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Understanding How a Leaders of Color Network Supports the Retention of a Diverse Leader Workforce

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that diversifying the educator workforce has a strong positive influence on students, particularly vulnerable and historically underserved groups. This article presents an intrinsic case study of a Leaders of Color Network that provided promising design elements to reduce professional and racial isolation, promote collective sense making, and develop coalitions. It also highlights how employers must do more than hire leaders of color. They must create systematic strategies to uplift, empower, and amplify the needs of diverse leaders.

Teacher diversity has been shown to have a positive impact on student outcomes (Dee, 2004; Eddy & Easton-Brooks, 2011; López, 2016), increase inclusive student discipline practices (Lindsay & Hart, 2017) and positively impact the probability of attending four-year college (Gershenson et al., 2018). These findings underwrite the significance of investigating issues of turnover among teachers of color as well as supportive conditions for retaining teachers of color (Dixon et al., 2019; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Kohli, 2009; Partee, 2014; Sun, 2018; Woodson & Bristol, 2020). For example, Dixon et al. (2019) describe how school, district, and state leaders can create conditions that retain teachers of color through financial support, monitoring progress through data collection and analysis, investments in the career pipeline, and creating environments that are “inclusive and respectful of all racial and ethnic groups” (Dixon et al, p. 3). However, parallel work has not been done on leader retention and diversity.

There is emerging evidence that racial, ethnic, and gender diversity in the leader workforce has an impact on teacher outcomes (D’Amico et al., 2017; Grissom et al., 2021; Meier et al., 2004). D’Amico et al. (2017) found that Black candidates were significantly more likely to receive job offers from Black principals than White principals. There is also evidence that principal race or ethnicity influences student outcomes (Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Meier et al., 2004). as illustrated by Bartanen et al. (2019) who found that principal turnover decreased student achievement in Missouri and Tennessee by .03 SD. Yet, there are few studies that describe how to diversify and retain leaders of color.

Research suggests that diversifying the educator workforce has a strong positive influence on student achievement, particularly for vulnerable and historically underserved student populations (Bartanen & Grissom, *In Press*; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Goldring & Taie, 2018; Hanushek et al., 2004). Yet, little attention has been paid to how districts can support the retention and efficacy of leaders of color. This article presents an intrinsic case study of a promising Leaders of Color Network (LOCN) implemented by a university-based leadership preparation program in a partner school district that is attempting to diversify its leader workforce.

Context and Background

Nationally, 80% of all school principals are White, ten percent are African American, seven percent are Latino, and three percent represent Other Races (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). While the principal workforce is diversifying, it has not kept up with the same level of changes among public school students (Grissom et al., 2021). In California, 77% of the total student enrollment in public schools is composed of students of color while only 38% of the teacher workforce is comprised of people of color (Boser, 2014). This disproportionality negatively impacts the diversity of school leadership as California requires active teaching credentials and a minimum of five years of teaching experience for all administrators. Thus, even in one of the most racially diverse states, issues of diversifying the leader workforce are persistent and challenging.

In Bell District (anonymized), the context for this study, student enrollment averages 10,000 from preschool through high school. In 1968, Bell made national news for its decision to implement a voluntary desegregation plan that integrated all schools through an ambitious two-way busing plan. Now, more than 50 years later, the city has experienced significant demographic change. In 1968, 42% of student enrollment was comprised of African American students. In the 2019–2020 school year a mere 1,511 African American students (14%) were enrolled districtwide. White students are now the largest student population representing 39%. While more integrated than the California average, the teacher workforce in Bell is composed of primarily White teachers: 66% at last report.

For over 20 years, the Principal Leadership Institute (PLI) at the University of California, Berkeley has worked closely with four San Francisco Bay Area partner districts that serve over 140,000 students and employ half of all PLI graduates. Since 2011, three of the four partner districts, including Bell, have employed an increasing number of White administrators despite public commitments to equity. To support partner districts who aspire to create a more diverse school leadership workforce, PLI, a program that has prepared over 600 leaders, has a committed focus on racial equity and encourages candidates of color to become credentialed school leaders. In two partner districts, for example, more than 50% of the principals of color were graduates of the PLI (Cheung, 2017).

