

Advancing Educational Justice Given the Benefits, Challenges and Potential  
of Participatory Action Research in a Neoliberal Era

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, a collaborative group of university researchers and a community organizer who participated in a two-year participatory action research (PAR) partnership reflect upon their inquiry process and analyze its effects. Drawing upon many hours of participant-observation, group dialogue, and interview data, authors examine the benefits, challenges, and potential of using PAR to advance educational justice amidst austere neoliberal educational reforms. Such reforms include school closure interventions, state-governed schools, redistricting, and state sanctioned privatization. Authors consider ways PAR can not only help enact social change, but disrupt dominant and oppressive “pillars of power” that many urban educational organizers and activists are committed to opposing (Stoner, 2017). The findings discussed pertain to cultivating community-based versus academic research norms, fostering the learning and leadership of PAR members, experiencing success in mobilizing policy opposition, and negotiating the complexities of extending research partnerships. Implications for implementing justice-oriented PAR in urban educational arenas affected by intensifying neoliberal political contexts are highlighted.

## INTRODUCTION

Improving education involves exerting voice, power and influence over educational practice and policy making. Such acts are typically associated with K-12 educational leaders vested with formal authority. Youth, families, and other community members, however, can employ social agency and political citizenship in sophisticated ways that also affect educational change and constitute leadership (Author, 2015; Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015; Cox, 2015; Ishimaru, 2014; Patel, 2016; Schultz, 2006).

In this paper, we reflect on a two-year partnership involving university researchers and a community-based organization (CBO) that was formed to help pursue educational justice in Detroit, Michigan. The CBO members largely comprise ethnically diverse and low-income adults and youth working toward equity-oriented, public school improvement in a city deeply affected by neoliberalism that has spurred market-oriented and privatizing reforms. CBO members actively participate in educational lobbying, coalition building, and grassroots activism as they navigate the contentious, neoliberal political contexts and unstable governance structures of Detroit. They joined with university researchers in the fall of 2015 to co-design and co-implement participatory action research (PAR) to advance their justice-oriented work.

PAR brings differently situated individuals together to do collaborative research that leads to social action (Fine & Torre, 2004). Through PAR, CBO members have increased their learning about how to conduct original research and explored specific topics related to their reform priorities, such as special education access and school closure policies. CBO members are now working to marshal data to propose practical solutions to their neighbors and educational officials. Researchers from the University of Michigan have been involved in this PAR partnership to both study the community organizers' educational activism and be a part of

conducting research that has immediate, equity-oriented influence. Indeed, both the university and community-based groups have used PAR to reassert democratic and social justice-oriented participation in an urban educational reform arena where it is often blocked (Green, 2015; Author, 2015).

In line with PAR objectives, findings from the partnership study suggest that PAR privileges, highlights, and leverages the experiential knowledge and inquiry of marginalized citizens and it strengthens their civic leadership (McTaggart, 1991; Pant, 2014). University researchers are important collaborators who offer research support and facilitation in this partnership, but they have aimed to not drive the group's inquiry procedures. The PAR collaboration has not been without challenges given partners' varied needs, positionalities, areas of knowledge, and competing priorities and commitments—a common reality of collaborative inquiry (Author, 2006; Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Clark & Moss, 1996; Fine & Torre, 2004; McIntyre, 2008).

PAR, at its best, is an educative inquiry process anchored in collaborative meaning-making that yields community change and groups' increased social efficacy (Fuentes, 2009), but it is not power neutral (Fine & Torre, 2004; Bergold & Thomas, 2012). In this paper, we—an authoring group consisting of university researchers and a CBO member who have all participated in a PAR partnership—examine the benefits and challenges of our previous and ongoing collective work.

Below, we overview pressing political contexts and policy initiatives affecting Detroit, Michigan that lend to the educationally oppressive conditions for the city's public school children. Such contexts and initiatives greatly inform the organizing agenda of the CBO members. We also discuss our conceptual framework that integrates theories of PAR and

community organizing. We then describe the history and methodology of our university-community research partnership along with the larger study of which it is a part. Data is then discussed. We highlight four specific findings related to: 1) successes in cultivating community-based versus academic research norms; 2) the learning and leadership development of community-based PAR team members, as evident in an illustrative vignette; 3) the successes of PAR yielding direct sociopolitical impact through mobilizing school closure policy opposition; and 4), the benefits and dilemmas of extending our community-university partnership to incorporate a third research partner. We pay particular attention to the ways our process strove to disrupt dominant “pillars of powers” that are evident in decision-making behaviors, the enactment of biases, and/or the perpetuation of problematic institutional, societal, and research dynamics (Stoner, 2017). We conclude the paper by highlighting implications for implementing justice-oriented PAR work in urban educational arenas affected by intensifying neoliberal political contexts.

#### SYSTEMIC INEQUITY AND NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION IN DETROIT

Detroit, Michigan—a city once renowned as the world’s seat of the automobile industry— has received significant local, national, and international media attention in recent years for its socioeconomic struggles. Undoubtedly, Detroit has been harshly impacted by decades of population decline, fiscal and civic disinvestment, and subsequently, sobering rates of poverty, unemployment, and crime (Author, 2015; Sugrue, 2005). These challenges, however, are coupled with the city’s cultural vitality, the communal pride and resilience of its residents, and a living legacy of innovation, entrepreneurialism, and social activism in many sectors of the city. It is also becoming increasingly known for its ongoing cultural and economic revitalization efforts. While the character and identity of the city is often debated, depending on whether one

views Detroit through a lens of fear, lament, disdain, paternalism, optimism, compassion, and/or pride, the vast extent to which the city's public schools are under-resourced, low performing, and systemically dysfunctional is rarely contested (Author, 2015; Green, 2017; Pedroni, 2011).

Analysts, including its residents, differ in how they attribute the causes of the city's educational crisis, and in what solutions they support. Still, the lack of availability of high quality, stable, and well-resourced public schools to most of Detroit's children is fact, as is the reality that an egregious amount of educational inequity is occurring in a city that is predominantly Black and highly impacted by poverty, and in a district and schools serving over 90% students of color (Author, 2015; Bosman, 2016).

The systemic failure of Detroit's school systems over the past 20 years has resulted in numerous state policies and interventions that have spurred a climate of neoliberal, market-oriented experimentation along with austere state regulation. The majority of Detroit's schools are charter schools, including those run by for-profit management organizations. Moreover, until 2017, the majority of the city's traditional public schools was run by a local district overseen by a state-appointed Emergency Manager. A smaller percentage of schools—the bottom performing 5% in the city—has been fully managed by the State of Michigan's Education Achievement Authority. Structural allowances for local and democratic control was largely absent in the organizational and political structure of Detroit's educational landscape until 2017 legislative and local policy changes. The lack of local control in the city's educational systems and the reign of state-sanctioned neoliberalism, however, remain sources of tension and protest in many of the city's communities.

