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Curated Conferences to Strengthen Equity Leadership Capacity: A Case Study of Aspiring School Leaders

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Introduction

As education scholars and practitioners, we attend professional, academic conferences to learn. For many, this learning informs our research and enhances our teaching and praxis. Conferences also provide the opportunity to extend collaborative networks and deepen our learning through reflective dialogue where others' critical perspectives influence our own (Bohm, 2013; Kordts-Freudinger et al., 2017). Professors often escort students to conferences to experience this same type of learning and to be socialized into the field of academia (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Golde, 1998). However, less is known about the participation, experiences, or learning of students attending professional conferences who are oriented toward careers in practice, not academia.

Two assistant professors of educational leadership at a university in the southeastern United States discussed their shared belief in the value of conference learning and wondered, might Masters in School Administration (MSA) students, whose career goal is in school leadership, deepen their learning in this context? Both professors shared the perception that conferences do indeed advance learning and may be more influential than traditional learning spaces, such as a classroom or internship, given that adults' motivation to learn increases with community integration and connection (Wlodkowski, 1999). As such, we took a group of graduate students seeking their MSAs and careers in school leadership, to the University Council of Education Administration's annual conference.

Knowing a national conference would be new for most students, and the breadth of the conference large, we created a curated conference experience. Oxford Learner's Dictionary (n.d.) defines curate, "to collect, select and present information…for people to use or enjoy, using professional or expert knowledge". Expanding on this definition, we coined the term *Curated Conference Learning Experience* (CCLE). We defined and enacted CCLE as one in which faculty engage their expertise to guide student learning (Vygotsky, 1978), identifying conference sessions for students to attend and specifying complimentary learning mechanisms to encourage student engagement with session content for knowledge possession and construction (Cook et al., 1999). This broad definition situates the CCLE as a student learning-model worthy of consideration by other higher education programs who seek to strengthen student learning at conferences.

The decision to curate the conference experience was also influenced by our faculty's desire to extend program curriculum and further strengthen student learning toward *leadership for equity*—a learning outcome central to our MSA program. School systems create and perpetuate gross inequities that harm Black, Brown, Indigenous, differently abled, LGBTQIA, and linguistically diverse students (Gorski, 2017; Kirshner et al., 2010; Koretz, 2018; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). In response, our student program learning outcomes, guided by national standards for equity, seek to build school leadership capacity to disrupt harmful systems and enact equitable practices for all students (NPBEA, 2018). Tapping into our collective knowledge of relevant and influential scholars in the field of equity in education, we examined the conference program to identify sessions with strong potential for growing students' "equity capacity" (Capper & Frattura, 2017). When possible, we selected sessions for our students to hear and meet researchers they had read in previous coursework (i.e. Khalifa, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine whether a CCLE could stimulate new learning or deepen existing learning around leadership for equity for aspiring school leaders.

We wondered, "What equitable leadership practices might aspiring school leaders learn or strengthen in a CCLE?" Beyond the learning of equity-oriented theories and practices—in what additional ways might the CCLE support aspiring leaders' capacity to lead for equity? Finally, what CCLE design elements encouraged student learning? Following these lines of inquiry, we provide the first study of this type of learning experience and begin a discussion that considers the potential value of adding curated conference learning experiences as a component to school leadership preparation. Our study addresses Hernandez and McKenzie's (2010) call for more literature on what experiences should be included in leadership preparation programs with a focus on social justice.

Literature Review

Our literature search included using multiple education databases (Education Source, ERIC, JSTOR, Education Database) with the following terms in different combinations "conference", "graduate students", "guided learning", "professional conference", "professional development". While we did find literature related to doctoral student engagement in conferences as a mechanism for professional socialization (Gardner & Barnes, 2007) as well as preparing graduate students for the professoriate (Golde, 1998), we were unable to locate research that explains or explores CCLEs within the field of education. We believe this to be a truly innovative practice. As such, we cannot lean into extant literature to substantiate the role of CCLEs in student learning or leadership capacity development. However, we can look toward findings that suggest a potentially strong connection between conference participation and learning.