Developing and sustaining partnerships with districts and practicing alumni is a distinct hallmark of PLI as it informs program design and evaluation (Hyler, 2020). Through ongoing discussions, Bell leaders, including alumni, expressed repeated concern about the well documented trends of gentrification and rising housing costs, particularly in regard to the consequences related to recruiting a diverse leader workforce. This was, in fact, the original impetus for the Leaders of Color Network project. When a campus funding opportunity arose, PLI approached Bell District leaders with the possibility of developing LOCN to support the retention and efficacy of site leaders and/or entry level district administrators. With Bell District leader consent and university support, the project was launched in 2018.

Participants

Now in its third year, the Network has increased in size from seven participants in Year One to twelve in Year Two and fourteen participants in Year Three. Overall, the program has supported eighteen leaders of color. (As of the 2020–2021 school year, Bell District employed thirty-five leaders as entry level administrators.) In Year Three, participants represented 100% of the district's African American leaders, 58% of Latinx leaders and 25% of Asian administrators. Over the three years of LOCN, 58% of participants were new hires and graduates of PLI also represented 58% of participants.

The leaders of color in this study also represented individual, positional, and system level diversity. 21% were male, and 79% were female. [Table 1](#) provides a summary of the racial composition indicating that 50% African American, 39% Latinx, and 11% other races. Participants held four different titles: Coordinator (21%), Dean (11%), Vice-Principal (32%), and Principal (36%) (See, [Table 2](#) for more

Table 1. Racial composition of network participants.

	Number of Leaders Served	Percent of Total Participants
African American	9	50%
Latino	7	39%
Other	2	11%

Table 2. Position titles held by network participants.

Position Title	Number of Leaders Served	Percent of Total Participants
Coordinator	4	21%
Dean	2	11%
Vice-Principal	6	32%
Principal	7	36%

*Calculations based on total positions held over three years. Numbers are rounded.

Table 3. System level assignments for network participants.

System Level Assignment	Number of Leaders Served	Percent of Total Participants
Elementary School	6	32%
Middle School	3	16%
High School	7	36%
District Office	3	16%

*Calculations based on total positions held over three years. Numbers are rounded.

details). Finally, [Table 3](#) summarizes the system levels for participants. Thirty-two percent worked at the elementary level while 16% worked in middle schools, 36% worked in high schools, and 16% worked in the district office.

Network Design and Content

As an invitational program intended to support entry-level leaders, there were extended conversations with Bell District leaders about the design and membership of the Network. The Leaders of Color Network was conceived with three important assumptions: 1) there is need to be able to dialogue freely about race, 2) there is a need for confidentiality from supervisors, and 3) that within Bell, leaders of color would benefit more from meeting as one group instead of in racially specific groups. Powell and Menendian's (2016) theory of othering and belonging was employed to frame the Network. They define othering as a "set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities" (p. 1). Thus, the Network was publicized as supporting entry level leaders who were racially othered because of their outward appearance within Bell District.

Bridging is presented by Powell and Menendian (2016) as the antidote to othering. By affirming and supporting inherent connections and celebrating differences, a sense of connection and inclusion was created. Ultimately, the Network design focused on creating belonging and inclusion through three goals. First, to uplift leaders of color by celebrating their strength and resilience. Second, to empower leaders of color through resources as well as deeper connections formed through the networked community. Third, to amplify both the needs of leaders of color and the need to support leaders of color.

At the beginning of every school year, Bell District provided a list of all eligible leaders. PLI directly recruited participants while district leaders sanctioned time within paid work hours to attend as well as a meeting space within the district boundaries. Network activities occurred in two formats: five facilitated Network meetings totaling seven and a half hours throughout the school year and participation at various other professional development events sponsored by the university. The facilitated sessions were the core of the project, with an average 80% participant attendance rate over three years.

Since the start of LOCN, four of six African American faculty in the Graduate School of Education and all of the PLI faculty of color (5) have participated as guest speakers and/or facilitators. All activities were designed and implemented by faculty and staff of the PLI who are all former public school administrators of color.

The design of the content borrowed from exemplary practices that support teacher learning including providing opportunities to learn from personal practice, interactions with others, and enhancement projects (National Research Council, 2000). Reflective storytelling, for example, was a commonly used strategy. Brill (2008) defines reflective storytelling as “structured opportunities to serve as co-learners who base their learning on actual challenges confronted in the field” (p. 11). Within LOCN, it allowed participants to retell and share their experiences to develop a deeper understanding of both individual and collective experiences. In addition to network meetings, participants were provided access to campus-based events including faculty speakers, guest speakers from other universities, and professional learning events primarily held on weekends. Most of these sessions were held at the university (within a 15-minute drive) or virtually. While participation in university activities was self-directed, more than half of Network participants participated in one to three university events per year. Topics have consistently focused on issues of educational equity such as school integration, anti-racism, restorative justice, equity centered master scheduling, leading for equity in special education, and improving socio-emotional learning environments.

