

Parent Leaders Taking the Lead: Capacity Building and Co-Constructed Relevance in Community-Engaged Research

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This article reflects on a multi-year project involving participatory research with parents. Specifically, it reports on an ongoing capacity-building endeavor that consciously places parents at the center of a parent education project – wherein parents are regarded as project participants, possessing valued knowledge, rather than as more traditional passive research participants. Based in participatory action research, systematic inquiry methods are used to determine the project issues and engage all participants in co-construction of knowledge. By building capacity in parents, we observed improved outcomes in their own lives as well as in the lives of the children they nurtured. Implications of our study for the growth in public scholarship are explored.

Introduction

This article reflects on a multi-year community-engaged research project in the area of capacity building with parents. Since 2011, parent researchers in several Connecticut communities have joined with University of Hartford researchers to examine the role of information in parents' lives – specifically how to best support parents with young children, from birth through age eight, to be critical consumers of information as well as producers of essential knowledge. In this article, we discuss the process surrounding development of an issue guide to facilitate deliberative dialogue with parents as co-participants in community activism. The issue guide – *Looking for Answers Together: How Should We Nurture Children to be Healthy and Make Better Choices?* – was collaboratively developed by university researchers and parent co-researchers, referred to as Parent Researchers, using systemic inquiry methods. Parent Researchers took the role of moderators/leaders during community deliberations around the guide – parents occupied the center of the project, as engaged individuals possessing valued knowledge rather than as more traditional passive research participants.

Motivating development of the issue guide, *Looking for Answers Together*, was the idea that we as adults, citizens, and community members (not just parents) have a role (if not a responsibility) to nurture children. Because of the nature of how this particular issue guide was brought forth, a working theory of change was enacted. The capacity building of the Parent Researchers using an inquiry model directly connected the work of the issue guide to specific communities and thus was an opportunity, in and of itself, to invest in the adults who nurture children. The Parent Researchers then had the practice of applying the inquiry model throughout their own commu-

nity-specific projects. This work not only highlights the unique benefits of parents serving as co-constructors of knowledge on childhood development but is also rooted in the belief that those most affected by a community issue are critical to any efforts to address that issue.

Project Background

The desired outcome of this funded work was to scale outward the capacity building opportunity that began during the initial phases of the issue guide by expanding the number of Parent Researchers involved. A relational understanding of family and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) set the overarching methodological orientation for this research. Guiding this particular portion of the larger, ongoing parent information and inquiry research with parent leaders were the following research questions:

1. What insights do parent leaders engaging in deliberative work offer parent leadership development, in particular parent facilitation training?
2. In what ways can this research contribute to the understanding of opportunities that support parents' dynamic agency and in leadership roles?
3. How can parent leaders, learning with the support of a community of practice, inform our understanding of:
 - a. The phenomena of parent leadership?
 - b. The role of parent inquiry in the use of information?

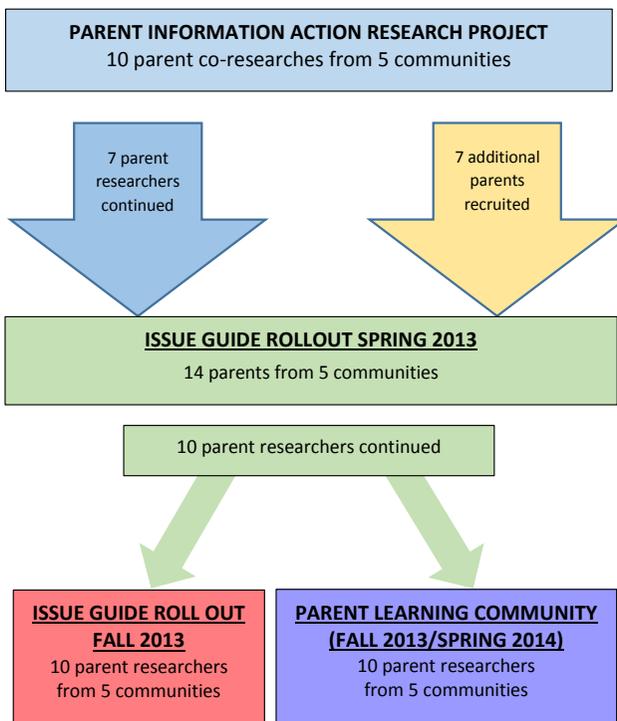
The arc of this work with Parent Researchers consistently offered complexity and simultaneously held multiple dimensions of experience and understanding. As this work has evolved over the past three years, there have been multiple action points, or layers, and several significant and influencing norms. The following represents our working definitions of relevant terms to support deeper understanding of this work. "Parent Researchers" are those who have been part of the work in some role that also included the research aspect (be that of the originating work), pilot phase, or the parent learning community. Parents and "parent leaders" are terms also used to denote parents who have been involved, but not in the research aspect. The active commitment to learning together through inquiry and from each other most accurately reflects the intent of the Parent Learning Community.

