

## Equity in Practice: Leveraging Communities of Practice for Critical Reflection and Agency in Rural Educational Settings

**Carrie L. Morris**

*East Carolina University*

**Lyndsay B. Britt**

*East Carolina University*

**Jennifer James**

*East Carolina University*

*Public schools in rural communities are often among the largest employers, positioning educational leaders as critical stewards of rural cultural wealth. By creating spaces for reflection and dialogue, leaders can challenge deficit-based narratives, foster agency, and promote more equitable practices. This paper draws on three participatory action research (PAR) studies in eastern North Carolina to examine how communities of practice (CoPs) support equity-focused leadership in rural schools. One study engaged an affinity-based CoP of six white women leaders reflecting on identity and leadership, while two examined principal-led CoPs in early college high schools centered on equitable discourse, access, and inquiry. Together, these studies demonstrate how well-facilitated CoPs create opportunities for critical reflection, collaborative problem-solving, and intentional action toward equity. Two key findings emerge: (1) equity requires praxis, where critical reflection informs shifts in leader and teacher practice, and (2) nested CoPs strengthen agency and sustain equity-focused change. These findings underscore the potential of CoPs as powerful mechanisms for cultivating inclusive, transformative school leadership while honoring the agency of rural educators.*

*Keywords:* rural education, educational leadership, equity, communities of practice, teacher agency, critical reflection

Public schools are often among the largest employers in rural communities. The educational leaders in these communities have a distinct and critical opportunity to share stories of rural cultural wealth. When they provide occasions to do so, they challenge deficit-based stereotypes and build self-awareness and agency that support engaging educational experiences for all students (Crumb et al., 2022; Yosso, 2005). In eastern North Carolina, each rural community has a unique history and identity yet, as is the case in many public schools, school leaders and educators often do not reflect the diversity of the student population (Pini & Bhopal, 2017; Swain & Baker, 2021). While educators may proceed with good intentions, if they do not reflect on their positions and the diversity in the communities they serve, unexamined classroom practices can lead to inequitable classroom experiences and instructional practices for students (Tredway et al., 2025). Educational leaders can provide classroom evidence and reflective opportunities for teachers, leading to structures that better support all students (Hewitt & Reitzug, 2015). The purpose of this paper is to present three participatory action research (PAR) studies focused on disrupting the status quo educational practices and enacting equity leadership. Two of the studies are from school principals who facilitated teacher groups working on improving equitable academic discourse and inquiry. The third study was of six white women leaders, including the schools of two authors, who met regularly to understand how to disrupt the status quo and provide more equitable learning opportunities for students. We offer this paper to educational leaders who view human potential as a key asset in school improvement and aim to create more equitable and inclusive educational environments for all students.

## **Context**

Public schools in rural eastern North Carolina (ENC) serve as vital anchors for their communities, providing both educational and social support. While research documents systemic inequities that can challenge school effectiveness, these schools are also sites of resilience, innovation, and committed leadership. Rural educators and leaders navigate structural barriers such as limited professional development opportunities, scarce resources, and underdeveloped systems for collaboration (Oakes et al., 2021). Yet, these challenges coexist with dedicated teachers and leaders who continuously seek strategies to support student success. Evidence highlights persistent achievement gaps between rural students and their peers in urban or more affluent districts, including disparities in standardized assessments, dropout rates, and graduation outcomes (Triplett & Ford, 2019; Cai, 2020). Recognizing these gaps not as inherent deficits but as indicators of structural inequities underscores the importance of research that explores how educators can actively transform learning environments to foster equity and opportunity.

Beyond student performance, rural educators often face barriers to professional growth, particularly in opportunities for collaboration and collective problem-solving. Many work in relative isolation, without ready access to mentorship, networks, or feedback to strengthen practice (Ford, 2016; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). However, the same contexts that pose challenges also provide fertile ground for innovation: educators and leaders are finding ways to create collaborative structures, share expertise, and implement targeted strategies that enhance teaching and learning. Drawing on three participatory action research studies, we

highlight how rural leaders and teachers can work together to establish supportive conditions, engage in critical conversations about equity, and advance pedagogical practices that improve outcomes for all students.

### **Area of Focus**

Key terms—diversity, equity, and inclusion—have become contentious; thus, addressing the inequities that affect student success has become more challenging. Nevertheless, educational leaders have a responsibility to examine student success data through multiple lenses and identify areas where interventions are needed (Blackmore, 1999; Dugan, 2021; Tredway et al., 2025). In the three PAR studies described in this paper, layered communities of practice (CoPs) provide school leaders with opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations about educational equity in rural areas while implementing practices that directly target inequitable outcomes for students (Britt, 2023; James, 2023; Morris, 2023). As Loewen’s quote suggests, human potential is an asset inherent in every rural community. We, the authors, sought to draw on multiple layers of potential to uncover and celebrate the rural cultural wealth within our communities (Crumb et al., 2022).

### **Research Inquiry**

In this paper, we analyze three participatory action research (PAR) studies to explore how communities of practice (CoPs) can support equity-focused leadership in rural schools. Our inquiry was guided by the question: *How do communities of practice, as documented in participatory action research studies, support leaders in addressing and disrupting inequities in educational contexts?* CoPs provided leaders with spaces to engage in explicit conversations about identity, equity, and bias, which in turn informed intentional and thoughtful leadership decisions. Morris facilitated an affinity-based CoP where leaders from multiple districts reflected on the alignment between their espoused and enacted practices. Building on this work, Britt and James, participants in the affinity space, facilitated CoPs at their early college high schools: Britt collaborated with teachers to increase access and rigor, while James and her colleagues strengthened classroom inquiry practices. Across these studies, we identified conditions that fostered meaningful dialogue and collaborative problem-solving. Leaders were able to engage in explicit discussions about equity and bias within the affinity space, while addressing these issues implicitly in their leadership by guiding teachers to reflect on and adapt their instructional practices. These findings highlight the agency of rural educators and leaders, demonstrating how CoPs can serve as powerful mechanisms for positive change and sustained improvement in schools.

### **Significance of the Study**

We (Britt, James, and Morris) wanted to understand how to be more effective in our roles as educational leaders and how to support the creation of more equitable environments for all students. We aimed to become leaders who not only knew how to engage in critical conversations about equity but could also facilitate those conversations while maintaining

positive relationships with our colleagues and staff. We were determined to take on this responsibility ourselves rather than relying on others to lead these conversations, ensuring that the responsibility for advocating for all students was shared across the educational community. Table 1 provides an overview of our backgrounds, the educational contexts in which we work, the demographics of the educators who participated in each CoP, and the focus of the equity issues addressed in each PAR study.