As Conner and Cosner (2014) explain:

In education, neoliberalism is manifest through the increasing application of business

principles to educational processes: the privileging of high-stakes test scores as ‘the bottom line’ ..., the notion that schools should compete for students and unpopular schools should be discontinued; the outsourcing of low-performing schools to private educational management organizations; the unfettered expansion of privately managed charter schools and the absence of oversight for their operations; ...and efforts to enervate or vilify teachers unions and erode protections for teachers, such as due process. (p. 31).

These reform dynamics largely characterize Detroit’s public educational arena, and they continue to invite school privatization. In another study of Detroit’s educational challenges, the first author (2015) linked such dynamics with systemic racism and the “politics of disposability” that serve to civically and politically disenfranchise people of color (p. 6).

The Detroit community organizers involved in the PAR partnership are members of a community-based organization called 482Forward whose members describe themselves as consisting of “neighborhood organizations, parents, and youth committed to ensuring that all Detroit children have access to an excellent education, regardless of their race or socioeconomic status;” and, “[t]ogether, we are building power to make systemic change and win educational justice for our communities” (<http://www.482forward.org/our-approach.html>).

482Forward, founded in 2015, has specifically organized to advocate for increased democratic governance of Detroit’s public schools by lobbying for legislative reform to increase local control, school access, transportation, and charter school accountability, while opposing school closure and educational inequities, such as those affecting students with disabilities. In addition, the CBO has tended to issues of school safety, chronic absenteeism resulting from many students having to unsafely travel long distances out of their neighborhood to reach their

school, and dilapidated facilities. Moreover, they regularly act in coalition with other social justice oriented non-profit community- and faith-based organizations that recognize that Detroit’s educational inequities target children of certain “zipcodes,” race, class, and color (<http://www.482forward.org/detroit-education-justice-coalition.html>). Many of their members, including their youth organizers, also work with the perception that many of Republican, white powerholders—who constitute the majority of Michigan’s policymakers—hold culturally-deficit views of Detroiters. For instance, one youth CBO member, in her efforts to publicly contest the confirmation of U.S. Secretary Betsy DeVos referred to Detroit’s schools’ as embodying “depravity institutionalized,” saying the schools in Detroit are poor and it’s not because *we* are poor,” (Public Videorecording, 2017).

482Forward organizers employ a wide variety of changemaking strategies like grassroots protects tactics, lobbying, community education, and neighborhood canvassing. Engaging in research to gather trustworthy data related to their educational improvement priorities is another strategy they chose to use. And in the fall of 2015, organizers formed a research partnership with University of Michigan (UM) to co-construct and co-implement a participatory action research process with the hope that collaborating with university scholars would help enrich the quality of their learning and inquiry methods, and also boost the “credibility” of their findings as they marshaled evidence to lobby city and state policymakers to make social justice-based change.

## PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

### AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Detroit’s exclusionary politics has redefined traditional notions of community engagement and citizenship (Cox, 2015). Drawing on rich legacies of resistance and community uplift, Detroit parents, youth, and concerned residents employ a range of activities to both make



due and reassert the promises of democratic participation (Kinder, 2016). Of varied methods and activities employed, participatory action research (PAR) brings differently situated individuals together for collaborative participation in the research process and social action.

Notably, how PAR is enacted greatly varies across contexts. No two PAR processes, projects, or even methodologies are the same. Due to its necessary responsiveness to the people and communities engaged in the research process, PAR is ultimately defined and actualized by the unique contributions of participants. Decision-making throughout the PAR process should be shared and thoughtfully negotiated. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) explain that collaborative approaches to research generally seek “to include research participants in all or many of the phases of the research project”, seeking to not only disrupt hierarchies between the researcher and participant at the site of data collection, but to disrupt hierarchies throughout the entirety of the research process (p. 51). In collaborative inquiry like PAR, a dynamic and iterative process of group inquiry occurs where traditional ‘researchers’ and ‘participants’ work together to interpret and co-construct knowledge (Cooper, 2006). Bergold and Thomas (2012) specifically explain that PAR aims to work towards the reconstruction of marginalized knowledge with those who are immediately affected. Cooper (2006) also asserts that “critical reflection, critical dialogue, and other activities geared towards building a community are essential to making collaborative inquiry a meaningful process” (p. 116).

By using PAR methods, community and professional researchers, typically university-based, unite to jointly select a social problem to examine, devise research questions, and establish each other’s areas of expertise. They also pinpoint information gaps and points of confusion, develop collaborative inquiry strategies to learn more about their selected topic, and gather data and evidence. Like other forms of collaborative inquiry, PAR is also a highly

dialogic process that engages inquirers in critical self and group reflection as they work towards moving beyond biases, negotiating group work roles, norms, and goals, and also “learning to listen and listening to learn,” (Author, 2006; Bergold & Thomas, 2012; McIntyre, 2008, p. 8). PAR, enacted as a critical qualitative research approach involve inquirers aiming to research “with” each other versus conduct research on each other (Moss & Hartel, 2016; Root, 2007). It also often involves high levels of creativity as community members take the lead on devising compelling ways to disseminate findings to the audiences they think will be most positioned to help make their desired social and political changes in culturally relevant and persuasive ways (Pant, 2014). Moreover, it is a research process that whereby university researchers should strive to defer to the needs and voices of their community research partners, rather than assuming the traditional expert roles their profession usually confers (Kapoor & Jordan, 2009; Moss & Hartel, 2016). Hence, PAR at times is colloquially referred to as “the people’s research” (Henderson, 2014, p. 246), and it is commonly undertaken with transformative objectives (Pant, 2014).

Through collaboration of individuals with varied identities and positionalities, PAR attempts to not only create knowledge, but to also create greater social justice in local communities. Stovall (2014), in advocating for more humanizing research approaches, encourages a commitment to community-based research and explains that methods “should be rooted in a tangible commitment to the physical/material, social, and intellectual support of communities that are experiencing educational injustice” (p. 179). PAR aligns with such ideals. Moreover, as Fine and Torre (2004) contend, PAR “can reveal the complex workings of power within institutions and [work to] re-member the bodies of social and political exclusion” (p. 16). In attempts to reassert democratic participation in public institutions, knowledge that is often

silenced or ignored is highlighted in the PAR process to shed light on the systems and practices that reify inequity and exclusion. Moreover, given how PAR attempts to reshape power dynamics, it holds radical possibilities to facilitate the educational leadership and influence of grassroots social actors while also empowering university researchers to help influence social change much more directly than is usually possible via traditional academic means (Pant, 2014; Moss & Hartel, 2016).

