

**Moving from “This Is How It’s Always Been”
to “This Is How It Must Be”
Lessons from Participatory Design Research
Vianna Alcantara & Joanna Geller**

The Family Leadership Design Collaborative
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THE FAMILY LEADERSHIP DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

The Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC) is a national network of over 40 scholars, practitioners, and family and community leaders who seek to center racial equity in family engagement by catalyzing an expansive national research agenda and developing “next” (beyond current “best”) practices, measures and tools. We envision family and community wellbeing and educational justice as core aims in this work that begins from non-dominant family and community ecologies, creates ongoing transformative possibilities, and builds solidarities towards collective action for racial equity, from early childhood to secondary education.

We mobilize inter-disciplinary and experiential forms of expertise and see families and communities – particularly those marginalized by race, class, language, or immigrant status – as learning experts, co-designers, collaborators, and fellow leaders in the work. For more information, visit our website at www.familydesigncollab.org or email us at uwfldc@gmail.com

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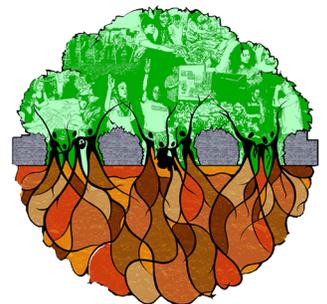
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Partner With Communities Where Children Come First



Annenberg
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Moving from “This Is How It’s Always Been” to “This Is How It Must Be”: Lessons from Participatory Design Research

Vianna Alcantara and Joanna Geller (Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University)

Introduction

These are not ordinary times. Just in the month or so since Trump’s inauguration, ICE has arrested parents in front of their children as they perform routine acts like taking their children to school, an engineer from India was shot and killed at a bar in Kansas City, a mosque in Texas was burned to the ground hours after the signing of the Executive Order, 140 Jewish centers and schools nationwide have received bomb threats, the rollback of protections for transgender students has placed these students at greater risk of stigma and bullying among a population that is already 25 times more likely to report attempting suicide than the rest of the population (National Transgender Discrimination Survey, 2015), etc. etc. etc.

If there were ever a time for those who are outraged to question the way they and their institutions “have always done things,” it’s now. Calling representatives and marching is critical, but these times also require a deep look inward at the relationships in our everyday lives that perpetuate the “us vs. them” mindset that propelled Trump into the presidency in the first place. For researchers, this is the time to question how our own institutions and our relationships with communities are either contributing to the status quo or promoting “transformative social change.” Bang and Vossougi (2016) define transformative social change as,

“the interweaving of structural critiques with the enactment of alternative forms of here-and-now activity that open up qualitative distinct social relations, forms of learning, and knowledge development, and contribute to the intellectual thriving and well-being of students, teachers, families, and communities” (p. 175).

What follows are reflections on our experiences conducting participatory design research (PDR) as members of the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC). We share the ways in which PDR influenced us personally and professionally and the lessons we learned throughout the process. Our aim is to provide fellow researchers with an idea of how they may reimagine their relationships with one another and communities in unordinary (and hopefully in ordinary!) political times. First, we describe background about the FLDC, design circles, and the local context of our work. Then, we share who we are and discuss how our experience with PDR made us reconsider what transformative social change at the individual, relational, and collective levels look like. We close by discussing the need to consider how the structures and cultures that we have come to take for granted in our institutions need to be upended in order to make this alternate idea of research work.

Background

The FLDC is a national network of 40 scholars, practitioners, and family and community leaders who seek to center racial equity in family engagement by catalyzing an expansive national research agenda and developing “next” (beyond current “best”) practices, measures and tools. The network envisions family and community wellbeing and educational justice as core aims in work that begins from non-dominant family and community ecologies, creates ongoing transformative possibilities, and builds solidarities towards collective action for racial equity, from early childhood to secondary education. The network mobilizes inter-disciplinary and experiential forms of expertise and see families and communities – particularly those marginalized by race, class, language, or immigrant status – as learning experts, co-designers, collaborators, and fellow leaders in the work.

Nationally, there were 12 FLDC design circles, a series of at least three conversations facilitated by FLDC members and partners in communities across the United States, varying by context, focus and participants. Design circles are in-depth, reciprocal working groups or focus groups that aim to engage stories, experiences, and expertise within communities to catalyze action within that context. The circles

honor community leadership and perspectives by co-designing solutions rather than only on voicing and naming challenges (Bang et al., 2010).