**Table 1**  
*Overview of Each PAR Study*

CoP Facilitator/Author	CoP Participants & Race/Gender Demographics	Focus
Britt, former Eastern North Carolina (ENC) teacher, Early College Principal (position during the PAR), current assistant professor at Elizabeth City State University (ECSU)	Upper-Level English Teacher (Black female) Science Teacher (Black female) Mathematics Teacher (White female) Social Studies Teacher (White male)	Promoting equitable academic discourse among students
James, former ENC teacher, Early College Principal (position during the PAR), current district director of K-12 curriculum and instruction	English Language Arts teacher (White male) Math teacher (White female) Social Studies teacher (White male) Instructional Coach (White female) Project Based Learning Community Coordinator (White female)	Shifting classroom practices toward inquiry-based learning
Morris, former ENC teacher and administrator, grant program coordinator at a regional university (position during the PAR), current founder of CLLM Educational Services, LLC	James (White Female) Britt (White Female) K-8 Principal (White Female) High School Principal (White Female) Assistant Superintendent (White Female)	Examining leadership roles in dismantling inequitable school practices

### Literature Review

Ishimaru and Galloway (2021) note that professional development often emphasizes changing “hearts and minds” before addressing structural and organizational inequities, yet participatory design approaches provide a way to intervene while generating knowledge about equity-focused change (p. 495). In rural eastern North Carolina (ENC), we cannot rely on mindset shifts

alone; each of us conducted participatory action research (PAR) projects aimed at supporting and empowering teachers, the factor with the greatest influence on student learning. These studies provide a lens for examining key aspects of equity leadership, relational trust, principals as instructional leaders, and communities of practice (Grissom et al., 2021), while also highlighting persistent gaps and tensions in creating conditions that allow teachers to thrive and, in turn, enhance equitable outcomes for students.

### **Equity Leadership**

We believe educational leadership is equity leadership (Aguilar, 2020). Equity is the ability to recognize and address disparities by providing different levels of support based on individual needs, ensuring that everyone has access to the tools and opportunities necessary to succeed (Radd et al., 2021). Educational leaders possess the positionality to affect equitable change in schools and have an immense responsibility to the children and families in the community (Rigby & Tredway, 2015; Theoharis, 2007). Galloway and Ishimaru (2017) identify ten high leverage practices that leaders can adopt to promote equity, including creating and implementing an equity vision, overseeing equitable teaching and learning, and cultivating organizational leadership focused on equity. Roegman (2017) emphasizes the necessity of prioritizing equity amidst the changing dynamics of school environments, asserting that leaders must consistently adopt an equity lens. As Aguilar (2020) articulates, “every conversation I have in and about schools is a conversation about equity” (p. 9). This transformation starts with leaders building and sustaining relationships within the school and community (Fullan, 2002). Establishing relational trust among all stakeholders is crucial for fostering honest dialogue and progressing toward common goals.

### **Relational Trust**

Relational trust is built through daily interactions among individuals within an organization, beginning with the actions of leaders. Bryk and Schneider (2002) describe relational trust as a fundamental resource for school reform, rooted in respect, personal regard, competence in essential responsibilities, and integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). This type of trust aligns with Freire’s (1970) vision of education as the practice of freedom, as opposed to domination, and serves as the foundation for culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (Hammond, 2015; Khalifa, 2018). Thus, leaders need to create an environment in which trust thrives. Trust is essential for high-performing schools, as it lays the groundwork for collaboration (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Tschannen-Moran (2014) indicates that teachers' trust in their principal significantly influences the overall atmosphere of the school. A key responsibility of leaders is to establish and maintain a culture of trust, which is vital for improving instructional practices and, consequently, student learning outcomes (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). To cultivate trust and collaboration, leaders must be emotionally responsive. Aguilar (2016) emphasizes the importance of leaders knowing themselves, fostering a culture of trust, and developing emotional intelligence. By understanding their own emotions and those of others, leaders can enhance relational dynamics within the school community.

## Principals as Instructional Leaders

The principal occupies the central role of the head learner. As such, the school leader needs to engage in, display, and model the behaviors expected by teachers and students (Barth, 1990; James, 2023). Principals must engage staff members in the continuous process of learning, discovery, and growth (Aguilar, 2022; Terehoff, 2002; Njenga, 2023). Principals need to understand andragogy, how adults learn (Knowles, 1970), and create reflective spaces to help adults become “self-authoring and self-transforming knowers” (Drago-Severson, 2012, p. 41). Grissom et al. (2021) further highlight that effective principals demonstrate four key elements of instructional leadership: shaping a vision of academic success for all students, creating a climate hospitable to learning, cultivating leadership in others, and improving instruction. Yet, an inclusive space for principals to learn and vulnerably share their own developmental needs is not always a focus in school improvement efforts, and principals often feel isolated or siloed (Lam et al., 2024). Leaders require intentional learning to address pervasive challenges, such as disparities in student achievement along lines of race or gender, yet Ishimaru and Galloway (2021) note a “lack of robust practitioner-focused frameworks for moving to equity organizational change” (p. 494).

## Community of Practice

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people with shared passions and concerns who interact regularly to learn how to do something better (Lave, 1991; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). CoPs provide a framework for organizations to reflect on internal and external environments over time, viewing learning as a continuous process, yet much of the CoP research does not focus on issues of equity. Principals often lead communities of practice (CoPs) for teachers, but they also need dedicated spaces to learn and grow themselves, especially in public schools where leaders are often guiding schools with diverse populations. Educational leaders must commit to lifelong learning to enhance their understanding of the contexts in which they live and work, and to better navigate the complexities of leading in diverse and changing environments (Michael & Bartoli, 2023; Sealy-Ruiz, 2021). In other words, principals require space for professional development and reflection. These spaces support leaders to interact, learn, and build knowledge and skills that challenge the status quo, ultimately addressing historical inequities and fostering both micro and macro changes that improve education for all students (Meyerson, 2004; Rigby & Tredway, 2015; Theoharis, 2010; Tredway et al., 2025). This work is best accomplished in community with each other.

## Identified Gaps and Tensions

Schools have a role and responsibility in a democratic society but are not responsible for fixing all of society's ills (Berliner, 2013; Labaree, 2008; Morris, 2023); understanding one's agency as a leader requires awareness, reflection, and intentionality. Educational growth is co-created between teachers and the conditions within schools that either facilitate or hinder agency (Aguilar, 2022; Tredway et al., 2025). Agency “is the ability for someone to initiate and act, ideally without fear of retribution or violence” (Weiner & Higgins, 2023, p. 132). In other words,

we must pay attention to the necessary conditions in school that foster collaboration and agency (Tredway et al., 2025). Positive interpersonal relationships and organizational structures that promote reciprocal benefits among members tend to enhance agency. Elements such as mutual support, shared beliefs, open discussions, and collaborations among colleagues significantly contribute to effective teaching and learning (Sang et al., 2023). Radd (2008) describes people with agency as people who do not see themselves as victims but as able to affect their situations.

In this paper, we seek to address a gap in the literature by illustrating how school leaders, working in community with one another, can develop a deeper awareness of equity and use that understanding to promote meaningful change in schools. By strengthening their own practices and perspectives, leaders are better positioned to support teachers, the primary drivers of student learning, in increasing access, rigor, and opportunity in classroom instruction. Importantly, this work occurs within and through collaborative communities of practice, allowing leaders to nurture relational trust, co-construct equitable practices, and sustain a culture of continuous learning both among themselves and within the broader school community.