#### Disrupting the “Pillars of Power” Through PAR

The ways that PAR principles and methods address power dynamics nicely cohere with the aim of community organizers who also strive to disrupt the status quo for justice-based aims. For instance, the power-based model of community organizing, based in Saul Alinsky’s (1971) theories of power and social change, traces urban problems to the political disempowerment of urban residents. Adherents to this model believe that power redistribution within the existing political system is a sufficient condition for change; hence, they select organizing strategies that are designed to build representational power and demonstrate their political clout to dominant powerholders (system authorities like mayors, superintendents, policymakers, etc.). While the Alinskian model has persisted as the dominant model of community organizing in the United States, Smock (2004) explains that the *transformative model* has emerged as a more radical alternative. The transformative model centers broad systemic injustices as the primary driver of urban problems. In this way, the transformative model reaches farther than the power-based model in its understanding of structural injustices and depravities. The transformative model sees these issues as underlying existing inequities in power distribution, rather than just symptoms of unequally distributed power within otherwise functional systems of governance. Thus, transformative organizing strategies seek to challenge dominant political and economic

institutions and offer an alternative ideological framework and social narrative for working to ameliorate systemic inequities (Delgado, 1998).

One common organizing tool for mapping the institutional forms of political and economic power is the “pillars of power” analysis (Stoner, 2017). This exercise maps the dominant power system as the roof of a house that rests upon institutional pillars. By defining those pillars, organizers draft an architectural understanding of systemic supports that, if effectively toppled, would collapse the dominant status quo. For instance, the “pillars” upholding structures of injustice can include institutions (e.g. the military, schools, businesses) and the problematic dynamics of their operations (e.g. de facto segregation in public schools or the disproportional influence of businesses in political lobbying).

By conceiving of ideology as something that is instantiated in societal institutions, transformative organizers are able to move beyond transactional strategies for power redistribution (for example, organizing for a re-institution of a cap on the number of charter schools allowed within a city) to focus on challenging the “consent and cooperation of the institutions and organizations that sustain the oppressor” (Stoner, 2017). An example of this in education could be challenging oversight policies of charter schools so that Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) are subject to the same systems of accountability that have traditionally structured public education administration. This type of approach requires the process work of an organization to align itself with the group’s desired ideological outcomes. As researchers working with a community-based organization that fundamentally adheres to this approach, we have had to be vigilant to align our research methodologies accordingly, lest we strengthen the pillars of power by using our positioned privilege and researcher roles unskillfully.

In Detroit, the political powerholders’ decision-making behaviors, enactment of biases,

and the perpetuation of problematic institutional and societal norms all contribute to the pillars of power upholding the lived injustices of 482Forward's members and the city's school children. PAR has provided a methodological framework through which we—community organizers from 482Forward and UM researchers— jointly strive to break down these pillars of the current oppressive system.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The data that inform this paper stem from a larger Community-based Research on Equity, Activism, and Transformative Education (CREATE) study. CREATE is a multiple, ethnographic case study through which UM researchers seek to examine how educational activists work to improve schools by promoting civic engagement, community education, advocacy, and at times, democratic protest—all understudied areas of educational leadership and reform that occur in both formal and informal educational and political spaces (Ishimaru, 2014; Author et al., 2015). In this paper we are focusing on a subset of CREATE data that reveals how PAR matters to 482Forward's community organizing work. Data further addresses our guiding inquiry questions: 1) How do university and community-based researchers collaborate to design and implement a PAR process that advances educational justice? 2) How does this process affect partners' learning and internal relationships? 3) How does the process affect the CBO's realization of their justice-based reform goals?

Our PAR group collaborated as part of a 482Forward research committee, which the CBO formed early after partnering with the University of Michigan CREATE team. Community researchers named it the 482 Finding Answers and Creating Truth (FACT) Committee, which we often refer to as FACT. We have gathered multiple sources of data from FACT (our PAR group) and considered multiple perspectives to address our inquiry questions. We also employed

triangulation and member checking strategies to ensure the accuracy and fairness of our analysis (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Data specifically include 47 hours of participant-observation data, six interviews with FACT Committee members, and several artifacts documenting correspondence, evaluation data, and work products.

#### Considering Positionality and Additional Political Contexts

Our participant-observation fieldnotes, analytical memos, and audio recorded debriefings further include data and critical reflection about the positionalities of our PAR group members. While over 200 community members are involved in 482Forward's overall work, the PAR group members of the organization have consisted of about 11 consistent members over two years, including 7 adult organizers, 1 youth organizer—who we refer to as *community researchers*—and three university researchers from the University of Michigan. Our PAR group, including the university researchers, is predominantly African American, with some white and Latina/o members and two male members. The university researchers are non-Detroiters who have recognized the importance of being attuned to their outsider status and have made ongoing efforts to learn the city's history, its racial and class politics, policy milieu, shifting demographics, ever changing educational landscape and schooling structure, while also gauging how community researchers shift in their understanding and experiences of such contexts. These considerations reflect what is commonly linked to upholding the integrity of PAR and other similar forms of action research (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Fine & Torre, 2004; Moss & Haertel, 2017)

The membership of 482Forward, which include our PAR group's community researchers, are parents and family members, students, and concerned residents. They daily navigate Detroit's complex educational policies and political dynamics as city residents with distinct histories and

social lives that help shape their knowledge and perceptions of schooling and reform (Author, 2015; Khalifa, Jennings, Briscoe, Oleszweski, & Abdi, 2014; Deeds & Pattillo, 2014; Johnson, 2013). Since engaging educational policy matters and processes have been central to our PAR work, we have been mindful of Shore and Wright's (2011) assertion that, "policy is a narrative in a continual process of translation and contestation...At every moment of translation, new voices enter with new ways of seeing the problem, reinforcing or contesting the concepts and assumptions written into the policy texts" (p. 14). Hence, we reflect upon and analyze our PAR data recognizing that our inquiry process has been influenced by, and at times responsive to austere neoliberal policy contexts. This will be evident later in our discussion of PAR and school closure opposition.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

*"You're not just researchers, you're researchers aiming to organize...support organizing"- M.S. (Fieldnote, June 13, 2016)*

### Cultivating Community-based versus Academic Research Norms

Throughout our PAR process, there has been a continued negotiation of traditional, university-based notions of research with the aims and purposes of research for organizing as determined by the unique needs of 482Forward. This reflects the varied identities and subjectivities through which individual participants and organizations utilize knowledge, and particularly knowledge towards social change. In our case, it also reflects the growth of researcher confidence among the community organizers in our group through their increased exposure to the research process and select methods.