We conducted three design circles in Central Falls, Rhode Island. Central Falls has a population of approximately 19,000. The city is culturally and linguistically diverse, with 73% of the population speaking a language aside from English in the home and 43% having been born outside of the U.S. (American Community Survey, 2009). The majority of those born outside of the U.S. emigrated from Latin America (67%), although residents have also emigrated from North America (12%), Europe (12%), Africa (8%), and Asia (1%) (American Community Survey, 2009). One-third of families with children under the age of 18 are in poverty. The school district has an enrollment of approximately 2,800 students. 81% of the district’s students qualify for free or reduced priced lunch, and the student body is 73% Latino, 12% Black, 13% White, and 2% other races.

In December of 2015, we completed a multi-year evaluation of a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant issued to the Central Falls School District to expand opportunities for family engagement in early childhood. Therefore, we had strong existing relationships with staff from the school district, who helped to recruit seven parents to participate in the design circle and supported the logistics. We met three times in the evenings, and each design circle lasted for two hours. Two of the parents spoke only Spanish, two spoke only English, two were bilingual but mostly spoke English, and one parent was most comfortable speaking Portuguese but spoke Spanish during the design circles.

Who We Are

Joanna: I am a White woman in my early 30s. Professionally, I identify mostly as a researcher, but personally, I identify as a partner, a soon-to-be mother, a sister, as the daughter of parents who protested against the Vietnam War and for civil and women’s rights; the granddaughter of my beloved grandparents who fled Nazi Germany but whose lives were defined by so much more; and the great-granddaughter of great grand-parents who never escaped Berlin and who therefore never knew my mother, their granddaughter, or her children, my brother and me but undoubtedly influence who we are

today. These identities, molded by those who came before me, are inextricably linked to my identity as a researcher. I believe that building empathy, understanding, and love across difference is one of the most important tools for dismantling oppression, yet one of the hardest. This belief is why I was drawn to studying family engagement when I was in college – building partnerships between schools and communities is essentially about building strong relationships across difference. This belief also drives the way I strive to approach my research; I try to be honest with myself and understand my biases and listen carefully to understand and analyze perspectives different than my own.

Vianna: There are multiple I identity boxes that I fit into and maybe because I turned 30 last year I have been asking myself what exactly these identities that are typically assigned to me mean to me as an individual and what do they say about me in relation to the collective. With hesitancy and forewarning that these identities are currently being interrogated and thus feel fluid I will say that I identify as a Dominican immigrant, queer lower-case femme, “working” poor single mother. I am also a researcher/scholar, community worker, friend, sister and daughter. I am also a survivor. A survivor of multiple generations of physical and emotional abuse, neglect, incest and sexual violence. Life as a child, for me, consisted of a constant instability, learning how to protect myself, learning how to speak quieter, how to be unseen. Little did I know that my family was teaching me what society had taught them in order to survive. As poor men and women of color in a country wrestling with a history of colonialism and dictatorship they had been consistently dehumanized. I did not understand this as a child and so as I reflect back I have realized that I constantly find myself at the intersection of the past, the present and the future. As a child, my brain forced itself to erase parts of the past in order to navigate the present and ensure my future. In college, I began to wonder what the role of the past, the present and the future were in terms of my own transformation and the radical social transformation that I sought for my family and my community. Did we have to explore our past to understand our present situation and envision our future? In our exploration of the past, did we have to dig deep, find the wounds and heal them before moving towards the future? How much time should we dedicate to that exploration? Or, could we/should we just charge ahead, as we were, unaware of how our past had shaped our present? Understanding the

interrelationship of the past, present and future and the various tensions existing in these intersections has taught me to be much more empathetic which is something that I always take into my scholarship and research.

Researching with the Heart

We use the heart as metaphor for our experience with PDR as well as a model for sharing lessons. For us, PDR helped us experience research as a living organism that challenged us to constantly change and evolve. There is nothing accidental about the heart. It has been perfectly designed, whether by a higher power or evolution or both, to function exactly as it does. Every vein, artery, chamber and valve is placed in the exact position it is meant to be. Each part has a unique role and each carries out this role with precision. Each individual part is integrally, interconnected and dependent on the other parts in order to function. We do not mean to imply that PDR is perfectly designed or that it always works exactly as planned. Similar to the heart though, every principle, every person and every aspect of the community is integral, interconnected and dependent on each other in order for PDR to function. Very much like the heart functions as an essential pump for the constant flow of blood in the body, PDR was an essential space for us to examine the interrelated functions of the individual, relational and the collective in our research. All of these functions were essential to the process of transformative social change.