The work is anchored by an abiding goal to create capacity building experiences that will increase skills and knowledge of individuals. While we have not used a formal metric for measure, we consider the evidence of capacity building to be individuals demonstrating new skills and knowledge and the ability to apply them in a new or alternate setting. The ability to apply new skills and knowledge in new or alternate settings indicates an internalization and integration of the skills and knowledge, or a knowledge

possessed (Cook & Brown, 1999).

The trajectory of parent engagement since 2011 is represented visually in Figure 1. The actual Parent Researchers engaged in this work represent a diversity of age and race, as well as diversity of education and professional experience (see Bray, Pedro, Kenney, & Gannotti, in press). From among the initial Parent Information Action Research team of ten Parent Researchers, seven continued with the phase of the work reported on herein. The Parent Researchers were asked to recruit formal and informal parent leaders and other engaged parents to train as moderators and recorders in the pilot phase of the roll out. Parent Researchers recruited seven parent leaders representing three communities for a total of 14 parents from five communities for the pilot phase. The trajectory of parent engagement, now going into a fourth year, continues to flourish through a learning community, officially called the Parent Inquiry Initiative, and referred to as Parentii. After the pilot phase of the roll out, parent leaders were invited to participate in the parent learning community grant as well as the Fall 2013 portion of the 2013-2014 roll out of up to ten communities. Of the 14 eligible parents from the pilot phase of the roll out, ten chose to continue with the project and made a six-month commitment.

Figure 1. Parent Involvement



The literature on theories of change, such as the work by Frontiers of Innovation at the Center on the Developing Child, is central to our understanding of how a theory of change can directly impact the nurturing of children. Specifically the project, “Building Adult Capabilities to Improve Child Outcomes: A Theory of Change,” supported by Harvard University and philanthropic investment, underscored that attention to the adults in children’s lives matters. Of significance in this work is the clarification that results do not come from giving people advice, but rather by skill building with practice.

By building capacity in adults we see improved outcomes in their own lives as well as improved outcomes in the lives of the children they nurture. The issue guide work with Parent Researchers not only created a tool for deliberation, but also served as definite action toward capacity building. We regard the Parent Researchers’ level of engagement and preponderance to continue with the work over its various phases as validation of its worth. This observation is also supported by earlier Parent Inquiry Action Research project data (Bray, et. al., in press).

In addition, the Parent Researchers’ understanding of their own level of engagement is paramount to our belief that parents will not stay engaged unless the work is understood as intrinsically worthwhile. Accessible dissemination of this work has been a strong and abiding commitment. The Parentii website, a primary means for documentation and dissemination over the arc of this work, poses the questions: Why does this work matter to parents? (See website inserted here as Figure 2, left of video image). What do parents have to say about parent inquiry, information, learning, and leadership?

Figure 2. Website

http://www.hartford.edu/enhp/itr/cpheap/parent_ii_update.aspx

ENHP Home
 About
 Academics
 ENHP Day 2013
Institute for Translational Research
 Center for Health, Care, and Well-being
 Center for Learning and Professional Education
 Initiative: Educational Main Street
 Initiative: Farmington Valley Transitional Academy
 Initiative: Hartford Public School System
 Initiative: Magnet Schools on Campus
 Initiative: Montessori Studies
 Initiative: Parent Inquiry
 Initiative: Wintonbury Early Childhood Magnet School, Bloomfield, CT

College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions
Parent Inquiry Initiative Update
 This initiative has grown out of the two-year **Parent Information Action Research** project including multiple dissemination venues as well as continued parent leadership and inquiry opportunities. Why does this work matter to parents?