Notably, in the first six months of our work together, the inquiry of the FACT Committee focused on the state of special education in Detroit's educational landscape. This focus was

prompted by 482Forward's parent members who identified special education inequity as a salient, pressing issue many Detroit families experienced. Consequently, FACT sought to identify precise issues and power imbalances within special education services through which the CBO could launch a winnable campaign. To the 482Forward, a "winnable campaign" meant their members could produce data that would garner sustained attention and effectively galvanize the progressive action of various powerholders.

Following a more traditional inquiry approach, the committee selected broad, exploratory research questions and utilized various research methods including conducting literature reviews, expert interviews, and a focus group. This inquiry process resulted in a narrowing of issues. Still, the pursuit of special education as a potential campaign was ultimately postponed due to a lack of time amid competing priorities of the CBO. The FACT committee realized there was very little Detroit specific data on special education and the time it would take to produce accurate and compelling data that pointed to special education disparities would be very lengthy.

In assessing the special education inquiry process in June of 2016, FACT recognized the need for a more intentional focus on a research process that centered their community organizing needs and the continued input of 482Forward's larger membership. We carefully overviewed 16 common steps of implementing PAR synthesized from the literature, which the university researchers in our group informally presented (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; McIntyre, 2008; Pant, 2014). Our community researchers noted which steps were most relevant to their organizing work and which steps we needed to rethink. This resulted in the creation of the committee's own revised steps of implementing PAR that explicitly drew on the expertise and skills of various members. For example, Randy, proposed procedures to create a timeline and track tasks for future research processes. This was informed by Randy's extensive logistics training from



serving in the national reserve.

As our exploration of PAR continued, Shanice, a 482Forward coordinator, asked the university researchers in our PAR group to offer FACT targeted research method “trainings” that could nurture community researchers’ skills and boost their confidence in independently conducting data collection and analysis. Our PAR group also identified the goal of doing more to seek feedback from all CBO members not just those on the FACT committee. This was done through taking more steps to increase communication between FACT and 482Forward’s membership. Overall, the collective redefinition of FACT’s research process marked a shift in ownership where community researchers began to define and reshape the PAR process to meet the unique needs of organizing in Detroit’s contested, neoliberal educational landscape. This also allowed our university researchers to support their needs. Hence, when we resumed our PAR work in the fall of 2016, we began with research trainings (which we later refer to as “design circles”).

The research trainings involved our continued learning and dialogue about research strategies, principles, and skills and they foster some critique, negotiation, and adaptation of traditional research methods. This approach provided opportunities for community researchers to share how they perceived their day-to-day organizing and inquiry skills as relating, overlapping, or conflicting with such methods. Our dialogue and interactive activities also allowed for all of us to increase our understanding of each other’s personal narratives and educational experiences that motivated us to engage in PAR.

For example, during a training on interview strategies, we began with pairs of committee members interviewing one another about their personal education and/or organizing experiences. When sharing out in the large group, pairs shared experiences of love and hatred of their

neighborhood conditions, feelings of comfort and ostracism in K-12 schooling, and how their upbringing shaped their commitments to the creation of schools as a space of care and safety for all students, among others. Carlos, a committee member and clergyman with extensive organizing experience in Chicago and Detroit, noted that he felt a sense of “fellowship” after the interview training session (Memo, October 17, 2016).

We intentionally created space to “speak back” to the gaps, mismatches, and/or inconsistencies of traditional academic research and the needs and sensibilities of community members and organizers. For example, when explaining the importance of taking notes and audio recording to ensure accuracy in traditional interviews, Sherry, a committee member and social worker, interjected the importance of employing mnemonic strategies to accurately remember details when just listening to an interviewee rather than taking extensive notes since doing so can be off-putting to interviewees, especially when they are discussing sensitive and/or emotional topics. She explained that taking notes can convey impersonal body language and make interviewees feel uncomfortable. Samantha, another 482Forward coordinator, supported Sherry’s assertion, frankly stating:

same thing for one-on-ones (a community organizing activity). We never take notes during [them]. The minute you leave you write down everything you remember, so you don’t forget unless you ask permission, and there’s some reason to take notes during [it]; but otherwise, never!” (Audio Transcript, October 17, 2016).

A university researcher facilitating the training then emphasized the importance of paying attention to employing strategies like quick jottings or noting brief markers during an interview to ensure data accuracy. Overall, though, the push back of some of our community researchers regarding the notetaking issue required us all to revisit and rethink some traditional data

collection procedures to meet the desired social and relational norms of community organizing. While the community researchers did not conclusively state if they would or would not take notes during an interview moving forward, they owned the research process as their own and asserted the need for our PAR process to reflect community-based and generated standards versus those of academia.

At the conclusion of the research trainings, the FACT Committee created a “Research Workbook” (482Forward, 2017) that overviews the committee’s group-defined, community-based PAR process. The workbook offers information and activities on exploring researcher identities, utilizing “steps of the PAR process”, selecting research methods, exploring one’s biases, and remaining responsive to the individuals and communities. To date, the FACT research workbook has been used to train 482Forward youth members and youth who are part of their partner organizations so that PAR may assist them in their respective campaigns for greater educational justice.

#### A Vignette Highlighting a Community Member’s PAR Learning and Leadership

To illustrate the learning, role negotiation, leadership, and influence of our PAR work on community researchers, we offer a vignette about Dawn Wilson-Clark. Dawn is the FACT Committee lead and a co-author of this paper. Dawn is also a lifelong Detroiter, Black mother to five children, education organizer, and staff member at 482Forward. She has extensive experience navigating Detroit schooling systems, in attempts to meet the needs of her five children and community. Shortly after the commencement of FACT, Dawn was appointed as its lead organizer. Among many tasks, she is charged with working to recruit and encourage the participation of members, conduct interviews and family focus groups (along with other members), and help synthesize findings to share with the wider membership of 482Forward.

