

# Systems-Focused Equity Leadership Learning: Shifting Practice Through Practice

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## Abstract

This article shares our experience using a job-embedded active learning approach to support candidates' growth as systems-focused equity leaders in the University of Washington's Leadership for Learning program. We describe how socio-cultural learning theory helped us shift from field-based application projects to job-embedded learning. Our approach involved clarifying systems-focused leadership practices as primary learning targets, centering candidates' workplaces as the main learning setting, and providing high-quality support consistent with apprenticeships and communities of practice. We conclude with opportunities, challenges, and ways forward for educational leadership programs seeking to design such approaches and develop systems-focused equity leaders.

## Keywords

leadership, education doctorate (EdD) socio-cultural learning theory, critical race theory

Educational leadership programs in colleges and universities across the country aim to support educational leaders of all stripes in becoming powerful agents of educational equity. This emphasis reflects substantial research that shows educational leaders are vital to ensuring excellent educational opportunities and outcomes for each student, especially students of color, those living in low-income circumstances, students eligible for English language learning (ELL) services, and others historically underserved in public school systems (Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Theoharis,

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2007). Research also underscores the importance of supporting leaders' learning with job-embedded supports—those available to them as they go about their regular work (Augustine et al., 2009; Blase & Blase, 1999; Leithwood et al., 2004). Such job-embedded learning seems especially important when leaders are tackling systemic barriers to educational equity—what we call systems-focused equity leadership—since the complexity of such work is hard to simulate or capture sufficiently in texts and takes ongoing practice in real settings. However, supporting active learning that is job-embedded is challenging, particularly for instructors in higher education who sit outside school districts and have traditionally provided instruction in classrooms not in practice. What kinds of job-embedded learning strategies help such educational leadership programs enact active learning approaches to support their candidates in developing their systems-focused equity leadership?

This paper explores that question with an analytic description of how one educational doctorate program has been evolving its pedagogical strategies to maximize candidates' job-embedded learning as systems-focused equity leaders. The University of Washington's Leadership for Learning (L4L) Ed.D. program and our curricular strand on inquiry and data-informed leadership provides a strategic case for this investigation. L4L faculty have made particular pedagogical shifts in that strand that we associated with candidates' progressively deeper engagement in systems-focused equity leadership and other positive results. In partial recognition of this progress, in 2016, the University Council of Educational Administration recognized L4L as an Exemplary Educational Leadership Preparation Program, the only superintendent certification program to receive that distinction out of six programs between 2013 and 2019. To inform our analysis, we drew on our extensive experience as the main instructor of the Inquiry strand over the past 10 years and research assistant for 2 years, as well as analyses of strand teaching materials and student work.

Below, we briefly introduce L4L and the Inquiry strand and review extant research supporting our long-standing approach to active, job-embedded learning: cycle-of-inquiry action research projects candidates conducted in their own work settings. We then share program data that showed demonstrable improvements in candidates' growth as systems-focused equity leaders, but only after we redesigned our pedagogical approach to reflect key ideas from socio-cultural learning theory (SCLT) about authentic learning in practice. Our active learning approach that emphasizes job-embedded work now involves: (a) ensuring specific systems-focused equity leadership practices as the main learning targets, (b) centering candidates' workplace and daily practice as the main learning setting, and (c) providing the kind of assistance characteristic of high-quality one-on-one mentoring relationships and communities of practice. We elaborate those features of our pedagogical approach and provide illustrative examples of student work. We conclude by identifying particular supports that helped us evolve our pedagogical approach, some challenges that remain, and implications for educational doctorate and other educational leadership programs that aim to help their candidates lead for systems change that matters to educational equity.

**Table 1.** L4L Curricular Strands as Support for Systems-Focused Equity Leadership.

Strand	Supporting questions
Equity & excellence	What are the multiple historical and contemporary sources of educational inequities and how do leaders interrupt them and rebuild?
Instructional leadership	What is the latest research on student and adult learning, including culturally responsive pedagogy and antiracist teaching? How and why do school systems tend not to reflect that research and how to create systems that more centrally support student and adult learning in service of educational equity?
Leadership for equitable systems (LES)	What are the main dimensions of school systems—governance (boards and the superintendent), finance, policy, law, and others—that constrain educational equity? How can leaders redesign those systems to drive educational equity, including through their superintendent internships?
Inquiry and data-focused leadership	How to use data and research to lead continuous improvement processes that integrate ideas from the other curricular strands and interrupt and rebuild educational systems in service of educational equity?