Researchers have recognized the work of adult-learning theorists who promulgate that learning occurs beyond formal, traditional, pedagogical arrangements (Smith & McCann, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). Jacobs and McFarlane (2005) specified several conference functions noting the value of a reflective community of practice including "…inducting inexperienced members into the community of practice by making aspects of practice explicit…and ensuring that, as a whole, research and/or professional practice progresses both substantively and methodologically" (p. 319).

Fox and McCormick (2009) espoused there is typically an absence of formalized teaching in conference spaces. However, Seymour et al. (2004) found several benefits to student conference attendance including, foremost, scholarly learning. Walkington et al. (2017) acknowledged the catalytic power of dialogue in conference spaces to ignite student learning. citing "bidirectional exchange of ideas and insights enabled students to ask and answer questions that transformed each other's thinking, allowing them to arrive at understandings they could not have achieved by themselves" (abstract).

Haley et al. (2009) came to similar conclusions noting, "the interchange of ideas outside formal sessions may provide an environment where new knowledge is constructed that is only peripherally related to conference content—possibilities for leaps" (p. 80). All of these scholars recognize that content-learning is amplified when coupled with subsequent communicative exchange. Our conceptual framework below leans on robust literature on critical theory and praxis, guided learning, new learning, and communities of practice.
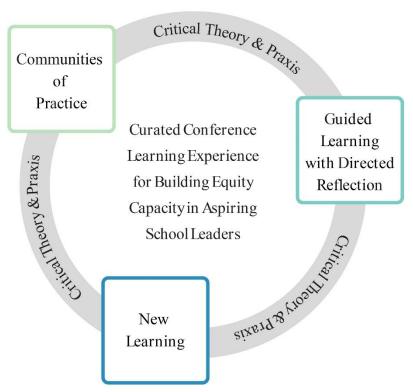
Conceptual Framework

In the following section, we present four andragogical theories: critical theory and praxis (Brookfield, 2005; Capper, 2018; Freire, 1970; Habermas, 2015; Mezirow, 1981); guided learning (Cole, 1996; Reiser, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978); new learning (Wiessner, 2008); and

learning within communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). These four theoretical bodies integrate to form our conceptual framework unique to a CCLE intended to build equity capacity in aspiring school leaders (Figure 1). We posit CCLEs are likely to build equity leadership capacity because the learning of critical theory and practice is elicited, deepened, and nurtured through guided learning, community learning, and the power of new/strengthened learning.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework for the Curated Conference Learning Experience

Critical Theory and Practice

  An essential component of the design of the CCLE was the thoughtful selection of conference sessions with strong potential for strengthening aspiring leaders' equity capacity. As we designed the CCLE, we chose sessions which embraced identity-specific theories (e.g. critical race theory, critical disabilities theory, LatCrit, queer theory) and critical praxis (the enactment of critical theory). Examples of the latter included culturally responsive school leadership, anti-racist leadership, de-tracking, leadership for care, supportive inclusion of students who identify as LGBTQIA, and engaging community members as partners in reform.

  In his exploration of critical theory coupled with adult learning and teaching, Brookfield (2005) suggested that instructors elicit "…learning to recognize and challenge ideology that attempts to portray the exploitation of the many by the few…to uncover and counter hegemony…unmask power…pursue liberation…reclaim reason, and to practice democracy" (p. 39).

  As such, our goal as we created the CCLE experience was to select sessions and encourage reflection and discussions that would that would expand participants' knowledge and commitment to lead for equity.

Guided Learning

In many ways, our term, "curated learning" is analogous to guided learning. An examination of our definition for the CCLE reveals the heavy presence of guided learning theories (Reiser, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978) where instructors draw upon their expertise to provide "strategic guidance" (Reiser, 2009) that builds upon learners' existing knowledge. In the context of the CCLE, guided learning (as opposed to self-regulated learning) is appropriate given participants' limited ability to identify exceptional scholars in the field, lack of experience with national conferences, and an emerging level of understanding for justice in education.

