

Chapter 13

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

Kirsten Ebersole Lacroix

Center for Leadership and Educational Equity, USA

Donna Braun

Center for Leadership and Educational Equity, USA

Michelle Li

Center for Leadership and Educational Equity, USA

Chris Jones

Center for Leadership and Educational Equity, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes effective ways for educational intentional learning communities to harness time, focus, and adult learning practices to ensure that they increase equity. Five key practices to develop equity-focused ILCs are described. These include (1) aiming for equity, (2) focusing efforts on the core of learning and teaching, (3) using key leadership practices and continuous improvement methodology, (4) using tools to develop community and transformational learning, and (5) walking the talk. The chapter begins with a short description of how one organization iterated these practices and ends with areas in which the organization is evolving their work. The intent of this chapter is to not be a polished recipe book, but rather an opportunity to share a learning journey of the five key practices, how they were developed, and how the organization has learned to enact them in their practice. The intention is for this chapter to be used to help ILCs reflect on their own improvement journeys to guide them into their next steps in leading for equity-focused improvements.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7270-5.ch013

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION LEADING THE LEARNING

The Center for Leadership and Educational Equity (CLEE) is a non-profit organization that drives student success by developing shared leadership to address the root causes of educational inequities and transform instructional practices and systems. CLEE fosters shared leadership through numerous programs and services that build the capacity of participants to engage in and lead transformative learning experiences within Intentional Learning Communities (ILCs). The programs all aim to increase equitable student learning outcomes in the schools they serve. At CLEE, we define equity as giving students what they need in order to unleash their unlimited, unknowable potential. This vision includes eliminating disproportionality in student learning outcomes between historically marginalized groups of students and their peers.

The journey to develop the methodology, practices, and programs to reach toward this vision of educational equity began over two decades ago when CLEE's Principal Residency Network (PRN), one of the longest-running principal residency-based preparation programs in the country, was created to develop creative and innovative school leaders through intensive residencies with mentor principals (Braun et al, 2013). Over the years, each cohort of the PRN formed an ILC that set the groundwork for a broader ILC of mentors and graduates of the PRN that were serving in schools across the state of Rhode Island and beyond. To nurture this growing community's focus on creating a more equitable and just public education system, CLEE developed a variety of services and supports to the field of education.

Over the last 13 years, CLEE expanded programming to support every stage of equity-focused educational leaders and systems. As is demonstrated in CLEE's Equity Statement (CLEE, 2020), leadership is broadly conceived and needed:

At CLEE, we believe that leaders at every level and in every facet of education—from teachers, resource providers, and administrators to students and parents—can be leaders for increasing equity of voice and excellence for all learners. We believe that skilled leaders are not born, but developed through powerful learning. That such complex learning and leading is not a solo act. That working together we can do better than the best one of us alone on their best day. (p. 2)

The CLEE community has learned and grown with and for the field, iteratively applying theory and practice to evolve research on how to design and facilitate transformative professional learning that increases equitable outcomes for students. This chapter will describe the key practices CLEE has honed to develop equity-focused ILCs, how it was learned, and the ways CLEE is aiming to improve in the future.

KEY PRACTICES FOR EQUITY-DRIVEN ILCs

As an organization, CLEE is also an ILC dedicated to continuously learning, evolving, and amplifying the impact of key practices that overcome barriers to increasing equity in education. This section describes five of the most effective ways we have found for educational ILCs to harness time, focus, and adult learning practices to ensure that their communities increase equity: (1) aiming for equity, (2) focusing efforts on the core of learning and teaching, (3) using key leadership practices and continuous improvement methodology, (4) using tools to develop community and transformational learning, and (5) doing the work.

The Need for an Equity Aim

Many ILCs use excellent adult learning practices (Breidenstein et al., 2012) to focus on improving their craft. We have found that these are essential; however, they are not adequate to ensure impact on educational inequities. Rather, ILCs must have an unwavering focus on understanding the inequities in their own contexts and taking action to create equitable outcomes for each and every student in their community (La Salle & Johnson, 2018).

An aim toward equity in ILCs may sound like an obvious goal; however, we have learned that many ILCs stop short of this focus without intentional practices, tools, and facilitation to encourage and support them to take on this challenge. When the focus of an ILC is not on understanding, challenging, and monitoring progress to increase equity in student learning, learning may still be transformative for educators, and yet not necessarily transformative for the students they serve. Kegan and Lahey (2016) define transformational learning as a process of shifting underlying mental models and assumptions, resulting in increased complexity in understanding ourselves and the world. Transformative learning can happen for all when ILCs design and facilitate for both educator and student outcomes. In an educational system rampant with inequities, an aim on increasing equity is not an “equity lens” to choose to put on or take off, it is an essential stance for ILCs.

Powerful transformational learning happens for educators and students when ILCs aim to impact equity due to a number of important learning experiences that manifest, which would otherwise not. In striving to address inequities, ILCs encounter systemic (i.e., structures and processes) and internal (i.e., beliefs, assumptions, and practices) barriers inherent to the reason the inequities exist. ILCs focused on increasing equity begin “to see the structures within which we operate” (Senge, 2006, p. 94), including their own beliefs, assumptions, and practices, in order to “work with them and change them” (Senge, p. 94) toward practices and assumptions that more equitably serve students who are not being served by the educational system (Braun et al., 2021). The continuous effort of identifying and addressing assumptions and beliefs that need to be surfaced and expanded in order for substantial shifts in practices and mindsets to manifest is the work of an equity-driven ILC. The upcoming sections will detail the ways in which CLEE leads ILCs to set and learn from holding a steady aim on increasing equity.