## The Problem of Practice With the L4L Inquiry Strand

For many educational leaders, Ed.D. and superintendent certification programs like L4L are a last stop in their formal university-based education and professional certification (Honig & Walsh, 2019). Upon completion of our 3-year program, all candidates earn an Ed.D. (168 since 2002) and nearly all now pursue a superintendent certificate as well. However, we do not focus our curriculum on specific roles like the superintendency or central office director positions. Instead, we support all of our candidates in improving their ability to lead for fundamental changes in educational systems that promise to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for students historically underserved in public schools—what we call systems-focused equity leadership.

Consistent with this focus on practice rather than role, our candidates come to us holding various educational leadership positions from school principal to chief academic officer, and, occasionally assistant principal, community leader, or higher education leader. More important than their position is the extent to which a candidate has been attempting to lead for systemic changes in service of educational equity and has a clear vision for how L4L will help them strengthen their systems-focused equity leadership practice.

Inquiry and data-focused leadership is one of L4L's four main multiyear curricular strands that help candidates develop some aspect of that leadership (see Table 1). In Inquiry, candidates learn to lead continuous improvement processes to identify and tackle educational inequities at their systemic roots.

From the outset of the program, L4L instructors' pedagogical approach in Inquiry has had two main enduring features also characteristic of other Ed.D. programs and some principal preparation programs—that candidates must (a) lead an improvement

process in an authentic setting that promises to support educational equity and (b) take a cycle-of-inquiry approach to their work. The latter prompts candidates to identify a problem of practice, construct a theory of action about how to address the problem, plan to assess progress, take action, and assess progress. In the process, candidates practice particular habits such as continuously reflecting on what they are doing and why they think particular actions will lead to improvements.

These two features reflect research on leadership preparation across the educational leadership spectrum, from teacher leaders to superintendents, that emphasizes the importance of field-based experiences to learning. For example, research has long highlighted internships as essential to prospective principals' growth (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; M. T. Orr, 2011; Perez et al., 2011). More recent research on Ed.D. programs highlights internships as well as applications of learning in real-world settings through action research and other projects (Auerbach, 2011; Barker & Ayala, 2016; Buss & Avery, 2017; Osterman et al., 2014; Watson & Mochizuki, 2017). For example, Cosner et al. (2018) found that field-based application-oriented projects in a dual principal preparation and Ed.D. program supported candidates' leadership of projects informed by and responsive to school contexts.

Our specific use of a cycle-of-inquiry framework as the basis for candidates' field-based work stemmed in part from broader scholarship on the potential of such frameworks for supporting leaders' learning (e.g., Mintrop, 2016; Schön & Argyris, 1996; Spillane & Coldren, 2015). For example, Copland (2003) associated principals' use of cycle-of-inquiry frameworks with positive outcomes such as principals' improved collaborative problem-solving.

Although these features had long anchored our pedagogical approach in Inquiry, about 6 years ago, we saw significant improvements, especially in candidates' systems-focused equity leadership. For example, only 15% of candidates (14 of 92) in the first four cohorts focused their final Inquiry demonstrations on equity matters, with most addressing general problems like how school principals manage multiple demands and discrete interventions such as new science curriculum. By Cohort 6, 57% of the demonstrations emphasized systems-focused equity leadership rising to 88% in Cohort 7, even though earlier cohorts conducted their demonstrations after 3 years and later cohorts after 2 years.<sup>1</sup>

For example, one candidate in Cohort 6 started Inquiry focused on the persistently poor math achievement of Latinx youth in his district. He first attributed that problem to students, then to certain teachers, and ultimately to the problems' systemic roots: specific ways district professional development did not help teachers improve their core math instruction, especially for students eligible for ELL services, and to how the district hired teachers without sufficient readiness to grow quickly in doing so. He demonstrated how he had shifted his core leadership in practice as the district's chief academic officer (CAO) from an emphasis of promoting specific interventions for students and teachers to redesigning the district's approach to teacher professional development to ensure teachers significantly improved their ability to support Latinx youth and other historically marginalized students across the curriculum.