Guided learning practice is also evident in the timing of the CCLE. We intentionally situated the CCLE in year two of the MSA program. We were concerned that students coming from conservative, rural school contexts, if exposed too early, might not be open to or ready for the radical learning often cultivated at academic conferences, particularly one focused on equity. In the selection of sessions, we scaffolded learning (Wood et al., 1976), building upon students' prior knowledge of equity in education. This approach considered students' "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978) allowing the CCLE to move students farther away from their "actual developmental level" and closer to their "potential developmental level".

As another example of guided learning, we chose conference sessions and specified complementary learning mechanisms. We tapped into our collective knowledge of relevant and influential scholars in the field of equity and social justice in education to choose sessions that extended earlier coursework and focused upon critical theory (Brookfield, 2005; Capper, 2018) and praxis (Freire, 1970) for transformation and emancipation (Habermas, 2015; Mezirow, 1981) in educational leadership.

Two primary learning mechanisms were chosen to encourage deeper student engagement with the conference session content: 1) directed personal reflection; and 2) directed group reflection. Although reflection is widely touted as a means of self-directed learning, pre-determined prompts suggest some degree of directed or guided learning. Students wrote personal reflections during or immediately following each session. The group reflection occurred at the end of each conference day. Both reflection processes extend from Dewey (1933) and Habermas's (1975) findings on the power of reflective learning within a democracy.

Considering the work of Zamudio et al. (2009), Freire (1970), and Kincheloe & Steinberg (2002), Bradley-Levine (2012) recognized the power of group reflection when it intersects with critical theory and critical consciousness,

> Individuals grow in critical consciousness through the sharing of "counterstories" and personal experience (Zamudio et al., 2009, p. 457). Through dialogue, we recognize oppressive social structures, including those inherent in various types of individual privilege, a process that allows us to build "a common humanity" (p. 754).

Reflection, as discussed, is a powerful learning tool and can add to the synthesis and application of new learning.

New Learning

We suggest theories of new learning also played a role in participants' increased growth within the CCLE. Haley et al. (2009) relied on Jarvis's (2007) three-stage conception of learning when examining participants' new learning at a conference focused upon the scholarship of teaching and learning.

> In [Jarvis's] first stage, a person encounters an experience or idea that is unfamiliar and that does not fit within his or her prior understanding. The second stage involves

thinking, doing and feeling. Reflection and contemplation are emblematic of this phase and may involve making plans for action. The third stage involves a changed person who is ready to engage in a new cycle of learning (p. 74).

We posited, like Haley et al. (2009) and Jarvis' (2007) conference participants, our CCLE participants would also experience new learning at Jarvis's first and second stages.

Communities of Practice

A number of theories have emerged substantiating the effectiveness of group interaction, group communication, and shared participation on adult learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Building upon Bereiter's (2002) work, Jacobs and McFarlane (2005) connected conference learning to these "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998) situating:

conferences as instantiations of a forum for a community of practice, even a knowledge building community (Bereiter, 2002) albeit an ephemeral one. . . conference participants constitute a temporary knowledge building community…(p. 318).

In the CCLE, the concept of community can be applied to the conference as a whole (a community of educational leaders and scholars) as well as the cohort of participants in this study. Learning occurred within and between the participants in the macro-organization (the conference) as well as the micro-organization (the cohort).

Method

The scant literature on graduate student attendance at professional conferences is qualitative or theoretical in nature. This is likely due to small sample size and unique learning contexts which lend themselves to qualitative work. Our work was bound by the same features, making a qualitative study the most sound decision and a logical choice given other literature in the field. The primary purpose of this case study was to discover whether the CCLE helped to build the capacity and learning of aspiring school leaders to lead towards equitable outcomes for all students. Yin (2018) explained that researchers should utilize the case study method "to understand a real-world case and assume that such an understanding is likely to involve important contextual conditions pertinent to [the] case" (p. 15). As such, this study relied on the context of both the participant's enrollment in the grant-supported MSA program and their attendance at the conference sessions. Yin (2018) further noted:

a case study copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide design, data collection, and analysis and as another result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion (p. 15).