Focus Matters: Increasing Equity in the Instructional Core

In addition to ensuring that an ILC has an aim to increase equity, ILCs in the education sector also need to have a focus on improving practices and systems within the Instructional Core (IC) (City et al., 2009) that will increase equity. The IC is the interactions among what students are engaged in, teacher practices, and rigorous content (City). Throughout our work, we noticed when ILCs did not focus on strengthening components of the IC, they put their attention on improvements that were outside their locus of control (e.g., what students did outside of school time) and/or were symptoms (e.g., attendance and behavior) rather than root causes of inequities that show up in student learning outcomes and experiences. Focusing on areas not within the IC often results in reinforcing inequities by placing blame and responsibility for growth outside of the ILC and/or by focusing on behavioral interventions, resulting in external incentives that forgo long-term impact for short-term gains.

To make the aim of increasing equity through improving the IC concrete and achievable, ILCs members construct a specific equity goal and brainstorm ways to improve components of the IC to reach the goal. This helps to set direction and guide planning and monitoring of the impact of their changes through

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

a process that is further detailed in the upcoming sections. Table 1 is an example of a school ILC that is committed to increasing equity in the IC. After using data to uncover an inequity between students who receive special education services and their peers in 11th grade, the school created an equity aim to increase equity for both the identified focal group and their peers. After disaggregating and analyzing multiple data points to uncover root causes, the educators brainstormed ways that they could implement research- and/or evidence-based changes in the IC. This ensured that the change efforts the ILC was about to embark on would be focused on teacher’s practices, student engagement, and content rigor.

Table 1. Worksheet from educators brainstorming ways to improve the instructional core in writing for their focal group of students in Grade 11 who receive special education services

What will it look, sound, feel like to increase teacher knowledge, skills, and dispositions to increase student learning and equity for the focal group?	What will it look, sound, feel like to increase student engagement to increase student learning and equity for the focal group?	What will it look, sound, feel like to increase content rigor to increase student learning and equity for the focal group?
Clarity in learning objectives, task requirements, and success criteria-revisiting it more than once during the lesson		
Responsive to student needs	Engaging in higher order tasks-productive struggle	Stated task and enacted task are the same
Use appropriate (wait) time for students to process and engage with information/task	Collaboration with peers, building of one another’s thoughts, ideas, answers	Instruction that allows for multiple entry points and is scaffolded as needed with the goal of gradual release of supports (focused on the skills needed to culminating tasks)
Modeling what is expected	Making connections beyond lesson	
Observing other teachers to reflect on their own practice	Providing explanations, evidence	Content that reflects the learners (do the students see themselves?) and feels meaningful and relevant to the learners
Emphasizing the process rather than the correct answer or regurgitation of information	Providing feedback to peers	Appropriate resources provided to complete task
Timely feedback	Increased independence - persevering with a difficult task and not requiring a scaffold, modification or accommodation with every task	Encourage student thinking by -conceptual connections -open ended tasks/questions -requiring evidence
Strategic lesson planning - grouping, regrouping to meet learners’ needs	Advocating when assistance is needed	
Understanding/getting to know their students (background, home culture, interests, how they identify)	Increase participation/ accountability	Authentic performance tasks - real-world audience and purpose
Use of data at the classroom level by individual teachers/cohorts	Applying in multiple-modes	
Surface teacher beliefs (implicit bias)	Students tracking growth	

Using the term “equity” and/or having an intention to improve equity-driven practices in the IC is of course not enough for ILCs to impact educational equity. By focusing ILCs on improvements inside the IC, educators learn to see more clearly their own practices and mindsets and ways to have greater agency to improve them (Skrla et al., 2009). This then results in expansion of mindsets, practices, and coherence in their schools and a decrease in the variability in performance between classrooms that is often prevalent. This is hard work that is easily derailed. For ILCs to stay focused in this hard work,

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

sound methodology, practices, and systems are needed. The next sections detail the clear practices and tools that are needed for ILCs to move from seeing barriers to equity to overcoming them.

ILCs Need a Guide to Move From Theory to Practice

Using extensive field research, as well as CLEE's continuous improvement cycles, we developed a methodology to guide ILCs to implement facilitative leadership practices that improve the IC and increase equity. The method is anchored in continuous improvement methodology (Bryk, 2015) and guided by the enactment of CLEE's Core Leadership Practices (Braun et al., 2017).

Core Leadership Practices

Unlike other leadership standards often derived from the perspectives of experts, the Core Leadership Practices (CLPs) are derived from research on the shared leadership practices used across a school community that result in increased equity. The six CLPs encompass both skill sets and mindsets (i.e., dispositions): Setting Direction, Monitoring Practice, Building Capacity to Teach, Building Capacity to Collaborate, Building Capacity to Lead, and Reorganizing Systems. For example, the practice of Setting Direction guides ILCs to set their aims to increase equity and focus improvements on the IC (described in the previous sections). See Table 1 for a description of the dispositions and practices under each CLP.