At the first meeting of each year, participants individually and collectively generated the topics and questions they wanted to discuss. Then, the PLI team analyzed their ideas into guiding questions and facilitated the content accordingly. In the 2019–2020 school year, some of the questions generated included: How do I address issues of race and racial bias in teaching and learning? How do we organize the voices of leaders of color to advocate with senior leadership? In the 2020–2021 school year, some of the questions that emerged included: How do I lead for equity during the reopening of schools? How can this Network help me to be less isolated as a leader of color?

While participant generated guiding questions served as a central focus for the Network meetings, activities included small group and whole group discussions, guest lectures by university faculty, sharing experiences, and problem-solving support. Throughout, PLI leaders facilitated, brokered, and connected university expertise with the interests of Network participants. Annually, multiple professional books were purchased for all Network participants and used in the session activities.

An annual report that summarized Network activities and amplified the collective needs of leaders of color was produced annually by PLI leaders. The reports were included in ongoing partnership meetings with Bell District leadership. The 2019–2020 report, for example, included an analysis of the participants (anonymized), summary of activities, participant feedback, an analysis of key themes related to workplace conditions, as well as related resources. Between Year One and Year Two of the Network, there was a Superintendent and Associate Superintendent transition. Due to the positive feedback from participants as well as the annual report, the Network was sustained without any delays. It has served as an enduring point of collaboration between the university and school district.

Study Focus

This intrinsic case study seeks to explore and describe how a promising Leaders of Color Network uplifts, empowers, and amplifies entry level leaders who diversify Bell’s leader workforce. Research on this case focuses on the following questions:

- How do leaders of color participating in the Network describe their workplace conditions?
- How do participants access support to design and implement equitable practices in their daily work?
- How does the Network meet the needs of leaders of color?

Methods

Data collected and analyzed for this case study included: individual interviews; feedback surveys and written accounts of participants; descriptive and reflective field notes; and artifacts including session agendas and materials. This case study involved a purposive sample of participants in the Leaders of Color Network because it was the only organized structure that is intentionally designed to support leaders who were othered in Bell District. The authors served as action researchers for this project, as they also participated in the facilitation and design of all Network activities. Data collection included taking descriptive and reflective field notes at each Network meeting; collecting artifacts including session agendas and materials; and the frequent use of participant feedback surveys.

For triangulation purposes, structured interviews were conducted with a third of participants in Spring of 2020 ($n = 4$) and transcribed for analysis. To ensure authenticity of responses, researchers asked for participant volunteers and conducted an interview with each. Interviews were approximately 30–45 minutes in duration and participants were asked about their experiences in the Network as well as their experiences as a leader of color in Bell. For example, they were asked to compare differences between LOCN activities and typical professional development spaces in Bell. They were also asked to describe a change in their practice or an action they took as a result of their participation in the Network.

Data was analyzed through a five-step process: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Yin, 2011). First, it was organized and compiled into a time-based sequence. Then, we used memos to capture emerging themes and potential patterns. Next, we conducted, transcribed, and coded the structured interviews. In the reassembling process, we cross-analyzed connections between data collected in the Network meetings and the individual interviews to identify broader themes. Finally, as an intrinsic case, it is important to note that at the time of writing, LOCN is an active and ongoing project. Therefore, all participant names have been anonymized for the purposes of this article.

Discussion

Describing the Workplace

Our first inquiry was centered on understanding the workplace environment for leaders of color and identifying the key challenges they collectively experienced. The most common themes were coping with professional isolation, racial isolation, colorblind race talk, as well as restrictive policies and practices. In every meeting, leaders of color provided different examples of how these four issues impacted their daily work.

Professional Isolation

Administrative assignments as well as meeting structures and content contributed to the professional isolation of participants. In Bell District, it was commonplace to assign one administrator per school at the elementary level. At the secondary level, entry level leaders, such as the participants in LOCN, were not convened to regular meetings. Rather, they were expected to be on site so that principals could attend meetings.