Our students' increased capacity to lead towards equitable outcomes is the central interest of our study. Focus groups and reflective journaling provide multiple data points in this case study.

Context and Participants

In this case study, two white, female, assistant professors in a MSA program created a curated conference learning experience for 13 students (one Black man, five white men, and 7 white women). All participants were enrolled in year two of a MSA program in a regional-comprehensive institution situated in the southeastern United States.

Participants were required to attend 12 pre-selected conference sessions. Participants were also required to attend reflection/focus groups at the end of each conference day. We

selected conference sessions to extend student learning beyond program curricula and to align with National Education Leadership Program Building Level Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness (NPBEA, 2018, p. 15). An example of sessions included: Social Justice Leadership, Cultural Wealth, Voice and Identity, Community/Family Engagement in Schools, Interrogating LGBTQ+ Issues in Educational Leadership, The Practice of Social Equity in Schools, and Culturally Responsive Leadership. Sessions included keynote addresses, paper sessions, round tables, and critical conversations to provide participants with a full overview of research presentations.

Data Sources

Two sources of data informed this study: focus group transcripts and individual journal reflection entries. We conducted semi-structured focus groups at the conclusion of each day. We posed the same four open-ended questions to identify new learning, extended learning, and learning that might translate into practice.

1. What did you learn today that is new learning for you in the area of leadership for equity?
2. What information reinforced your present knowledge in the area of leadership for equity?
3. What did you hear about today in the area of leadership for equity that you want to learn more about?
4. What did you learn in the area of leadership for equity that you will apply in practice?

All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Additionally, each participant submitted a reflection journal after the conference concluded. Reflection prompts mirrored those posed in the focus groups. Students were instructed to record their reflections during session attendance to increase engagement with session content and capture session-specific learning. We used students' journal reflections to help confirm findings from the focus group transcripts as well as provide additional depth to some of the comments, following Yin's (2018) directive for using multiple sources of evidence.

Data Analysis

To identify participant outcomes in the CCLE, transcripts and journals were coded by three of the authors. Before the initial round of coding, each participant was given a pseudonym and we determined several codes. Saldaña (2016) argued that the use of *a priori* coding helps ensure the analysis answers the research questions. We then individually coded the first focus group transcript, noting when emergent themes appeared. After the first round, we met again to clarify criteria, revise codes, and discuss emergent codes. We transcribed the remainder of the transcripts and journal entries independently using pattern coding (e.g. all codes related to identity—student, teacher, self—were put into a single theme of "identity"). Finally, we came together to confirm each item coded, reclassifying as necessary. In a small amount of cases, datum was simultaneously coded (Miles et al., 2020) to account for multiple meanings as we discussed and came to consensus on the appropriate codes (Harry et al., 2005). We identified nine major themes through this process. We noted the connection between some themes, and grouped findings into five major areas: (1) relationship building; (2) understanding identity and co-constructing leadership for equity; (3) roadblocks and realizations; (4) connection to previous coursework; and (5) increased commitment to equity work.

Results

This section provides data collected from focus group transcripts and journal entries to support the three research questions: 1) What equitable leadership practices might aspiring school leaders learn or strengthen in a CCLE?; 2) In what additional ways might the CCLE support aspiring leaders' capacity to lead for equity?; and 3) What CCLE design elements encouraged student learning?

R1: What equitable leadership practices might aspiring school leaders learn or strengthen in a CCLE?

Participants indicated three terms were new learning: mothering, guardians of equity, and fragmentation of harm. Additionally, participants noted seven theoretical concepts as extensions of earlier, course-based learning: moral courage, color blindness, post-colonialism, subaltern, critical race theory, homegrown teachers, and geo-spatial analysis of community capital. While students noted these terms and concepts, relationship-building and understanding identity and co-constructing leadership for equity dominated discussion regarding strengthened learning within the CCLE.