- Parents own the data
- Parents listen for community needs which directly inform inquiry process
- Parents make data-driven decisions
- Parents take action towards desired community-based outcomes

Parent Information Action Research Project

PARENT INQUIRY INITIATIVE (PARENTII)

- Parentii Blog
- Looking for Answers Together
- Buscando Respuestas Juntos
- William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund
- Kettering Foundation
- Connecticut Birth to Three System
- Stone Soup 2012 Conference
- Early Childhood Conversations Conference
- Education Programs at the University of Hartford

An Open Invitation to Participate If you are a parent, work with parents or would like to support parent leaders in ensuring children’s well-being and community success we would like to hear from you. You are welcome to join our collaborative efforts to support parents with young children birth through age eight be critical consumers of information as well as producers of essential knowledge. If you see yourself contributing to this work in anyway, contact Paige M. Bray through the Parent Inquiry Initiative at parentii@hartford.edu.

While deliverables required by funding agencies, academic reports, scholarly presentations, and publications all remain tangible outcomes, dissemination of this work that parents can use, share in, and leverage are equally desirable parallel outcomes if the project is to matter and be of use to parents. Listening to the parents in their own words, as enabled through the website videos, gives the public access to the co-constructed work of researchers, parents, and community members.

Future efforts to build networks for dissemination will continue to develop our notions on the theory of change; at present, parents' dynamic agency (Bray, 2008; Bray & Schatz, 2013) is the core context for this work. Parents' dynamic agency is the responsive, in-the-making unique expression of human capacity that those with the primary responsibility of caring for young children build and demonstrate. Of note, through our continued research we have come to understand that the intentional engagement of parents in dynamic inquiry has the expressed intent and desired outcome of capacity building. Also paramount is the understanding that community action research (in particular expressions of participatory action research such as parent inquiry) is the commitment and practice that puts parent leaders at the center of a project as engaged knowledge makers, rather than as more traditional passive research participants.

This collaboration has involved multiple points of action; there has not been one physical location that has drawn together the Parent Researchers and university researchers from five communities across the state of Connecticut. There are the common meetings locations, such as community center or local churches, but these are simply the most viable physical locations where the Parent Researchers can gather to engage in the work. These are not typical research "settings" and have been dictated by geographical distance and a myriad of transportation struggles. Each layer provides locations of actions and thus data gathering opportunities. Each layer also provides different, and, at times, contrasting, perspectives. Asserting a post-structural understanding, these different and even divergent perspectives can be held at the same time. Thus far we have identified these discrete layers co-existing in our version of public scholarship:

- Community member experience of the parent leaders moderating and recording;
- Parent Researcher participatory experience of moderating and recording;
- Parent Researcher Learning Community experience;
- Parent experience of their own moderating and recording training;
- Researcher experience in navigating action research in a community setting;
- Researcher experience in navigating community-based action research during process of inquiry and scholarly development

- (particularly given the academic tenure and promotion process);
- Researcher experience of meeting the needs of multiple organizations including learning community, funder, community organizations, and higher education;
 - Researcher framing of deliverable with funder;
 - Researcher and funder framing stipends for parents as resources for the work;
 - Researcher and funder leveraging the “in-process” moments of the work for viability.

With this many co-existing layers, the flow of communication quickly emerges as a logistical and relational element. Capturing communication as tied to each layer and among the layers is an ongoing area for attention for those in higher education who are socialized to communicate more formally at the completion of work.

Methodology

The systematic inquiry method used to determine the content of the issues guide itself and to engage in co-construction of knowledge with the Parent Researchers was participatory action research. The intent of action research, particularly community-based action research, is to improve the quality of community life through action. The process of action research is an educative process that draws on the extraordinary human capacity to wonder, to question, to seek solutions for daily problems and the challenges to our life dreams. The learning opportunity of action research provides a frame for addressing issues and a process for seeking practical solutions. The collaborative, interactive nature of action research demands a skill set that includes interpersonal skills, personal agency, and attending to outcome-based efforts, a skill set which offers a solid foundation for leadership (Stringer, 1999, 2008).