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

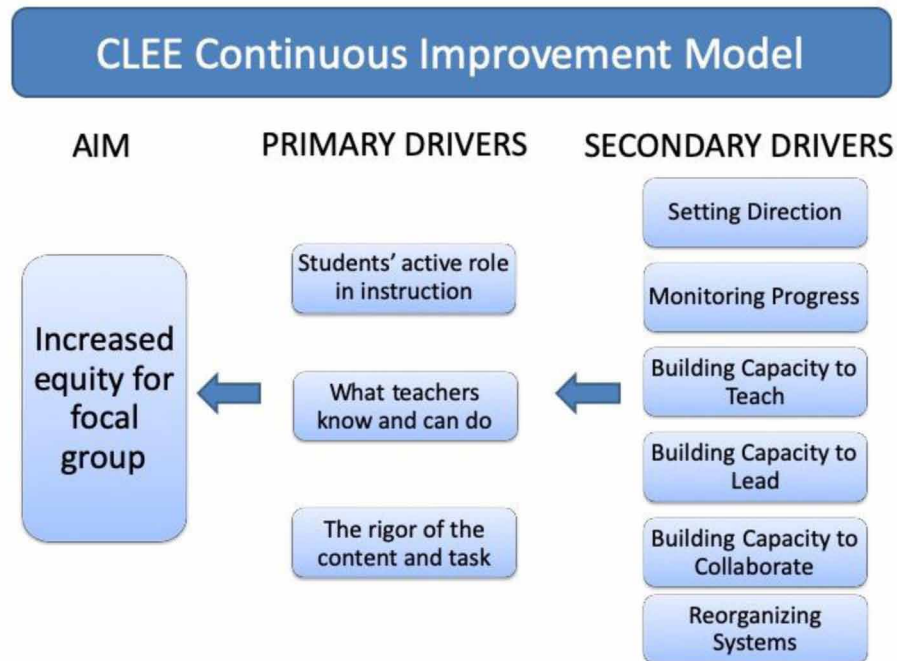
Table 2. Core leadership practices (CLPs)

CLPs	Dispositions and Practices
1. Setting Direction	<p>Dispositions: Leader respects diverse perspectives and questions assumptions as they engage self and diverse stakeholders to:</p> <p>Practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop a shared understanding of the current reality and why inequities exist • develop a shared vision and mission that uphold belief in high and equitable outcomes for all students • develop key schoolwide goals to galvanize community to achieve the vision and mission • develop research- and evidence-based action steps to improve practices of adults
2. Monitoring Progress	<p>Dispositions: Leader promotes growth and drives a focus on continuous improvement as they guide teams and diverse stakeholders:</p> <p>Practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand strengths and needs, especially identifying inequities for focal groups • plan short- and long-term steps to meet needs • monitor implementation and adapt rapidly based on learning and shifting circumstances • celebrate growth toward the vision and distill learning necessary for continued improvement
3. Building Capacity to Teach	<p>Dispositions: Leader maintains an assets orientation and sets high expectations for learning for all as they engage educators in learning experiences and structures to:</p> <p>Practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drive improvement of instruction aimed at accelerating the learning of all students. • build a culture where people are supported and encouraged to take risks to improve instructional practice • ensure ownership and responsibility for improvement of the IC
4. Building Capacity to Collaborate	<p>Dispositions: Leader balances needs of self and others and develops a climate of belonging, interdependence, and respect as they engage educators in collaborative learning to:</p> <p>Practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facilitate adult learning for teams and diverse stakeholders • give and receive collegial feedback • create receptive space where assumptions are questioned and changed to align with vision • build a culture of coherence and shared ownership rather than autonomy and isolation
5. Building Capacity to Lead	<p>Dispositions: Leader is reflective, self-directed, and responsible as they:</p> <p>Practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • create the conditions for others to demonstrate their leadership • embrace and lift up the perspectives of systemically silenced members of the community • advocate for actions and conditions necessary to achieve equity
6. Reorganizing Systems	<p>Dispositions: Leader demonstrates resilience and courage to be a catalyst for equity as they develop and adapt systems and structures to:</p> <p>Practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maximize time for adult collaboration and student learning (to increase equity) • align resources to the school vision and mission • support a positive and safe learning culture for all • ensure access to excellent teaching and learning for all • leverage the resources and strengths of families and community partners • ensure compliance with relevant laws, rights, policies, and regulations and advocates for changes to increase equity

When the CLPs are enacted to engage in continuous cycles of improvement, they form a roadmap or guide for ILCs to use to know where to focus their attention and efforts to improve their own facilitative leadership practices in order to improve the IC and increase equity. Figure 1 illustrates how enactment of the CLPs drives improvement in the IC and increased equity.

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

Figure 1. The core leadership practices (secondary drivers) drive the improvement of the instructional core (primary drivers) to reach the aim of increasing equity



Continuous Improvement Methodology

The CLPs guide ILCs to engage in continuous cycles of improvement, a methodology supported by research in the field of improvement science (Bryke, 2015). As articulated in previous sections, the best way for ILCs to deeply impact equity is to focus their efforts on increasing equity by improving their IC. To operationalize what this looks like, CLEE’s methodology guides ILCs to enact each of the CLPs in the following ways.

Setting Direction

ILCs set direction by identifying an inequity within the school between a focal group of students (i.e., not currently being served well by the school) and their peers and subsequently setting goals to remedy the inequity. This is the step that ensures the ILC is focused on understanding inequities and articulating goals to increase equity. As illuminated in the previous two sections and Table 1, this first step is crucial to ensure an ILC’s learning and actions result in transformational learning for both educators and students. There are many challenges to choosing a focal group. CLEE has found that when ILCs use data digs and root cause analysis, they are better able to identify both a “keystone” (Duhigg, 2014) inequity (e.g., a focal group of students who are not being served well) and change practices. Keystone focus and practices are those that, if improved, would (a) increase equity for students who are most underserved, (b) illuminate inequitable structures, systems, and practices in the school that need to be changed, and

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

(c) have a ripple effect to other grade levels or subject areas when progress is made and methodologies/strategies are shared with colleagues.

