC built school and district leaders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use equitable practices with their teachers because SL-NIC had an opportunity to build social capital and authentically collaborate.

### *Modeling and Coaching School Leaders*

District leaders working with school leaders is not new; however, effective modeling and coaching that includes dialogue for leader learning is. Effective collaboration among school and district leaders can shift instructional practice and is a key lever in school and district transformation (Daly et al., 2015; Honig et al., 2010). Through collaboration, district leaders can support school leaders to ensure all students have the best possible experience in school, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. A national qualitative study focusing on the collaboration between district and school leaders in three large urban districts found that positive change occurred with direct, collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals. These relationships focused on helping every principal become an exceptional instructional leader (Honig et al., 2010). In this study, through the intentional planning and structure of the SL-NIC, we achieved a useful collaborative process.

In this study, I purposefully modeled specific meeting structures and protocols during the

PAR project and used specific texts to impact leader learning. I grounded our SL-NIC sessions in constructivist learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) to encourage dialogue and deep thinking. Educators who employ constructivist methods bridge students' prior knowledge and academic skills (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Social interaction among learners is another essential component of constructivism. Vygotsky (1978) argued in his cognitive development theory that learning occurs through social interaction. Human beings are innately social. District leaders must model how they expect school leaders to conduct learning experiences for the instructional staff in their buildings. The intentionality behind this modeling, use of protocols and tools, and the follow-through from the district leader of coaching is high quality learning design.

District leaders can set the tone for school leader collaboration by using specific collaborative moves between school leaders to improve equitable instructional practices. Prioritizing leader agency, designing learning for leaders, and modeling for school leaders are moves that contribute to the improved use of equitable practices within schools. The second finding explains how district leaders can enact a collaborative meeting structure grounded in constructivist learning theory.

**Enacting a Collaborative Meeting Structure**

After the district leadership sets the tone for collaboration, enacting the collaborative meeting structure is the next step. The second finding is that school and district leaders collaborate on equitable practices by enacting a collaborative meeting structure. This finding addresses the overarching research question and sub-question 2: *To what extent do school leaders use tools and processes to address equitable practices?* The structure, or process, used in this study was a Networked Improvement Community (NIC); we named our CPR team the

school leader NIC (SL-NIC). A NIC is a narrowly focused collaborative team that addresses a specific task through cycles of inquiry (Bryk et al., 2015; Scanlan et al., 2016). This structure worked well in the study since we focused on exploring equitable practices. The SL-NIC engaged in rapid, iterative processes of starting bite-sized innovations, prototyping, failing, reporting, and adjusting based on failures before beginning the cycle again at our next SL-NIC session (Bryk et al., 2015; Scanlan et al., 2016).

As a result of this collaboration, school leaders learned about equitable instructional approaches and implemented aspects of them with teachers at their schools. The SL-NIC worked together to use networked improvement science to accelerate learning of themselves as individuals and the whole team's capacity to learn and improve. From the data, specific pieces came to light about the tenets of a school and district leader collaborative meeting structure. This structure has three essential tenets: (1) intentionally focuses on building relational trust, (2) holding gracious space, and (3) grounding activities and content in research and literature. In the following paragraphs, I tie each of these to literature.

### *Building Relational Trust*

Trust is a critical foundational element in all human learning (Rotter, 1967). In schools and organizations in which learning is the goal, trust is a key factor in fostering collaboration between teachers, students, families, and school leaders (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). Trust is the willingness to be vulnerable within a network. Trust within organizations is a way to reduce uncertainty by having confidence that others will meet our expectations. As a result, a leader build confidence within the organization and plays a role in positive cooperation and communication, which are foundational for productive relationships within organizations (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran, 1999).

Since schools and districts are organizations, organizational trust is critical and represents a shift from trust between individuals to more widespread sense of trust among all organizational actors. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) delineate the faces of trust after reviewing four decades of research and over 150 articles about trust. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran's (1999) faces of trust are common themes that emerged across the literature:

1. Willingness to risk: A through-line in all definitions of trust is the willingness to be vulnerable. Where there is no vulnerability, there is no need for trust. Willingness to risk is the amount of confidence one has in a situation of vulnerability.
2. Benevolence: The most common of the faces of trust, benevolence is the confidence that the trusted person or group will protect your well-being. Another way to look at this is that those being trusted have positive intent in the relationship.
3. Reliability: Combining predictability and benevolence, reliability is the extent to which you can count on another person to deliver on commitments. Reliability applies to the tangible (i.e., deliverables) and intangible (i.e., willingness to participate or listen).
4. Competence: Competence is the ability to do something effectively and efficiently. Competence is a facet of trust because good intentions aren't enough. When a person depends on someone (or an organization), they must have the skill to deliver to be trusted.
5. Honesty: Integrity, character, and authenticity make up honesty. To trust a person or organization, they must deliver on commitments and agreements in a truthful way.

6. Openness: Transparency, or openness, is the process by which individuals make themselves vulnerable by sharing information. Openness signals reciprocal trust. Being guarded does the opposite and can cause suspicion instead of trust.

This study found that enacting a collaborative meeting structure between school and district leaders is essential for authentic collaboration. A piece of the needed collaborative meeting structure is an intentional focus on building trust. We built trust through the SL-NIC over time through personal narrative activities, structured sharing, and the use of authentic academic tasks. A purposeful focus on trust building in the meeting structure must be in place for relational trust to be built. Ellen shared that collaboration depends on who is “at the table” and the relationship between each leader, saying, “It all comes back to trust and who is in the group.”

A lack of trust often results in people being cautious and unwilling to take risks, creating a non-collaborative, "siloed" environment. Daly et al. (2015) discovered, through a qualitative study that analyzed negative relationships among educational leaders, that a common understanding of trust between school and district leaders reduced difficult relationships and increased collaboration. This study underscored the importance of district leaders modeling risk-taking and vulnerability between school and district leaders. Daly's work is supported by sharing, distributing, leadership, and moving away from the formal leadership hierarchy (Daly et al., 2015). During our SL-NIC sessions, I purposefully took risks by asking the group tough questions, being vulnerable in my learning, and continually stating that I didn't have all the answers. As a district leader, it was important to me to model for school leaders that they are allowed to not always have all the answers.

The structure of the SL-NIC included activities and purposeful time spent building relational trust. Each SL-NIC session was grounded in the Community Learning Exchange

(CLE) axioms that focus on building trust. These five CLE axioms are:

1. *Learning and leading are dynamic social processes*. All participants have a voice to share and something to learn. All contributions are welcome through questions, conversations, and storytelling. Relationships build learning.
2. *Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes.* Relationships are at the core of social learning theory, so creating a safe space to share is critical to the process. Safe spaces support vulnerable, honest conversations and relational trust.
3. *The people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns.* Listening to people closest to the issue or topic allows all groups to have power and a voice in decision-making. In addition, having people from various roles and schools can generate new ideas and perspectives.
4. *Crossing boundaries enriches the development and educational processes.* Border crossing increases inclusion, and it forces leaders to leave their comfort zone. Encouraging curiosity about alternative approaches can shift from the status quo to addressing the root of issues.
5. *Hope and change are built on the assets and dreams of locals and their communities.* Allowing people to have meaningful participation in sharing and proposing solutions is empowering. This empowerment can help shift systems and people with deficit mindsets to growth mindsets (Guajardo et al., 2015).