Another indicator of improvement was our on-time and overall completion rate, which we viewed as related to Inquiry because candidates' Inquiry projects tended to

**Table 2.** Main Pedagogical Skills.

Learning dimensions	From: Action research project with the cycle-of-inquiry as the main research design	To: Job-embedded learning to strengthen systems-focused equity leadership
Target practice	Cycle-of-inquiry	Systems-focused equity leadership
Main learning setting	Classroom-based learning applied in practice	Candidates' core work in real time
Faculty & cohort support	Advising on action research project	Approximate apprenticeships and communities of practice

be the main outstanding work that interfered with time to degree completion. In the first three cohorts, 56.5%, 72%, and 44% of candidates, respectively, did not complete their Inquiry work or graduate on time. In Cohorts 5 and 6, 100% realized on-time completion (Honig & Walsh, 2019).

### Using Theory to Improve Practice

We attribute these improvements, in part, to our use of ideas from socio-cultural learning theory to strengthen our pedagogical approach in Inquiry. The data above were contemporaneous with those improvements, suggesting an association between the two. SCLT is also robust—having been substantiated with empirical research across varied settings and over decades, often in the context of professionals learning complex ways of working, which further supported the connection between our use of SCLT and improved results.

Overall, SCLT helped us understand that although we intended to help candidates grow in their systems-focused equity leadership, our pedagogical approach did not sufficiently support that outcome but rather emphasized candidates learning how to take a cycle-of-inquiry approach to an action research project that they largely added on to their ongoing work. We saw improvements in candidates' engagement in systems-focused equity leadership as a core part of their actual practice on the job when we shifted our approach to job-embedded learning that specifically supported that leadership as candidates' core daily practice. Table 2 presents the main pedagogical shifts, which we elaborate in the following subsections.

#### *From Cycle-of-Inquiry Research to Systems-Focused Equity Leadership as the Target Practice*

First, we clarified the specific practices involved in systems-focused equity leadership and reinforced those practices as the main learning targets in Inquiry through the grading rubric, cycle-of-inquiry tool, and other strategies. SCLT emphasizes that professionals learn on the job all the time but learning toward specific targets requires clear images of the target practices that learners can see and understand are

**Table 3.** Selected Core Systems-Focused Equity Leadership Practices.

Practices
Identify and tackle inequities at their systemic roots
Recognize and address own leadership as part of the system perpetuating inequities
Take a race-explicit and strengths-based approach

of value to their organization. These images provide models that learners can copy, even when their understanding of those models is limited, and thereby develop their understanding of what the models entail and why to engage in them (Collins et al., 2003). When learners understand particular practices are of collective value, they experience more motivation to persist with their learning than if they view their learning as an individual pursuit or compliance matter (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sharp & Gallimore, 1991).

Tools, like cycle-of-inquiry frameworks and grading rubrics, can be important carriers of those images (Brown et al., 1989; Honig & Ikemoto, 2008). Conceptual tools lead with ideas, like “start with a problem of practice,” to prompt learners to shift how they think about their work in ways important to also changing their behavior. Practical tools ask learners to take action as a main strategy for also deepening how learners understand new practices.

These ideas about target practices and tools helped us see that while we intended candidates to demonstrate systems-focused equity leadership, our tools and strategies actually primarily reinforced the value of cycle-of-inquiry tasks instead. For example, initial grading standards emphasized candidates starting with problems of practice before jumping to solutions and using data to pinpoint problems. Candidates then engaged in those tasks in their settings as part of projects to improve results for historically marginalized students. However, the framework, grading rubric, readings, or session content did not identify the specific practices of systems-focused equity leadership let alone reinforce candidates’ engagement in those practices.

To center systems-focused equity leadership, we first identified the practices such leadership entailed and made them integral parts of our cycle-of-inquiry framework and basis for grading. We turned to critical race theory (CRT) for guidance because it elaborates particular practices consistent with a systems approach to equity leadership (see Table 3).