LOCN participants also described how the District's meeting structures created additional isolation. For example, high school administrators did not meet with elementary, middle school, or district office leaders on a consistent basis. At one meeting, one of the participants who worked at the high school level expressed that she was surprised to learn that leaders of color at her site appeared to have a different experience because "50% of the admin team are leaders of color and we discuss and strategize about equity issues with their admin team before taking it to the whole teaching staff or to parents. We have each other's back." (Participant K, October 7, 2019). She was unaware that her workplace context was an outlier for leaders of color within Bell.

The content and design of district meetings was repeatedly described as one-way dissemination of information that were not optimized for networking and collaboration among leaders, regardless of race. One participant described it this way, “Site administrators meet on a weekly basis, but that space is not collaborative – it is led by the higher ups. I connect with the others by text. There is not a space that has been set up for us.” (Observation Notes, October, 7, 2019)

Racial Isolation

As described earlier in this paper, Bell is experiencing the effects of housing gentrification including a 66% decrease in African American student enrollment over 50 years. LOCN participants are in the numerical minority when compared with the leadership workforce, teacher ranks, community members, as well as students and families. Racial isolation compounded the professional isolation experienced by participants. One leader of color who is the only administrator at her school site observed dynamics between herself and her White teachers sharing, “Sometimes, I think that White colleagues want to pull you in so that you validate them. If you don’t reciprocate, they may feel you are a threat thinking, ‘we brought you here- why aren’t you hanging with us?’ It’s like you are a mask or a token” (Observation Notes, October, 7, 2019).

Colorblind Race Talk Culture

Issues of professional and racial isolation were further compounded by the colorblind race talk practices in Bell. The participants in the Leaders of Color Network centered many of their dialogs around negotiating unspoken rules and tensions largely revolving around race. Colorblind racial ideology is the “widely held belief that skin color does not play a role in interpersonal interactions and institutional policies and practices” (Neville et al., 2016). Leaders of Color Network participants repeatedly described issues and challenges related to colorblindness in Bell. In describing faculty meetings, one participant elaborated on the concept of “safety” as a leader of color operating in a predominantly White space: “Depending on the mixed space or what it is or who’s leading, safety is on a personal level and also in terms of how far in pushing a conversation.” They added “safety includes this whole other piece of energy that’s required to process through what’s the just-right vocabulary to still be honest and be who I am in a room but make sure it’s palatable for the others, particularly if the facilitator is White or a White male” (Participant F, personal communication, January 13, 2020).

In another case, a leader described how his White supervisor put him in the unreasonable and uncomfortable position of educating his White colleagues during a professional development event focused on the content in Robin DiAngelo’s book (DiAngelo, 2018) *White Fragility*. The supervisor planned a book discussion using a fishbowl protocol which involved engaging a small group of leaders in discussion while the rest observed and listened. The leader of color shared, “I was invited to be a participant in the fishbowl – which I did not mind – but I wanted my White colleagues to be in the fishbowl too . . . It’s safer to just sit back and listen as a White liberal progressive.” (Observation notes, March 2, 2020). Ironically, DiAngelo analyzes the phenomenon of asking people of color to educate White people as a reinforcement of White innocence. Specially, she writes, “to ask people of color to tell how they experienced racism without first building a trusting relationship and being willing to meet them halfway by also being vulnerable shows that we are not racially aware that this exchange will probably be invalidating for them” (p. 64).

In a third example, a leader described an experience of racism similar to those documented by researcher Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) in her book “*Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*” and *Other Conversations about Race*. Specifically, the participant described how her supervisor explicitly requested that she stop sitting with other leaders of color at principal meetings. By her account, the handful of leaders of color who attended principal meetings had developed a habit of arriving early to support each other. When her supervisor observed the pattern, she said, “I observe you sitting with the same 2 people all the time- [leaders of color]. You are always sitting with them. What’s up with that?” (Participant H, October 7, 2019). When the leader shared her experience in

a network meeting, several other leaders confirmed similar experiences with comments such as “there are no private spaces for people of color” and “our presence is there to placate White people and to create the appearance of progress which means we cannot be too close together” (Observation Notes, October 7, 2019).

Restrictive Policies and Practices

Issues of restrictive district policies and the need to address structural inequality and systemic oppression were discussed in all 15 Network meetings. Teacher evaluation, academic and non-academic interventions, leader evaluation, parent involvement and student discipline were repeatedly named as areas that needed to be revised to include stronger orientations toward equity. When the discussions touched on reducing exclusionary practices of teachers and low expectations for marginalized student populations, for example, one participant noted, “How do I get teachers to love their students of color? How can I mandate empathy? Bell is good at saying one thing and then treating students of color differently. Words do not match actions. Celebrating teachers who are able to keep kids of color in the room is not enough.” (Observation Notes, March 20, 2020). Another remarked, “It is dangerous when district leadership does not respect students and families of color. What about the teacher evaluation policies and practices? Why isn’t there anything about cultural competency in the tool?” (Observation Notes, March 20, 2020).