***Hold Gracious Space***

Holding gracious space for school and district leaders is another tool essential to enacting a collaborative meeting structure. Gracious space creates a meeting environment that encourages vulnerability, hope, and joy, which depends on these four tenets for learning: spirit, setting,

inviting the stranger, and learning in public (Hughes & Grace, 2010). Each SL-NIC session's environment allowed for deep conversation and moments of joy and vulnerability. Participant and district leader, Olivia, said this best when she said that leaders need a space to "be messy for a minute." Hoy and Tschannen-Moran's (1999) work about openness plays a pivotal role in creating a gracious space. Transparency, or openness, is the process by which individuals are vulnerable by sharing information. Leaders during SL-NIC sessions shared what I named "school stories" when they made connections between trends and happenings at their schools. The setting of the gracious space allowed for this sharing.

Throughout each research cycle, participants referenced that the SL-NIC was one of the first times they felt they authentically collaborated with other school and district leaders. They left sessions feeling affirmed in their work and with new information and perspectives to apply in their leadership context. Laura said this best, "Leadership can be lonely; this [the SL-NIC] makes me feel like I'm not alone."

***Grounding in Research and Literature***

During each SL-NIC session, I chose specific literature and research to use with school and district leaders as we learned about equitable practices. Olivia summarized this process best during an SL-NIC session, "Using literature or research neutralizes the session and helps people take the personal opinion out of it while still bringing a personal reflection about what you read." When learning about equitable practices and how we define them, thoughtful use of research and literature was significant. In the area where this study took place, the term "equity" was weaponized prior to the start of this PAR project, which caused heightened awareness about equitable practices. Each SL-NIC member was in a different place relating to what equity means and what equitable practices look like in action at the school level. During this study, we

examined the work of equitable practices, which are defined as culturally relevant or responsive practices (CLRP; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Though it is far from controversial that all teachers should have practical pedagogies to work with learners of different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, this was in play at the time of this study (Neri et al., 2019). Multicultural education scholars insist that teachers should be "knowledgeable of cultural diversity and develop pedagogical skills to combat racism and promote social justice" (Neri et al., 2019, p. 222). Since the inception of culturally relevant or responsive education in public schools, the implementation and naming of multicultural education, and therefore CLRP, has been met with resistance in some spaces. Though professional learning for educators about multicultural education is not political initially, it involves tensions between competing value systems (Gay, 2005; Neri et al., 2019). CLRP names and teaches practices to ensure all students, no matter their race, gender, ethnic group, or socioeconomic status, cultivate their gifts and talents at school. In some circles, CLRP is viewed as "promoting a redistribution of power between the defenders of the status quo and advocates of change" (Gay, 2005, p. 221).

Because of the weaponization of the word equity, I strategically chose texts and learning progress for the SL-NIC that leaned into defining equity and exploring ways they can adjust practice at the school level to improve the use of equitable practices. Each session had a core text we used for discussion or a high-quality task, based on research, that involved leaders working together to complete it. The process of choosing specific tools, such as literature or activities, contributed to new learning about equitable practices. For example, in the Pre-cycle, we participated in the "4$^{th}$ Box Activity" from the Center for Story-Based Strategy (2019).

We used this activity guide our learning about defining equitable practices by addressing

the research question: *How do you use tools and processes to address equitable practices in your role*? This activity involved looking at images depicting equality, equity, and liberation through the analogy of watching a baseball game. Participants reflected and wrote about where they feel their school or department is on the spectrum of equality, equity, and liberation. Then the four participants worked in pairs to create an image showing what they wanted to be true for public schools beyond liberation. This authentic academic task required high cognitive demand and complex thinking. Authentic academic tasks connect to underlying concepts and big ideas and require active examination of many potential solutions (Doyle & Carter, 1984; Smith & Stein, 1998). The use of tools, such as tasks, protocols, and activities, and processes, such as the well-defined meeting structures, was prevalent in this study and translated well to school environments. Engaging school leaders in authentic academic tasks are essential for true collaboration and, later, the replication of these learning experiences at the school level.

**Transfer to Schools**

After district and school leaders enact a collaborative meeting structure, the hope is that they transfer it to school sites or within the teams they lead. The final finding is that school leaders transfer and sustain collaborative meeting structures in their schools with teachers when they have time to process and find value in the work. This finding addresses the overarching research question and sub-question 3: *To what extent do school leaders replicate collaborative learning spaces around equitable practices in their schools?* The theory of action of this study is that if district and school leaders work together in a collaborative space focused on equitable practices, they will develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use equitable practices with teachers. During each PAR cycle, leaders referenced replicating strategies and emulating the collaborative meeting structure at their school site or within the teams they lead.

Laura, a principal, shared that she completely restructured meetings and professional learning at her school, saying, "The work of the SL-NIC has changed a lot about what I do. It's changed the way I lead staff meetings and how I collaborate with other school leaders." The pieces that were imperative for replication at the school level were having time to process the information shared and finding value in the work, whether it was the session goals or the literature and research-based tasks shared.

The time and space to process with other district and school leaders is praxis—reflecting to act on behalf of others to create social change (Freire, 1972). He believed that co-learning through participation is central to any attempt to work with others. This study builds on Day et al. (2009) and Kolb's (1984) work that school leaders need skills and knowledge and the capacity to reflect on their practice. Laura said this best during an interview, "We provide the experiences all the time, but we don't provide the space to process through the experience, and this is where the real learning happens."

Finding value in the work during the SL-NIC also contributed to replication at the school level. All articles and tasks shared in the SL-NIC were targeted and easy to replicate at the school level. School leaders had time to brainstorm ideas for how to use activities shared during SL-NIC sessions. Implementing and intentionally teaching curriculum standards in classrooms is best done through cognitively demanding tasks that require students to think, reason, and problem-solve (Tekkumru-Kisa et al., 2020), this is no different when leading professional learning for school and district leaders. Ensuring tasks are authentic and timely for leaders is also essential and contributes to value. Authentic learning comes from solving problems arising from "conflict-generating dilemmas" (Driscoll, 1994, p. 235). School and district leaders face dilemmas daily and their time is limited. This study found that engaging leaders in high-quality,

targeted learning through tasks is vital and contributes to the replication of these practices at the school level for teachers.

As a result of the findings of this study and associated literature, I created a framework for district and school collaboration. This framework, a continuum, is sequential and relies on the modeling and support from district leaders. The framework challenges district leaders to be learning designers and teachers first.

## A Framework for School and District Collaboration

Though this study focused on the needed knowledge, skills, and dispositions of school and district leaders to learn about equitable practices, much of what we learned applies to school and district collaboration as a whole. The relationship between the district and school leaders is a traditional, hierarchical relationship. This study challenged this compliance-based relationship and discovered ways for district and school leaders to collaborate authentically. As Honig et al. (2010) state, district leadership must lead boldly to build capacity for improvement in partnership with school leaders. This study shares specific ways to make that partnership a reality.

The District and School Leader Collaboration Continuum, illustrated in Figure 19, shares a new framework for district and school leader collaboration based on the findings of this PAR project and aligns to literature and research. The continuum begins with district leaders purposefully planning and setting the tone for collaboration between district and school leaders through enacting a collaborative meeting structure. This could be through specific learning experiences or establishing a professional learning community that goes through cycles of inquiry, PDSA cycles, or narrowly focuses on learning about a specific topic—as SL-NIC did in this study. The learning design of the collaborative meeting structure is based on a distributed leadership approach in which all school and district leaders work together to learn vs. using the

banking method (Freire, 1972) in which the district leader shares information, and all the school leaders listen.

Next, district leaders must model for school leaders, which depends on the learning space design and the content of the learning. Authentic, academic instructional tasks for leaders to engage in as a team that can transfer to their context are a way to model educational best practices. District leaders can build social capital and trust among the team of leaders (Daly et al., 2015) through the use of personal narratives and using the Community Learning Exchange axioms (Guajardo et al., 2015) to design the collaborative meeting structure.