First, systems-focused equity leadership involves identifying and tackling inequities at their systemic roots. CRT emphasizes that inequities based on race or other forms of historical discrimination may be *minimized* by efforts to shift individuals’ beliefs and behaviors—the kind of intervention or discrete project work typical of our candidates’ cycles of inquiry in the first cohorts. However, spreading and sustaining those shifts require fundamental changes in how schools and other systems operate (Bell, 1995; Freeman, 1995).

Second, systems-focused equity leaders continuously seek to understand how their own leadership has contributed to the current state and can be marshaled as a main

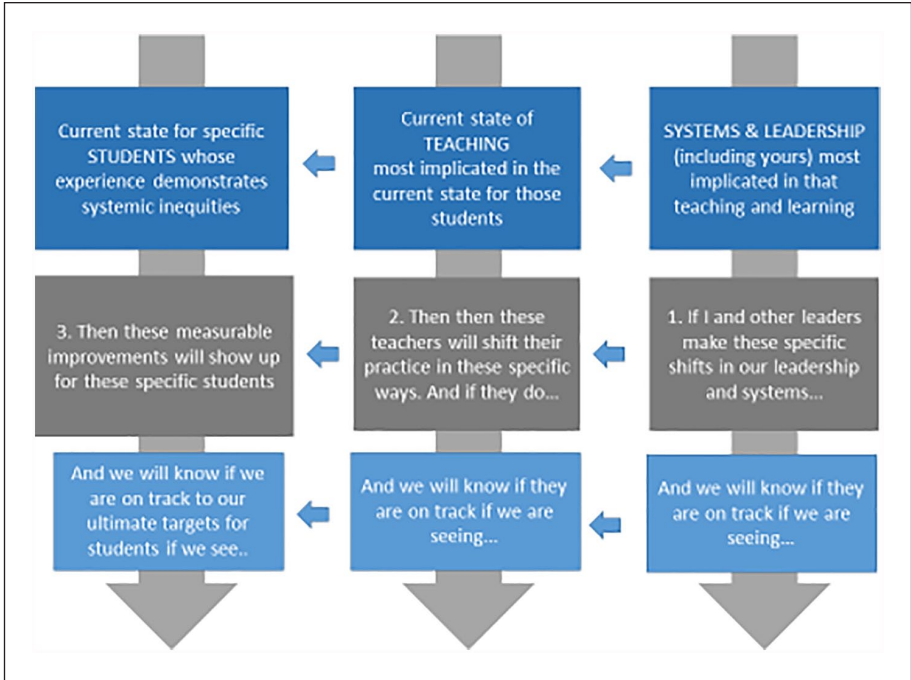
lever of change. In this view, white leaders and leaders of color alike working to change the status quo are still agents of the systems in which they work and sometimes secure legitimacy and credibility by following long-standing norms and practices that can frustrate educational equity (Anyon, 1997; Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015). Leaders must continuously interrupt such tendencies as they lead forward.

Leaders must also take a race-explicit approach to detecting and addressing those systemic roots. CRT underscores how “race-neutral” or “colorblind” approaches can normalize racism and leaders must daylight distinct race-based patterns in the distribution of resources and outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Wright et al., 2020). In the process, leaders must ensure that their race-explicitness does not inadvertently reinforce deficit-focused views of historically marginalized communities as when the simple disaggregation of data by race can reinforce negative associations with particular racial groups (Pollock, 2009; Toldson, 2019). Doing so often requires leaders to move beyond data typically available in district data systems and elevate student and community voice, revealing assets and aspirations of individuals behind the numbers that have often gone unrecognized in public school systems (Tuck, 2009).

Our CRT cycle-of-inquiry framework reinforces those core practices as the main leadership targets. As shown in Figure 1, candidates must focus on a small but meaningful group of students whose experience demonstrates how the broader school system—including their own leadership—perpetuates educational inequities and do so in race-explicit and strengths-based terms. Candidates’ theories of action and actual actions must address those systemic roots.