Relationship-Building

When considering equity-oriented school improvement processes, participants reported a deeper, reinforced understanding of the need for relationship-building and trust across and beyond the school community (Clark-Louque et al., 2019; Khalifa, 2018; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). For example, Dana noted relationship building with the external community was "important in changing the school culture and making it something that is equitable." She also envisioned herself as a school leader by having "co-constructive leadership with community that has an attentiveness to the cultural capital of that community." Journal entries such as Cary's showed aspiring leaders' desire to "find ways to connect stories for families in our schools."

Regarding the importance of establishing relationships and building trust, Cal pondered, "Who is being left out of the process, conversations, the table?" He went on to say, "You have to be intentionally inclusive or you will be unintentionally exclusive…You have to be willing to engage in critical self-reflection and do the hard work – you have to listen to your population and community- how else will you know you are oppressing them?" Ali stated it summarily when she said, "… making sure no matter who we are serving, that they feel like they are a part of that community…that they are valued…that they are treated in a way that raises them up and gives them a voice."

Participants discussed that students are valuable stakeholders too, and school leaders must cultivate strong relationships with their students across all endeavors. Lisa highlighted this belief when she commented, "[when we were in the classroom] We were probably all very successful at building those relationships." But as an administrator, one can be "overwhelmed," and because "there is so much that needs to be done," little time is given to connecting with students.

Thus, conference sessions challenged participants to be conscious of their interactions with students. Reba acknowledged this when she talked about being "mindful" of "micro behaviors that make a difference." This behavior included listening to students and giving them "space to humanize their experiences." Paul poignantly stated, that students need to be seen not as "data sources" but rather "leaders in change." Mary's thinking resonated with the other participants. She grappled with what she could do to make sure "[students] don't feel like they are disposable" and concluded that, as leaders, they "must be deeply invested in caring."

Understanding Identity and Co-constructing Leadership for Equity

Throughout the CCLE, participants revealed an understanding of the role of identity development through reflective practice in the formation of a school leader and organization's critical-consciousness (hooks, 1994; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2002; Young & Laible, 2000). Participants explored the intersection of reflection and identity development of self (as leader) and in relationship to students, teachers, and the school community.

Participants grappled with reflective identity development and its role in school leadership. Sarah emphasized, "As professionals, self-reflection is key as well as owning our biases." Cary pondered, "Am I being critically reflective enough? How do I disrupt my own bias on a daily basis?" Dana summarized critical self-reflection as "a pillar of culturally responsive leadership and necessary to disrupt oppressive systems." Commenting on a panel discussion she said, "The panel's self-reflection work and their ability to own their biases were presented as essential to their success as school leaders. Critical self-reflection is on-going work and should be a part of a leader's daily practice." Reba noted a shift in her leadership orientation stating, "Now I feel that being a good educator means being committed to self-reflection, pushing yourself to have moral courage, and not always following the rules, not doing what you're told necessarily, but instead challenging the status quo and doing what you know is right for kids."

Participants spent a considerable amount of time exploring their relationship with race as an identity. In both the written reflections and during group reflections, students expressed concern for color-blind policies and practices. Cal stated, "At the end of the day you should see color or you're not serving the children in the way that you should." Joe articulated, "We need to know the child… Everybody has their own story, and we don't need to mute that in an attempt to be politically correct." Sara shared, "Being one of the only white people in the building...I have to own my own biases and move that forward, but at the same time, keep those asset-based lenses open and encourage my staff." Mark (a Black man) stated, "I have to let my grade level understand I own my bias, own my racism, because this morning in that panel when they made the statement of a Black person being racist, it struck a nerve. It made me realize…that's real."