The authentic tasks that leaders are engaged in should be timely in the context of the school leader and be grounded in constructivist learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivism is based on the idea that people actively construct their knowledge as a learner and that previous knowledge is the foundation for new learning. Processing and social interaction are vital in this process (Vygotsky, 1978). District leaders must model how they expect school leaders to conduct learning experiences for their instructional staff in their buildings. The intentionality behind this modeling and the follow-through from the district leader of coaching is high-quality learning design.

Lastly, time to process in a gracious space must be a part of the collaborative structure. Leadership can be a lonely job, and leaders need to feel affirmed in their work and free to share with others; every participant in this study shared feelings of isolation over all three PAR cycles. Thus, the district leader to set the tone that created the gracious processing space. School leaders must find meaning and value in working with the district leaders for the work to translate to school sites.

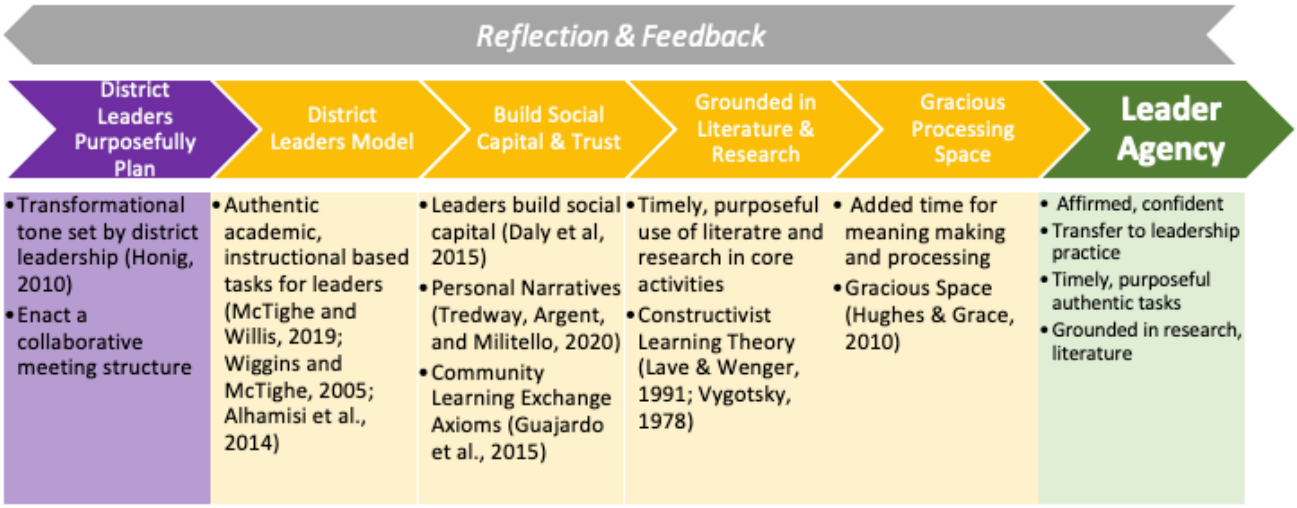


*Figure 19*. District and school leader collaboration continuum.

The culmination of the continuum is that both school and district leaders increase agency. Leader agency focuses on a leader managing their learning to impact their performance and the teachers and students within their schools. When school and district leaders are a part of high-quality learning with their colleagues, they are more likely to create those same experiences for their teaching staff at their school site. District leaders must model how they expect school leaders to conduct learning experiences for their instructional staff in their buildings. The intentionality behind this modeling and the follow-through from the district leader of coaching is high-quality learning design. The ongoing reflection and feedback of school and district leaders through engaging in praxis is a continuous piece in the continuum (Freire, 1972).

## Implications

The PAR study shares how school and district leaders can authentically collaborate by enacting a collaborative meeting structure that encourages leader agency. This PAR study fills a gap in research about collaborative learning structures in which district and school leaders are at the center of school reform (Rorrer et al., 2008). Next, I detail the practice, policy, and research implications of the study's findings.

### Practice

The findings of this study land firmly for local, district, and state-level school leadership. The findings of this study share specific ways for district leaders to structure learning to best meet the needs of school leaders and create an environment of distributed leadership at the highest level of a school systems leader team (Elmore, 2000; Spillane et al., 2001). The implications for practice include district leadership (1) setting the tone for school leader agency through modeling collaborative practices that are strategic by including collaborative moves and

authentic tasks; (2) enacting a collaborative meeting structure between school and district leaders, and (3) providing ease of replication at the school level and for district leadership teams.

School district leaders, specifically superintendents, can set the tone for leader agency by structuring time with district leaders where they model collaborative practices, engage leaders in tasks that build relational trust, and enact a collaborative meeting structure. How time is used by superintendents in meetings with district leaders, such as their Assistant Superintendents and Directors, sets the tone for how these leaders work with and collaborate with other leaders. Superintendents can lead sessions by using a personal narratives (PNs) to build relational trust, grounding in research and literature when sharing new information, and ensuring there is ample time for discussion among leaders. Using authentic tasks and scenarios with leaders to learn new information is also something to consider.

As this study demonstrated, the same is true for principals with their teachers. Principals, especially new ones, need to build relational trust with their teachers. A way to do that is through leading each meeting with a PN that intentionally aligns to the focus of the session, holds space for hope and joy, and builds trust. Leaders modeling effective collaboration and sharing for teachers has the potential for replication in their classrooms with students. Using structured collaborative protocols, scenario discussions, and authentic tasks that align to the learning target of the session all have the potential to ensure teachers find great value in their time with their schools lead learner—the principal.

**Policy**

Traditionally, school systems operate with a top-down approach that can inhibit collaboration and co-learning. This study challenges this structure by proposing a framework that includes a District and School Leader Collaboration Continuum that builds leader agency. This

study has national, state, and local policy implications for school and district leader collaboration and learning.

### *State and National Policy (Macro)*

Education policy at the federal and state levels should support district and school leaders in ensuring that they have access to high-quality learning experiences so that they can, in turn, lead their schools. The research is clear, next to teaching, school leadership is the next critical lever in school reform (Bryk et al., 2010b; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rigby, 2014; Supovitz et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003). Ensuring all students, no matter their gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, have access to a high-quality, equitable education should be a central belief of all school and district leaders. However, school and district leaders need practices and space to learn to enact these beliefs.

National and state policy priorities can (a) include methodology about adult learning and community building into school administrative programs, (b) include culturally and linguistically responsive practices into instruction in school administrative programs, and (c) incentivize districts to create high quality learning and collaborative experiences for school and district leaders. Incentivizing districts to create high quality learning and collaborative experiences for leaders could include reprioritizing Federal Title II funding to include funds for school and district leaders to continually improve their craft through coursework or partnerships with research universities.

### *Local Policy (Micro and Meso)*

At the district (meso) level, like the national and state policy level, I found that the space for collaboration and learning must be created for both school and district leaders. This study fortified that district leaders set the tone for collaboration (Honig et al., 2010). Still, those district

leaders also need a space to learn and process before facilitating learning for school leaders. Districts can create professional learning structures that separate managerial and compliance-based information from new content and instructional information to give the time and space for processing and true learning. The SL-NIC being separate from monthly school and district leader information sharing meetings was key in the learning about equitable practices having depth and breadth. Another aspect for districts to keep in mind is that school leaders are more likely to transfer practices and share resources from the district that they find valuable. School leaders found value in application to their context, timeliness, and ease of replication.