For example, a curriculum developer in another district was concerned that a significant number of 12th-grade students had received services for English language learners for over 5 years. The Inquiry tools and sessions prompted her to explore how those students actually varied significantly within that group. Using data within and beyond the district data system, she identified nine of those students who spent the most years receiving ELL services with the least progress—not to the exclusion of the others but because focusing on nine helped her see the individual students behind the numbers and variations in their experiences important to systems improvement. She started with the deficit-based claim that the nine students were not reading at grade level in the 12th grade. After deeper exploration of the students’ actual experiences, she made personalized strengths-based claims such as “Three students demonstrate high reading comprehension in out-of-school settings which they routinely help family members navigate” and “Six of those students were reading near grade level in the fourth grade and have gradually fallen behind grade-level targets in reading.” She then pursued courses of action that addressed parts of the system just after fourth grade that got those students off course.

As another example, had the CAO introduced above used our earlier cycle-of-inquiry framework, he might have pursued an intervention for Latinx students in mathematics. The revised framework prompted him first to see the current state for those students as a lagging indicator of how the district’s system of professional development reinforced pulling those students out of core instructional activities to receive language services in ways that led some of those students to fall behind. As the CAO,



**Figure 1.** A CRT Cycle-of-Inquiry Approach.

he was a main agent of that system, supporting his staff in using professional development strategies that did not help teachers address how they were underserving certain Latinx students in math. He then focused his theory of action on demonstrable shifts in his own leadership to redesign teacher professional development from a race-explicit, strengths-based stance.

*From Classroom- to Work-Based Learning*

SCLT also prompted us to center candidates’ core work on the job as the main setting for learning. Doing so meant recognizing the difference between applying ideas in practice and actually learning in and as practice. SCLT emphasizes this distinction—that learners do not integrate new ideas into their professional practice mainly by experiencing those ideas outside the settings where they would use them and then using the ideas in those settings. Then, learners tend to develop superficial understandings of the new ideas and still require substantial engagement with them in real settings for such integration. Instead, learners deepen their engagement in particular professional practices by making those practices a core part of their work and identity—their fundamental conception of who they are as professionals—as they work alongside others in real settings over time (Brown et al., 1989; Collins et al., 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991).



Furthermore, in real-world situations, learners have access to knowledge resources such as the experience of colleagues, which is impossible to capture in research articles, simulations, and other classroom-based materials but essential to enacting new practices in those settings; learners must be in those settings to deepen their ability to use those ideas (Brown et al., 1989). The mismatch between classroom and real-world knowledge resources is especially acute when the classrooms are located in historically white institutions, like some Research-1 universities, that typically privilege knowledge different from that required to work effectively in and for communities of color (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Lee, 2008).

Our previous approach had centered the university classroom as the main learning setting. During the first 2 years of the program, Inquiry sessions engaged candidates with texts on topics such as action research methods and aspects of the cycle-of-inquiry including identifying and framing problems. Strand assignments largely involved reading those texts with some discrete applications in practice. For example, one assignment had candidates use particular strategies to analyze data in their setting and identify specific problems of practice suggested by the data. In the third year, candidates were to bring their various skills together to conduct a full cycle-of-inquiry in their settings—their first opportunity to practice a whole cycle as a method for action research. Candidates worked with faculty advisors to develop a project proposal that identified the problem of practice, theory of action, and assessment plan. Upon passing their proposal review, candidates executed and documented the projects which they “defended” in a dissertation-like exam.

SCLT prompted us to move the main center of learning from the classroom to candidates’ own core work on the job in real time and over time. First, we eliminated the culminating cycle-of-inquiry project and other assignments that involved significant preparation outside candidates’ regular workday. Now, at the outset of the program, candidates identify an aspect of their core work in practice that they see as important to educational equity in their settings and lead that work forward from a CRT cycle-of-inquiry approach in real time throughout the first 2 years.

We now start the Inquiry strand with case studies and other opportunities for candidates to envision what systems-focused equity leadership entails, how engaging in a CRT cycle-of-inquiry process can support development of that leadership, and clear differences between that leadership and learning and what’s typical in their settings. In the process, candidates start to see that their professional identity has focused on ways of working different from systems-focused equity leadership and to deepen the collective value of those leadership practices as noted above.