### Methodology

We employed a comparative qualitative design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Tisdell et al., 2025) to examine three parallel participatory action research (PAR) studies, identifying patterns and context-specific variations in how communities of practice (CoPs) supported leaders in disrupting educational inequities. We (Britt, James, and Morris) first met during a yearlong professional learning experience focused on equity in mathematics classrooms and later conducted separate PAR studies as part of parallel EdD programs at the same university. Although each study was situated in a unique context, our shared commitment to equity-driven leadership and practitioner inquiry provided the foundation for this collaborative analysis.

Our work was guided by the question: *How do communities of practice, as documented in participatory action research studies, support leaders in addressing and disrupting inequities in educational contexts?* To answer this, we conducted a cross-CoP analysis in which we reviewed our dissertations, identifying patterns, divergences, and shared insights across studies. We use first-person plural (“we”) to describe our collective actions, reflections, and methodological decisions and third person to describe the distinctive features of each PAR study, including participants, data collection, and context-specific activities. This blended approach preserves clarity while representing both shared design elements and unique contributions.

Our methodology is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that includes Participatory Action Research (PAR), Communities of Practice theory (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), praxis and critical reflection (Freire, 1970; Irby, 2021), and Community Learning Exchange (CLE) principles (Guajardo et al., 2016). Together, these frameworks illuminate how educators learn through collective inquiry, interrogate their beliefs and practices, and take action to disrupt inequities.

## Research Design

Each of us conducted a separate PAR study addressing an equity issue within our respective contexts (Figure 1). Across all studies, we facilitated CoPs over three inquiry cycles using CLE methodology (Guajardo et al., 2016; Tredway et al., 2025). Although contexts varied, the studies followed an intentionally parallel design:

- Britt and James, early college high school principals in eastern North Carolina (ENC), each led a teacher CoP focused on equitable classroom practices.
- Morris facilitated a CoP of ENC school leaders, including Britt and James, exploring the praxis, reflection and action, intended for white women leading in diverse communities with a shared commitment to equity leadership.

Our theories of action were guided by the principle that CoPs with shared goals and regular interaction improve practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Across all studies, we critically reflected on our identities, contexts, and responsibilities in creating equitable, accessible schools, cultivating change from within, and leading collaboratively (Grubb & Tredway, 2010).

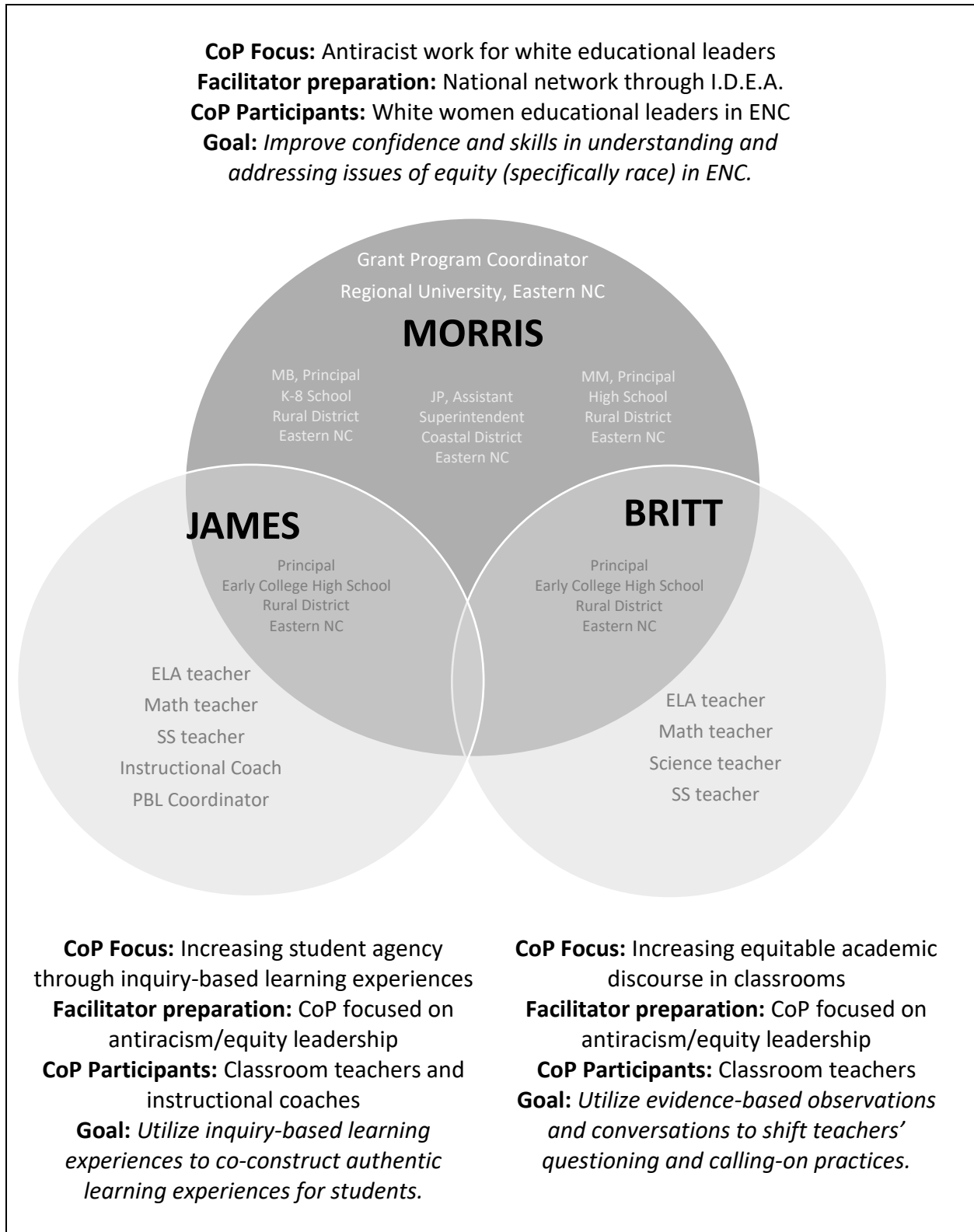
Participatory Action Research (PAR) provided the methodological and philosophical framework for this work, supporting participants to investigate problems, improve practice, and reflect iteratively on evidence (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Herr & Anderson, 2014). The PAR approach emphasized action-oriented inquiry, fostering collaboration, trust, and responsiveness while engaging participants' expertise and passion (Hale, 2001, 2008; hunter et al., 2013; Cook-Sather, 2020). Through this process, participants developed strategies to better understand teaching and learning processes and reconsider assumptions about students and schooling.