At the school (micro) level, school and district leaders in this study shared they shifted to using more constructivist practices with their teachers and staff after participating in the SL-NIC. This study has two main policy implications for schools: (1) provide collaborative space for teachers to learn together and (2) use practices that create relational trust to set the groundwork for continual learning. Just as I provided the SL-NIC space for leaders to learn about a specific topic, school leaders can replicate this at the school level for teachers. Ensuring school-based professional learning communities (PLCs) include protocols for sharing and structured collaboration leads to increased team relational trust.

**Research**

In this PAR study, I analyze the conditions for school leaders from across a school district to collaborate and learn about equitable practices. As a result of this collaboration, school leaders learned about equitable practices and implemented them with teachers in their schools. Through this study, I discovered conditions for district and school leader collaboration and learning that contribute to leader agency. This study contributes to the body of research about school and district reform surrounding district instructional leadership (Daly et al., 2015; Honig

et al., 2010) and school and district leaderships' role in implementing CLRP (Khalifa, 2018; Rigby & Tredway, 2015).

Though scholarship is abundant on teacher professional learning spaces, there is little research on collaborative practices within administrative networks (Khalifa, 2018; Theoharis, 2010). This PAR study fills a gap in research about collaborative learning structures where district and school leaders are at the center of school reform (Rorrer et al., 2008). Specifically, I contribute to the research by adding collaborative moves for district leaders and a continuum for district and school leader collaboration. This research has implications for school leaders, policymakers, and district leaders as it explicitly identifies intentional behaviors and actions required to make meaningful improvements.

During this PAR project, there were many moments when I saw a glimpse of something interesting in the data but didn't have quite enough to substantiate a theme or finding. There are three areas that came to light in this study warrant further research: (1) expanding on the conditions for leader agency, (2) narrowing the scope of equitable practices to just CLRP for district leaders, and (3) diving deeper into implementing academic tasks for leaders using a scope and sequence. First, I created the term leader agency in this study to encompass self-efficacy and confidence. Leader agency focuses on leaders managing their learning to impact their performance and the teachers and students within their schools. There is a plethora of research on student agency (Bandura, 2009; Jääskelä et al., 2020; Zeiser et al., 2018), and looking at agency through the lens of only leaders could be interesting. Another opportunity for further research is diving specifically into the implementation of CLRP with district leaders. Sleeter (2012) stated that more research is needed on the implementation of CLRP in schools and its effect on the student experience. Focusing only on district leaders or principals could be an interesting

perspective. Lastly, I touched on using authentic academic tasks with leaders in this study. Analyzing the conditions for implementing a series of academic tasks with school or district leaders using a scope and sequence on a specific topic could be investigated further. Next, I share a few questions researchers could investigate to build upon this study's findings.

- How does increased leader agency contribute to school culture? Student experience?
- How does CLRP implementation in schools affect the student experience? Student achievement?
- How does CLRP implementation at the district level affect the student experience? Student achievement?
- How does implementing a collaborative meeting structure between school and district leaders affect outcomes for teachers and students?
- How does implementing authentic academic tasks with school district leaders affect learning conditions at the district level? School level?
- How does implementing authentic academic tasks with principals affect learning conditions at their schools?

## Limitations

There are limitations present during all studies. This section discusses limitations based on my role as a researcher, the study size, and potential validity issues. As the primary researcher for this PAR study, I worked alongside leaders from different schools, contexts, and experiences. This setup provides multiple perspectives and points of view for enacting each inquiry cycle. I am also aware of my role as a district administrator and the perceived influence over the school leaders in the SL-NIC. I know my positionality and its potential to influence the research outcomes (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Because of this power perception, I took extraordinary

measures to ensure all participants gave informed consent without any coercion or sense of obligation. I am also aware of my potential biases as a former teacher and school administrator. I hold personal values and beliefs about education; however, throughout this work, I did my best to remain neutral in all situations and pay particular attention to potential biases in my reflective memos. Another limitation is the small sample size. The SL-NIC included five total school or district leaders from one school district, potentially limiting replication to larger districts in different contexts.

## Leadership Development

*Around here, however, we don't look backwards for very long. We keep moving forward, opening up new doors and doing new things, because we're curious... and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.*
- Walt Disney

This PAR project was a great joy to conduct alongside school and district administrators, and I learned a great deal professionally and personally along the way. This section answers the last sub-question: *To what extent does working with school leaders support my growth and development as an educational leader?* My hope in entering a doctoral program was to learn, meet amazing people through my classes, and become a more skilled researcher. I accomplished all these goals by completing this dissertation research and my doctoral degree. However, I also learned to become a practitioner-researcher. I set to learn, but I didn't expect for the design of the EdD program to significantly change my practice as a district leader. The program truly merged scholarship and practice in a way that has made me a better learner, researcher, and leader.

I have spent the last five years working at the district level in roles that support school principals and assistant principals; ensuring that professional development for leaders is high quality and purposeful is important to me. As a teacher in the classroom, ensuring that every student was a part of a high-rigor, purposeful, and joy-filled lesson was my main goal. I seek to

translate that into my work as a district leader because all leaders are lead learners. This study allowed me to explore the intersectionality of innovating adult learning and educational equity—two areas I'm passionate about. I expected to learn how to structure collaboration through literature and experiences in the SL-NIC. I didn't expect to learn so much about the importance of relational trust and ways to build it authentically and strategically.

This work substantially impacted the school and district leaders who participated. Each referenced significant change to how they structured collaboration at their schools and within the teams they manage. This study prompted a shift in how I approach facilitating learning for school and district leaders. It's also given me a new lens to look through as a district leader to ensure a time that school and district leaders spend together is purposeful, sacred space.

At the close of PAR Cycle Two data collection, I transitioned into a leadership role in another school district across the state that is more than seven times larger than the district where this study occurred. In this role, I support and coach 20 elementary principals and serve on the team that designs the district's learning scope and sequence for leaders. I was able to take the findings from this study and apply them in a new context while building relationships with the principals I support. It was incredibly validating to create a principal professional learning community based on this study's findings. This collaborative space has been a breath of fresh air and something that principals have shared through feedback that their team needed after the disconnection of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the CLE Axioms and continuing to be a research practitioner in my role has been a substantial pedagogical shift for the district I serve and within myself. The importance of moving from research to practice, or paper to practice, is something that I keep top of mind as a district leader. Research is important but translating the research from paper to practice and explaining how to make changes in the work will move

schools forward. I know that the trajectory of my future work as a leader was substantially shifted by my participation this program and from conducting this study.

The instructors, mentors, and colleagues associated with East Carolina University (ECU), particularly Dr. Sandra David and Dr. Matt Militello, pushed me, supported me, and provided me with the space to reflect and grow. In the past three years, I learned that I need a network of folks committed to improving educational equity to process and learn with. Through this research and the doctoral program, I learned how to create these networks among district and school leaders in my role as a district administrator. As the first CLE axiom states, learning and leading are dynamic social processes where everyone has a voice to share and something to learn (Guajardo et al., 2015).

## Conclusion

*You have to see it to be it.*
- Billie Jean King

District and school leaders are always teachers–their classrooms just expanded. School reform initiatives ensure that all students, regardless of their gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, have access to a high-quality, equitable education. Furthermore, the research is clear, next to teaching, school leadership is the next critical lever in school reform. Therefore, it is imperative to build the capacity of educational leaders, specifically in the area of equitable practices (Bryk et al., 2010a; Leithwood et al., 2004; Rigby, 2014; Supovitz et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003). Creating the space for authentic collaboration between school and district leaders using a collaborative meeting structure has the potential to distribute leadership vs. perpetuate the traditional top-down hierarchical structure of public-school leadership.