Regularly, LOCN participants expressed concern about losing funding to continue the Network activities (the grant award occurred on a 1 year cycle). They consistently expressed doubt that Bell district would prioritize the Network without outside funding. Simultaneously, they also recognized the need to transfer the conversations and practices within LOCN to District meetings. As one participant reflected, “Because LOCN exists, it’s a signal to the Bell district leadership that there is a need for the space. However, Bell has nothing institutionally established to continue this work beyond what the university offers” (Observation Notes, October 27, 2020).

Impact on Equitable Practices

Our second inquiry was into the daily practices of leaders of color and how the network helped participants access support to design and implement equitable actions. Two important themes arose: developing coalitions and identifying equity considerations. Both informed and empowered participants in their daily leadership decision making.

Developing Coalitions

Participants described ways they were able to advocate for under-served students at the system level due to coalitions made through LOCN. One leader described how LOCN strengthened her confidence and capacity. First, she recounted navigating a lot of deficit based talk with a large math department where there were only two teachers of color and disproportionate numbers of black and brown students were failing the classes. Then, during Year 2 of the Network, Bell District had a priority focus on improving math outcomes for underperforming students and several members of the LOCN were also serving on a district wide Math Task Force. This leader saw an opportunity to amplify her concerns by using the Leaders of Color Network to forge a coalition:

The Leaders of Color Network give me an opportunity to connect with [another participant who works at] the district level. She was also on the Math Task Force. She was the second person I knew on the Task Force. By knowing those two people, and sharing my ideas with them, and receiving their support in a few quick individual interactions, I [had the confidence to speak boldly at the meeting.] I said, “Race is affecting student education in Bell. We need to do something about it.” Where did I get the power to make such a bold statement? It’s because of the unique environment of the Leaders of Color Network. I feel empowered by the Network. I know those people believe in me. I know those people support me. They’ve got my back. (Participant G, personal communication, January 13, 2020)

A second example occurred during the pandemic when a group of parents began to pressure district leaders to re-open and participants realized that they could use their collective voices to advocate for students who were in the most need of in person learning. Questions they asked each other included, “How much risk do we want to assume? How do we engage others who agree with us who are not a part of this group? How has more informal power? Who do they listen to?” (Observation notes, February 2, 2021).

Collectively Identifies Equity Considerations that Inform Leadership Practices

Frequently, participants noted how opportunities to share specific leadership dilemmas helped them to better understand underlying equity considerations that informed their decision making and practice. One participant said, “[it] helps keep me grounded and [reminds me] that I am doing important work. It helps keep the work that I’m doing creative, because I’m always able to get new ideas. “She concluded by saying, “I feel refreshed coming from those meetings. The work is really hard. I feel good leaving the meetings and it carries with me for weeks after” (Participant B, personal communication, January 15, 2020). A specific example occurred during the COVID 19 pandemic. Participants used Network meetings to discuss some of the challenges around supporting student attendance. An excerpt from observation notes below illustrates how their dialogs sharpened equity considerations for their daily leadership:

Participant O: Home language is a big barrier right now. And, families with means have created their own support.

Participant Q: Half of students were having a lack of connection due to the technology. Also, it’s hard for teachers to build relationships with students. I can’t just scoop up kids in the halls when they kicked out of zoom.

Participant N: There is a big gap in teacher skills. Students are not going to all classes. They attend classes where teachers are giving them a voice. The attendance “hot list” is also an equity issue because many families are scared that they will get kicked out of the district through address checks.