Dana wrote about identity work and "...how the power of collective belief shapes school culture – how that belief is built, shaped, and maintained and also where and how it is being disrupted when it is driven by white privilege." Her comments illustrated the interconnectedness of reflection, identity, and equitable reform by journaling, "Critical self-reflection and a deep understanding of identity development may help disrupt systems of oppression in schools." Dana further explained she'd like to "...reform the way discipline is doled out to students. The last session reminded me of the school to prison pipeline and how the dehumanization of the black body is perpetuated in our discipline practices, zero tolerance, suspensions, and exclusion. This goes back to diving into identity development and examining the epistemologies that perpetuate oppressive structures."

Some participants voiced concern for the lack of ability and support for reflective practice and self-reflection. Don questioned, "Are we critically self-reflecting? Probably not. We don't have the space to do that." Ali noted time constraints within the school day when she stated, "I think I need to make sure that I dedicate time where I can reflect on my practice and provide that time for my staff too...that's just something I need to be very intentional about…because I'm going to be honest...I just don't have the time." Dana concurred and indicated she'd like to create a space where everyone in the building participates in critical self-reflection, not only adults but also students. She posed, "It made me wonder if that's something

we should look at in school structures. Are we really building space for that? Are we really valuing critical self-reflection for everyone in the building? Because I don't think that happens. I think we're so in the rat race of trying to get achievement that we forget that piece...I think that could do a lot for just changing your culture and creating a culture of care."

Participants embraced the importance of representative, collaborative, and distributed leadership for reform (Friend & Cook, 1990; Hallinger & Heck, 2011) to co-construct leadership for equity. Cary noted, "We need to be a community of practice instead of an educator team. A lot of schools like to set up a team that is working on equity...and they're having a really hard time convincing everybody else in the building that it's worth the time. And so, if you really want to make steps and move forward...it can't be something that you're sitting on a team hoping it's going to happen." Mary journaled the importance of "parents and communities to address inequities through shared organization, advocacy, and shared leadership." Mark concurred, "If you just incorporate your equity team and not your entire school, you're not going to move a school…I feel like we don't have enough active voices in all the departments of our school, and that's what we're missing. We're missing the boat there."

When collaborating in schools around equity work, Cary shared a poignant message from one session he attended, "Someone at the end said that when you come into my building, I don't want you to work *on* me. I want you to work *with* me. And that was a good reminder for me." Recognizing the need for district-wide enactment and support, participants imagined the expansion of equity work beyond their individual schools. Ali shared, "It made me realize how powerful this would be at our own district level by creating equity teams with representation from schools and with having this kind of educational discourse on what we can do at individual school levels and at a district level that would really make waves." Cal imagined, "...to be able to go to the schoolboard, to go to the superintendent, to go to the staff and say we need this. Look at this data...what we really need is...those uncomfortable conversations. This actually will create this change that we all say we want."

R2: In what additional ways might the CCLE support aspiring leaders' capacity to lead for equity?

Roadblocks and Realizations

Beyond building and reinforcing participants' knowledge of terms, concepts, and individual equity practices, the CCLE provided a forum for discussing concerns about the resistance participants would likely face when attempting to enact equity within their school communities (Theoharis, 2007). Mark explained that being at the conference, surrounded by like-minded individuals was positive, "but when you go back to your own school and you don't see that, it's disappointing." He shared a past example stating, "The teachers were like 'all-in' talking about professional development with curriculum. But, when they started to move to address racism, they stopped participating because they were uncomfortable."

The participants were overwhelmed that they were one of few who were ready and willing to do equity work in their schools. Mary explained, "We don't have any voices for equity in my school…and I'm a little bit scared to be the one person." Recognizing the reality of their contexts, students acknowledged that equity-oriented reform would not come easy given the present policies and practices that protect the status quo. Despite these challenges, participants seemed to lean into the sessions to inform how they might approach barriers as equity-centered leaders.

Participants voiced they expect to experience challenges when working to bring about change, but they also knew they would have some control in moving their schools toward more equitable outcomes. Mark described this balance, "…and so I just keep thinking that we have to be the ones to take the things we've been exposed to and just keep giving a little bit here and little bit there." Ali and other participants agreed that they would be change agents in their schools, and felt more prepared to face the hesitancy that often accompanies equity work. Participants indicated that hearing multiple presenters' experiences with resistance provided encouragement for engaging in difficult conversations within their own contexts.