In order to identify the focal group and associated keystone change practices, ILCs use disaggregated data and data protocols to determine areas where students' learning is not being adequately served. Crucially, ILCs then follow this process with a root cause analysis in which the potential roots or reasons for the student learning results are delimited to the parts of the IC (what teachers are doing, what the rigor of the content/task is, and/or how students are engaged) (City et al., 2009). This process allows the ILC to encounter and see the barriers in themselves, in the practices, and in the system. Then, we move the groups quickly from seeing and understanding inequities to determining highest leverage keystone change ideas.

The practice of Setting Direction is not only for schools who can devote numerous hours; rather it can happen under a variety of conditions in contexts. Over time, CLEE has learned to make this practice of Setting Direction accessible with many different types of ILCs (e.g., multi stakeholder groups, educator school teams, etc.) who operate in a variety of contexts and with limited time available to engage in this first CLP.

In addition to using student learning data in Setting Direction, CLEE created the Learning Community Survey for ILCs to better understand the degree to which their learning community implements the adult learning practices (i.e. the CLPs) that directly impact student learning. The Learning Community Survey is a short survey given to each adult in a learning community. The survey measures the six CLPs used when leading and facilitating work with colleagues. Research shows that there is a correlation between the implementation of these leadership practices and improved student learning and increased equity in schools (Braun et al., 2021). The results of the survey are analyzed in the ILC and allows both positional leaders and the community of learners to analyze their successes and stretch areas to grow their capacity in each of the Core Leadership Practices in order to address the key root causes of inequity for their focal group(s).

Building Capacity to Collaborate and Lead

As ILCs implement the change practices to increase equity, they use facilitative leadership practices to empower shared leadership among themselves and in their community. This is further unpacked in the next section on the tools that foster the capacity of ILCs to engage in this work.

Building Capacity to Teach

In their efforts to improve practices in the IC to better serve their identified focal group, ILCs use tools described in the next section to strengthen their understanding of students and best ways to meet their needs and unleash their unlimited potential.

Reorganizing Systems

While many of the identified keystone change practices are within the practices of ILC members, often there are also needed changes to systems that are uncovered in the root cause analysis and/or in the process of implementing change practices. ILCs advocate and take action to improve the systems to achieve the best outcomes for their focal groups. For example, as a result of their improvement work, one ILC

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

implemented a schedule that allowed for every student to have a Whatever I Need (WIN) Block, while previously only some students had access to WIN, which resulted in inequity.

Monitoring Progress

Throughout the continuous improvement methodology, ILCs use data to examine the impact of changing their practices in short cycles called Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycles. In doing so, they monitor the extent to which they implemented what they intended, as well as the impact on their practices, assumptions, and beliefs, and on the focal group they aim to benefit.

This continuous reflective practice is the key to transforming practices and beliefs that may hold a team back from attaining their goal (Kegan and Lahey, 2016). In continuously monitoring and reflecting, they are able to deepen their understanding of students, their own practices, and adjust their efforts for the best possible outcomes. As one ILC participant shared:

My biggest take-away from the experience is that reflection will bring tremendous growth. The PRN teaches you how to harness continuous reflection - through interactions with peers, mentors and others for continuous improvement. It nurtures self reflecting practices and guides you to embrace a growth mindset, two extremely important dispositions needed to lead for equity.

The data routines that are part of Monitoring Progress in an ILC are essential to changing beliefs, which in turn leads to change in adult practices inside the IC. Focusing on adult learning and helping ILC members monitor the progress of student learning helps them further build pathways to bridge knowledge/theory and practice. In utilizing both the skill sets and mindsets to address the barriers that previously felt unsolvable, ILC members create new pathways together to remove barriers. One member of an ILC of school leaders describes the impact of this process well:

It has been powerful. It's been slow and steady, and it's gotten everyone to look at the data more, which is what we as a district needed to do in order to continuously improve. People may have had certain beliefs, and when they started to look at the data, they had aha moments like, "Oh wait a minute, you know, this is actually the reality. This is what it's telling us."

Over the years, CLEE has learned that neither a methodology (e.g., Continuous Improvement) nor practices (e.g., Core Leadership Practices) alone was enough to ensure ILCs had the guidance they needed to move from theory to practice in classrooms and schools. In our time working with ILCs who were positional leaders and with varied educational stakeholders, we learned that both must be interwoven to guide ILCs to increase equity in their contexts through transformational learning for adults and students.

In the field of education, learning and research often focus either on systems improvements or on capacity building of individuals. The coupling of continuous improvement methodology with the CLPs provide the process and guidance for ILCs to do both iteratively. As they purposefully focus their improvements on increasing equity, they simultaneously build each other's capacity to teach, collaborate, and lead while strengthening systems that allow transformational learning to flourish. Doing this complex work requires precise tools and protocols. The next section will introduce the key tools and protocols CLEE has found to be most effective.

ILCs Need Tools and Protocols to Facilitate Growth

The transformational learning required to achieve educational equity must be fostered in a climate of trust that welcomes vulnerability (Menakem, 2017; Immordino-Yang, 2016). Deliberate efforts and tools must be used to unlock the power of community in ILCs to drive risk taking, new skill sets, and shifts of mindsets needed to make what feels impossible, possible. To achieve this, ILCs must use key tools of facilitative leadership (i.e., agreements, debriefing, protocols, etc.) as they enact the CLPs to continuously improve toward increased equity.