Writing about Freire’s beliefs about love, Antonia Darder, shares that Freire saw love as “a motivational force for struggle” that was linked to developing “emancipatory relationships” (Darder, 2015). Darder outlined, “faith and dignity in our relationships with others, social responsibility for our world, participation in the coconstruction of knowledge and solidarity across our differences” as political values of a pedagogy of love (Darder, 2015). In talking about the heart, we would like to point to not only its physiological significance but also to its significance as a symbol of love and our shared humanity. More specifically, we look at the heart as the source of a political love that is aimed at individual and collective transformation. To arrive at this political love, we felt that we had to engage with the process of PDR at an individual, relational and collective level. Each level contained multiple layers. We found that

these layers could not be isolated and that the more courageous we were to engage all of the layers the deeper that we understood each individual level. Below we share our individual and collective experience with PDR and its impact to us at the individual, relational and collective levels. As deeply personal as some of these reflections are we hope that we can share lessons that can resonate with others.

Individual Level

Although we each experienced PDR differently, we identified core principles that we would recommend that other researchers who are engaging or planning to engage in PDR consider. At the individual level, these principles include:

- Reflecting on ourselves and our actions within the group
- Being vulnerable
- Holding ourselves accountable to the alignment between our personal values and behavior
- Taking risks and being courageous
- Listening to our own hearts
- Opening ourselves up to something new and different; being creative

We each reflect on how we experienced these core themes below.

Joanna:

As a researcher, I was trained to ask good open-ended questions, to listen carefully and probe for more detail and more examples, to make participants feel comfortable and welcome. Conducting focus groups has always been one of my favorite parts of being a researcher, but recent focus groups I led during the i3 evaluation in Central Falls left me feeling like there was something missing from the experience. Most of our team's focus group questions asked parents to *describe*. "Describe how you feel in your child's school, how the teachers communicate with you, how the principal communicates with you. What do you like or not like about this?" Towards the end of the focus groups, we asked parents to

imagine. “What would you like to change? What would make your school and community better?” This is where parents would start to become organizers. Sometimes through tears, they described their children being bullied and their attempts to make it stop; they spoke passionately about how there needed to be more buses and after-school activities, safer playgrounds and parks, freedom from the fear of deportation, a stronger sense of community. Soon after these impassioned conversations began, I would need to end them. “Unfortunately, that’s all the time we have. Thank you so much for coming, here is your gift card.” Back at the office, we would type up the parents’ recommendations and send them to the district. Despite their best intentions, the district could never alone give parents everything they wanted and deserved for their children. I knew that. But, I settled for parents’ hopes and dreams living on a Word document and eventually in conversations with the district and community partners. These conversations were rich, but none of the parents were part of them. They had received their gift cards and gone home long ago.

PDR demanded something more from me. Listening comes easily to me but sharing about myself does not, especially to a group of strangers. However, we all came to the design circles as people, not as “researchers” and “subjects.” Sharing our stories fostered an ongoing exchange that I had never before experienced in more traditional research, much like the heart is constantly exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide with the lungs. Sharing my story, thoughts, and feelings required me to be vulnerable. I worried about being perceived as not fitting in, as the only person in the room who wasn’t a parent, one of the only two people who didn’t live in Central Falls, and the only one with two parents with graduate degrees. Yet, asking parents to be vulnerable without showing a willingness to be vulnerable myself would maintain the idea that researchers take and communities give, without an exchange. Just listening is taking information and making sense of it through my own filter. Dialogue is repeating what I’m hearing, sharing how I’m interpreting it and why, and asking whether that interpretation is correct. Dialogue means findings come alive and are no longer prisoners to Microsoft Word documents!

PDR required me to accept another kind of vulnerability as well – admitting that there was no way to have every answer or know the “right” thing to say at every moment. I had to throw out everything I had ever learned about running a “good and productive” meeting, including preparing a structured

agenda with time allotments for every activity. During the third and last design circle, I opened myself to the novel idea of going in without an agenda at all, only an idea about the tensions we wanted to discuss. This departure from the way I had always done things was unnerving but powerful.