Increased Commitment to Equity Work

Regardless of the obstacles participants anticipated they would face in their careers, their time at the conference spurred a sense of increased commitment to equity work. Lisa summarized, "I think what all of us are learning from this is that we don't really just want to do it the traditional way. We want to branch off from that and do this differently." Cal agreed, "Yep. I'm all in. I'm jumping in the water as deep as it goes. I don't care. I'm—this is the way it should be. And I think if we surround ourselves with people like that, then the sky's the limit […] when we get in those positions where we get to make those decisions."

Participants' commitment to equity work was expressed in group reflections and echoed in their desire to hold leadership positions. They reported feeling a "call to charge" and "empowered." Some used the term "guardians of equity." One participant explained how the conference moved her away from feeling hesitant about taking on a leadership role. She said, "it felt very clerical" but the conference "reminded me why I went into this program."

Participants discussed the value of learning from one another and having a space or group of people who understood one another and with whom they could share their thoughts. Don spoke about how being in sessions with like-minded individuals was confirming for him. "And so, I just felt, 'Okay, so maybe I'm on the right track a little bit. Maybe this work is telling me what I'm passionate about is real." Students also discussed that while they were passionate about their new roles, or the potential for change, they often felt alone in their work context. Don explained, "I think I struggle with that moral courage being in an area where I feel like people are not ready to hear that to a certain degree." The presence of other educators working toward similar goals gave Don and his peers some comfort. Later, Dana explained why being at the conference and processing together was important. "I think what we are doing right now has probably been one of the most important things for my learning. Listening to other people, having that discourse…sitting around and really talking through these ideas, I feel like I have a stronger understanding of the [sessions] I participated in today."

R3: What CCLE design elements encouraged student learning?
Connection to Previous Coursework

Participant comments about the CCLE process supported our theory that student learning was bolstered by the CCLE's design. In particular, participants noted timing of the CCLE in their program of study, session selection, individual and group reflection, and communities of practice. Data revealed participants frequently tethered previous coursework learning to conference session content. This back-and-forth movement of their thinking signaled the value of positioning the CCLE later in the students' program, after learning foundational content in critical theory and praxis.

Cal confirmed, "It's all built on the things that we've done in our classes...had I come to something like this two years ago, none of this would have resonated." Ali commented on how the structure of the selected sessions supported prior learning. She stated, "...those different sessions [have really] reaffirmed what we've been learning." Cary followed by stating the sessions, "...weren't all over the map. They were very specific and they were really geared towards what we were doing in this process and helped me go deeper."

Beyond content scaffolding, positioning the conference after personal identity-development work may also have reduced student resistance to "radical" notions. Mary shared, "I remember when I first came into the program and I was like – it's been an evolution for me in so many ways. And, I was bristly at first because I was like, I'm not one of *those* people."

Choosing sessions for students assured targeted learning in leadership for equity. Ali and Reba discussed how coming to a conference this size was overwhelming but having professors create an agenda with preselected sessions to attend made the experience less stressful. Ali stated, "...those different sessions really tied into what we've been doing and has reaffirmed what we've been learning...I appreciate having it mapped out for us...otherwise it may have been 'Let's just go here or there' and not really knowing exactly where we needed to be to have the most impact." Reba continued, "That [conference] book is so thick! I think I'd be stressing more about, 'Did I go to the right thing? What am I missing?', rather than having it planned out and trusting that I was exactly where I was supposed to be."

Limitations

The findings from our study reflect positive learning outcomes from the CCLE. However, given that this was a case study and our participants were enrolled as a cohort in an MSA program with a strong emphasis on social justice and equity, we cannot state with certainty that others would experience the same outcomes. Merriam (1998) argued reliability "is problematic in social sciences simply because human behavior is never static" as such "replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results" (p. 205-206). We suggest programs with an emphasis on social justice and equity might consider undertaking a CCLE of their own and have similar results. While we were not able to find prior studies specifically about a curated learning experience, we hope this study will serve as a starting point for future exploration.