Some examples of these tools are using the tenets of adult learning to design collaboration time, building group agreements, debriefing to distill and refine practice, and using protocols that support the use of inquiry such as text-based, dilemma-based, work-based and data-based protocols. We have found specific tools and protocols meet multiple critical needs for ILCs, such as:

Attending to the crucial work of creating mindsets that allow ILCs to uncover and see barriers,
Trying new learning on without judgment,
Helping adults see their collective capacity and expertise to solve their most pressing dilemmas
Improving their practices in ways that most directly impact increasing educational equity.

The need for the benefits above were exemplified by three schools in an ILC that was focused on improving their Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) using the CLPs and continuous improvement methodology described in the previous section. As the ILC engaged in the Setting Direction phase (conducting a data dig and root cause analysis) they decided that, in order to make progress on improving their key schoolwide systems, they needed to intentionally attend to their team's shared leadership practices using effective tools. When the team looked at CLEE's agenda design tool which promotes ILCs to engage in co-construction, a light bulb went off. They realized that making time to connect, revisit agreements, and engage in collaborative inquiry were essential so that learning is centered, everyone has a role in the meeting, and there is equity of voice. Too often educators participate in ILC meetings that fall short of transformational learning because facilitative leadership tools aren't being used.

There are a plethora of open-access tools and protocols now found at clee.org (formerly housed at the schoolreforminitiative.org) that can be used to foster growth in an ILC. We have found the specific tools in Table 2 support ILCs to develop key facilitative leadership skill sets and mindsets as they enact the CLPs to continuously improve. The result is the creation of a receptivity among educators to learn amidst challenges because they don't feel as though the process is being done to them or for them, but rather they feel they are active agents in the process.

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

Table 3. CLEE’s continuous improvement for equity steps by core leadership practice and tools

CLP	Description of How ILCs Implement Steps	Tools*
Setting Direction	<p>Understanding current reality, setting a vision:</p> <p>(a) analyze disaggregated student achievement data to identify an inequity between a focal group of students (i.e. historically underserved) and their peers.</p> <p>(b) setting a vision and goals to increase equity</p> <p>(c) analyzing a variety of data to investigate the root causes of the inequity</p>	<p>Atlas Data Protocols</p> <p>Text Based Discussion Protocols</p> <p>CLEE Learning Community Survey</p> <p>Forming Group Agreements</p> <p>Realms of Influence</p> <p>Compass Points</p> <p>Network Driver Diagrams</p> <p>Root-Cause Analysis</p> <p>Empathy Interviews</p>
Building the Capacity to Teach	<p>Plan and Do:</p> <p>(a) prioritize which root causes to address</p> <p>(b) determine which research evidence-based instructional practices will address root cause</p> <p>(c) make and enact a plan to facilitate the implementation of the instructional practices among colleagues using Core Leadership Practices</p>	<p>Prioritization Graphic Organizers</p> <p>Plan-Do-Study-Act Organizers</p> <p>Evidence-Based Instructional Practices</p>
Monitoring Progress	<p>Study:</p> <p>(a) identify a practical measure to determine the impact of the plan</p> <p>(b) collect data</p> <p>(c) analyze data to understand the impact of the steps taken and how they are addressing the root cause</p>	<p>Practical Measures</p> <p>Data Visualizations</p> <p>Atlas Protocol</p> <p>Data Driven Dialogue</p> <p>Success Analysis</p>
Reorganizing Systems	<p>Act:</p> <p>(a) decide whether to adopt (continue), adapt (adjust), abort (stop) the practices identified to increase equity</p> <p>(b) decide what other restructuring may be needed (e.g., schedules, funds, personnel)</p>	<p>Consultancies</p> <p>Issaquah/Coaching Protocol</p> <p>Tuning Protocol</p>
Building the Capacity to Collaborate and Lead	<p>Throughout the process, educators use facilitative leadership practices that empower shared leadership</p>	<p>CLEE’s equity dispositions embedded in each Core Leadership Practice</p>

Note. This table is modified from Li et al., 2022. *Most tools are open source and can be found at clee.org.

When you put together the key practices we have described thus far (having an equity aim, focusing on the IC, enacting CLPs to implement continuous improvement, and using precise tools of facilitative leadership), the work is complex and the effect is transformational learning for educators and students. A school leader who worked with CLEE to form an ILC at their school illuminates the experience well:

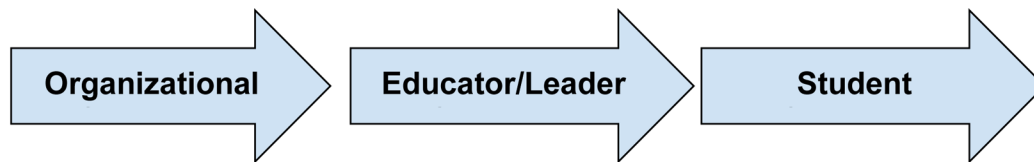
We ran our bi-monthly grade report to check on how many students were academically struggling and in need of strengthened support. It wasn’t pretty data, in fact it was jarring. When the data puts us on our heels, where do we go? We immediately started a full-on data dive process, utilizing the Root Cause Analysis protocol in spiraling group settings to pull together the strength and brilliance of our staff to address the needs of our students and the jarring inequities of the moment. I’d be lying to you if I said that we “solved it”, but I can honestly say that our staff and admin have put together some of the most thoughtful student and community-centered action steps in reflection from these protocols, and tackled radical ideas that we could never have imagined they would be on board with. We’re now in the midst of implementation, but I felt I needed to share with you all our appreciation for the tools, skills, and mindsets carried over from our time together in the PRN and working with CLEE to take on what has felt like a Gordian Knot.