Dawn is known throughout Detroit as Kuddles The Hip Hop Clown, a profession that was passed down to her from her mother. Dawn explained that working as Kuddles made sense considering her love of children. She stated:

I love children, and I always wanted to have five children and be a mama, nothing more, nothing less. And it was funny, Dayna, my daughter, my older daughter, when she turned 13, she said, ‘Mama, when you were 13, what did you want to be?’ I said, ‘A mama!’ She said, ‘Dang, you didn’t have nobody to encourage you!’ [laughter]

Dawn added:

I always loved children. Sometimes, my children always say, ‘You think you everybody’s mama! Because I will—I don’t care who you are, where you are, what you’re doing—if I see you out of order, I’m gonna say something. I can’t help myself and I believe that’s a gift from God because so many people see so much and don’t say anything, you know?’ (Interview, April 20, 2016)

Indeed, the vested interest Dawn has in the communal care and uplift of children and her community permeates her approach to both organizing and PAR.

Furthermore, if you get Dawn talking about her children’s educational experiences or education in Detroit in general, her passion and care is palpable. While Dawn is quick to explain that “I am new to organizing,” often expressing her trepidation or lack of experience with trying to “make people do things”, Dawn’s strong interpersonal skills and care serve as strong organizing assets. For instance, during a discussion about facilitating focus groups for PAR purposes, Dawn shared that she was thinking about “not being so emotional because I am very emotional.” “I cry a lot.” “I don’t want to be leading with my tears.” (Audio Transcript, November 21, 2016). Samantha, a CBO coordinator explained that “we’re not completely

removed [in community organizing and research processes]. If like you're riding an emotional conversation, you showing emotion could allow others to then feel safe" (Audio Transcript, November 21, 2016). As an organizer, Dawn tells her stories and experiences with vulnerability and humor as she interacts with others. We recognize this is a disposition not typically advised by traditional research methodological principles that affirm more detached or "objective" researcher stances (Hesse-Beiber & Leavy, 2011); yet, it is one linked to Dawn's personal authenticity, which was validated in our PAR group. Moreover, Dawn's willingness to share where and when she's been failed by Detroit's public school systems and how she continues to fight for educational equity despite facing such barriers positions her as a powerful parent organizer and informed, empathetic, and compelling community researcher in our PAR group.

With a smile, Dawn expressed that she was "told" that she would be leading the FACT committee. She admits that she was initially intimidated by holding this position in the organization, even though she's always been a reader and had her own process for finding out the things she needs to know. As an organic community researcher, Dawn grew in her leadership and confidence in the research process through increased exposure to traditional academic spaces. She recounted presenting with the UM CREATE team at an educational leadership conference and being very nervous before entering the space. However, she realized when she arrived how badly parent voice was needed at the conference. For instance, she explained that when it comes to urban education, often academics are either all for charter schools or all for traditional public schools, when in reality, "parents don't care, we want good schools" (Interview, April 5, 2017). Dawn expressed that while further developing confidence through continued exposure to academic venues, she has recognized that traditional university researchers have their own biases and gaps. Dawn sees greater parental voice as crucial to a more

holistic understanding of issues in urban education. Recognition of the absence of parental voice in urban education boosted her sense of ownership and researcher confidence within the FACT committee, and more broadly in urban educational change.

With an increased sense of ownership of the FACT committee, Dawn explained that she plans to significantly increase parental voice on the committee. She explained that by increasing the number of parents on the team it would allow for a greater validation of parental experiences and knowledge. She said that often parents are left to navigate educational and political systems by themselves and they don't realize that they are all going through similar experiences. Her experiences as a parent excluded from decision making in her community motivates her to promote parent involvement and collectively empowerment as she works for change in Detroit's schools. Moving forward with the FACT Committee, Dawn said she would be working to "find my people"---referring to her desire to recruit more parents as PAR community researchers (Interview, April 5, 2017).

A difficulty of increasing parent voice and participation on the committee is their competing demands and time constraints. This has been an issue throughout the tenure of FACT. Dawn cited recruiting her sister-in-law Sherry, who actively participated in two of our research trainings. Sherry brought a wealth of experience and knowledge to the group as a Detroit mother and former social worker. However, after briefly participating she started a new job that conflicted with the FACT meetings times.

Despite barriers to retaining the participation of parents, Dawn spoke of the FACT Committee as an integral part of Foward's future work. Through Dawn's parent-centered leadership, the FACT committee's PAR process holds potential and promise to contest further contest exclusionary political dynamics and become more representative of Detroit's families

and 482Forward's broader membership. Moreover, through an unwillingness to comply with systems that aim to separate and silence parents, Dawn's organizing vision supports PAR's transformative purpose and disrupts the pillars of power that can reinscribe the status quo.

### **Yielding Sociopolitical Impact through Policy Opposition**

While many of our PAR findings related to our research process, considering the sociopolitical influence of PAR is of great importance too. Impacts of the PAR and the FACT Committee were observable in 482Forward's recent campaign against an impending wave of school closures in Detroit. School closure has been an ongoing political issue in the city. Indeed, the CBO cites the 2008 appointment of a Detroit Emergency Financial Manager, Robert Bobb, as a political shift in power that triggered a wave of neoliberal education reforms, including school closures and the removal of any limit on the number of charter schools and charter school authorizers permitted to operate in the city.

The CBO's most recent school closure campaign began in response to the 2016 passage of Public Act 192, which mandates (a) that the state maintain a "top-to-bottom" list (ranking all schools based on student test scores) and (b) that the School Reform Office (SRO) close any Detroit school ranked in the bottom five percent of schools, statewide, for three consecutive years (Michigan Public Act 192). Public Act 192's passage and substance were characterized by a lack of clarity about the specific mechanisms for its enactment. Namely, the bill allowed for the SRO to halt closure if it deemed that closing a school would create "unreasonable hardship" for students (Michigan Public Act 192). However, specific criteria that would constitute this standard of "unreasonable hardship" were not outlined in the language of the bill. Additionally, the bill was passed at a time when Detroit public schools were transitioning from belonging to the Detroit Public School District (DPS) to the newly formed Detroit Public School Community

District (DPSCD). The formation of a new school district for the city of Detroit was part of a state-government-backed plan to manage the debt of DPS while allowing for the city's public schools to join a freshly constituted governance structure (DPSCD), unburdened with the heavy financial strain imposed by the debt management plan. Michigan governor Rick Snyder hired a private law firm to make an independent recommendation as to whether Public Act 192 would take into account rankings of schools under DPS governance or, alternatively, would not include any of those previous rankings in the three-consecutive-year count dictated by the law. The law firm issued a legal opinion that schools belonging to the new DPSCD would not face any repercussions from their previous constituency in DPS; namely, they would not have any prior low rankings on the top-to-bottom list count against them.