Additionally, I had to explore how I was or was not holding myself accountable to my values and the alignment between my ideas of what justice should look like in the community and the inequitable power dynamics that were happening within the group. During the second design circle, one parent described how she felt sorry for children she observed at the school whose parents didn't hug them in the morning, implying that these parents didn't love their kids. During the evaluation, we heard this sentiment a lot. We wrote about it in our report, we spoke with district staff about it, we talked about it when we presented to the Central Falls community. In fact, my entire dissertation focused on how school cultures could disrupt deficit-based attitudes toward families of color. However, in this moment, sitting across the room from the parent, I was too focused on the clock that was running out of time and thought to myself, "We'll find a way to address this in the next design circle" rather than making myself vulnerable enough to address it in that very moment. In this moment, there was a misalignment between my silence and my values that this type of deficit-based thinking is dangerous and must be disrupted. I had to reflect on this moment so that for the next design circle, I could be ready to dig into moments like these as they arose.

Finally, I ultimately had to reflect on how my presence as a White monolingual English-speaking person was reinforcing an inequitable power dynamic. Although I had considered my race, class, and language relative to the group, I didn't think seriously enough about my Whiteness relative to my co-facilitator, a woman of color. During the second design circle, when parents shared out about their "homework" assignment, they addressed me, even though it was my co-facilitator, Vianna, a woman of color, who had introduced the activity and was facilitating. When we raised this during the third design circle, a parent noted that she addressed me rather than Vianna because she thought I was the leader, as I was the one who introduced the purpose of the design circles – I was the one who spoke first. This required me to reflect on my values and how I was responsible – intentionally or not – for reproducing the very power dynamics I was hoping to disrupt. As Bang and Vossougi (2016) note, "Claims of objectivity

or neutrality often absolve researchers from the need for careful and intentional relationship building and decision making with regard to researchers’ roles and positions.”

Vianna:

Growing up, I had many questions about the world around me. I often wondered why things were the things they were and if/how they could be different. I would day dream of ways that my mother could get out of poverty. I would think of all the different ways that my siblings and I could help around the house so that our mom would have some free time when she arrived tired from work. I spent a lot of energy observing our neighborhood, my mother’s friends and relatives and trying to find solutions to problems I did not have the name for. It was perhaps for this reason that the core principles of FLDC resonated so strongly with me. The four core principles, cultivating family and community wellbeing and educational justice, beginning with family and community ecologies, creating ongoing transformative possibilities and building solidarities with collective action, tapped into and gave language to the dreams and aspirations that I had as a child trying to navigate multiple levels of oppression.

In my work as a researcher I often find myself wrestling with the question that has stemmed from my personal experience: How can I stay in a place of gratitude and celebration of all the things that my mothers and I/marginalized communities had to endure to survive while acknowledging the pain and trauma that survival caused and simultaneously holding a vision for healing and change? Though this question occupies a lot of my mind space, I rarely find the space to explore it within my workspace. This is especially true when using “traditional” research methods that requires all inquiries to be boiled down to a few questions and expects a clean-cut methodology that results in a number of recommendations. When Joanna introduced the Design Circle proposal to me it sounded much like this. My understanding was that we were going to go to Central Falls, educate parents about Cultural Wealth Theory, guide them through the research process design and then facilitate a conversation where we arrived at a research question. I asked Joanna if there was any room to do something different. What if parents were not interested in theories of cultural wealth? What if they were not interested in doing research? How could

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we explore questions and issues that parents were genuinely interested in? How could we support parents in figuring out what to do with those questions? I was happy that Joanna was willing to not only discuss the possibility of changing our design but was also open to changing it. This was the beginning of our participatory design research.