CLE methodology aligned with PAR's activist orientation by emphasizing "the power of place and the wisdom of people" (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 27; Hale, 2001; Tredway et al., 2025). Within each CoP, we modeled equitable practices, engaged participants in transformative work, challenged the status quo, and aligned espoused and enacted values for the benefit of students (Radd et al., 2021; Weiss, 1995). CLE's five axioms guided the learning process:

1. *Learning and leadership are dynamic social processes.*
2. *Conversations are critical and central pedagogical processes.*
3. *The people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns.*
4. *Crossing boundaries enriches the development and educational process.*
5. *Hope and change are built on assets and dreams of locals and their communities* (Guajardo et al., 2016; Tredway et al., 2025).

This structure supported our guiding research question, shaping PAR cycles, CoP facilitation, data selection, and the cross-case analytic process. By integrating PAR, CLE, and CoPs, we positioned educators as co-researchers generating actionable strategies for equity-focused improvement. The methodology itself fostered shifts in practice, including new instructional

**Figure 1**  
*Overlapping COPs for Equity Leadership in Practice*



approaches, revised leadership routines, and deeper recognition of students' and communities' assets, laying the foundation for the practical implications discussed later.

### **Settings and Participants**

Morris, a university program coordinator in eastern North Carolina (ENC), invited Britt, James, and three other white women (MB, a K–8 principal, JP, an assistant superintendent, and MM, a high school principal) to participate in a CoP focused on antiracism and equity leadership. All participants worked in different districts across ENC. To prepare for facilitating an affinity space for white educators, Morris engaged with the Institute for Democratic Education in America (I.D.E.A.), a national network providing tools, strategies, and support for antiracist work among white educators (I.D.E.A., n.d.). These PAR studies began during a period of heightened social unrest and continued through the COVID-19 pandemic, as school leaders navigated multiple, intersecting challenges.

James, principal of a small rural Early College High School in ENC, invited five team members to engage in a CoP focused on implementing inquiry-based classroom pedagogy. The focus of the CoP emerged over time as the team recognized the need to incorporate student voice and agency into classroom experiences. After the COVID-19 pandemic, staff were under pressure to recover lost learning but resisted returning to traditional “teach to the test” practices. James led the CoP by modeling inquiry-based learning practices with adults and guiding them through three cycles of inquiry, engaging in multiple collaborative activities aimed at improving teaching and fostering student agency.

Britt, principal at another small rural Early College High School in ENC, invited veteran teachers with over nine years of experience across various content areas to participate in a CoP focused on increasing equitable academic discourse. The CoP focus developed as Britt engaged teachers in discussions grounded in classroom observation evidence of their calling-on and questioning practices (Tredway et al., 2021). Britt modeled equity-based protocols in CoP meetings and intentionally created a safe space for teachers to discuss and reflect on their practice, ultimately supporting the implementation of equitable academic discourse in classrooms. As Figure 1 illustrates, the CoPs of Morris, Britt, and James overlap, creating interconnected learning spaces across these contexts.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

As facilitators of each CoP, we engaged in a reflective process using Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model to capture reflections and consider next steps. In this process, each of us described a concrete experience and noticed feelings and thoughts. Each of us then conceptualized the experience by relating it to larger, more abstract ideas and research, and then identified what the next steps may be with a focus on how to change behaviors or actions. This process of recording the metacognitive and/or meta-affective reflections through memos was at the heart of the data to be collected in each PAR study (Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Saldaña, 2016; Starr, 2010).

Although our studies had different research questions and participants, we followed similar processes for collecting and analyzing data. In each CoP, the lead researcher/facilitator

collected information from multiple sources, including observations, conversations, interviews, meeting artifacts, and reflective memos. These memos provided a structured, cyclical process for reflection and action. After engaging in experiences with participants, we reflected, conceptualized our understandings within relevant research frameworks, and considered how to adjust our actions. Data, including meeting artifacts, participant reflections, memos, interviews, field notes (Morris), and observation data (Britt and James), were organized and coded to identify categories and themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016).

In each individual study, participants acted as co-researchers. They collaborated with the lead researcher/facilitator to implement actions and provide feedback on the validity of the evidence (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Participants also served as critical friends and conducted member checks to support the lead researcher's interpretations and findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Foulger, 2010).

Across all three studies, we engaged in iterative cycles of inquiry, each lasting approximately 12–14 weeks. In each cycle, the lead researcher/facilitator worked directly with participants to plan and implement activities, analyzed the resulting evidence, and made decisions to guide the next cycle, ensuring continuous learning and improvement.

To generate the findings for this study, we conducted a systematic cross-case analysis of our three completed dissertations. We collaboratively reviewed our data displays, analytic memos, coded themes, and documented PAR cycles to identify where our studies converged and diverged. We first mapped common constructs, such as identity work, collaborative inquiry routines, and equity-focused problem framing, and examined how each construct developed across different CoP contexts. We then engaged in iterative rounds of comparative coding and meaning making, using constant comparative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2016) to analyze how similar processes unfolded across roles, settings, and participant groups. Integrating our reflective memos and CLE principles allowed us to interrogate our positionalities and ensure analytic rigor. This cross-case synthesis produced the shared findings presented in this article.

### **Ethical Considerations and Researcher Reflexivity**

As the lead researchers, we paid close attention to positionality and how our roles could impact the study. We mitigated any issues through thoughtful reflection, careful planning, and triangulating evidence throughout the projects, particularly using reflective memos and member checks (Saldaña, 2016). The major limitations of the PAR studies were each sample size of 4-5 participants per study. The studies are specific to the ENC context, and as a result, generalizations to other settings may be limited. However, the processes we used offer an example to other educators or leaders who want to collaboratively engage in a Community of Practice focused on addressing an issue of equity in an educational context. Validity, confidentiality, and ethics were vital, and we followed the guidelines for the University Internal Review Board. All participants consented to the study and selected pseudonyms for anonymity.

During these studies, we designed activities that encouraged praxis, what Freire (1970) describes as reflection to act. At CoP meetings, participants reflected on readings, successes, challenges, and data collected during observations (Britt and James) or field visits (Morris). We utilized CLE protocols to shift power structures and create safe and collaborative learning

spaces for reflection, a first step in equity leadership (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). We found that the reflective exercises improved each group's ability to determine the next action steps in each study.

## Findings

Across the three PAR studies, participants engaged in intentional cycles of reflection and action that enabled them to translate increased awareness into meaningful change (Irby, 2021). In each context, leaders and teachers examined equity challenges within their spheres of influence and identified how their behaviors either reinforced existing patterns or promoted inclusivity, access, and rigor for students. Through this work, principals recognized how their positionality and leadership decisions shaped racialized experiences in schools; teachers uncovered how everyday instructional practices could either expand or limit opportunities to learn. These realizations set the stage for shifts in practice.

A central throughline across the studies was the alignment of espoused beliefs with enacted practice. Participants consistently entered the work wanting to be stronger equity-minded educators, yet they often lacked awareness of how their routines, language, or assumptions contradicted their stated commitments (Ezzani, 2020; Weiss, 1995). As leaders and teachers engaged in praxis, critically reflecting on their actions and revising them accordingly, they developed more deliberate and equity-focused ways of working. For example, Morris's study showed how leaders identified deficit-oriented tendencies and reframed them through an asset-based lens, while Britt and James used classroom observation data to help teachers recognize inequitable patterns in participation and implement more inclusive instructional moves.