Moving collaboration between leaders from parking lot conversations after a meeting to being the focus of the meeting itself can change how we do business in public education. Moving

from our silos at each school and the school district office to purposefully designed collaborative meeting structures can potentially have a multiplier effect. This study found that when district and school leaders work together in a collaborative space, they are more likely to transfer that same collaboration when they lead at their school sites. As Laura said, “if we really want to build transformational leaders in a district, we have to support them and help them process through experiences that change their thinking—not simply tell people what to do." If we want people to be able to truly see how to do something, we have to include them in it and help them translate it to their context. To be it, we must see it in action.

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# APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board**
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** ·
**rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/**

## Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: Johanna Parker
CC: Matthew Militello
Date: 9/17/2021
Re: UMCIRB 21-001673
Collaborative Spaces for Leaders

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 9/16/2021. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 1 & 2ab.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

| Document | Description |
|---|---|
| Adult Consent Form_Parker_Updated.docx(0.01) | Consent Forms |
| Chapter1-3_Parker 9.3.21.docx(0.01) | Study Protocol or Grant Application |
| Interview Protocol(0.01) | Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions |
| Recuritment Script_J.Parker.docx(0.01) | Recruitment Documents/Scripts |

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

# APPENDIX B: CITI CERTIFICATE

CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 03-Jan-2021
Expiration Date 03-Jan-2024
Record ID 40163092

This is to certify that:

**Johanna Parker**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

**Human Research**
(Curriculum Group)
**Group 2.Social / Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel**
(Course Learner Group)
**1 - Basic Course**
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

**East Carolina University**

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wb6b50470-e8b9-4e8d-ba32-0710980a83d4-40163092

# APPENDIX C: SITE APPROVAL LETTER

DARE COUNTY SCHOOLS

Dr. John D. Farrelly | Superintendent

Board of Education

Mary Ellon Ballance | Chairman
Margaret Lawler | Vice-Chairman
Susan Bothwell
Frank Hester
Joe Tauber
David Twiddy
Carl Woody

August 2, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

Dare County Schools recognizes the benefits of participating in relevant, well-designed research studies proposed by qualified individuals. Approval for conducting such studies is based primarily on the extent to which substantial benefits can be shown for Dare County Schools and its mission of educating students. The purpose of this letter is to notify you of the **approval** to conduct your dissertation study titled, "Collaborative Spaces for Leaders: A participatory action research study to improve district and school leader collaboration about equitable practices" with participants in our schools. We also give permission to utilize the following spaces in Dare County Schools to collect data and conduct interviews for the dissertation project: school leader professional learning, site and classroom visits.

**The project meets all our school/district guidelines, procedures, and safeguards for conducting research on our campus. Moreover, there is ample space for Johanna Parker to conduct her study and her project will not interfere with any functions of Dare County Schools. Finally, the following conditions must be met, as agreed upon by the researchers and Dare County Schools:**

- ☐ Participant data only includes information captured from the state data collection strategies.
- ☐ Participation is voluntary.
- ☐ Participants can choose to leave the study without penalty at any time.
- ☐ Any issues with participation in the study are reported to the school administration in a timely manner.
- ☐ An executive summary of your findings is shared with the school administration once the study is complete.

In addition to these conditions, the study must follow all the East Carolina University IRB guidelines.

**We are excited to support this important work.**

**Respectfully,**

John D. Farrelly, EdD

## APPENDIX D: ADULT CONSENT FORM

# Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: COLLABORATIVE SPACES FOR LEADERS

Principal Investigator: Johanna Parker, under the guidance of Dr. Matthew Militello
Institution, Department or Division ***(As Applicable)***: College of Education
Address: 220 Ragsdale, ECU, Greenville, NC 27858
Telephone #: (919) 518 – 4008

Participant Full Name: _____Date of Birth: _____
**Please PRINT clearly**

---

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems, and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in the research.

**Why am I being invited to take part in this research?**
This participatory action research study aims to improve district and school leader collaboration about equitable practices. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a district leader, school leader, or teacher in Harbor County Schools. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that must be in place for school leaders to improve equity in classroom instruction.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 30 people to do so.

**Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?**
There are no known reasons for why you should not participate in this research study.

**What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?**
You can choose not to participate.

**Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?**
The research will be conducted in Harbor County Schools. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study will not exceed 15 hours for school and district leaders and 5 hours for teachers over the next two years.

**What will I be asked to do?**
If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to participate in the following:

- Team meetings every six weeks and complete reflective memos after each session.
- Interviews with the principal researcher
- Co-lead two Community Learning Exchange professional learning sessions.
- Participate in two Community Learning Exchange professional learning sessions.

**What might I experience if I take part in the research?**
We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

**Will I be paid for taking part in this research?**
We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

**Will it cost me to take part in this research?**
It will not cost you any money to be a part of this research.

## Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the North Carolina Department of Health, and the Office for Human Research Protections.
- The University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

**How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?**
The information in the study will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Consent forms and data from interviews and focus groups will be maintained in a secure, locked location and will be stored for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

## What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop, and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

## Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator Johanna Parker, Director of Innovation, Harbor County Schools. parkerjo@daretolearn.org, 252-256-1508.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections at 252-744-2914.

**I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?**
The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following, and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

_____

**Participant's Name (PRINT)** **Signature** **Date**

**Person Obtaining Informed Consent**: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

_____

**Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)** **Signature** **Date**

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to meet with me today. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview and will limit the time to one hour.

My name is Johanna Parker. I am conducting research as a graduate student at East Carolina University. The interview is part of a study to determine how district and school leaders can work together in a collaborative space focused on equitable practices to better help teachers use equitable practices.

Disclosures:

- Your participation in the study is voluntary. It is your decision whether or not to participate, and you may elect to stop participating in the interview at any time.
- The interview will be digitally recorded in order to capture a comprehensive record of our conversation.
- All information collected will be kept confidential. Any information collected during the session that may identify any participant will only be disclosed with your prior permission. A coding system will be used in the management and analysis of the focus group and interview data with no names or school identifiers associated with any of the recorded discussions.
- The interview will be conducted using a semi-structured and informal format. Several questions will be asked about both the individual knowledge and skills gained and the organization practices used. It is our hope that everyone will contribute to the conversation.
- The interview will last approximately 60 minutes.

**Interview Questions**

**TURN RECORDER ON AND STATE THE FOLLOWING:**
**"This is Johanna Parker, interviewing (*Participant Code)* on *(Date)* for the Collaborative Spaces for Leaders Study.**

Interview:

*The first interview only*: To begin the conversation, please introduce yourself (*first interview only*) and describe your role at the school and your initial reactions to participating in the focus group in the Collaborative Spaces for Leaders Study.

1. How do you collaborate with other school leaders?
    a. What topics do you collaborate about?
    b. What do you wish that collaboration looked like?

2. How do you collaborate with district leaders?
    a. What topics do you collaborate about?
    b. What do you wish that collaboration looked like?

3. What do you think fosters and inhibits work with other schools/district leaders around equity?

4. How do you address equitable practices with your teachers?

5. What do you think fosters and inhibits work with teachers around equity?

6. How have you implemented any learning around equitable practices with the school leader NIC into your practice as an educational leader? With your staff?

7. How do you feel the school leader NIC has fostered or inhibited your growth as a leader?

## APPENDIX F: REFLECTIVE MEMO TEMPLATE

The format below will be input to a Google Form that school leader NIC members will use to complete reflective memos after each school leader NIC meeting.

Reflective Memo (Kolb, 1984)

Name:

Position:

School:

1. **Engage in Experience** - Fully participate and document the experience.