The strength of the distributed cognition that comes from using facilitative leadership tools is that all the thinking and the learning doesn't just happen and stay in individual brains and hearts, it happens across many brains and hearts. Learning becomes more expansive and change becomes more durable. This too inoculates against the reality of staff turnover in schools. When individuals come and go, the ILC continues to cultivate the processes that enable transformational learning to continue. Thus, they keep making progress toward their equity aim and goals without being derailed by staff turnover.

Walking the Talk

While the practices, methodology, and tools described in the previous sections are what guides ILCs to increase equity, they are not the only ingredients we have found essential. The final piece that promotes success is to walk the talk as facilitators, an organization, and a community. As an organization made up of facilitators of ILCs, the work we have done internally (i.e., in ourselves, the organization, and our community) has been as essential as what we ask and support our participants and community members to do. This section details how we aim to continuously improve across each component of CLEE's Theory of Action (Figure 2).

Figure 2. CLEE's theory of change



Organizational Outcomes

As an ILC that includes staff and board members, CLEE sets targets annually based on a variety of data that represent what we aim to achieve (e.g., staff capacity, program quality, financial, marketing, and scaling). We use multiple points in the year to analyze, learn, and plan to implement improvements from the data. Most importantly, our cycles of data use help us to keep our eye on whether the work we are doing as an organization is having a direct impact on improving educator and student outcomes.

In order to achieve our annual targets, we invest our time and attention to internal development. The cornerstone of our capacity to grow as an organization has been the creation and use of a staff development system that puts equal value on growth and evaluation. The system has rubrics that identify key dispositions, practices, and competencies aligned to the CLPs. Similar to the ILCs we support, each staff member identifies keystone change ideas to improve through continuous cycles of improvement. CLEE staff members collaborate closely with their supervisor and colleagues across the organization to both give and receive feedback and share out key individual learning. This staff development system allows us as facilitators of ILCs to walk the talk of continuous improvement, which in turn promotes our individual growth and collective ability to evolve our capacities and practice as an organization.

In addition to the staff development system, as an ILC, the CLEE staff prioritizes our learning and improvement in a multitude of ways. We use the same methodology, practices and tools described in

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

Table 3, such as agenda design templates and protocols. We plan our meetings using adult design learning principles, and intentionally design them based on the learning or outcomes needed to reach our collective goals. The use of feedback structures that help us stay receptive to expanding our assumptions and practices has also been impactful and allowed us to operationalize our commitment to addressing tension before it turns into non-productive conflict. Finally, our work to define, practice, and evolve our CLEE staff agreements allows us to constantly revisit how we choose to work together as an organization and an ILC. It is never perfect, and yet we are always focused on transparency and learning to improve. Our stance has been that in order to achieve what we aim to see in educators and student outcomes, the people who work at CLEE must do the hard and messy work we ask of others - to walk the talk. These practices and systems don't eliminate the messiness of doing equity work, yet they help to channel the messy work toward productive learning, growth, and change.

Educator/Leader Outcomes

One of CLEE's primary objectives is to build our participants' skill level in facilitating transformative adult learning. Supporting this objective is our core belief that educators can solve their own problems and need not rely on outside experts to descend upon them to do so. To understand the degree to which we are achieving this objective, CLEE developed a codified system of data collection. This system allows us to be honest and transparent in our use of outcome data just like we are leading educators and leaders to create in their schools, districts, and/or organizations.

One data source we have found helpful to both make adjustments to the needs of the ILCs and the degree to which they increased their key CLPs is a pre and post program survey. The post survey serves as summative data to learn and improve programming. Another powerful tool to understand our impact on educators is through a participant reflection form that acts as a practical measure or formative assessment. Participants complete the reflection form at the end of each session by responding to questions like, "To what degree did we meet the objectives of our session?" and "To what extent did this session help you further understand the inequities that may exist in your school right now?" Participants are also asked to complete open-ended questions such as, "What skills, knowledge, and/or dispositions did you strengthen at today's session?" By using this same form across all our programs, regardless of audience or the specifics of the session, we are able to measure the outcomes that CLEE is aiming for across the programs. And, we are able to modify our practices to better serve ILCs and participants in quick and responsive ways.

Student Outcomes

While students do participate in many ILCs that CLEE has facilitated, often, our influence on student outcomes is mediated through our influence on the ILC participants we support. That said, we find it crucial to collect and learn how to further improve by examining our impact as an organization on student outcomes. To measure our impact on student learning, we use the data that we guide teams to collect and analyze as part of the continuous improvement process articulated in Table 2. Therefore, we are able to use statistical methods to analyze the extent to which both the focal groups and peer groups in the ILCs we support are growing in their academic learning and the degree to which the inequities (or distance) between the focal and peer groups is reducing.

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

Whether the data are focused on organization, educator, or student outcomes, CLEE uses the same facilitative leadership protocols and tools we guide ILCs to use. A favorite is the Atlas protocol (clee.org) to analyze and determine next steps in our facilitation, materials, agenda design, programs, etc. CLEE's data practices have been the key to forming coherent codified practices (see Table 2) that are never outdated because they are always evolving. This is strategic on our part to better serve our ILCs. It is a way that we don't let the key learning stay inside one ILC but rather to take key learning and allow it to scale, permeating and driving learning in the variety of ILCs that we facilitate, organize, and serve. At the same time, it enables cross pollination of learning across our organization in ways that allow us to bring our individual perspectives and lived experiences to learn from one another as a staff. The new learning and improvements are then codified in the curriculum, which undergoes a cycle of improvement to constantly move us toward our targets.