Despite this reassurance, Michigan state Attorney General Bill Schuette issued a separate ruling ordering that the SRO take into account Detroit school rankings from the DPS era, with the result being the planned closure of any qualifying schools at the end of the 2016-2017 academic year. The closures would have a disproportionate impact in the city of Detroit: of the 38 schools included in the bottom five percent of the top-to-bottom list, 25 are in Detroit; the closure of all 38 schools would displace 18,000 students, 16,000 of whom are African-American and 3,000 of whom are identified as special education students. Facing the very real threat of these closures, 482Forward sprung into action.

Given 482Forward's prior knowledge about the material, community, and educational impacts of school closures, its members were quick to cast the most recent political developments as symptomatic of larger structural inequity and the systematic deprivation of democratic participation in Detroit. In doing so, they enacted principles of transformative organizing aimed at breaking down pillars of power. Dawn, the FACT Committee lead,



explained the pattern of neoliberal education reforms as the state government and private entities combine forces to create what she deemed “crises after crises,” (Interview, April 20, 2017).

Based on our observational data of FACT Committee members involvement in resisting school closure, Dawn and many other 482Forward members regarded such reforms as intentionally yielding a sweeping destabilization of local democratic control over Detroit’s public schools.

To organize against the 2016 school closure threats, 482Forward created a School Closure Campaign Committee (SCCC). The SCCC established four sub-committees: leadership, policy, community engagement, and research. Dawn ultimately served as the bridge between our prior PAR work with the FACT Committee and the research committee on the SCCC. As the member-leader of both committees, Dawn provided guidance and expertise in designing research questions and performing various research methods. As research partners, members of our UM CREATE team participated in research committee meetings and the UM principal investigator provided—upon request from members of the SCCC research committee—a research brief she co-wrote about school closure policies and effects (Author et al, 2017).

Furthermore, as leader of the research subcommittee, Dawn initiated attempts to request data on school funding and other state documentation about school performance under the Freedom of Information Act (Fieldnotes, February 2, 2017). At one research committee meeting, one co-leader of 482Forward shared hardship profiles (created by DPSCD employees) of each Detroit school on the closure list, including maps and data to demonstrate the difficulties in school access that students would face if their current schools were indeed shut down (Fieldnotes, February 2, 2017). This kind of information was used to build a detailed case 482Forward could reinforce (with other closure opponents) about how school closure would invariably violate the hardship provision of the act. As the closure campaign continued, Dawn

continued to lead research efforts, employing many research skills and strategies she gained as part of our PAR group. After attending a Detroit Town Hall meeting at which gubernatorial advisor Richard Baird mentioned “innovation zone schools” as possible alternatives to school closure (Fieldnotes, February 13, 2016), Dawn researched the concept and discovered its origins in conservative education policy agendas like those proposed by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). Dawn shared this information at a meeting of the whole SCCC; her research significantly informed the committee's discussion about how to move forward with their campaign in light of this new potential policy initiative (Fieldnotes, February 15, 2016).

The work of the SCCC, including work by the research committee in researching origins of the laws and detailing hardship consequences, was intensive, thorough, and public. After facing community pushback, the state-run SRO initially chose to delay closure decisions. Even after ultimately deciding to move forward with a much narrower scope of school closures than originally threatened, the SCCC and 482Forward more generally can recognize the impact that their work had. Furthermore, Dawn relayed a conversation she had with a 482Forward coordinator when she was feeling frustrated by the state’s decision to move forward with some school closures. In Dawn’s retelling, the coordinator said, “Just remember back in 2014, they wanted to close schools. They wanted to shut the district down. That did not happen. They wanted to open all these charter schools; only a couple have opened” (Interview, April 20, 2017). Understanding the arc of their work helped Dawn re-center FACT’s successes and their continued commitment to making a positive socio-political impact for the city’s families and children. Dawn said that the PAR/FACT activities in which she and other 482Forward members engage comes down to their core work. In her words, PAR involves “finding *more* answers and creating *more* truth” (Interview, April 20, 2017). Among its many effects, the PAR work has

yielded sociopolitical impacts by informing efforts to protect school communities.

### Negotiating the Benefits and Dilemmas of Expanding PAR Partnerships

Our final set of findings connects back to the process of developing and enacting PAR. In this section we address our efforts to expand our PAR partnership to collaborate with a second set of university researchers. During the second year of our PAR process we joined the *Family Leadership Design Collaborative* (FLDC) based at the University of Washington (UW). FLDC is a national network of university scholars and community-based practitioners working in a range of non-profit organizations. All parties are dedicated to racial justice, community advocacy, and supporting the educational empowerment of diverse, marginalized families (see <http://familydesigncollab.org/>). A key part of the FLDC is to encourage the use of research “design circles” that not only tackle problems that families and communities experience but also promote “building relationships, conceptualizing root causes and facilitating emergent family and community leadership and perspectives through co-designing theories of change and pragmatic solutions...”<sup>1</sup> The design circles also reflect methodologies of participatory design research theorized by Bang and Vossoughi (2016), which call on researchers to “work toward transformative relations and forms of accountability” as university and community researchers collaborate and disrupt their traditional roles (p. 176). In doing so, they also incorporate critical consideration of historical contexts, power, mutual learning, the identities and positionalities of the collaborators, and their relationship.

When the first author was invited to join the FLDC she recognized the potential alignment between the design circle’s methodological and practical goals and those of PAR. She presented the UW partnership opportunity to the 482Forward FACT Committee, who after

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<sup>1</sup> <http://familydesigncollab.org/design-circles/>, paragraph 1

discussion agreed with full consensus to be part of the national collaborative. Joining FLDC entailed our PAR group constructing and implementing three design circles during the fall of 2016, submitting recordings, analytical reflections/memos, and other artifacts from those circles to the UW research team. They then transcribed, reviewed, and offered a impressionist analysis of that data, thereby sharing their preliminary insights about design circle/PAR work as informed, allied outsiders. Such feedback served a valuable purpose being that it lent objective perspectives that complemented our PAR group members' insider perspectives.

Additionally, the FLDC partnership provided the chance for the co-principal investigator (PI) of the UW research team to visit our Detroit-based PAR group during our third design circle. During the visit she shared information about the broader national collaborative and dialogued with us about our research process. The co-PI lent additional suggestions and constructive critique we engaged, and this feedback supplemented the written analytical feedback the UW team submitted to us throughout the design circle process. Hence, an advantage of our extended partnership with UW was the creation of an analytical feedback loop that enhanced our ability as PAR researchers to be critically self-reflective. As we note later, sometimes it also helped us be corrective. This feedback loop is a recommended strategy that can increase research rigor and validity (Given, 2008).