The rest of the curriculum proceeds as a series of shifts candidates must make on the job in their actual practice in between our monthly weekend sessions with those sessions as retreat-like touch points that aim to deepen candidates’ conceptual understanding of ideas and practical understanding of their own progress on the job. In the fall, candidates should be working in their settings from a race-explicit, strengths-based stance to identify and elaborate the current states for students, teachers, and leaders on which they will focus; readings and session discussions reinforce that emphasis. In December, if they have not already done so, candidates should be

building out theories of action while they continue to understand the current state. Throughout, since candidates are in their main on-the-job learning setting far more often than they are in session with faculty, we position candidates themselves as the main designers of their on-the-job learning. For instance, candidates set their own annual and monthly growth targets and plan out how they will shift their own leadership in real time toward systems-focused equity leadership.

As an illustration, the CAO we introduced above was already responsible for improved student learning across subjects including mathematics and programs for students eligible for ELL services. At the start of Inquiry, he made the latter a more central part of his daily work, reassigning some other work responsibilities and focusing more of his regular work week on matters related to mathematics and ELL-eligible students. He set annual and monthly milestones to help him act on his theory of action within the first year of the program.

Other candidates find that the situated nature of learning across a 2-year timeline helps them even more fundamentally expand their thinking about what is worth working on as systems-focused equity leaders. For example, one school principal started Inquiry focusing on creating powerful teacher learning communities at her school. As she moved forward, she deepened her understanding of how what was happening in her school was a symptom of how the district's Human Resources department selected and placed teacher candidates and the districts' approach to teacher professional development—neither of which fostered teacher collaboration. She then expanded her core work as a school principal to include helping central office leaders deepening their own understanding of these issues and how to move forward.

In addition, each month, candidates share and receive feedback on authentic work products such as materials from actual meetings they conducted in practice. At first, instructors provide fairly detailed prompts for what to share to reinforce the importance of submitting materials they already created or used in practice. Then, as elaborated below, in tandem with their monthly milestones, candidates choose authentic work products to bring forward for faculty and cohort feedback. Since reflection on their own leadership practice is an essential part of systems-focused equity leadership, candidates include these reflections with their monthly submissions. Candidates must complete reflections not as a side project during evenings or weekends but during their regular workday. Candidates then compile their authentic work products, including their reflections, into a portfolio that they submit each year as evidence of their systems-focused equity leadership growth.

Candidates also lead an annual public demonstration of their leadership. With this requirement, we aim to further reinforce the centrality of work-based learning, even when candidates are on campus by having candidates lead an authentic activity that is part of their ongoing work in ways that make their leadership practice visible for feedback.

For example, leading up to the first public demonstration day, a principal supervisor had been working with her chief academic officer, central office assessment director, and a school principal to develop new strategies for helping school principals grow as instructional leaders. For the demonstration, the candidate and her district team worked

together in real time on campus to take authentic next steps in that work, with other candidates, program alumni, and other guests observing. After the observation period, the team and guests worked together to reflect on the team's progress and advance their work in real time.

As that example suggests, we center candidates' workplace as their main learning setting by requiring that they collaborate with co-workers as they carry out their Inquiry work. This emphasis on a workplace-based learning team differs from some other approaches where candidates themselves form teams and jointly conduct a collaborative inquiry project in a particular setting. Instead, our candidates each develop authentic teams in their workplaces that include others essential to the success of their systems-focused equity leadership. This distinction is important since truly addressing the systemic roots of educational inequities takes the aligned work of leaders across educational systems who also come to see that work as their core practice.

For example, a school principal began by investigating the current state and identified his own instructional leadership practice and that of other secondary school principals as key points of leverage for strengthening instruction for certain Black boys. He then convened those other principals as his core team and eventually expanded the team to include central office staff important to their success.

### *From Advising on Action Research to Assistance Relationships and Communities of Practice*

SCLT also elaborates that learning happens on the job all the time, but assistance relationships and communities of practice help focus that learning on particular target practices. First, assistance relationships involve

situated modeling, coaching, and fading . . . whereby . . . coaches promote learning first by making explicit their tacit knowledge or by modeling their strategies for students in authentic activity. Then, teachers and colleagues support students' attempts at doing the task. And finally they empower the students to continue independently. (Brown et al., 1989, p. 39)

Such models help learners to access images of the entire target practice at the outset and throughout their learning. Routine access to the whole helps learners see themselves as on a trajectory toward that full practice, especially compared with learning through discrete procedures that do not appear connected to a broader purpose of value to the community (Jordan, 1989; Rogoff et al., 2003). Models also help learners create their own mental images of the new professional practice—on which they can draw as guides even when the mentors are not present.