It took courage to bring my concerns up to Joanna who had invited me to be a partner in this project. I knew that asking her to change the outline that she had originally designed was a risk and it took me several meetings before I did. I looked at the plan over and over again, read over the recommendations that we had outlined from our evaluation and read Yosso's (2005) piece on Cultural Wealth. Something did not feel completely right. My heart had wanted to build relationships with the parents I had met at Central Falls during our evaluation. It had wanted to connect as a mother, as a Latinx woman, as an immigrant as a co constructor rather than an observer/researcher/collector of data. When I connected my brain to my heart I knew that it was important to bring my questions up to Joanna and to suggest something different. It was possible that Joanna could say no to my suggestion, after all we did not have much time and she was the person who had initiated the project but after much reflection I arrived at the conclusion that it was worth taking the risk. Reflecting on my values helped me take the risk. For me, taking the risk meant holding myself accountable to the values I hold as a researcher and principal among them is to start with the members of community first. To be humble, to listen and to offer not impose. It was important for me going back to Central Falls that we would disrupt power dynamics, that within this framework of participatory design research, we could play around with our understanding of the role of researcher within community and movement building. So I took the risk and offered that we start with a relationship building exercise first. I suggested that we were intentional in centering relationships, in not only asking folks to be vulnerable but making ourselves vulnerable too, to create a space of trust. For me, establishing trust required time and intentional praxis.

Relational Level

We define the “relational” level as the relationships and processes that happen between facilitators, between facilitators and participants, and among participants. Core principles that we identified at the relational level included:

- Holding one another accountable
- Embracing conflict
- Prioritizing trust-building
- Intentionally naming and disrupting of power dynamics
- Taking risks and being courageous
- Listening to each other
- Being in dialogue

Joanna:

Before the design circles, I thought much more about what I wanted the outcomes to be than about what I wanted the relationships in the room to look like. My understanding of the design circles when I began the process was that we would be working with a group of 5-7 parents to imagine how the Central Falls schools and community could be more just and equitable. We would spend the three design circles talking about pressing issues, narrowing the issues down to one or two, exploring the roots of the problem - what we already knew, what we needed to know - and finally craft a research question that the group could study together as participatory action researchers. I was imagining that we would begin to brainstorm issues during our first session together. After all, we only had three sessions, and there was no time to waste!

Instead, Vianna suggested that we have everyone create a “journey map” – a drawing of how their race, class, and gender had influenced their current thinking about education, and then go around and share. I did some quick math in my head. 5 minutes to introduce the activity, 20 minutes to draw, 5

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minutes to share each, times 9 people. I worried about going through our entire first design circle without surfacing any “real” issues, but I deferred to Vianna’s judgment. Sharing the journey maps was a beautiful experience. Everyone listened intently, smiling, nodding. Everyone clapped for the sharer when she finished. We learned about one another’s families, cultures, where we grew up, what drove us to be part of this group. We saw plainly that aside from being women, there were commonalities that united us all. We weren’t designing a “product” or a “tool” but we were designing a community.

Of course, it wasn’t all perfect or even close to it. The three Spanish speakers said far fewer words than the four English speakers, who were able to joke around informally and finish one another’s thoughts. As mentioned, the dynamic in the room often mirrored the power dynamics of school, with the parents addressing me, a White woman, as they spoke and asking me for permission to use the bathroom. Moments of surface-level tension and disagreement that could have led to rich discussion and new understandings were swept under the rug because time was running out.

For the third design circle, we were encouraged by Ann Ishimaru, the co-PI at UW, to give up on trying to design “something” and re-focus on designing community. After all, if we couldn’t figure out how to make this space one of honesty and inclusion, what hope did we have to transform the entire district or community? We went into the third design circle with little of a plan, except to embrace discomfort, to allow the conversation to flow organically, and to dig into tension rather than to let it linger in the air until it evaporated. We told the parents that this design circle was going to be different – and it was. Although we had danced around the issue of language and power during the first two circles, during this design circle, parents shared their true beliefs about whether or not the district should provide translation and interpretation to services to parents who did not speak English. One English-speaking parent worried that this would enable those parents not to learn English. Another English-speaking parent countered with her belief that America was built by people who spoke different languages.

The honest dialogue that happened during this design circle required courage and risk-taking from everyone in the room. The parent who expressed her concern that the district was enabling parents who didn’t speak English took a risk in sharing this opinion. The parent who challenged this mindset also

took a risk in challenging a fellow parent with whom she typically laughed and joked around. Everybody had to embrace discomfort and disagreement. This is very much at odds with the ways in which successful meetings are often defined, where participants feeling comfortable and agreement is more desirable than tension and disagreement. Again, everyone had to throw out their previous ideas about what a “successful” meeting looked like.