These shifts were made possible through well-facilitated and, in some cases, nested communities of practice that created safe spaces for dialogue, collaborative problem solving, and shared ownership of next steps. Whether examining leadership interactions, analyzing classroom artifacts, or designing inquiry-based learning experiences, participants exercised agency to enact change within their immediate contexts.

Based on the collective evidence from the three studies and the cross-case analysis, we present two overarching findings:

- Equity in practice requires praxis; critical reflection leads to shifts in leader and teacher actions.
- Well-facilitated and nested communities of practice (CoPs) support participant agency.

Together, these findings demonstrate how structured collaborative inquiry, grounded in PAR, fosters both the reflective capacity and practical action needed to advance equity in schools.

### **Finding 1: Equity in Practice Requires Praxis; Critical Reflection and Shifts in Action**

Establishing equity-focused CoPs was pivotal in fostering reflective and action-oriented educators. These communities created supportive spaces where leaders and teachers engaged

in critical conversations, examined their own practices, and then transferred insights into concrete shifts in classrooms and schools. Much of this work involved moving from deficit thinking to asset-based approaches that acknowledged and drew upon the cultural wealth of rural communities (Crumb et al., 2022).

Within these spaces, leaders and teachers engaged in praxis—cycles of reflection and action—that transformed both perspectives and practices. James’s study highlighted how teacher reflection supported instructional change: “I have reflected on the way I teach and began to revamp my instruction so that it is less of me giving students the answer and more about them finding the answer” (Team member 2, James, 2023, p. 146). Another teacher noted, “The things that I have changed since last year is that I am giving students more opportunities to provide and receive feedback...students helped create their rubric... it helps give them ownership in their learning” (Team member 5, James, 2023, p. 152).

Britt’s study revealed how observation and coaching conversations deepened reflection and shifted classroom discourse. One teacher shared, “It was very awkward to have [evidence that] pointed out that only the white students are talking in your class...It has affected my reflection... it [observation] has 100% changed how I reflect on my practice” (Participant Patrick, Britt, 2023, pp. 168–169). Another added, “I would let Jane answer my questions and think every student had it...Now, I am intentional about how I call on students and how I ask students to respond” (Participant Sue, Britt, 2023, p. 162).

Leaders, too, described transformation through reflection. In Morris’s study, one participant noted, “Reflection has served as a critical component for me as a leader...I reflected on the systems we have in place that affect students and on the internal transformation I have made” (LB, Morris, 2023, p. 107). Another emphasized the importance of interrogating biases: “I recognize my need to check my thinking about people, to check my biases when I make decisions...‘why do I think this way?’” (JJ, Morris, 2023, p. 121).

Taken together, these accounts illustrate that equity-focused CoPs created conditions for praxis, critical reflection paired with intentional shifts in action. As participants engaged in this cycle, they grew more aware of how their behaviors either reinforced inequities or expanded inclusivity, access, and rigor for students. This recursive process not only changed individual practice but also reshaped how leaders and teachers collectively enacted equity in their schools.

## **Finding 2: Well-facilitated and Nested Communities of Practice (CoPs) Support Participant Agency**

When leaders engaged as learners in their own CoPs, they experienced the power of reflection, vulnerability, and collaboration firsthand. These experiences directly informed the way they facilitated teacher CoPs, creating *nested CoPs* that extended agency across levels of the school system. By *nested CoPs*, we mean that leaders first participated in a CoP as learners themselves, reflecting on their own leadership practices, and then carried those insights into their facilitation of school-based CoPs with teachers (Tredway et al., 2021). In this way, leaders modeled collaborative inquiry and created parallel spaces for teachers to engage in reflective and equity-focused learning.

Central to this process was the presence of *well-facilitated CoPs*. A well-facilitated CoP provided structured time for building relational trust so that participants could share both strengths and areas for growth with vulnerability, what Tredway et al. (2025) describe as “setting the necessary conditions” (p. 18). It also positioned principals as instructional leaders who drew on observation evidence to surface how teachers invited students into learning, using that evidence to guide reflection and support teacher-led instructional improvement, consistent with adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2014). In addition, these CoPs explicitly focused on access and rigor in classrooms while helping leaders and teachers recognize, uncover, and address equity issues in practice. Through this balance of trust-building, evidence-based reflection, and equity-centered inquiry, the CoPs became generative spaces for both leadership and instructional growth.

In Morris’s study, leaders described the leader CoP as “a lifeline...I’m a better leader, one who never stops learning” (JP, Morris, 2023, p. 117). This experience shaped how they created safe, reflective spaces for teachers, emphasizing input and collaboration over top-down direction: “My role as a school leader is...ensuring things happen with teacher input is more important than pushing forward without full understanding” (LB, Morris, 2023, p. 105).

Teachers similarly described how participation in their CoPs fostered risk-taking and agency. In Britt’s study, one teacher reflected: “I have felt liberated the entire time...we were able to discuss openly about what we do in the classroom...we created our own questions and thought of our own little ways to make sure we were reaching all students” (Participant Sue, Britt, 2023, p. 175). Britt’s other participants echoed this sentiment, noting that the CoP “provided a safe space...to reflect and make changes to the way we teach” (Britt, 2023, p. 138).

In James’ study, every member of the CoP indicated they had grown because of participation in the study. One teacher shared, “they felt fortunate to be part of the team because they had time to think through inquiry, to restructure teaching to offer more opportunities for students to lead their learning, and to grow in their ability to implement new teaching practices” (James, 2023, p. 170). Another participant explained, “I have reflected on the way I teach and began to revamp my instruction so that it is less of me giving students the answer and more about them finding the answer” (James, 2023, p. 146).

Together, these findings illustrate how nested CoPs expand agency and advance equity: leaders developed as reflective learners in their own communities and then facilitated teacher CoPs that empowered educators to shift classroom practices. This layered approach fostered relational trust, collaboration, and continuous improvement, creating conditions for more inclusive and rigorous learning environments.