When we use data to monitor the impact of our collective work on our Theory of Action, engaging in the same type of continuous improvement work we guide our participants and ILCs to do, we are able to confront the same challenges our participants face. Using the same tools as the ILCs we facilitate, allows us to identify where we get tripped up in the experiences. For example, using the Atlas Protocol (clee.org) when we have close ownership to the data allows us to find tips and tricks to help our participants who are confronted with the same challenges. CLEE's systemic and ongoing collection and use allows us to practice using the same tools and processes we lead participants to use. This, in turn, helps us both evolve our practices and the ways we can work together effectively.

EMERGING AREAS OF GROWTH

As a learning organization doing the work we strive for others to do, we are always identifying our next areas of improvement. These growth edges emerge from using the methodology, tools, and practices we described above and from reflecting on the variety of data we collect. These emerging areas of growth are often larger inquiries that propel us forward to innovate and evolve.

Adapting and Using Limited Time Differently

One of the most immediate and pressing areas we are working to build on is better understanding how to support ILCs to use the methodology, tools, and processes inside the limited time allocated to adult learning in schools. This dilemma has become even more prominent for schools in the post-pandemic world. To address this dilemma, we offer our programming through a variety of modes: in person, hybrid, and virtual. We offer scopes of work that span a range of time and budget constraints, from stand alone equity sampler sessions to a full 40-hour deep dive into using the entire continuous improvement method detailed in Table 2 over the course of an academic year. In addition, we are using a Learning Management System to design modules to provide participants with engaging asynchronous learning, easy access to materials, and the ability to connect to a wider community for ongoing, timely support. We are in deep study of how to design the online learning modules as a scaffold to engage in the content in deeper ways, rather than a tool of compliance whereby users race to click through the content. We still have a lot to learn about how to promote transformational learning in a world in which time is one of the most limited resources.

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

Engaging Youth, Families, and Community Members in ILCs

CLEE also aims to improve ways to bring multiple stakeholders (adults, family members, and students) of the community into the work more authentically. We have had experience in doing this successfully in specific services that engage community stakeholders; however, have found it more difficult to do in school-based ILCs. Some of the challenges we have found that students, families, and community stakeholders experience are:

Accessing technology used in virtual sessions (e.g., Zoom, Jamboard, etc.)

Familiarity with educational jargon

Power dynamics among educators, leaders, students, families, and diverse community stakeholders

We have learned key strategies that help students, families, and community members to be full contributors in ILCs focused on improving their schools. Below are some highlights.

Decentralize Power

Decentralize power in ILCs by developing collective agreements, identifying roles in the school teams, building capacity through facilitation of protocols and processes, and co-creating agendas. For example, in one ILC focused on improving 9th grade math practices, two students shared how working alongside their educator counterparts developed their sense of purpose and identity.

Centering Student Voices

Center student voices by creating deliberate modifications to protocols. These may include simple modifications like specific times for students to talk first and using share orders to ensure students have reserved time to share their perspective. In one ILC focused on transforming school climate, student members experienced powerful transformation learning as a result of being listened to and stepping into leadership roles. One student stated that it was the first time he felt like what he thought mattered, and allowed him to lift the ceiling on ways he could change his school and the world around him.

Engage Students in the Real Work

We have found that when students work alongside their teachers in an ILC as a co-member, not a mascot, they can become the conduit for their peers to also have a voice in school improvements. When students directly engage in the practices shared in Table 2, like data analysis and planning, they provide a divergent and essential perspective on how to increase equity in their school. In one ILC, as students facilitated staff meetings alongside their teachers, they saw an acceleration in the shifting of educators' beliefs and practices, which rippled quickly to many areas of the school.

While we have found some important successes, we are still working on a number of challenges to address increasing student, family and community engagement in ILCs. First, while it feels most accessible for secondary students to be active participants, CLEE is committed to finding ways for students at all grade levels and their families to have their voice and leadership centered to improve their schools. Further, for students to learn alongside their teachers requires release from the students' school day or

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

requires time after school. This either conflicts with their in-school learning, conflicts with students' ability to participate in after school sports and clubs, and transportation home may be an impediment to engage students. Likewise, families' working schedule can create barriers to involvement. As we continue to find opportunities to mitigate these challenges, we aim to use innovative technology and collective problem-solving to design ways to further engage students, families, and community members in ILCs.

Using Data to Increase Equity

Using data is essential in equity work. Developing skills in collecting, disaggregating, and analyzing data are critical components to CLEE's improvement process. Yet, we often encounter ILCs whose use of student data can create a few pitfalls. For example, many districts and schools do not have systematic ways of organizing and visualizing data that they are collecting. This makes it difficult to have data that is usable to target and monitor the progress of those improvements. When we partner with districts, we have found it to be helpful at the onset of a program to identify a data point person. This person allows for a more streamlined way of communicating data needs and allows us to provide the necessary support to help the district/school use their data more explicitly. It is important to note that not all districts have a person on staff whose role is to manage data. This in turn can make it more difficult to help schools organize their data for analysis and learning. Data use can be happenstance based on a skill level of individuals in a school or grade level and not a consistent practice within a school or district. We are committed to finding more streamlined ways to help districts and schools successfully manage their data and move it towards a systems improvement rather than in the hands of one individual.

When using data to set equity-focused goals or for analysis, an ILC might choose to focus on standardized test scores as the only reason for improvement, engage in experiences that reinforce stereotypes rather than dismantle them, use rewards based systems to improve a desired outcome, or perhaps focus on students on the border of proficiency. Improvement work is about balancing the need to understand the root causes and managing a bias towards action. While focusing on the IC can circumvent the focus to only look to improve Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, we can experience the tension of time, quick wins, and reinforcing stereotypes that thwart the process of focusing on increasing equity. In response, we deliberately use different grain sizes of state level data, school level data, and qualitative perception and experience data that can be derived from empathy interviews and focus groups. We hypothesize that a more direct and intentional use of these three levels of data throughout the improvement process will circumvent some of the barriers we often face when leading ILCs in their use of data.