Yet, even after these tense and uncomfortable moments – and probably because of them – the group seemed to reach a new level of empathy and connectivity. Eventually, we were able to stop talking about who was to blame for what and why and re-focus the dialogue on the reason we were all there: to improve educational opportunities for children and young people in Central Falls. In one of the mother’s words, “At the end of the day, we all have children in this community. We all have relatives in this community. We all have some type of connection to this community, whether it be family, school, whatever it is, teachers, teachers’ aid, lunch aids, we all are in this community.” This same parent shared an emotional story about her experiences being marginalized by her child’s school, a story she hadn’t felt comfortable sharing before. The air of honesty and risk-taking in the room propelled her to share at that moment. Although the journey mapping activity during the first design circle helped the group build trust and a sense of connectivity, the unstructured and unplanned conversation during the third design circle went a step further. This type of conversation required an authentic exchange – it required listening, responding, listening again – not only between the facilitators and participants, but among all members of the group.

Vianna:

Throughout the four months or so that we were involved directly with this project what I appreciate the most was the many opportunities for dialogue. Dialogue created a space to wrestle with ideas, concepts and data. In these spaces, we were never looking for a right or wrong answer or seeking particular solutions. It was a space where Freire’s notion of praxis was alive because we were actively sharing our individual reflections and allowing those to influence our collective action. Within these

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spaces, I felt the humanistic aspect of education manifested and we were all becoming more fully human in our experience. We were allowed and we allowed to be seen and feel included, we built solidarities not walls across our differences and most importantly we dreamed of a new world together. This was true every time Joanna and I sat to plan and then to debrief, when we met with the parents, and when we met with our colleagues at the University of Washington. Each space offered in its own way an opportunity to be vulnerable, to be both subject and object, to learn and to grow and to share that growth and learning with others.

Participatory design research offered me the opportunity finally to really stand in that tension point of the past, the present and the future. To understand more fully what Freire meant by the power of dialogue, of using our words to name our worlds as a precursor to transforming our world. I felt like I grew as a researcher by learning how to use data differently, as a mother by sharing my story with other mothers and as a woman by allowing myself to be shaped by the stories of the women who have been part of the project.

A few specific moments come to mind that I feel capture my ideas of humanistic education and living praxis. The first happened during our first Design Circle while we shared our journey maps. I was blown away by the level of vulnerability displayed in the room from the parents. The mothers shared their stories authentically, demonstrated trust and the room felt supportive. I had never experienced that level of connection in such a short amount of time especially not within the context of research. I, again, was faced with a choice. Would I take a risk and share as vulnerably as the other mothers or do I hide behind my role as facilitator/researcher and share superficially? During our planning, I had mentioned to Joanna that it was important that we did not ask parents to do something that we were not willing to do. That if we asked parents to share with us their journey we should be willing to share ours as well. I found the courage to share with a group of women whom I had just met that I had been sexually assaulted at 16, had gotten pregnant as a result and that that child was turning 13 in a few weeks. It was part of my journey that I had not even shared with my colleague Joanna before. I felt trust in the room and in

response I also felt a sense of responsibility to not only acknowledge but contribute to the building of that trust. Sharing vulnerably was one way in which I felt I could contribute.

The second moment happened during the last Design Circle during a moment of tension. The conversation was again becoming one of blame and of what parents should or shouldn't do. This had been a point of conflict throughout our time together and our time for that evening was running out. I decided to engage the conflict anyway and to place myself as an object rather than a subject disrupting the power dynamics in the room. I shared with the mothers my own insecurities as a mother, my own shortcomings, my feelings of hypocrisy when writing and presenting about parent engagement knowing that I would receive the lowest score on many of the measures of family engagement published. The energy of the room shifted a little. There seemed to be an opening for compassion and empathy, a moment to stop and reconsider. I followed up by asking how we could instead of blaming or judging think of ways that we could support one another in being the best parents possible. Could we imagine a community where everyone was invested in everyone else's well-being? There were many more moments that brought praxis to life for me, including some that Joanna has shared.