Learners do not simply observe models and wait to participate. Instead, from the outset, even novices assume "legitimate roles in the ongoing activities of a community . . . gradually moving to fuller participation" (Hewitt & Scardamalia, 1998, p. 77; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Mentors also reinforce "intent participation"—learners' understanding that even when "listening in" they are not just seeing someone else's practice, but

the practice in which they too participate in the present and progressively deeper over time (Rogoff et al., 2003).

A particular kind of ongoing dialog—sometimes called “narration” (J. E. Orr, 1986), trading stories (Jordan, 1989), or creating coherent accounts (Brown & Duguid, 1991)—is also fundamental to assistance relationships. Such dialog involves learners generating theories or hypotheses about the nature of the current state and possible ways forward. Tools like frameworks and texts may inform the theories, but, especially in cases where systems are not working in service of particular goals like educational equity, the knowledge and experience of participants and cues in the setting are essential (e.g., Brown et al., 1989). Thus, narration is a fundamentally situated, social activity. And as learners engage in such dialog over time with others, they develop their own identities and contribute to the development of others in the practice community (Brown & Duguid, 1991).

We call our approach to acting on these ideas “approximate apprenticeships” because we are not in practice with candidates with opportunities to mentor them in real time. Nor do candidates typically have access to others in their settings who can model systems-focused equity leadership at a high level. Instead, faculty model with case studies and detailed examples of what such leadership involves in various settings and have program alumni share their ongoing systems-focused equity leadership. We also regularly model our thinking about why to engage in those practices with positive examples as well as common negative examples to actively avoid.

Probably most importantly, we engage in regular narration with candidates about their leadership practice. Each month, faculty provide detailed written comments on the leadership evidence candidates submit, comparing the evidence to the target practices and prompting the candidates to consider for themselves the relationship between the two. Candidates then reflect on how their next submission takes the earlier comments into account, to which we respond in an ongoing dialog. In addition, we engage candidates in monthly video or phone conferences. Each conference starts with candidates’ reflections on the written feedback and then proceeds to a discussion of candidates’ leadership in relation to the target practice and next steps.

And as we have noted throughout, we use in-class sessions to create a community of practice in support of candidates’ learning. Session content amplifies the common leadership practices in which all candidates should be engaged, even though their core work and settings vary. Candidates routinely consult with each other using the grading rubric and protocols that support narration as described above—to help each other understand evidence of their leadership and discuss next steps.

## **Opportunities, Challenges, and Ways Forward**

Specific developments in the field, resources, and strategic decisions helped us move in the directions above and make other aligned shifts. First, the faculty team’s bold decision to eliminate the culminating action research project freed us up to explore how to make candidates’ actual leadership practice the core of the Inquiry strand and the program overall. Without that constraint, we were able to bring a new imagination

to identifying the kind of leadership we wanted to see as our candidates' core practice, how to help them shift their practice in real time during the program, and how to help them develop habits of ongoing learning that they would carry forward into their leadership beyond the program.

Research in the field and having tenure-line faculty on the program team served as major resources supporting these shifts. For example, as we were clarifying the systems-focused equity leadership practices, leaders in the field were advancing CRT in ways we could apply readily to leadership settings and one of the primary authors of the new equity-infused national leadership standards joined the faculty team (e.g., Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). The team included others well versed in SCLT and other theories of learning from their scholarship and other teaching (Honig, 2008; Knapp et al., 2014). Research assistants and our full-time program manager conducted extensive research on practice-oriented forms of assessment, such as portfolio assessments, and analyzed student work and various program data.