Community-based action research engages the individual in the context of his/her community (Thompson et al., 1997) as well as individuals across a community (Ramirez and Soto-Hinman, 2009). For the purposes of this project, “community” is defined not only by the geographic boundaries of Connecticut municipalities but also by the community of Parent Researchers. Participatory action research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000), particularly the feminist approach to action research (Maguire, 1987; Paradis, 2010), enables university researchers to engage with community members (in this case Parent Researchers) as facilitators and as resources, but not as the sole producers of knowledge. An exchange of information exists inherently that cuts across the power dynamics of traditional research, where the “researcher” holds expertise and knowledge without the intent or obligation of sharing this information with the participant or “research subject” from which data will be extracted.

Utilizing a community-based (Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Horton, 1998; Stringer, 1999; 2008) participatory action research model (Freire, 1970; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Maguire, 1987) with the Parent Researchers, we understand this work to be grounded in an explicit set of social values and assumptions. These assumptions include the research process as: a) engaged “with” people in a process, not “for” or “on” research subjects; b) a democratic, inclusive process which enables participation of all parent leaders while developing critical consciousness; c) an equitable process recognizing human capacity and an individual’s ability to contribute; and d) a liberating and life-enhancing activity with the expressed commitment to practical outcomes that transform structures and relationships (Bray, et al., in press). The trustworthiness (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2000) of this research was ensured through multiple techniques, including: a) prolonged engagement, b) researcher journal, and c) inherent and extensive member checking.

Findings

We present our findings here in a way that reflects the breadth and depth of this work with multiple, co-existing layers. The four sections are: a) Engaging Deliberative Discourse, b) Parent Researchers Design for Parent Leaders, c) Understanding of the Phenomena of Parent Leadership, and d) Understanding the Role of Parent Inquiry in the Use of Information.

Engaging Deliberative Discourse

Our first research questions addressed the process of engaging in deliberative discourse. Research question one asked: What insights do parent leaders themselves engaging in deliberative work offer parent leadership development, in particular parent facilitation training? During the Spring 2013 pilot and the Fall 2013 roll out, Parent Researchers and leaders were forthcoming with feedback and input through the member checking process. This has not only been the norm for the arc of this work, but also has become the expectation of the Parent Researcher for engagement. Through focus group data, researcher participatory observations, Parent Researcher participatory observations, and a learning community work session, the following sections speak to our findings thus far on parent leadership development.

Parent Researchers Design for Parent Leaders

Over the course of the 2013 roll out, Parent Researchers offered a parent and parent leader’s understanding of what is needed to enact an issue guide deliberative conversation. These insights have come through the formal focus groups and their participant observations. Since the early 2013 kick-off of this work, Parent Researchers named specific elements they asserted parents and parent leaders need. These specific elements arose out of

the focus groups and through conversations about the support materials being translated into Spanish. For instance: If the materials were being translated, would there need to be adaptations in the training or actual conversations? Over the course of an hour during a winter 2013 member checking meeting, the naming of possible points for a training session in Spanish morphed into points that would be responsive to Spanish speakers and adult learners and then again changed to the broadest frame of what the Parent Leaders named the “Parent Researcher” training.

The tension of parents creating knowledge and content for training when not directly connected to a community agency or higher education institution was palpable. While in the moment and in that specific context, all stakeholders supported parents as creators of knowledge and even co-constructors, when the parents began to transform larger, institutionally framed elements the work became more challenging. They became more challenging because the work of community agencies and higher education is very public, and so many of these institutions champion engagement. However, to engage in public scholarship is to have a transparent process that is not shielded by the long-standing privilege of higher education and academic work.

Understanding of the Phenomena of Parent Leadership

The initial part of research question three asked: How can parent leaders, learning with the support of a community of practice (or learning community), inform our understanding of the phenomena of parent leadership? What the arc of this work (the last year of collaboration and the three months of the Parent Learning Community) informed was an understanding of the phenomena of parent leadership as both when people experience parents in leadership roles and when the parents experience themselves as leaders. In the Spring 2013 pilot and Fall 2013 roll out, parents and community members experienced the Parent Researchers as leaders with expertise, deep knowledge of the issue guide, and earned authority through life experience.