Discussion

From our analysis, we discovered the CCLE stimulated new learning and deepened existing learning around critical theory praxis, contributing to the equity capacity of its participants, aspiring school leaders. Given our personal experiences with conference learning, and our understanding of the research that supports conference learning (Haley et al., 2009; Seymour et al., 2004; Walkington et al., 2017) we were not surprised at this outcome. However, we did not know which content areas would best advance student learning since conference session descriptions lack detail, and it is challenging to predict which content will resonate since adult learning is often connected to individual interest. Those who curate conference learning might see this as a limitation if their desired learning outcomes are specific. We, on the other hand, were not concerned that students learn specific content. We sought enhanced or deeper learning around equity to edify program curricula and offer an intensive learning experience beyond the requirements of the MSA.

The CCLE also provided a forum for discussing the barriers to enacting equitable leadership while simultaneously empowering students to persist and increase their commitment

toward the enactment of equitable practices. We did not anticipate this benefit because we were focusing primarily on student learning. We now recognize that this is a unique and powerful conference offering—something university programs may not be able to provide within traditional settings. At the conference, participants were given a rare gift: the time and space to have conversations with others about their concerns. They talked with one another, scholars, and other leaders. They leaned into each other for ideas, support, and empathy finding a sense of empowerment in leading toward equity. Although this forum for reflective dialogue and support could be conceived as an entirely separate benefit, we see it as a necessary learning support. The capacity to lead with equity requires more than content knowledge. It requires the space for school leaders to reflect, learn, and grow; and a community to encourage, support, and join that growth (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

We leveraged student learning by curating the conference through integrating components supported by adult learning theories: guided learning, reflection, new learning, and a community of practice. We had hoped for this result but were not entirely confident given the lack of extant literature for CCLEs. We were uncertain whether the focused daily schedule would prove too restrictive knowing the benefits of self-directed learning. Although students reported satisfaction with the selected schedule of the CCLE, in future CCLEs, we will try to find opportunities for students to self-select some sessions as well, creating space for individual interest.

We believe it is important for school leadership preparation programs to take students beyond the walls of academia into new and connected communities of practice so that they may deepen their learning. Our study addresses Hernandez and McKenzie's (2010) call for more literature on what experiences should be included in leadership preparation programs with a focus on social justice. So long as our educational outcomes remain dismal for many K-12 students, we must seek additional ways to develop and enhance the equity capacity of school leaders.

Not only do we see our research as valuable to leadership preparation program faculty, we believe associations designing conferences in other fields can utilize our conceptual framework and findings to consider more intentional designs for conference learning. Might associations partner with university programs to develop and support CCLEs? Might conference organizers work with university programs ahead of the conference to create dedicated space and time in the schedule for student reflection groups? Could the student conference experience be reconfigured to recognize the power of both guided and self-directed learning mechanisms? How might both the conference developers and university programs tap into technological advances to foster reflection and connection that deepens learning? We are hopeful that this paper will begin a discussion that considers the potential value of adding curated conference learning experiences as a component to school leadership preparation programs and is applicable across other disciplines as well.

Conclusion

This paper will interest those seeking innovative pedagogical approaches for building equity capacity among aspiring school leaders. The CCLE can be applied across other practitioner disciplines as well for those who want to engage conference participants in more meaningful ways. Our findings suggest we cannot disregard the potential power of this innovative practice to extend students' prior learning. The CCLE combined guided learning, directed reflection, and new learning within a community of practice to expand student

understanding of critical theory and praxis, thereby expanding students' equity capacity. In addition to new and deepened learning, students were given both a forum for discussing concerns about resistance and opportunities for connection with others engaged in equity work. We believe these resources provided participants with knowledge, support, and empowerment that will help them navigate obstacles as they lead schools toward equitable outcomes for all students.

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