Our FLDC involvement also enabled us to learn about the efforts of design circle groups doing work in other locales who have shared commitments to educational justice. Our PAR group further benefitted from having access to the rich researcher-practitioner network and helpful resources available via FLDC's website, webinars, and our PI's broader involvement with the Collaborative.

After conducting our design circles, we developed a community-based work product to

disseminate to 482Forward's Detroit stakeholders and the FLDC during winter 2017. Doing this was a term of our UW partnership. Members of our PAR team, including the PI (first author) and community researcher (third author) participated in a two-and-a-half day FLDC conference in Seattle where they were able to share, learn, debrief, and strategize about family-community partnership work in education, as well as specifically reflect on our PAR group's design work. Dawn, was the attending community researcher from our team. Upon reflecting on her time in this larger collaborative, and university-based, space of approximately 40 participants, she shared that she appreciated being linked to this broader community, exchanging ideas, and learning more about other justice-driven work in education. Similarly to her experience presenting at her first academic conference with PAR co-authors (and university researchers), she also recognized the value of *her* presence and parental voice and perspectives that contributed to informing others.

Our FLDC involvement has included being invited to collaborate in joint national conference presentations (of which this paper is part) and potential publications. Additionally, UW provided financial assistance to help cover the costs of our design circles and provided honoraria and/or additional research resources to our university PI and 482Forward.

The advantages of our partnership with UW were paired with some challenges too, particularly philosophical and methodological dilemmas. For instance, we were mindful of the transformative intent of design circle; yet, as we earlier noted, our efforts to begin developing them coincided with community researchers from the FACT teams requesting that the university researchers provide our PAR group with skill-based, research "trainings". University researchers were cognizant that such trainings typically involved a more traditional "delivery" style and thus could reinforce notions of academic researchers being the experts/teachers/knowers and

community members delegated as being the receivers/learners/non-knowers. This of course contradicted PAR and design circle methodological principles and our PAR group's existing working ethos; still, community researchers were firm and well-reasoned in their request.

Prior to the training request, the PAR team collaborated for a year in ways that were true to PAR's power-sharing, egalitarian, and discursive norms. Good rapport, trust, and mutualism were well-established between our university and community members. So, the key challenge in fulfilling the training request was to do so in a way that was still as democratic, inclusive, and interactive as possible. Our university PI, a PAR group member, was especially perplexed by this task. Still, she was committed to being as responsive to the community members' needs and desires given the importance of university researcher reciprocity and the reality that the university researchers indeed had some specialized knowledge, additional resources and time that could be lent to, and of value to, our PAR group.

In light of the guiding ethics and aims of our PAR groups work and extended partnership, the university researchers ongoingly consulted with the FACT Committee about their ideas and preferences for the trainings (which we would eventually interchangeably refer to as design circles). By incorporating some aspects of our previous PAR group meetings and new preferences that FACT members voiced, university researchers planned design circles that were formatted to include presentations, interactive activities, whole group and small group reflective dialogue, and group brainstorming about short-term and long-term next steps in our PAR work. In each circle—which again, community members explicitly asked the university members to facilitate— university researchers asked the group: “Who is our audience & why?,” and, “How is the process (e.g. interview protocol development, focus group facilitation, assessing the credibility of data for research purposes, etc.) like or unlike community organizing assessments

& tactics?,” “How should we adapt traditional research processes to achieve FACT members’/482Forward’s goals?” Moreover, at the closing of each circle, group members were asked to each share, “How do you feel?” (UM CREATE Design Circle agendas 1-3, fall 2016).

University researchers were particularly mindful of the community member expertise given their lived experiences and the effective inquiry skills and processes they designed and implemented as part of their community organizing prior to, and sometimes outside of, our university-community partnership (e.g. surveys, mapping, etc.). For instance, Shanice commented during the design circle on focus groups that they required “getting actively involved. These are often listening opportunities and as part of our cycle of organizing.” We also solicited anonymous written evaluation feedback from our PAR group after each circle. The feedback positive each time. For instance, groups member complimented the circle’s use of “level, equitable discussion, ” the “facilitation and agenda,” use of multimedia, and suggested more time to practice skill-based activities (Design Circle #2, 10/17/16). Members’ suggestions informed the continued design process.

After reviewing our design circle data, UW team members sent written, analytical feedback that pinpointed some emerging themes and often pinpointed “juicy tensions” emerging from both our PAR groups critique of traditional research methods and, at times, our university researchers’ roles. Given these tensions, the UW team encouraged our PAR group to do even more to leverage community researchers’ knowledge and involve them more in design circle planning. Again university researchers strived to be open-minded and considerate of the constructive critique. Such critique related concerns that our design circle practices and “trainings” veered from the FLDC’s vision and goals. For instance, the FLDC co-PI contacted our university PI to share:

I'm hoping you might help me think through what's going on and how it relates to FLDC a bit. It's great that the group seemed really engaged and energized this time (re: our second design circle), but I'm not sure that research method trainings are getting where we'd hoped for the design circles. [A couple university researchers] brought up exactly the sorts of questions I am wondering about in your debrief— how does this move beyond trainings in research methods?...What might the group co-design?...How do these trainings with a select group of folks translate into the organizing work of the group? (November 4, 2016 Email/FLDC Dialogue Nov. 7 Prep).

Our group's PI understood how from the outside our FACT trainings could seem contradictory to the non-hierarchical norms of design circles (and PAR). Nevertheless, she and our PAR group saw the continued integrity of our work.

The trainings were temporary departure from our typical work, yet they were requested by our community researchers and they also contributed to the building our group's overall research capacity and pursuit of PAR. While being featured a speaker during an online FLDC webinar, and later participating in an exit interview with UW, the UM PI/first author pinpointed the following dilemmas of the UM-Community-UW collaboration. These related to wonderings and "wrestlings" about whether university researchers can: oversimplify and over-romanticize how notions of democratic practice can manifest; overestimate the time community members can devote to PAR; and, underestimate the competing priorities community members deem more urgent (e.g. participating in a protest rally versus coding data alongside university researchers). She also wondered if university researchers and PAR methodologists can be too unimaginative in visions of shared power and egalitarianism and/or negate needs for university members to enact reciprocity via service, at times research leadership, and being strategic in marshalling their



professional knowledge and resources in ways community members genuine desire and find helpful rather than patriarchal, hierarchical, or as act of exerting institutional power.