Collective Level

We define the “collective” level as transformations we would like to see in the broader community, beyond the design circle group. Core themes at the collective level included:

- Being empathetic to those outside of our group/ Developing empathy and responsibility for the collective good
- Embracing connectivity to a broader collective
- Holding ourselves accountable to build collective ownership
- Taking risks and being courageous
- Listening deeply

Joanna:

Those who are overwhelmed by the deluge of injustices occurring right now might feel that there is no time to focus on relational dynamics when there is so much happening “out there.” Why does promoting justice for the broader collective demand attention to relational dynamics within small groups? How does the relational move into the collective? After the tone in the room became one where the group could feel comfortable being honest and vulnerable with one another is when the mother shared her story about being marginalized from her child’s school. All of the other parents rallied around her, declaring their empathy, saying “We should get a petition going” to change the school policy. Just like the heart feeds oxygen to the rest of the body, a group that experiences trust, empathy, and connectivity feeds energy to the broader collective.

A vision for the broader collective also feeds the relational. During the first design circle, the group had identified that they were all there to improve educational opportunities in Central Falls. Just like the reciprocity between internal relational dynamics and external structural change, the heart and the lungs rely on one another to function. During the second design circle, the group shared their dreams for their children, their schools, and their community. Most of these dreams involved institutional change, not individual change. Yet, the mindset that parents should “just go learn English” contradicted these professed values. Our role as facilitators in the third design circle was to hold the group accountable to their professed values by challenging the ways in which deficit-based mindsets and parent-blaming contradicted our collective vision for the broader community. If we had continued to meet, we would have expected that eventually the whole group would be holding one another accountable.

Vianna:

Building community, a community grounded in and actively practicing the principles of love outlined by Darder, has always been much more than an intellectual exercise for me. I am deeply invested in learning, creating and engaging in ways that heal and build solidarity and community. I have experienced first hand the beauty, vibrancy and joy that exists in communities that have survived

centuries of dehumanization. I have also, often simultaneously, experienced the residuals of pain, sorrow, bitterness, fear and anger produced by that survival. I have always felt that my own freedom was deeply tied to the freedom of my mother, my aunt, my neighbor and recently that of my oppressor/s. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) I found the words for this longing, the definition of the kind of relationship and community that I sought and since then I have been working on creating spaces for “creative communion produced by freedom and even the very pursuit of freedom” (Freire, 1970). PDR has been the tool that has gotten me closest to developing that space of creative communion.

My understanding of Freire’s pedagogy of love is like PDR, it is a process that must be enacted and defined with the people most affected by oppression and marginalization and who are seeking to transform themselves and their communities (Freire, 1970). Within our PDR process we explicitly made power, stereotypes and structural inequality the object of reflection for our group by naming several assumptions operating in the room and their connection to larger systems of structural inequality. For example, the assumption that Joanna, a White woman, was in charge and I, a woman of color, was her assistant, which is similar to the leadership and teaching staffing structures of most urban schools. In these schools the majority of people of color are in service or assistant positions while most Whites are in teaching or leadership roles. Why is that the case? What kind of culture and expectations does it produce? How does it connect to the assumptions made by parents and by district folks? Another assumption was that offering support and services in the native languages of parents enabled parents to not learn English. By asking parents to reflect on why they were in favor of offering these services and supports to children in the classroom but not to the parents of those children, we were able to go deeper into the exploration of language and its use to include and exclude.

Our process of PDR provided time for individual reflection, for us this included, looking over the transcripts, reflecting on the evening and writing this article and for parents it included engaging in the activities “assigned” to them to take and complete at home. It also provided time for relational reflection. For us that meant engaging in dialogue with one another and also with our colleagues at University of Washington. Lastly, it included time for collective reflection. Our third design circle was a clear example

of that. We asked each other, what does this all mean? What can we do to change it? How do we build solidarity in this room? How do we extend that solidarity to the larger community? Within these interrelated spaces of reflection, the process of PDR was defined and redefined, made and remade, imagined and reimagined, blood was pumped in and blood was pumped out feeding our individual bodies, giving life to our collective struggle for liberation.

Rethinking Institutional Cultures and Structures

The type of research and themes that we described above are supported and hindered by institutional structures and cultures that we must closely examine - and if need be - disrupt in order to get to transformative social change. We recognize that structural and cultural ingredients in our institution and beyond both facilitated and hindered our PDR experience.