Parent Researchers experienced themselves in leadership roles as they were in trainings, moderating, recording, or taking a lead in logistics or problem-solving. These outcomes, representing capacity building, occurred precisely because they had deep knowledge of the context and an overview of the skills and process through their lived experience. Noteworthy is that even in the final interviews of the action research project, several parent co-researchers still did not self-identify as leaders, but rather as a kind of “facilitators” or “bridge-persons.”

Through taking the fruits of their work back to each community, with a *Looking for Answers Together* issue guide physically in hand, parents have experienced themselves as leaders. This has been true across adult learning needs, language and literacy levels, and prior possession of leadership skills. For some Parent Researchers, this has meant having to develop public speak-

ing or facilitation skills. For others, it has meant tempering extensive work experience or educational attainment to be present with and listening to the group. Each Parent Researcher has carved out an adult learning experience (modeling, practice, coaching, feedback, and specific reference materials) in order to feel confident and to actually step into new roles as leaders, whether it be for a one-time event or in ongoing ways.

The parent leader experience underscores the importance of parents in leadership roles. While there are frequently set places for parents to contribute to community organizations and educational institutions (often a place on a board or specified volunteer opportunities), it is important to be aware of tokenism. By offering autonomy and support to parent leaders, the information they bring to the table can change and shape relevant outcomes for communities and educational institutions. Parent leaders offer a unique perspective both couched in an understanding of their child's needs and the real world applications of certain practices. The intentional use of the "Parent Researcher" title was to denote not only a seat at the table or contribution to an already defined endeavor, but to reinforce their role in co-creation of the work. The Parent Researchers have the privilege of design, as well as the responsibility of contributing.

Understanding the Role of Parent Inquiry in the Use of Information

Parent inquiry itself was introduced to the Parent Researchers and modeled during the Parent Information Action Research project in 2011 while developing the issue guide. The Parent Researchers applied their inquiry skills and methods in 2012 to their community-specific projects. These Parent Researchers then brought their inquiry skills and understanding of process to the Spring 2013 pilots for *Looking for Answers Together*. This was the first "new context" where we documented Parent Researchers applying their inquiry skills and sense of process. This was also the first setting where we could see the Parent Researchers set a tone for engagement that was informed by their inquiry experiences.

The new contexts, tone setting, and subsequent application in the Parent Learning Community are powerful examples of how the inquiry skill set is transferable for use in any context to identify questions and needs, and then assess the information. A specific example from across the arc of the work includes one Parent Researcher from Bridgeport who brought people together in 2011 for issue guide concern-gathering forums, then recruited three new parent leaders (intentionally diversifying the community representation to include Spanish speakers) for the Spring 2013 pilot, and then took the lead for a Fall 2013 conversation that had the largest turnout to date.

While this Parent Researcher has realized perhaps the most complete application of her inquiry skills and process knowledge, she is by no means the only one or an outlier. Each Parent Researcher offers evidence of internalization, personal development, and application. As a corollary to

this steadfast example, we must remember that in using an inquiry stance there is wild unevenness among us as humans. So among 14 Parent Researchers comes a rich diversity of skills, comfort levels, talents, and experiences. It is also true that while parent inquiry, like any learning in our lives, becomes part of us, there remains vast unevenness of resources among us. This unevenness is reflected in the Parent Learning Community. Some Parent Researchers struggle to access transportation or internet access, while some struggle to manage work, family, and research commitments. This unevenness and diversity is critical for our consideration as we examine use of information.

In the systematic pursuit of knowledge as it occurs in higher education, resource unevenness can be a distraction, if not an impediment. In some methodological traditions, such unevenness is to be controlled or “cleaned up.” In those methodologies that embrace the particular and honor the context, the unevenness can exhaust resources. The time demands, the energy required for being present in the community, and many types of required fiscal resources are all possible inhibitors to co-constructed community work in higher education. In addition, typical procedures such as submissions to an Internal Review Board or application for funding can quickly become challenging as one tries to translate the demands of authentic community engagement into the language of higher education and the code of researcher conduct. So many norms intended to promote and maintain rigor can also become operationalized as elitist and deterring.