Participant I: Many parents at my school are working and not at home with students. Other elementary children are being supported by their middle school siblings. (Observation Notes, December 1, 2020)

As the conversation continued, these participants began to brainstorm solutions informed by the equity considerations. One shared a strategy of collaborating with teachers to implement short relationship building activities into class. “I can have a support staff member record the strategy so that they can share it with the students who missed class.” Another leader shared about the need to intentionally appreciate teacher efforts and maintain a healthy sense of humor. Most importantly, the participants describe how they had few spaces to engage in sharing strategies and practices. One leader summarized it this way, “We are so busy on the day to day, trying to problem-solve the issues that are coming up, but these conversations need to happen! It’s so important to have these discussions.” (Observation Notes, December 1, 2020)

Meeting the Needs of Leaders of Color through Belonging

Our third inquiry focused on how the network helped meet the needs of leaders of color. The findings revealed several salient themes regarding the Network’s ability to create belonging for leaders of color in Bell. Participants indicated safe spaces to share racialized experiences in efforts to reduce feelings of isolation and fatigue, collaborative sense making and activating a collective voice in service of systemic change as critical. Through reflective storytelling and dialogue exchanges, participants described their work experience as a profoundly racialized one, where a strict hierarchy entrenched in logics of color-blindness stymied even mentioning racial inequity, much less pursuing any action toward racial equity or meaningful systemic change. Participants noted this resulted in strong feelings of isolation, fatigue and constant concern for their career and personal wellbeing. The continual growth of enrollment in the Network suggests that participants value and access trusting relationships, mentorship and collegial guidance when planning or making equity centered changes.

Safety Is a Key Element to Uplifting, Empowering, and Amplifying

Based on consistently strong positive feedback, participants confirmed that the Network met its three goals of uplifting, empowering, and amplifying the needs of leaders of color in Bell District. Table 4 provides a summary of 6 surveys that focused on feedback related to the goals indicating high levels of positive response overall. 95% of respondents agreed that LOCN provided uplift, 78% felt empowered, and 84% felt LOCN amplified their needs. Survey responses including multiple choice and open response items were coded for specific patterns and themes.

Safety and sharing arose as supportive and critical conditions of the Network. When coding for key phrases across the surveys and observation notes, there were 24 mentions of “share” or “sharing” and 14 mentions of “safe” or “safety.” One participant described the Network as a “space that is safe for me to share in confidence and be who I am; sharing the empowerment could come from highs and lows. Listening to others and realizing I am not solo in the work that supports kids.” (Participant A, survey response, February 3, 2020). Another shared, “I can imagine my colleagues engaging in the difficult work I am also doing and that helps strengthen me in my resolve to persist.” (Participant K, survey response, March 2, 2020).

When describing empowerment, the concept of voice was raised repeatedly over the six surveys. One participant described the Network as “helping me find opportunities to voice my thoughts and utilize my deep experiences in a way that helps me continue to feel useful [to others]” (Participant I, survey response, September 23, 2019). Others noted the power of hearing other voices and opinions to share their own. As one wrote, “I love sharing and hearing from my fellow leaders of color. When I tell my story and connect to the stories of others, I feel empowered.” (Participant L, survey response, February 3, 2020).

Participants also agreed that the Network provided important avenues to amplify the needs of leaders of color in Bell. Several noted the unique significance of the Network itself, as captured in this survey comment, “the Leaders of Color Network partnership may be one of the few initiatives that amplifies needs of leaders of color. I can’t think of another. The LOCN has the potential to bring valuable data to support District Leaders to make informed policy decisions” (Participant E, survey response, March 2, 2020). Finally, participants noted the significance of the final report for district leaders including the inclusion of critical perspectives of workplace culture within Bell District writing, “The fact that there is a report and advocacy that contains my experience and voice amplifies my needs as a leader working to undo historic racist systems within my school and district is amazing” (Participant F, survey response, March 2, 2020).

The Network Reduces Professional and Racial Isolation

The Network combats isolation by helping participants feel more connected both professionally and racially. As noted earlier, participants described a deep divide between high school staff and the rest of the schools. The district office was frequently described as a third isolate. Thus, breakout groups at Network meetings were organized to nurture connections across these otherwise siloed domains. Participants have noted the importance of cross domain connections in all 15 meetings. As a second-year participant commented, “like last year, I’d like for LOCN meetings to give me a chance to connect with other leaders of color in Bell and therefore feel less isolated and new” (Participant L, survey response, December 1, 2020). And, as one new leader noted in her first meeting which included a breakout group with representatives from elementary, middle school, and high school, “Shout out to

Table 4. Summary of participant surveys.

	Percent of Respondents who “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that the Network meets the goal
Uplift	95%
Empower	78%
Amplify	84%

my breakout group- we have a lot of the same challenges and shared ways of addressing them. I'm new to the district so it can feel isolating. This helped me to see how things are connected" (Participant P, survey response, December 1, 2020).