2. **Reflect on Experience –** What happened?

3. **Contextualize the Experience –** Relate to current knowledge and research.

4. **Plan for the Future –** Based on the experience, what will you do differently in the future?

## APPENDIX G: SL-NIC AGENDA FORMAT EXAMPLES

### SL-NIC: Agenda 3/24/2022 9:00 - 10:30 am

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 min | **Welcome!** | Jo |
| 5 min | Dynamic Mindfulness | Jo |
| 15 min | **Personal Narrative - Leading in a Culture of Change**<br>*Read the excerpt from Leading in a Culture of Change by Michael Fullan. Choose a line or section that relates to your work right now.* | Independent |
| 30 min | **Sharing & Discussion** | Whole Group |
| 30 min | **Shifting Perspectives - Asset Framing**<br>Asset Framing with Trabian Shorters—VIDEO | Whole Group |
| 25 min | **Sharing & Discussion** | Whole Group |
| 15 min | Reflective Memo<br>Appreciations!<br>*Individual Interviews - Prior to Spring Break* | Whole Group |

| OUTCOMES | AGREEMENTS |
|---|---|
| 1. Cultivate relational trust in SL-NIC<br>2. Explore strategies for creating educator awareness and shifting practice | • Listen to one another's voices and perspectives<br>• Speak your truth to your level of comfort<br>• Assume best intentions first<br>• Take risks in engaging in conversations |

### SL-NIC: Agenda 2/26/2022 9:30-11:00 am

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 min | **Welcome!**<br>***Member Check*** | Jo |
| 5 min | **Dynamic Mindfulness**<br>Clearing the Mind: Mindful Movement | Jo |
| 10 min | **Personal Narrative - Student Voice**<br>*Read this & choose a line or section that resonates with your right now. Highlight it on your paper copy and write about it.* | Independent |
| 20 min | **Sharing & Discussion** | Whole Group |
| 30 min | **Educator Awareness Strategy Share**<br>**What?**<br>*Explain what you did. How it worked.*<br>**Now What?**<br>*Why did it matter?*<br>**So...what?**<br>*What's your next step?*<br>*What do you hope to gain moving forward?* | Independent<br><br>Pairs/Whole Group |
| 25 min | **Sharing & Discussion** | Whole Group |
| 15 min | Reflective Memo<br>Appreciations!<br><br>*Meet - March 24th or 25th?* | Whole Group |

| OUTCOMES | AGREEMENTS |
|---|---|
| 1. Cultivate relational trust in SL-NIC<br>2. Explore strategies for creating educator awareness and shifting practice | • Listen to one another's voices and perspectives<br>• Speak your truth to your level of comfort<br>• Assume best intentions first<br>• Take risks in engaging in conversations |

## SL-NIC: Agenda 11/18/2021 11:30 am - 1:00 pm

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 min | **Welcome!**<br>**Revisit Agreements** | Jo |
| 5 min | Dynamic Mindfulness: Mood Shifter<br>Seated or Balance? | Jo |
| 10 min | **Personal Narrative - Gathering**<br>*Read this & choose a line or section that resonates with your right now. Highlight it on your paper copy and write about it.* | Independent<br><br>Whole Group |
| 50 min | How do you use tools and processes to address equitable practices in your role?<br><br>The 4th Box Activity | Pairs/Whole Group |
| 10 min | **Closing**<br>4th Box Debrief | Jo |
| 10 min | Reflective Memo **Time**<br>Appreciations! | Whole Group |

| OUTCOMES | AGREEMENTS |
|---|---|
| 1. Cultivate relational trust in SL-NIC<br>2. Explore the meaning of "equity" and "equitable practices" | • Listen to one another's voices and perspectives<br>• Speak your truth to your level of comfort<br>• Assume best intentions first<br>• Take risks in engaging in conversations |

# APPENDIX H: CYCLE TWO CODEBOOK

| Finding Correlation | TABLE IN CYCLE 1 | | | CYCLE 2 ADDED DATA | | | | | | | Notes<br>Add where quotes are located! |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | SL-NIC 7/7/22 Audio | Individual Interviews | Reflective Memos | Data Reflection *Member Check | *regrouped totals for table* | Totals (Cycle 2 only) | Totals of Cycle 1 & 2 | |
| | Emergent Theme: Leader Agency (total 181) | | 181 | | | | | | 172 | 332 | |
| | Category | Code | Frequency | | | | | | | | |
| | Leader Self-Efficacy | | | | | | | | | | Self-efficacy came up during the SL-NIC meeting when discussing a quote about collaboration, then it was also a top theme during Cycle 1 data - statement! |
| | | District sets the tone for collaboration, growth | | 2 | 5 | 3 | 2 | | 12 | | SL-NIC Audio - "That's like part of the part of leadership is putting the thing on a plate and putting it in the room and then<br>Holly 7/18 - District sets the tone for collaboration. The follow through is the most important thing. It's really easy to liste<br>**sharing about district PLCs**"I want our space together to be a space for them to facilitate additional relationships. So t |
| | | Affirming, encouraging language | 118 | 91 | 32 | 1 | 1 | | 125 | 243 | Rachel 7/15 - The data from Cycle 1 was affirming...seeing how it connects to current research. Doing the right things. |
| | (total 148) | Validate leader's thoughts, feelings | 11 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 2 | | 13 | 24 | Elaine 7/18 - The SL-NIC empowered me to kep at it and keep going. Encouraging teachers and each other. Continue to be intentional and purposeful.<br>Elaine RM 7/7 - "I assumed that today's session would feel like an "end" to our sessions. Instead, reading the data that you shared today and our conversations made me feel better about all of the work you have done and we have helped you do:) It made me feel like our group's work isn't over, but just another beginning to the hard work that we are all trying to do in each of our buildings. I love the laughter and I really appreciated the quote and the mindfulness that Rachel shared. " |
| | | Growth, confidence as a leader | 11 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | | 3 | 14 | SL-NIC Audio 7/7 - "Emergent strategies, small tiny strategies not some big, huge thing we have to do" - Rachel<br>Rachel 7/15 - "Being in the SL-NIC has changed a lot about what I do. It's changed the way I lead staff meetings. It's changed the way I collaborate with, I view collaboration with school leaders." |
| | | Feeling empowered, renewed | 9 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 4 | 13 | Rachel 7/15 - "Being in the SL-NIC has changed a lot about what I do. It's changed the way I lead staff meetings. It's changed the way I collaborate with, I view collaboration with school leaders."<br>Holly RM 7/7 - "Together, we are better - and I leave these gatherings with a renewed sense of purpose." |
| | Leaders as Learners | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Differentiate learning (support?) for leaders | 9 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 7 | 16 | SL-NIC Audio - Rachel 1:17<br>But sometimes you don't even need coaching. Like, you know, like to support like micromanaging coaching, you just need like, Hey, are you okay? And you know what, how did that?<br>Holly 7/18 - Modeling how to differentiate with leaders so that they will do this for teachers in buildings.<br>Holly RM 7/8 - Stated that she wondered if a lot of the content represented what someone learns in a "typical" principal prep program.<br>Elaine 8/20 - RM "Just as we want our teachers to differentiate for our students, the type of learning that we do for our teachers and as leaders needs to be differentiated."<br>For example, if I'm working on a team with similar values discussing topics that are familiar or interesting to me, chances are I will feel more effective:) The opposite would hold true if I'm with a group of leaders who have different values and already have knowledge I don't. It's amazing how all of this is really similar to what we deal with in our classrooms with students... |
| | (total 32) | Leader awareness of inequity | 9 | | | | | | | | |
| | | Model equitable practices | 7 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | | 5 | 12 | SL-NIC Audio - Proper Intentional Modeling (Curtis, Page?).<br>Elaine 7/18 - Continually modeling practices for her staff. Continue to keep messaging at the forefront. Focusing on processes that get all students to proficient and beyond.<br>Curtis RM 7/7 - "This was a great way to model effective practices. I also enjoyed how reflective everyone in the group is at every moment. Everyone lets everyone talk, we all listen and then response without pre-mediated beliefs or answers. This experience was supportive and complementary."<br>Holly 8/5 RM - "Equitable practices lean into collaborative meeting structures such as intentional panning and gradous space, very much in the lens of building-level leadership, but its effectiveness hinges on the effectiveness of building-level leadership to lead classroom-level instructional planning, self-efficacy, and leadership to fulfill these leadership expectations at the building level." |
| | | Opportunity for leaders to learn together | 7 | 1 | | 2 | | | 3 | 10 | SL-NIC Audio 7/7"Doing small things is normal to us in leadership roles, but it's not normal to everyone." - Curtis<br>Curtis RM 7/7 - "As building leaders, bouncing ideas of what next year could be, and where we would like to go was so encouraging. Not to invention, all of the conversation was researched driven and supported."<br>Holly RM 7/8 - "This conversation could have been an entire PLC, as it was rich in context, application, and imaging what could be could redesign the culture." |
| | Emergent Theme: Collaborative Meeting Structure (total 192) | | 187 | 1 | 1 | | 1 | | 3 | 187 | Elaine 7/14"I think our time together. Has helped me realize that. Even though Curtis and Rachel both have elementary schools. You know, we all have similar needs and I think the more we can not just deal with the equity of our students, but equity of our teachers and their particular needs."<br>Holly Eng 8/5 Data Reflection - "Healthy collaboration requires that the person is in a position to receive the collaborative conversation - which means that the person invites another person into a collaboration with established norms." |
| | Category | Code | Frequency | | | | | | 102 | 49 [1] | |
| 2b | Gracious Space | (total 89) | 71 [2] | | 1 | | 1 | | 2 | | Curtis 7/28 - "Appreciate the way the agenda was set it was organized, allowed time for reflection, for thoughts to be shared with the team. The space was safe and I there was always something I could take back to my building. It was very relatable and timely. I'm thinking about how to organize type of collaboration with my school leadership team." |
| | | Juxtaposition of laughter/joy with deep conversation | 42 | 28 | 1 | | 2 | | 31 | 73 | Elaine 7/14 - moving beyond surface level PL of the district in the past.<br>Elaine DR 8/20 - "Chances are a team of leaders will be more productive when they can do both (work and play)...and for me, I can do this when there is trust." |