Discussion

One particular question surfaced by our work that is particularly relevant to conversations about the growth of public scholarship is: How can institutional structures support parent leadership and agency? By the nature of self-perpetuation and the desire to sustain, institutions can often be conservative and/or slow to change. Of course, the size of the organization, the mission, and intent are all key factors in supporting stronger organizational structures. Higher education is learning, possibly more now than ever before, how to be increasingly nimble and responsive. So, if we believe institutions can have some higher level of responsiveness (and some do not believe this is possible), then how can the structures in place support parent leadership and agency? It seems from this work that institutions can respond with resources – space, time, transportation, childcare, and access to physical and virtual resources. These can all support a parent leader in his/her identified purpose.

Institutions can also provide parents with leadership training, as well as personal and professional experiences that increase their sense of agency and their ability to draw upon their human capacity to contribute. This could include the more traditional pursuit of higher education degrees, but should also include bringing parents to the table – the real-world, power-brokering

table where the planning and decision making occurs. It should include opportunities for parents to co-construct and co-design with those of us in higher education. It is not simply about offering parents a seat, but a real place where their voices can be heard and where hard questions are posed and responded to with not only answers but also thoughtful responses. For this engagement to be authentic, the parent leaders must be seen as an integral part of the purpose at hand. If parents are seen as add-ons or placeholders or not having the credentials to be at the table, they are thus treated as peripheral and then there is not an increase in a sense of agency. In fact the double message of “You are welcome here, but not welcome to genuinely participate” is undermining, not only in the moment but also to a person’s overall sense of agency.

Our work offers significant insights on how those of us in higher education must be vigilant to our intent and to the enactment of our projects if they are to be experienced by parents or any stakeholders as capacity building. As we know first-hand, relationships around research require a give-and-take that is sometimes exhausting and even overwhelming, and it is hardly ever as streamlined as a one-directional delivery of expertise for imparting what we deem useful. Yet, if we hold a stance of having to give everything to, in this case, the parents (such as resources or knowledge), then unintentionally if not overtly we will communicate to the parents that they are less able, their knowledge is less valued, and their experiences less important. If we only see our ability to build parents’ capacity rather than see a dual directional capacity building experience, we in higher education are missing half of the relevance. If we hold a stance of having something to share with parents and something to learn from their talents, knowledge, and experience, then we are in an iterative cycle that affirms everyone’s sense of agency and draws upon everyone’s human capacity to contribute.

To address the goals of public scholarship, we can ask what happens when we and/or our institutions cannot be flexible, responsive structures that honor our individual and social locations. What happens when the talents, knowledge, and experiences are not the right fit to support parent leadership or when the parents and organizations have different versions of what parent leadership should look like? We can ask what the process of inquiry with parents has taught us when parents (people with the primary responsibility of raising children) find themselves on the periphery and cannot affect change on the structure, and then use their talents, knowledge, and experience to subvert the system.

By subversion we mean the best enacting of problem solving skills to find an alternate way to accomplish an identified sense of purpose. In many sectors and throughout history we have honored those who doggedly find a means to realize their sense of purpose. Parents who have identified a sense of purpose in the context of their community know how to ask meaningful questions, know how to make sense of information and data, and know how to take informed actions. In short, they have internalized tools

and processes for identifying and striving toward, if not accomplishing, their purpose. At this point of personal agency, a parent can not only gain from institutional structures, but can also question the structures and spin off such structures to create further learning opportunities. Inadvertently, the structures can then provide learning opportunities for parents by encouraging the questioning of the learning opportunities themselves.

Insights for Public Scholarship in Higher Education

If the intent of bringing community members together is to engage in deliberation, then there must be a central place for listening and responding in the course of the discussion in order to perpetuate the deliberation. This is active listening, and it is a key component in public scholarship - for without listening we are closed off from the wealth of perspectives and insights that should inform our interaction with community. As it has come up repeatedly during the course of this work, those of us in higher education must frame conversations that are not intended to persuade or convince, but rather to open up possibilities for examined thinking, beliefs, and actions. We are compelled to conduct further research to determine if there is a place for: a) direct instruction; b) explicit role play and modeling; c) shared expectations and desired outcomes; and d) language-based and/or adult learning needs being met in the context of public scholarship.