## Discussion

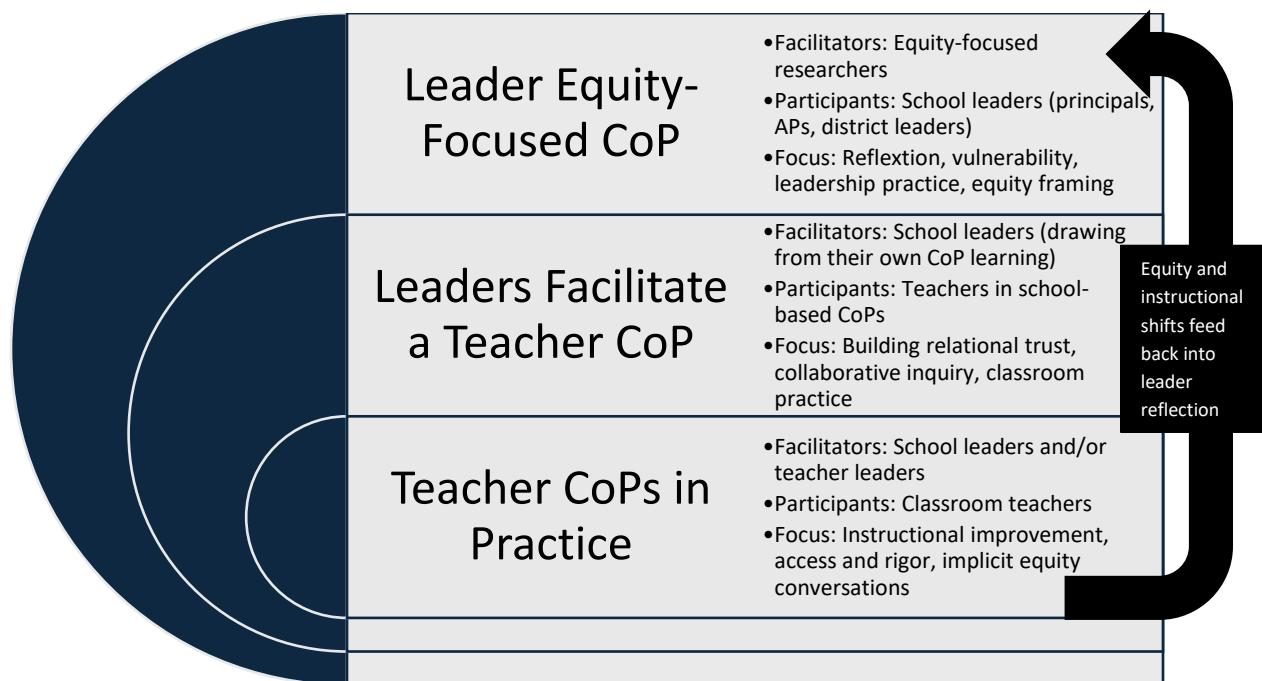
We argue that nested communities of practice (CoPs) must function as equity-focused learning groups; yet existing CoPs often fall short of addressing the dynamics of equity in schools (Wenger, 1998; Tredway et al., 2021; Tredway et al., 2025). School leaders are better positioned to enact meaningful, equity-driven change when they recognize their responsibility for equitable learning environments (Radd et al., 2021; Tredway et al., 2025), cultivate relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2005), and create the conditions for adult learning through strong instructional leadership and communities of

practice (Aguilar, 2022; Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Tredway et al., 2025). By extending this literature, our study shifts attention from normative collaboration to specific, actionable practices rooted in equity and assets that leaders and teachers can implement in classrooms. This approach not only deepens the understanding of equity in local contexts but also provides practical pathways for fostering inclusive learning environments.

Our findings suggest that preparing leaders to facilitate two layers of professional conversations is critical. First, leaders must be equipped to hold individual conversations with teachers about instructional practice, grounded in observation evidence, in ways that surface how teachers invite, or unintentionally exclude, students from learning opportunities (Drago-Severson et al., 2023; Tredway et al., 2025). Second, leaders must also learn to facilitate collective conversations in teacher CoPs that link these instructional observations to broader goals of equitable and rigorous classroom practice (Wetzel et al., 2023). In this sense, leader CoPs functioned as preparation spaces for the relational and instructional demands of school-based CoPs.

**Figure 2**

*Nested CoPs for Explicit and Implicit Equity-focused Shifts*



Yet, while explicit conversations about race, gender, and equity are often described as essential in the literature (Rigby & Tredway, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2010), our study underscores the political and cultural constraints that currently shape schools, particularly in the Southeastern U.S. (Welton et al., 2023). We recognize that direct, explicit conversations naming racism or sexism in practice can risk putting participants on the defensive and eroding relational trust within teacher CoPs (Irby, 2021; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2021).

Instead, leader CoPs became critical spaces where administrators could explicitly unpack questions such as *who is succeeding in our schools*, and *who is not?* and reflect on systemic inequities (Noguera & Syeed; 2021; Radd et al., 2021; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Leaders then translated these explicit insights into more practice-focused conversations with teachers, utilizing classroom observation evidence to help them recognize unconscious biases or unexamined inequities in their own classrooms and to align their instruction with the shared belief that all students can learn. These implicit conversations did not avoid equity; rather, they embedded it into discussions of teaching and learning in ways that were more likely to shift classroom practice (Tredway et al., 2025).

Well-facilitated CoPs were central to this work. Building relational trust allowed participants to take risks and acknowledge areas for growth, while structured protocols for dialogue created accountability and equal voice (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Pound & Edwards-Groves, 2024). Principals, acting as instructional leaders, brought observation evidence into the CoPs to help teachers reflect on student participation patterns and co-design strategies for improvement (Tredway et al., 2025). By developing teacher agency and grounding dialogue in shared evidence, CoPs moved beyond surface-level collaboration toward transformative professional learning (Polatcan et al., 2024; Woo & Henriksen, 2023).

Together, these findings illustrate how nested CoPs advance equity through both implicit and explicit routes: leaders engaged in explicit, equity-focused reflection within their own role-alike CoPs and then carried insights into teacher-facing CoPs where implicit, practice-based conversations about equity could take root. In doing so, they aligned with prior scholarship on adult learning and equity leadership (Knowles et al., 2014; Khalifa et al., 2016) while extending the literature by showing how sequencing of conversations—leader-first, then teacher-facing—creates conditions for equity-centered instructional change.

### Recommendations for Future Research and Implications

Our findings underscore the potential of nested communities of practice (CoPs) to support leaders and teachers in navigating the complex challenges of transforming instruction and disrupting status quo practices. However, additional research is needed to examine the long-term sustainability of such efforts, particularly in rural contexts where limited resources, staffing shortages, and political climates intensify challenges. Future studies should explore:

- **Sustained Identity Work:** How leaders' ongoing personal inquiry into their identities, values, and equity commitments shapes school-level practices and outcomes.
- **Agency Development:** The processes through which leaders and teachers develop agency within nested CoPs, and how this translates into measurable instructional change.
- **Rural Retention and Capacity:** The role of nested CoPs in addressing teacher recruitment and retention in rural settings, especially in light of persistent shortages.
- **Multi-Level Impact:** How equity work in nested CoPs influences change across micro (classroom interactions), meso (school/district policies), and macro (community structures) levels (Crumb et al., 2022; Tredway et al., 2025).

Further research should also investigate how trust, collaboration, and equity-focused facilitation strategies can be replicated in other contexts to deepen systemic change and ensure that equity efforts endure beyond individual leaders or programs.