Consistently over the duration of this project, participants in the Leaders of Color Network described LOCN as one of the few sanctioned spaces where they were able to talk about race "in public." New leaders used Network activities as an opportunity to validate their observations and unspoken messages related to talk about race. One shared, "I feel comfortable talking about race in this group. I need backing from the district to talk about it in my school community and know that I'll be supported if there is backlash." Another participant described responding to the same unspoken rules in a different way sharing, "At some point I decided to stop code switching. It's a huge struggle here. There is fear in the air here. Direct conversations here in Bell are different. It's an emotional toll to deal with it daily – the consequences of going 'Black or Brown' knowing the blowback that will happen" (Observation notes, September 23, 2019). A third new leader described her interest in the Network in this way, "I'm happy to be part of the Network. There is no support at the district level. I am the only [leader of color] in my department and it is not a safe place to have honest conversations. I'm already getting labeled as the person who is always talking about the students of color." (Observation notes, October 27, 2020). Talking about race deepened their sense of belonging while combatting the fatigue and emotional labor that resulted from working in a colorblind culture.

Network Activities Promote Collective Sense Making that Improves Efficacy

Through the Network sessions, participants engaged in collective sense making about their experiences in Bell District, especially related to workplace conditions. This process was made more effective through a collective that is both trusting and vulnerable as well as fluent in a baseline experience of being racially othered. Through dialogue, these acts of recollection provided for exchanges that avoided dismissive responses that attempt to question the validity speaker of their experiences. Rather, the sharing of experiences helped to deepen the understanding of racial dynamics at Bell and provide a space to think through strategies of resistance or alternative to inequitable and harmful practices in Bell.

Frequently mentioned was a concern of being attacked for raising concerns about racial equity and needing to constantly monitor their political movements to prevent a high degree of resistance when making equity focused change. For example, one leader described the pressure created by parents of students enrolled in Advanced Placement classes as being in direct conflict to meeting the needs of truant students (Observation notes, October 27, 2020). In contrast, participants perceived Network sessions as a trusting space that provides opportunities for them to problematize and analyze issues and strategize solutions in service of marginalized student populations.

Discussing relevant theories about race, power and education was also frequently mentioned. When coding interview data, the most frequently shared concept across all interviewees was a mention of the value of resources such as articles and ideas regarding race. For example, one leader shared that she left each meeting with "either a heightened perspective or a different perspective." She described the impact of a faculty speaker, Jabari Mahiri (2017), who gave a talk about his recent book *Deconstructing Race: Multicultural Education beyond the Color-Bind*. In the book, the problem of the color-bind is defined as "how people's identities are imprisoned within the limited spectrum of color categories that have been generated by and distinguished from whiteness as they are refracted through the prism of white supremacy" (p. 29). At first, she didn't connect the theory to her everyday work. In fact, she responded with disbelief. Then, she started observing the dynamics among the African American females at her school and noticed connections to the theory. Specifically, she described how there were "three big fights to establish the pecking order among the Black girls" and how they had to "perform to the highest levels of

Table 5. Enrollment and attendance patterns over three years.

Participant	Year 1 (2018–2019)	Year 2 (2019–2020)	Year 3 (2020–2021)
A	Continuing Employee		
B	Continuing Employee		
C	Continuing Employee		
D	New Employee		Left Bell District
E	New Employee		
F	New Employee		Left Bell District
G	New Employee		Left Bell District
H		Continuing Employee	
I		Continuing Employee	Left Bell District
J		New Employee	
K		New Employee	
L		New Employee	
M			Continuing Employee
N			Continuing Employee
O			New Employee
P			New Employee
Q			New Employee
R			New Employee

violence” to go to the top of the hierarchy (Participant B, personal communication, January 15, 2020). Ultimately, applying the theory of the color-blind informed how she addressed the discipline issues among the students because she was able to reframe the behavior away from the common deficit frames of random and unexplainable violence.

Short and Long Term Impact on Retention

This study occurred during the COVID 19 pandemic, a context which likely impacted individual decisions to leave or stay. With a relatively small-scale project, there were limitations to how we can measure LOCN’s impact on long term retention. Instead, we analyzed the patterns of departure and continued employment over the three-year period as displayed in [Table 5](#).

There are so many factors that contribute to a leader’s decision to leave. LOCN shows promise as a reason for leaders of color to stay. 100% of participants who remained employed in Bell District have continued participation in LOCN over multiple years. During this study, four participants (22%) left Bell for other employment and two (11%) were promoted. The data indicates that leaders of color newly hired to Bell District were more likely to benefit from LOCN. In Year One, four of seven participants (57%) were new leaders in Bell. In Year Two, 25% of participants were new leaders. In Year Three, 50% of the participants were in their first or second year of employment with Bell District. Twenty- nine percent were new employees and 21% were in their second year of employment.