Program structures and routines help us tap each other's expertise in ways that have been important to the changes we describe above. Among them, at twice monthly faculty meetings and occasional retreats, we reviewed research to deepen our collective understanding of our programs' target leadership practices and how support them in our candidates. We used these meetings to review the Inquiry syllabus alongside the others to consider how the program strands could support each other. As a result, we could focus Inquiry on specific core practices and rely on other strands to build candidates' leadership in other ways important to candidates' learning in Inquiry. For instance, when candidates must pinpoint the current state for students, they draw on ideas from the Instructional Leadership strand on the importance of working with "cases of one," rather than mainly large data sets to understand systemic inequities. The program's professional growth planning process helps candidates engage in using evidence to reflect on their growth in ways important to their leadership in Inquiry. And as we rolled out the new approaches, we discussed our progress together as part of our regular monthly meetings dedicated to examining student feedback on our teaching.

The extensive narration involved in Inquiry requires significant faculty time for in-person sessions, written feedback, and video conferencing each month. We have been able to account for that time in faculty's overall course loads and, when possible, having two instructors available to engage with candidates consistently each month.

And even with a 3-year program, engaging in systems-focused equity leadership is extremely demanding. Unless candidates enter the program with prior experiences with that leadership, they unproductively struggle to take full enough advantage of the Inquiry strand. We therefore select candidates in part for their prior systems-focused equity work as school principal has already been leading beyond their school building to effect broader change in their district or when a central office staff person demonstrates fairly deep understanding that leading meaningful systems change takes more than their being in a position of hierarchical authority.

We also face ongoing challenges as we advance our job-embedded approach. These challenges are not barriers but conditions that make our teaching in Inquiry fundamentally difficult. In particular, the approximate apprenticeships continue to remain just

that—a lesser substitute for candidates having mentors and communities of practice on the job that engage candidates with models and narration throughout their work day. On the job, candidates may also face models and institutional pressures that work against their systems-focused equity leadership.

Since we are not with candidates in their practice settings, candidates must figure out how to make their leadership visible as the basis for feedback and other forms of narration. The evidence they share is inevitably a representation of their leadership, not their actual leadership in real time. These challenges are compounded by the fact that leadership unfolds over time and sometimes is difficult to understand out of context. SCLT suggests that novices face particular challenges in accurately representing their practice, often inflating their self-assessments, in part due to their nascent understanding of what the target practices truly entail.

Based on our progress and ongoing challenges, we have developed questions to help guide improvements in our job-embedded active learning approach moving forward. Faculty of other university-based leadership programs might find these questions useful to consider in their own efforts to design such experiences and engage their candidates in job-embedded learning.

For one, how can we continue to ensure we are using pedagogical strategies actually likely to improve candidates' leadership practice? As our experience shows, applications of classroom-based learning in practice and some cycle-of-inquiry processes may help candidates conduct practice-relevant projects on the job but not necessarily grow in their leadership. Leaders of other programs may also find SCLT a useful guide in this regard. We continue to explore SCLT ourselves as well as other theories of learning in practice such as cultural historical activity theory that elaborates leadership for systems redesign. In the process, we and other program leaders must continue to attend to how these theories require university faculty to flip traditional university scripts from classroom-based learning applied in practice to practice settings as the main learning setting which classroom activities as a foundational support. We must ensure that we have the institutional support as well as program structures and routines to do so.

As we move ahead with such shifts, how can we do so in progressively more powerful ways that help candidates turn the tide in some of their work settings that pushes against their systems-focused equity leadership? More powerful ways include those that address the lack of models candidates encounter in practice, possibly by improving networks across cohorts so program graduates more routinely mentor current candidates. We have also enhanced our recruitment efforts within districts to try to attract multiple candidates from the same setting who can learn together on the job.

Ultimately, how can we continue to sharpen our focus on leadership practices that are especially likely to matter in real time and over time to addressing systemic roots of educational inequities? We have found developments in CRT especially helpful in this regard. Moving forward, how can we continue to tap knowledge in the field—and also contribute to that knowledge—in ways that make our next cohort's systems-focused equity leadership even more powerful?

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## Note

1. We base these distinctions on the extent to which student work samples included terms such as equity or racial equity and reflect candidates' explicit focus on the experiences of students in historically marginalized groups. We also considered whether their theory of action addressed systemic roots of inequities rather than discrete interventions for students (see also Honig & Walsh, 2019).

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