| Finding Correlation | TABLE IN CYCLE 1 | | | CYCLE 2 ADDED DATA | | | | *regrouped totals for table* | Totals (Cycle 2 only) | Totals of Cycle 1 & 2 | Notes<br>Add where quotes are located! |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | SL-NIC 7/7/22 Audio | Individual Interviews | Reflective Memos | Data Reflection *Member Check | | | | |
| 3b | | Ability to be vulnerable, clarify (process) thinking<br>***Added to Finding III** | 18 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 2 | | 11 | 29 | Diane 7/18 - "Our time together has been reflective and analyzing what it is we do and why we do it."<br>Holly 7/18 - "I know the groups historical experiences and what they bring to the table from all the places they've served and personal experience that become part of your fabric. All of that come out in the personal narrative.<br>Rachel 7/15 - "We provide the experience all the time, but we don't provide space to process through the experience. And that's where the real learning happens." Leaders perspective.<br>**"If we really want to build transformative leaders in a district, we have to work on support them and helping them to process through experiences and change their thinking. Not tell them what to do."**<br>Holly 7/8 - RM - "The personal narrative was powerful for me in multiple ways. First, it reminded me that professional learning and facilitation of professional discourse does not require a grandiose expenditure of effort to produce a fruitful conversation with positive outcomes. Additionally, the facilitator does not need to have the answers or be able to accurately anticipate the outcome of the discussion. Instead, it requires intense intentionality. In nearly every SL-NIC, we have started with a very short article, chapter, or - today - a quote to spark a conversation that, although person, was equally neutral. Today's quote, like previous selected texts, sparked thoughts that are grounded in my personal experiences and beliefs"<br><br>Holly DR #5 - "I wonder about the development of affirmation of leader language and acknowledge of leaders awareness, and it appears that this has not always been acknowledged or celebrated at the district level to support controversial conversations that sustain growth and change. Because of this, it has not always been a safe space to contribute ideas that do align with the loudest voices." |
| | | Discussing global, politically charged issues | 12 | 2 | 1 | | | | 3 | 15 | Holly 7/18 - "I think we fail to see things from other perspectives." Unaware of barries someone else has because we've never been exposed to it. SL-NIC helped break down barriers. |
| | | Sharing school stories | 12 | 9 | | | | | 9 | 21 | |
| | | Perpetual hope | 5 | 3 | | | | | 3 | 8 | |
| 2a | Intentional Planning | (total 66) | 33 [3] | | 4 | 1 | 2 | 85 | 7 | 90 | JP in CP Interview (7/28) - "Having great PLs is the same as classroom lesson planning. I wonder if sometimes administrators leave the classroom and forget what it means to teach well. Instead of expanding the classroom...all gatherings become dissemination of information (banking method)<br>**Rachel 7/15 - District should set aside time for structures collaborative time between school and district leaders, school-school, district-school**<br>Get comfortable in your group in PD then it's mixed up. If we're supposed to share this makes it hard. Intentional planning with groups and tasks that they are doing.<br><br>**Holly 7/8 RM - "For School leaders to engage the most find high value in the time with the district...takes a skilled, strategic district leader to create the environment."** |
| | | Use of Networked Improvement Community (NIC) | 21 | | 1 | | | | 1 | 22 | Holly 7/18 - Gave leaders an opportunity have discourse and talk in a structured way. |
| | | Relevance to current situations | 12 | 2 | 1 | 1 | | | 4 | 16 | Curtis RM 7/7 - "I loved how the first quote connected current research that I was looking at, surrounding relationships, strengths and collaboration with my MAS admins team current summer research project." |
| 2c | | Use of literature, research, texts | 16 | 4 | 1 | 1 | | | 6 | 22 | SL-NIC Audio - Holly "Using lit, text, research neutralizes the session....When we start with literature, research, text, personal narratives, research-based things, you kind of take the personal opinion out of it it, but you still bring in a personal reflection on what you read. But this thing that starts it, this article, this video it's neutral. Talking about the research makes the session authentic, brings in personal story but not how it starts..."57:35<br><br>Holly 7/18 - I really love starting with something that is research-based, an article, video, or quote that grounds everyone in information but it doesn't matter which lens you bring, your background...there is no right answer<br><br>Holly 7/8 RM - Made connections to a book shes reading about addressing inequity... |
| | | Purposeful, flexible agenda | 8 | | 6 | 1 | | | 7 | 15 | Curtis 7/28 - *"Appreciate the way the agenda was set it was organized, allowed time for reflection, for thoughts to be shared with the team. The space was safe and I there was always something I could take back to my building. It was very relatable and timely. I'm thinking about how to organize type of collaboration with my school leadership team."*<br>*Planning to prioritize adding the strategy being used to deliver the content to all meeting agendas moving forward.*<br>*Adding the How!!!*<br><br>Holly 7/18 - Learned just as much from facilitator led agenda items as discussion with the group.<br>Rachel 7/15 - Agenda should be structured, but not too structured. A balance. Too structures takes away creative liberty. |
| | | Planning for conversation, questions* | 6 | | 1 | | | | 1 | 7 | |
| | | Discussing global, politically charged issues | 12 | 1 | | | | | 1 | 13 | SL-NIC Audio page 26 - Johanna **"Part of this study is how to get people in leadership positions to actually collaborate about something hard."** |
| | | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Worthy of Time | | | | | | | | | | Diane 7/18 - Collaboration can start from a district session or space created, then morphs into phone calls, going to a training together, texts, etc. |
| 3a | | Resource replication and use* | 26 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1 | | 10 | 36 | SL-NIC Audio - Holly shared using the model with a district PLC that needed to make a pedagogical shift.<br>Curtis 7/28 - Shared specific strategies from PL I'e will use with staff.<br>Curtis RM 7/7 - Shared he will use the agenda to have more meaningful PLCs.<br>Diane 7/18 - gathering article, reflecting with admin team<br>Holly 7/18 - Started using the agenda framework with district PLC she leads.<br>Combining a strategic structure with trust building opportunities in PLCs that she leads.<br>Rachel 7/15 - changed the way staff meetings run, how she collaborates with other school leaders, shares information.<br>Diane 8/20 DR - All of the themes remind me of what our principals and district leaders tried to do with us the other day at our "retreat"...SL-NIC members *and a few others worked togheter to plan a collaborative start of the year meeting and I observed.* |
| 3b | (total 43) | Reflecting with other leaders* | 16 | | 2 | 1 | | | 3 | 19 | Diane RM 7/7 - Reflecting aloud with leaders of the progress over her shool over time was helpful. Helped her see connections - SILO, BARN, FARM analogy (in SL-NIC audio) |
| | **Emergent Theme: Trust within the Team (total 87)** | | 87 | | | | | | 80 | 50 | |
| | **Category** | **Code** | **Frequency** | | | | | | | | |