The findings from this study reinforce existing research underscoring the importance of school leaders and teachers working collaboratively to improve instruction (Grissom et al., 2021). Although small in scale, the study offers meaningful implications for practice, policy, and future research. When educators engage in new routines and instructional approaches through supported inquiry, they experience increased efficacy and sustained willingness to participate in continuous improvement cycles (Yurkofsky et al., 2020). Our use of participatory action research (PAR) further demonstrated how structured collaboration can function as a powerful mechanism for change. Through the co-practitioner research process, participants approached instructional and leadership challenges with greater creativity (Wong et al., 2021), deepened their understanding of teaching and learning (Aguilar, 2022), and developed a stronger sense of agency to enact new practices (Polatcan et al., 2024; Sang et al., 2023).

These shifts illustrate the potential of iterative, practitioner-centered inquiry, grounded in educators' own contexts and experiences, to drive meaningful instructional and leadership change. This approach is often missing from traditional professional learning, yet it represents a promising avenue for strengthening equity-focused practice across diverse educational settings.

### **Conclusion**

Our collaboration within nested communities of practice (CoPs) created a powerful environment that empowered us to lead with courage, support one another, and experience both joy and justice in the work. By aligning our enacted values with our espoused values, we fostered asset-based equity leadership that advanced our collective agency as educational leaders in eastern North Carolina.

Nested CoPs honored the wisdom of the people and the power of rural places by enabling leaders and teachers to learn from one another's experiences, reflect critically on practice, and take informed action. As Guajardo et al. (2016) note, "the people closest to the issues are best situated to discover the answers to local concerns" (p. 25), and this approach allowed educators to draw on local knowledge while embedding equity into classroom and school-level practices. When administrators trust and empower teachers as designers of learning, teachers, in turn, treat students as capable and thoughtful human beings (Mehta & Fine, 2019). These experiences also reinforce that, just as students need meaningful learning experiences, teachers and leaders benefit from engaging in the same reflective, collaborative learning processes.

Despite challenges such as under-resourced classrooms, political pressures, and sociocultural fragmentation, we observed remarkable ingenuity, resourcefulness, and cultural wealth in rural communities (Crumb et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2017). By centering equity in nested CoPs, educators cultivated relational trust, collaborative inquiry, and actionable strategies that fostered inclusive, rigorous, and accessible learning environments. Ultimately, this approach demonstrates that equity work is both personal and collective: when adults are empowered to grow, schools and students can thrive.

## References

- Aguilar, E. (2016). *The art of coaching teams: Building resilient communities that transform schools*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Aguilar, E. (2020). *Coaching for equity: Conversations that change practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Aguilar, E. (2022). *The PD book: 7 habits that transform professional development*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Barth, R. S. (1990). A personal vision of a good school. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 71(7), 512-516.
- Berliner, D. C. (2013). Effects of inequality and poverty vs. teachers and schooling on America's youth. *Teachers College Record*, 115(12), 1-26.
- Blackmore, J. (1999). *Troubling women: Feminism, leadership, and educational change*. Open University Press.
- Britt, L. B. (2023). *Creating a home: Promoting equitable academic discourse by establishing teacher agency and co-design* [Doctoral dissertation, East Carolina University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. (2830116387).  
<https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/creating-home-promoting-equitable-academic/docview/2830116387/se-2>
- Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2003). Trust in schools: A core resource for school reform. *Educational Leadership*, 60(6), 40-44.
- Cai, J. (2020, June 23). *Black students in the condition of education 2020*. National School Boards Association. <https://www.nsba.org/Perspectives/2020/black-students-condition-education>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Student voice across contexts: Fostering student agency in today's schools. *Theory into Practice*, 59(2), 182-191.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Crumb, L., Chambers, C., Azano, A., Hands, A., Cuthrell, K., & Avent, M. (2022). Rural cultural wealth: dismantling deficit ideologies of rurality. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 17(2), 125-138. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-06-2022-0076>
- Drago-Severson, E. (2012). *Helping educators grow: Strategies and practices for leadership development*. Harvard Education Press.
- Drago-Severson, E., Blum-DeStefano, J., & Lawrence, D. B. (2023). *Growing for justice: A developmental continuum of leadership capacities and practices*. Corwin Press.
- Dugan, J. (2021). Beware of equity traps and tropes. *Educational Leadership*, 78(6), 35-40.
- Ezzani, M. D. (2020). Principal and teacher instructional leadership: A cultural shift. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 34(3), 576-585.
- Ford, J. (2016, November 1). The root of discipline disparities. *ASCD Express*, 74(3). <https://ascd.org/el/articles/the-root-of-discipline-disparities>
- Foulger, T. (2010). An unexpected discovery about the critical friend in action research inquiries. *Action Research*, 8(2), 135-152.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Seabury Press.
- Fullan, M. (2002). The change leader. *Educational Leadership*, 59(8), 16-20.

- Galloway, M. K., & Ishimaru, A. M. (2017). Equitable leadership on the ground: Converging on high-leverage practices. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(2), 1-36.
- Galloway, M. K., & Ishimaru, A. M. (2020). Leading equity teams: The role of formal leaders in building organizational capacity for equity. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 25(2), 107-125.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967), *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). How principals affect students and schools. *Wallace Foundation*, 2(1), 30-41.
- Grubb, W. N., & Tredway, L. (2010). *Leading from the inside out; Expanded roles for teachers in equitable schools*. Ringgold, Inc.
- Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Janson, C., & Militello, M. (2016). *Reframing community partnerships in education: Uniting the power of place and wisdom of people*. Routledge.
- Hale, C. R. (2001). What is activist research. *Social Science Research Council*, 2(1-2), 13-15.
- Hale, C. R. (2008). *Engaging contradictions: Theory, politics, and methods of activist scholarship*. University of California Press.
- Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press.
- Hammond, Z. (2026). *Rebuilding students' learning power: Teaching for instructional equity and cognitive justice*. Corwin.
- Herr, K., & Anderson, G. L. (2014). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Hewitt, K. K., & Reitzug, U. (2015). Portrait of a turnaround leader in a high needs district. *Education Leadership Review*, 16(2), 19-35.
- hunter, I., emerald, e., & Martin, G. (2013). *Participatory activist research in the globalised world: Social change through the cultural professions*. Springer Netherlands.
- I.D.E.A. (n.d.). Spring 2021: Antiracism course for white educators. *The Institute for Democratic Education in America*. <https://democraticeducation.org/antiracism/>
- Irby, D. (2021). *Stuck improving: Racial equity and school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.
- Ishimaru, A., & Galloway, M. (2021). Hearts and minds first: Institutional logics in pursuit of educational equity. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 57(3), 470-502.
- James, J. (2023). *Leave this place better than you found it: Facilitating inquiry-based learning experiences* [Doctoral dissertation, East Carolina University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. (2830131757). <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/leave-this-place-better-than-you-found/docview/2830131757/se-2>
- Khalifa, M. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Harvard Education Press.
- Khalifa, M., Gooden, M., & Davis, J. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4). 1272-1311.
- Knowles, M. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy versus pedagogy*. Association Press.
- Knowles, M. S., Holton III, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2014). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. Routledge.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source for learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.