Conclusions

This article presents an intrinsic case study of a promising Leaders of Color Network implemented by a university-based leadership preparation program in a partner school district that is attempting to diversify its leader workforce. The descriptive data suggests that leaders of color experienced increased workplace stress including issues of safety, professional and racial isolation, as well as fatigue due to race talk rules and restrictive policies. The Network provided promising design elements that create belonging that supports the retention and efficacy of leaders of color including strategies to reduce professional and racial isolation, promote collective sense making, the development of coalitions, and the deepened understanding of equity considerations. Furthermore, the workplace conditions described present a clear need for leaders of color to receive targeted and systematic support that uplifts, empowers, and amplifies them.

Through a relatively small intervention, the Leaders of Color Network created belonging that is in sharp contrast to the othering participants experience in their daily work. Participant enrollment patterns indicate that newly hired leaders of color especially benefitted from LOCN. As one leader described, LOCN helps them “to persist in my agenda to make school work better for black and brown students; in my agenda to build the capacity of teachers and all adults to design the kind of racist free, opportunity rich schooling experience that students deserve. I’m empowered to keep learning and pushing the comfort zone of adults in our system” (Participant F, survey response, February 3, 2020).

Implications

Attending to the needs of leaders of color on an ongoing basis is an essential next step after hiring. As indicated in [Table 5](#), Bell District has hired a significant number of leaders of color in recent years. One offered cautionary words about the workplace conditions at the end of her second Network meeting writing, “I could put myself in jeopardy of union grievance if I speak my mind and/or defend myself. For the most part, I am someone who generally takes the high road or tries to find the silver lining, but during these challenging times – COVID, federal government [dysfunction], homelessness, etc. – I find myself feeling increasingly sad, frustrated, and feeling like there is no hope. I wish for this group to help me continue to bathe in the light” (Participant O, survey response, December 1, 2020). High rates of enrollment in LOCN by new leaders of color raise additional questions for future investigation. For example, what are effective and supportive hiring and onboarding processes for leaders of color? How do leaders of color learn the race talk roles in multiple contexts?

Schools and school districts are complex systems that require deep and sustained efforts to change. This promising case presents nested layers of Bell District that impacted the othering and belonging of leaders of color. For example, work culture norms impacted individual interpersonal interactions including colorblind race talk and the professional learning structures reinforced othering practices that led to professional and racial isolation. Transforming schools and school districts to create belonging for leaders of color will require strategic efforts that target the nested layers of the organization. While the Network supported short term retention for the majority of participants, the ultimate solution to retaining a diverse leader workforce lies in ameliorating the adverse working conditions. How can districts like Bell be supported to implement LOCN practices? More research is needed on how districts can develop and sustain policies and practices that are rooted in belonging.

While not the primary focus of the case, the university partnership between PLI and Bell District is also worthy of note. The Network resources, inputs, and facilitation were exclusively provided by the university. Existing relationships with alumni who work as leaders in Bell district likely accelerated the depth of conversations within Network activities. The fact that Bell has sustained this initiative across multiple superintendents with grant funding indicates a lack of internal capacity to attend to the needs. PLI’s annual report was a starting place for building internal capacity within Bell. However, it is likely insufficient. Research has emphasized that powerful innovations related to leadership development occur when universities and school districts work together in deep and sustained partnerships (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Davis, 2016; Edwards et al., 2019; Levin et al., 2020). This case provides examples of deep collaboration in action. More research is needed to analyze and describe university and district partnerships that improve and sustain a diverse leader workforce.

Finally, this paper raises questions around how to frame interventions related to leader diversity. By using Powell and Mendenian’s theories of othering and belonging, the Network was able to intentionally create bridges across individual identity (i.e. race, gender, religion) as well as levels of leadership (i.e. coordinator, assistant principal, principal) and levels within Bell school district (i.e. elementary, middle school, high school, district office). The case raises many additional questions for further study including: How can the theory of othering and belonging be extended to issues of leader diversity at large? Woodson and Bristol (2020) present the need to examine the “lived complexities subsumed

under the umbrella” of group definitions such as “teachers of color” so that issues of intersectionality and within group difference can be illuminated (281). What are new ways we should conceptualize and inform approaches to retaining leaders of color?

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