| Finding Correlation | TABLE IN CYCLE 1 | | | CYCLE 2 ADDED DATA | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | SL-NIC 7/7/22 Audio | Individual Interviews | Reflective Memos | Data Reflection *Member Check | *regrouped totals for table* | Totals (Cycle 2 only) | Totals of Cycle 1 & 2 | Notes<br>Add where quotes are located |
| 3a | Trust among Leaders | (total 36) | | | 2 | | 4 | | 6 | | Curtis 7/28 - Environment of SL-NIC was important, built trust among the group over time.<br><br>Rachel 7/18 - Districts need to actually coach leaders instead of telling people what to do.<br>Telling causes people to lose their confidence. Causes a spiral of being unsure. Know that you will get help as a leader, even when you mess up, then self-efficacy happens.***District sets the tone for how leaders lead in schools...<br><br>Diane 8/20 DR - Chances are a team of leaders will be more productive when they can do both (work and play)...and for me, I can do this when there is trust.<br>"I think about all of the topics that we've discussed over the year and the ones you've pulled from our discussions and I think trust is the most important (right along with shared values and beliefs). To me, they kind of go hand in hand. |
| | | Shared values and beliefs | 33 | 3 | 4 | | 2 | | 9 | 19 | Diane 7/14 - Continue learning with other leaders, even if they have different points of view...<br><br>Holly 7/18 - Appreciate leaders who continue to learn. Don't want to settle or get stagnant.<br><br>Rachel 7/15 - know what it feels like now to really collaborate, I don't want to waste time with people who don't want to collaborate. It's almost like I only want to collaborate with the people that I have trust and rapport"<br><br>Diane 8/20 - "It also tells a story of the 5 people in our NIC. When people have shared values and beliefs, it seems that the team can move forward with more momentum quicker." |
| | [total 24] | Dynamics that erode trust | 9 | | | | | | | | |
| | | Collaboration depends on who sits at the table | 5 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 6 | 11 | SL-NIC Audio, page 6 - "There's a leader in every chair. Yep. In this room. Yep. So how are you gonna take whatever leadership opportunity you choose or you're given and make it the best darn duty in the world?" - Diane<br><br>SL-NIC: And then some of it was there's a lot of APS that don't really wanna come learn. Yeah. And so if you put 'em in a room with the people that wanna learn, like the who's at the table piece in here. Collaboration depends on who's at the table. - Jo 1:54<br><br>Holly 7/18 - "I think when there's a lot of honesty, you get great work."<br><br>Rachel 7/15 - "If the culture was one of support then people would be more honest."<br><br>Jo 7/7 - I think about how if this study had been with different people, it would have been different. An extension of PM...wondered how open they would have been...vulnerable...<br><br>Diane 8/20 DR - Noticed that she doesn't fully participate when all leaders at the table are not lifelong learners and don't want to be there...noticed a change in the SL-NIC where everyone chose to be there. |
| 3c | Leader and Teacher Trust | (total 14) | | | | | | | | | |
| | | Intentional relationship building | 8 | 1 | 6 | | | | 7 | 15 | Curtis 7/28 - "I intentionally reach out to different school leaders to get to know them personally. Best way to start building relationships in a work environment." Go grab coffee, get their phone number, etc.<br>Holly 7/18 - The collaboration is always happening on district structure. Relationships are so important.<br>Rachel 7/15 - Rachel 7/15 - Know what it feels like now to really collaborate, I don't want to waste time with people who don't want to collaborate. It's almost like I only want to collaborate with the people that I have trust and rapport" |
| | [total 18] | Empower teachers to observe, ask questions, lead | 3 | | 2 | | | | 2 | 5 | Curtis 7/28 - Being intentional with the structure of all meetings at the school level. Ensure teachers know expectations and have training in Adaptive Schools to help hold leadership accountable. Starting with PLC structures. |
| | | Create an environment where it's ok to make mistakes | 2 | | | | | | | | |
| | | District sets the tone for collaboration, growth | | 2 | 5 | 3 | 2 | | 12 | | SL-NIC Audio - "That's like part of the part of leadership is putting the thing on a plate and putting it in the room and then just backing off and seeing what happens. Like it's not, you know what I mean?" Jo...put it on a plate and bring it the room.<br><br>Holly 7/18 - District sets the tone for collaboration. The follow through is the most important thing. It's really easy to listen and not do anything with it. "Credibility and relationships are lost when there's no follow through from the district."<br>**sharing about district PLCs**"I want our space together to be a space for them to facilitate additional relationships. So that that happens more authentically and frequently. But then also as a group then elevates to start bringing all of that back so that those conversations then migrate to the bigger groups of the whole space is safe right now<br><br>Rachel 7/15 - "They [district leaders] need to help us, you know, create new neural pathways with their vision by being thinking partners and not just coming in and saying, this is what you need to do. And this is how I want you to do it."<br>"District leaders have to be flexible thinkers. Administrators still need coaching, not I gotcha, but being a real thought partner."<br>Telling vs. coaching at the district level...could fit here too...SPRING in rachel's interview<br><br>Diane RM 7/7 - "I'm super excited about sharing time with Rachel and Catie next week. This is because I'm hoping to be able to hold some conversations that can piggy back off of our conversation today as I am really trying to find my words for my messaging during opening days."<br><br>Jo RM 7/7 - Continuing on..."Holly said that she hoped to continue all meeting (this was the last SL-NIC session) and that we could divide up different parts to do for each session. She said that the bulk of the planning during the study was on me, but that could change. This reminded me of what a true PLC is supposed to be. People who come together to collaborate and really want to be there learning together."<br><br>**Holly 7/8 RM - "For school leaders to engage the most find high value in the time with the district...takes a skilled, strategic district leader to create the environment."** |