- Labaree, D. (2008). The winning ways of a losing strategy: Educationalizing social problems in the United States. *Educational Theory*, 58(4), 447-460.
- Lam, H., Geissner, S. R., Shemla, M., & Werner, M. D. (2024). Leader and leadership loneliness: A review-based critique and path to future research, *The Leadership Quarterly*, 35(3), pp.1-20.
- Lave, J. (1991). Situating learning in communities of practice. In L. B. Resnick, B. Levine, & M. John, S. Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on socially shared cognition* (pp. 63-82). American Psychological Association.
- Loewen, J. (2015). The joy of antiracism. In E. Moore, M. Parks, & A. Michael (Eds.), *Everyday white people confront racial and social justice* (pp. 25-33). Stylus Publishing.
- Mehta, J., & Fine, S. (2019). *In search of deeper learning: the quest to remake the American high school*. Harvard University Press.
- Meyerson, D. (2004). The tempered radicals: How employees push their companies--little by little--to be more socially responsible. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Fall 2004. Stanford Graduate School of Business.  
[https://ssir.org/pdf/2004FA\\_feature\\_meyerson.pdf?q=tempered](https://ssir.org/pdf/2004FA_feature_meyerson.pdf?q=tempered)
- Michael, A., & Bartoli, E. (2023). *Our problem, our path: Collective antiracism for white people*. Corwin Press.
- Moore Jr, E., Moore, E., Michael, A., & Penick-Parks, M. W. (2017) *The guide for white women who teach black boys*. Corwin Press.
- Morris, C. L. (2023). *White women educational leaders: Embodying antiracism in eastern North Carolina* [Doctoral dissertation, East Carolina University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/white-women-educational-leaders-embodying/docview/2830119104/se-2>
- Ngunjiri, F. W., Hernandez, K. C., & Chang, H. (2010). Living autoethnography: Connecting life and research [Editorial]. *Journal of Research Practice*, 6(1), Article E1, 1-17.
- Noguera, P., & Syeed, E. (2021). The role of schools in reducing racial inequality. *Transforming Multicultural Education Policy and Practice: Expanding Educational Opportunity*, 275.
- Njenga, M. (2023). Teacher participation in continuing professional development: A theoretical framework. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 29(1), 69-85.
- Oakes, J., Cookson, P., George, J., Levin, S., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2021). *Adequate and equitable education in high-poverty schools: Barriers and opportunities in North Carolina*. Research Brief. Learning Policy Institute.
- Pini, B., & Bhopal, K. (2017). Racializing rural education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20(2), 192-196.
- Polatcan, M., Özkan, P., & Bellibaş, M. Ş. (2024). Cultivating teacher innovativeness through transformational leadership and teacher agency in schools: the moderating role of teacher trust. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 9(3), 227-242.
- Pound, J., & Edwards-Groves, C. (2024). Relational trust as community building practice. In *Middle Leadership in Schools: Ideas and Strategies for Navigating the Muddy Waters of Leading from the Middle* (pp. 81-97). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Radd, S. (2008). Looking for social justice: Competing perspectives as methodological instrument in a study of school leaders for social justice. *Journal of School Leadership*, 18(2), 268-286.

- Radd, S., Generett, G., Gooden, M., & Theoharis, G. (2021). *Five practices for equity-focused school leadership*. ASCD.
- Rigby, J. G., & Tredway, L. (2015). Actions matter: How school leaders enact equity principles. In M. Khalifa, N. W. Arnold, A. Osanloo, & C. M. Grant (Eds.), *Handbook on Urban Educational Leadership* (pp. 329-346). Rowman and Littlefield.
- Roegman, R. (2017). How contexts matter: A framework for understanding the role of contexts in equity-focused educational leadership. *Journal of School Leadership*, 27, 6-30.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.
- Sang, G., Huang, J., Chao, T., Ye, B., & Muthanna, A. (2023). Understanding rural school teachers' professional agency and its relationship to social structure. *Educational Studies*, 59(1), 30–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2022.2051033>
- Sealy-Ruiz, Y. (2021). The critical literacy of race: Toward racial literacy in urban teacher education. In *Handbook of Urban Education* (pp. 281-295). Routledge.
- Starr, L. (2010). The use of autoethnography in educational research: Locating who we are in what we do. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, 3(1), 1-9.
- Swain, A., & Baker, T. L. (2021). Whiteness owns it, Blackness defines it: Rural reality in the Black Belt. *Theory and Practice in Rural Education*, 11(2), 15-27.
- Terehoff, I. I. (2002). Elements of adult learning in teacher professional development. *NASSP Bulletin*, 86(632), 65-77.
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2), 221-258.
- Theoharis, G. (2010). Disrupting injustice: Principals narrate the strategies they use to improve their schools and advance social justice. *Teachers College Record*, 112(1), 331–373.
- Tisdell, E. J., Merriam, S. B., & Stuckey-Peyrot, H. L. (2025). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Tredway, L., Militello, M., & Flessa, J. (2025). *Leading and learning together: Cultivating school change from within*. Teachers College Press.
- Tredway, L., Militello, M., & Simon, K. (2021). Making classroom observations matter. *Educational Leadership* 78(7), 56-62.
- Triplett, N. P., & Ford, J. E. (2019). *E (race)ing inequities: The state of racial equity in North Carolina public schools*. CREED, Center for Racial Equity in Education.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. (2014). *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Gareis, C. R. (2015). Faculty trust in the principal: An essential ingredient in high-performing schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(1), 66-92.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, W. K. (2000). A multidisciplinary analysis of the nature, meaning, and measurement of trust. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(4), 547-593.
- Weiner, J., & Higgins, M. C. (2023). *Education lead (her) ship: Advancing women in K–12 administration*. Harvard Education Press.
- Weiss, C. H. (1995). The four “I’s” of school reform: How interests, ideology, information, and institution affect teachers and principals. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65(4), 571-592

- Welton, A. D., Diem, S., & Lent, S. D. (2023). Let's face it, the racial politics are always there: A critical race approach to policy implementation in the wake of anti-CRT rhetoric. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 31(109), n109.
- Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. *Systems Thinker*, 9(5), 2-3.
- Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015). *An introduction to communities of practice: A brief overview of the concept and its uses*. Wenger-Trayner. <https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/#:~:text=A%20community%20of%20practice%20is,distinguishes%20members%20from%20other%20people>
- Wetzel, M. M., Holyoke, E., Dunham, H., Alexander, K. H., & Collins, C. (2023). *Coaching in communities: Pursuing justice, teacher learning, and transformation*. Harvard Education Press.
- Wong, C. C., Kumpulainen, K., & Kajamaa, A. (2021). Collaborative creativity among education professionals in a co-design workshop: A multidimensional analysis. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 42, 100971.
- Woo, L. J., & Henriksen, D. (2023). *The critical role of teachers in educational design processes*. Teachers College Record.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.
- Yurkofsky, M. M., Peterson, A. J., Mehta, J. D., Horwitz-Willis, R., & Frumin, K. M. (2020). Research on continuous improvement: Exploring the complexities of managing educational change. *Review of Research in Education*, 44(1), 403-433.