A Commitment to Equitable Power

This work consciously puts parents at the center of the project as engaged individuals possessing valued knowledge rather than as passive research participants, which is counter to the norms of many academic fields. By engaging Parent Researchers in an equitable power scenario, relevant knowledge becomes an act of co-construction. Higher education researchers are no longer the experts giving their knowledge to the research participant, but equally receiving knowledge from their participant counterparts. This structure creates a capacity building environment, which embraces the innate abilities of the individual and optimizes growth for both researcher and community member.

Participatory Engagement

Drawing across the various trainings, conversations, learning forums, and member checks, there has been a significant revealing of Parent Researcher and leader expectations about participatory engagement. Our understanding and experience of these clarified and asserted expectations is a developmental process of each individual parent as a leader and researcher. The clarification and articulation of the expectations and well-placed questions by parents reflect their internalizing of the inquiry tools and processes.

This specific expectation cuts across forums – the time to be found and the space to be made for Parent Researchers’ questions, concerns, and learning needs.

What we also understand from our own first-hand experience with public scholarship is the disequilibrium experienced by higher education faculty accustomed to depersonalized interactions. Perhaps only after years into this work do we honor the intensity of extensive feedback from passionate, capable parents. Yet when parents take the time and extend themselves to offer extensive feedback, it means they are selecting to engage in meaningful ways and expect an intentional, specific response. This takes time, often because it requires a mode of communication and a common time most likely outside of the typical workday. It not only takes making space in our academic realities for the work of public scholarship, but also space in our personal conceptual maps for information and insights from perspectives we do not necessarily know first-hand. Do we create a “third space” where each of us can be open, sharing, and in a learning stance? We believe public scholarship demands a literal or metaphoric space where we all set aside expertise and build shared expectations to foster engagement in public scholarship.

As the “professionals” and researchers we must take responsibility for providing the required resources, for covering the informational materials, and for starting and ending on time. Yet we simultaneously must own what our responses mean to parents and other participants. Over the course of the work, even something as technically true as stating that there is “not enough time” has been perceived as not valuing a request to make enough time for it. If community members engaged in public scholarship (in our case parents) are to feel enough ownership to risk participating, then we must be hyper-vigilant to what our actions “say” to parents. If we want sustained engagement in public scholarship, we in higher education must question if we are remaining alert to finding time and making space for authentic individual and community development opportunities through participatory engagement.

Not Just Moving Through It, Being Part of Creating It

Both inquiry and collaboration can be very complex, uneven terrains to navigate. In this Parentii work we have come to understand that the Parent Researchers were not interested in simply moving through steps, curriculum, or protocols. In the spirit of participatory research and public scholarship, Parent Researchers demanded being part of creating the action, the trajectory, and the change for themselves and their communities. Can we in higher education see value in what parents bring, even when it is not what we expected as their contribution? How open can we be, and are we willing to be more open to others inquiry, especially when directed at our work, practices, and assumptions? How much room is there for us to alter

or change? There has not been a week over these months, nor over these years, that this parent inquiry work has not pushed both authors back to these tough questions.

At the core of sustaining ourselves in this public scholarship has been our researcher and author collaboration grounded by inquiry. Our collaboration with each other has been as we offer complimentary skills with shared commitments to an inquiry stance, to translational applied research, and ultimately knowing we are committed to answering to the Parent Researchers. Perhaps it is the shared early childhood inquiry stance, the intellectual pursuit of academia, or even the fierce sense of social justice that leads each of us to advocate; but without these commitments the intensity, wild flux, and vast unpredictability of this work would be overwhelming if not impossible.

Community members engaged in public scholarship and higher education partners (in this case Parent Researchers) demand of themselves, each other, and those of us who engage with them that we affirm our intentions to be inclusive. All parties want a clear stake in what is occurring. Regular examination of our assumptions must be reflexive. We must demonstrate commitment to the public work by continually checking in on what is being experienced by parents and community members, and that what they have actually experienced is not simply what we intended or hoped the experience to be. When engaging in public scholarship, each of us (University Researcher and Parent Researchers alike) need to not just move through the motions of engagement, leadership, and inquiry; each must be part of creating it.

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