The UM PI/first author additionally clarified her perspective about the tensions related to our design circle process via correspondence with the UW co-PI. She explained that despite some seemingly traditional aspects of the training/design circles, their key objective was to better educate the smaller group [FACT Committee] so they have increased knowledge, resources, and know-how to go back to their larger body [482Forward] and educate them.” She added this approach was “nested” in 482Forward’s “train-the-trainers” community organizing approach and mode of operating, and further explained that the trainings related “to a bigger picture about inquiry development and *sustainability* within their organization. In fact, one thing they (community organizers/researchers) discussed this week with their youth leaders is how [the FACT Committee/PAR group] can train their youth on PAR. So it's a passing down knowledge model -- from us (UM) to and **with** them (482Forward)... and them to their youth arm.”

Indeed, the university researcher PI wrestled with an array of methodological issues as one of the “chief worriers” of our PAR group’s collaborative research process, an informal but salient role often linked to researchers who feel (or are designated to be) primarily accountable for the ethical, logistical, and even legal aspects of the work (Author, 2006). This wrestling informed the university researchers’ debriefing and reflection processes in meaningful ways, as they brainstormed strategies for meeting both the FACT Committee’s needs (the top priority) and UW’s preferences, which they respected and had agreed to pursue. Moreover UW’s constructive critique did help push the university researchers to pinpoint more inclusive strategies, such as planning to encourage community researchers facilitate an activity during future design groups and gauge their interest in coming to future design circles with sample data

or information from their prior or ongoing campaign work that the PAR group could work with to advance our PAR process.

As of this writing, the UW design circles have successfully concluded, and we are in the midst of ending the second year of our overall PAR work. The FACT Committee has expressed interest in having more design circles, and we will see how future design and facilitation roles of determined and negotiated. Outside of the PAR work, our partnership has yielded two national conference papers and presentations through which university and community researchers have promoted the critical and equity-oriented benefits of PAR in distinguished academic arenas. More importantly, as earlier noted, our PAR yielded the community-based research workbook (as named by our community members). The workbook is designed to help 482Forward's youth organizers learn and implement PAR too.

We observed youth enthusiastically engaging the workbook and learning about PAR during a session that was facilitated by two of our community researchers during a youth retreat. The youth are currently working to implement and adapt the manual as they engage in their own inquiry process that will inform a social action campaign related to increasing the nutrition, quality, and adequacy of urban school lunch programs. So, in all, the benefits, complexities, and tensions of our PAR (and design circle) work culminated in meaningful outcomes for the use of Detroit community members ultimate objective of advancing educational justice.

#### FINAL REMARKS

Through all of our PAR-related work, be it the determining and revising our roles in our FACT research committee, considering how our university members could support 482Forward's anti-school closing campaign, planning of the FDLC design circles, collaborating to co-author and co-present academic papers and presentations, or brainstorming our community-

based work product, we have been deliberate in our goal of reaffirming the value of community-based knowledge, power sharing, and transformative collaborative inquiry that catalyzes justice-driven action. By privileging the questions and values of 482Forward and its community organizer members, our PAR process particularly demonstrated an epistemological understanding of community members as knowers of their own lives, community contexts, and sociopolitical realities. Doing so also challenged traditional research norms that can conceptually and practically isolate research to an exclusively academic realm and thus cement epistemological and relational “pillars of power” that devalue and marginalize community researchers. 482Forward’s intent to “train”—or rather prepare and empower—community members, particularly their youth members, shows the organization’s commitment to shared learning, the disruption of hierarchy, and progressive leadership too.

As evident in the vignette about Dawn, 482Forward recognizes value in distributing leadership and strive to implement distributive leadership approaches in ways that do not demean democratic praxis. Our trainings and design circle approach reflected this ethos as well. Throughout the PAR process, university researchers shared insight and resources, yet ultimately deferred to 482Forward members’ (the community researchers) priorities and wishes. In this way, they honored the organization’s commitments (which are outgrowths of an alternative, collectivist ideology). Doing this disrupted traditional norms of university researchers as acting as authority figures; and together, our PAR group collaborated creating a mode of political participation that is aligned with the 482Forward’s larger political values (Fuentes, 2009-2010). Consequently, our PAR partnership contributed to the organization’s praxis while helping to infuse a power-sharing—and leadership-sharing—research process rather than one that upheld hierarchical pillars of power.

As to be expected, our internal PAR process and our research collaboration with UW's FLDC occasionally involved tensions. Yet all the aspects of our work lent towards our collective growth and capacity building to better leverage knowledge, data, social networks, and resources in collaborative and mutually beneficial manners. Our FACT Committee work shaped us into a "community of practice," and our engagement in the University of Washington's FLDC linked us to an even broader community. According to sociocultural learning theory, a community of practice is an "intentional site of learning and social action where participants coalesce to co-construct new knowledge" based on their learning and inquiry activities---a process that also spurs learners new identities and roles ((Author et al, 2010, p. 766; Lave & Wenger, 1991). We experienced such educative benefits.

We analyzed a rich sample of data from our PAR process to discuss how our research partnership affected participants' learning, internal relationships, and influenced the community-based organization's broader efforts to advance educational justice and reform. Our findings stressed the benefits, challenges, and potential of using PAR and university-community partnerships to conduct research for positive social change.

Our joint efforts as a PAR group comprised of both university and community researchers demonstrate that navigating our varied positionalities, research backgrounds, and the politics and educational policies of Detroit is context-driven. It pertains to PAR members' intergroup relations, status, and discursive work, but also to the macropolitical structures and realities. Given the fast-changing neoliberal education arena of Detroit, 482Forward's priority was to better implement research methods that can enable them to skillfully and quickly deploy tools to fight against the implementation of undemocratic education policies. This intention was evident in some FACT Committee member's efforts to draw upon their PAR learning, skills, and

leadership to help to mount organized resistance to Detroit's school closures.

Additionally, reflecting on our community-university partnership has helped us recognize that our PAR work has constituted a meaningful vehicle for our political agency. Indeed, conducting justice-driven research to challenge inequities and increasingly oppressive political climates that are intricately linked to the primacy of neoliberalism and racial repression has been rewarding. It has served as a way for us to coalesce to do our part to advance community uplift and resistance during difficult times in Detroit and in the US overall: That speaks to the transformative potential of PAR.

We will deepen our analysis as we move forward to theorize about how our findings can advance PAR methodological considerations and inform other justice-driven researchers navigating thorny urban educational landscapes. We know that additional tensions are embedded in our work that pertain to varied research objectives and modes of implementation, which we plan to further name and unpack. We also plan to identify greater implications of PAR for community organizers and university-community partnerships, and look forward to the dialogue and recommendations for our work they may come during our AERA session.

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Will add citation of public video recording of D.W.

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