Centering Identity Work

Another key challenge we are working on is engaging participants in identity work in meaningful ways that leads to shifts in beliefs and corresponding changes in practice. We have developed strong curricula components in our principal preparation ILCs on the impact of individual and socialized identities. This effort has demonstrated transformational learning for participants that they are able to implement in their school settings. One of the reasons we believe this has been impactful is because we break our principal preparation ILCs into smaller communities called collaborative small groups. These smaller groups create opportunities for greater trust-building, agreements that support vulnerability, deeper collective knowledge, and authentic practice using tools to further uncover how each person's individual and socialized identities and systems of oppression impact our school systems and educator practices.

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

Also, due to the comprehensive nature of the principal preparation ILCs, the learning is integrated into each of the aspiring principals' continuous improvement efforts as they deepen their analysis of inequities that surface in their schools, develop strong tools to address them through the process and practices articulated in Table 2. However, the barrier still exists in the programs that do not have the number of touch points and hours of the principal preparation program. This is where we are iterating with the use of a Learning Management System to create smaller groups and further touchpoints for ILC participants to explore the impact of their individual and socialized identities.

CONCLUSION

Continuous Improvement is never ending and the learning at CLEE will evolve. Each new school year, each ILC, helps the work at CLEE refine and evolve. The constant iterations that have led us on the learning journey to develop the five key practices we shared for ILCs to overcome barriers to equity, and unleash transformational learning for youth and educators. We hope this chapter will allow reflection on your own improvement journeys and guide your ILC(s) to find the next steps to center equity for students.

REFERENCES

- Braun, D., Billups, F.D., & Gable, R. (2013). Transforming equity-oriented leaders: Principal Residency Network program evaluation. *Education Leadership Review, 14*(1).
- Braun, D., Billups, F., Gable, R., LaCroix, K., & Mullen, B. (2021). Improving equitable student outcomes: A Transformational and collaborative leadership development approach. *Journal of Leadership and Policy, 5*(1/2).
- Braun, D., Gable, R., & Billups, F. D. (2017). Leadership practices to increase equity through closing intraschool achievement gaps. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 1*(1).
- Breidenstein, A., Fahey, K., Glickman, C., & Hensley, F. (2012). *Leading for powerful learning: A Guide for instructional leaders*. Teachers College Press.
- Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Frunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Educational Press.
- City, E., Elmore, R. F., Fierman, S. E., & Tietal, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A networked approach to improving teaching and learning*. Harvard Education Press.
- Duhigg, C. (2014). *The Power of habit: Why we do what we do in life and business*. Random House.
- Immordino-Yang, M. H. (2016). *Emotions, learning and the brain: Exploring the educational implications of affective neuroscience*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. (2016). *An Everyone culture: Becoming a deliberately developmental organization*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Overcoming Barriers to Equity Through Intentional Learning Communities

La Salle, R. A., & Johnson, R. S. (2018). *Shattering inequities: Real-world wisdom for school and district leaders*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Li, M., Ebersole LaCroix, K., & Braun, D. (2022). *Centering equity and starting small to transform school climate*. In D. S. Peterson and S. P. Carlile, *Improvement Science as a Tool for School Enhancement Solutions for Better Educational Outcomes*. Meyers Educational Press.

Menakem, R. (2016). *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*. Central Recovery Press.

Senge, P. M. (2006). *The 5th discipline: The Art and practices of the learning organization*. Random House.

Skrla, L. E., McKenzie, K. B., & Scheurich, J. J. (2009). *Using equity audits to create equitable and excellent schools*. Corwin. doi:10.4135/9781452218953

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Continuous Improvement: Methodology that engages practitioners in continuous cycles of improvement, supported by research in the field of improvement science (Bryk, 2015).

Core Leadership Practices (CLPs): Derived from research (Braun et al., 2017) on the shared leadership practices used across a school community that result in increased equity. The six CLPs encompass both skill sets and mindsets (i.e., dispositions): Setting Direction, Monitoring Practice, Building Capacity to Teach, Building Capacity to Collaborate, Building Capacity to Lead, and Reorganizing Systems.

Disaggregated Data: The result of data being analyzed by subgroups to determine trends and patterns that demonstrate inequities.

Educational Equity: Eliminating disproportionality in student learning outcomes between historically marginalized groups of students and their peers by giving students what they need in order to unleash their unlimited, unknowable potential.

Focal Group: An identified group of students who are not being served in their school experience and are below standard proficiency requirements. The focal group is determined by disaggregating student academic data.

Instructional Core (IC): The IC is the interactions among what students are engaged in, teacher practices, and rigorous content (City et al., 2009).

Intentional Learning Community (ILC): A community of educators gathered for the purpose of enacting knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are focused on increasing equity for students. A community that is committed to sharing knowledge across participants and the field to improve educator practice and educational outcomes.

Peer Group: A group of students who do not share the same identifiers (e.g., do not receive special education services or are not multilingual learners) as the focal group, and who are either meeting or closer to meeting standard proficiency requirements than the focal group.

Plan, Do, Study Act (PDSA): Short, rapid cycles participants in our ILCs are supported through to implement improvements in pursuit of increasing equity in their schools.

Principal Residency Network (PRN): A principal preparation program run by the Center for Leadership and Educational Equity that focuses on equity-based school leadership preparation in an authentic, residency-based setting.