From a structural perspective, we benefited from certain features of our institution, the Annenberg Institute, which is an institute affiliated with Brown University but that operates more like an independent non-profit organization than a university department. Unlike faculty in traditional higher education departments, we are not rewarded by publishing in peer-reviewed journals, so we didn't have to think about how to justify our time spent on PDR by how many articles the process would yield. And, unlike many non-academic research organizations, we do not bill our grants hourly, so we were able to use time during the workday to plan and debrief without rushing through these conversations. From a cultural perspective, we benefited from working within an organization where community-engaged work is valued; thus, we didn't have to convince our supervisor that it was important for us to do this work in Central Falls. We also benefited from being part of a team of nine researchers who have taken many intentional steps over the past several years toward building trust with one another through regular team meetings, retreats, and discussions about our own experiences with different types of oppression. Therefore, the two of us had a strong foundation in place for working with one another honestly, vulnerably, and courageously throughout this process.

We also benefited from the structures that our University of Washington colleagues embedded into the project. A stipend for the design circles enabled us to appreciate the participants for their time and hire an interpreter. Because UW took care of logistics, such as transcription, we could focus on the substance of the work. Additionally, our UW colleagues prioritized making the time to meet with us and debrief after each design circle; this time for debriefing was critical to the success of the project. Not only were these structures in place, but our UW colleagues actively encouraged us to embrace honesty, tension, conflict, and fluidity, putting into practice the culture that the FLDC seeks to embrace.

Yet, the more we embraced the principles of PDR and recognized their value in our work in Central Falls, the more aware we became about the limitations of enacting these principles *within* our institution. Vulnerability, honesty, accountability, risk-taking, and dialogue require constant practice. These skills are honed not only when in use “out in the community” but also in a workplace setting where the power dynamics, risks, and hindering structures and cultures are often more profound. Our work in the community benefits when researchers are able to constantly practice these skills and learn how to exercise them in multiple settings where they experience varying identities and levels of power. Thus, we are currently reflecting on how the structure and culture of our own team facilitates and hinders our ability to do PDR in our community work and how to begin the process of change.

Despite the positive attributes of our team structures and culture described above, we have a long way to go. Cultural considerations include: How do we constantly bring our multiple selves into team meetings - not just when sharing our personal stories is the stated goal of the meeting? How do we support one another when we are vulnerable? How can we trust that we can name problems and take risks in spaces with individuals who hold varying levels of power without fear of how our vulnerability may affect how we are evaluated? How do we collectively own the act of naming these problems so that it doesn’t always fall on those who are most affected (and often have the least amount of power)? How do we hold leadership accountable to being authentic, to being just as vulnerable, if not more so, than everyone else? How do we make decisions where our sense of empathy and responsibility for the well-being of the whole team feels just as natural as considering our own individual well-being? Although

these questions are all cultural in nature, we can't ask and answer these questions without the appropriate structures in place. There is no doubt that we need more time to meet with one another to arrive at these answers and put our ideas into practice. We also need to re-think the structure of our meetings to allow more time for fluid conversation. This is not easy given that we all work on many fast-paced projects with constant deadlines.

We encourage our fellow researchers to meet these unordinary times with an unordinary response and to examine how their institutional structures and culture support and hinder the principles of PDR. We find it helpful to start with asking: What are the questions that, if answered, will help you and your institution be able to commit itself to PDR principles? Examples of these questions may include:

Structural:

- How is staff/faculty time allocated? Is there enough time for staff to reflect on themselves and collectively on the health of the group?
- How do funder expectations of timelines and deliverables hinder or support the themes highlighted above?
- How do promotion processes reinforce or encourage researchers to spend time improving the institutional culture and engaging in meaningful ways with communities?
- Who are the gatekeepers that have the power to change these structures and how do we engage them?

Cultural:

- Have we defined our individual and collective values? How are we holding one another accountable to practicing our individual and collective values?

- How do we define a successful meeting?
- How often do we reflect on our meetings and interpersonal dynamics? What processes are in place to intentionally name power within meetings and interpersonal dynamics? How are power imbalances addressed?
- Do leaders and people in positions of power value the themes outlined above? Do they intentionally support, encourage, and provide the space, support, and culture to ensure that these values are practiced? Are there structures to hold them accountable?

It’s hard to start asking these questions and even harder to answer them. Yet, given our short experiences with PDR, we can only imagine the cumulative impact on individuals, relationships, groups, institutions, and ultimately, transformative social change. We are committed to getting there and look forward to sharing about our process and progress in future writing.

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