

**Circling to Move Ahead:
Building Asian American Community Power for
Educational Justice**

Erin Okuno, Jondou Chase Chen, & Mindy Huang
in collaboration with Chinese Information Service Center (CISC)

The Family Leadership Design Collaborative
University of Washington, Seattle
www.familydesigncollab.org

THE FAMILY LEADERSHIP DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

The Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC) is a national network of family members, community leaders, educators, and researchers from across the United States, whose work centers racial equity in family engagement. The collaborative reflects a wide range of our cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, sexual orientations, ages, religions, and social class identities. We belong to and lead early childhood, K-12, and higher education institutions as well as community programs, cultural organizations, organizing groups, and national networks.

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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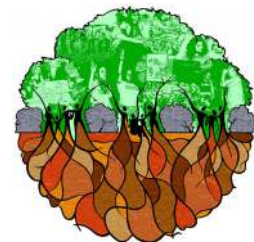
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SESEC's mission is to rally communities of color and allies to improve Southeast Seattle schools so all students succeed and all families are empowered.

[Chinese Information Service Center \(CISC\)](#) supports immigrants and their families by creating opportunities for them to succeed, while honoring their heritage.

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Chinese Information Service Center (CISC), Southeast Seattle Education Coalition (SESEC),
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Blogpost #1: Overview

Despite being in the US for over a century-and-a-half history and being the fastest growing racial group at present, Asian-American communities have largely remained an afterthought for education policy-makers especially with regards to racial equity. While certain Asian American groups (i.e. middle upper and upper class Chinese, Korean, Japanese, etc.) are attaining measures of success, these feed into the ‘model-minority myth’ that Asians do not need academic support or are immune to racism in the educational system. Seeking to counter this trend and the narratives used to legitimize it, a group of Asian American families, community organizers, and education researchers came together to co-design a strategy by which to change school policies and practices to address the needs of Seattle’s Toishanese (a rural ethnic community in southeast China outside of Hong Kong and Canton) community. Key steps to the process involved reframing community strengths and dreams, desettling cross-cultural interactions, and strategically interweaving immediate needs with longer term goals.

History

The co-design process reported here is the most recent iteration of an ongoing collaboration between the Chinese Information Service Center (CISC), the Southeast Seattle Education Coalition (SESEC), and the University of Washington. Following a SESEC community summit in the spring of 2015 where school-family engagement was identified as a priority for SESEC members, SESEC and UW convened a design team of educators, community orgs including CISC, and families that met over six months beginning in the fall of 2015 to design and implement a survey of family engagement. At the conclusion of this design process, findings from the survey were presented in a broader community meeting with follow-up meetings with individual organizations and schools to make sense of the data.

Throughout this process, CISC staff and family members, who are primarily Cantonese or Toishanese, were actively involved. Survey translations that had previously favored Mandarin Chinese speakers were adjusted to match Toishanese and Cantonese syntax. Toishanese families advocated for translation services for other East Asian languages including Japanese, which is powerful considering the history of Japanese-Chinese tensions both in Asia and the US. CISC staff and families were active in disseminating the surveys, with approximately one third of the over 600 surveys coming from CISC families. It was no surprise at the follow-up meeting with CISC families, family members indicated they wished to continue partnering with SESEC and the UW to use the survey data to move schools to engage in more equitable practices with CISC-serving families. The opportunity to continue building momentum presented itself with the formation of the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC).

Process

As one of ten FLDC design circles, CISC/SESEC convened two design sessions for CISC families and staff along with SESEC and UW team members and then two additional design sessions adding educators, school and government officials. All sessions were held at the CISC

offices located in the Chinatown/International District of Seattle, which is a majority Toishanese neighborhood facing emerging gentrification. Design sessions were facilitated by Peggy Kwok, a CISC youth and family manager, and Erin Okuno, SESEC executive director, with Jondou Chen, FLDC project director, as a cofacilitator at the first two sessions and as a process observer at the second two sessions. One additional SESEC staff member, Mindy Huang, who also grew up in Seattle's Cantonese-Toishanese community, attended all design sessions.

Our initial session focused on co-constructing our vision for our time together. In a go-around of the twenty design team members, folks shared either about why they came back to the design process or why they were joining us. We then spent time asking community members what their dreams for the community were. This allowed for us to surface community struggles from a strengths-based perspective and then to begin unpacking data from the previous design process.

Our second session took up the power of storytelling to both humanize research data and to call people to action. Participants were asked which data points were most important to them to discuss with the school and government folks joining our third and fourth sessions, and then asked to communicate not only about the data but their reasons why through storytelling.

The third and fourth sessions followed similar formats with four to six school and government officials attending each session. In addition to the CISC family members at each of the first two design sessions, an additional 15-20 family members joined each of these subsequent sessions. Originally only a third session was planned, but more officials wanted to participate and family members wanted more time with the officials. Erin and Peggy opened up each session as a learning opportunity for the officials and not for the family members, and then groups of family members meeting with each government official with a key ask around family-teacher conferences, translation services, and cultural representation in schools.

More specifically, Toishanese families asked for three parent-teacher conferences a year instead of the district-mandated one conference per year in the fall. Secondly, district allocations and staffing for translators are based on schools' perceptions of students' needs rather than families' needs. That is, schools provided for students in the classroom but not for families to communicate with the school, and support is not provided to families that need translation support but whose students do not. Finally, families wished to remove the political barrier between schools and home by bringing more Toishanese culture into schools so that students could appreciate their family's culture in the context of school.

In between all sessions, Erin, Peggy, and Jondou were in communication around next steps. Peggy met with family members as often as they wanted to better understand the data as well as to further develop their stories. Erin served as our primary liaison with school and government officials, utilizing her political capital from SESEC to ask school and government officials to attend. All sessions included a mix of Toishanese, Cantonese, Mandarin, and English with at least one official translator and often multiple people who were multilingual to varying extents. Additionally the first two sessions were video recorded and then transcribed in order to help facilitators reflect on the sessions in preparation for the next sessions. Because of the number of people in the room for the third and fourth sessions, as well as the official capacity that school and government officials carried entering the space, these sessions were not recorded but FLDC team members took field notes to share with facilitators.

Blogpost #2: Designing to Dream: One Design Team Member Perspective

By Mindy Huang

Who I Am

I am second-generation Chinese American. My parents emigrated from Guangzhou a little over thirty years ago. I was born and raised in Beacon Hill. I grew up in a multigenerational household where no English was spoken; I taught myself by watching cable TV. I translated for my parents at parent-teacher conferences and school events when they could find the time to make it while working multiple jobs. In second grade, I left Beacon Hill Elementary for the Spectrum Program at Lawton Elementary in Magnolia (30-min without traffic or additional stops). I was one of two students from my neighborhood on the school bus going to Lawton each day.

As a twenty-four year old daughter of Chinese immigrants who grew up in Seattle, these design sessions have been an experience for me, forcing me to reflect not just on my experience in Seattle Public Schools, but my parents'. I have the unique position of being closer in age to the parents at CISC than to their children, but still young enough to remember and relate to the experiences that their kids are going through and see my parents' struggles in the stories of the families at CISC.

Holding Multiple Identities, Visibility, and Honoring Culture

TaeTae: 我未这里是想自己的小孩同本地的小朋友得到平等的权利，他应该有的资源应该大家共享，不能因为我们的语言障碍，导致他们在学习上，在某方面丧失很多些机会，而对大人来讲亦都是一样。[I want my child to have an equal foundation as an American child. Our language should not be a barrier that puts them at a disadvantage in comparison to other children.]

I have never seen so many Chinese people in one room cry.

Growing up, I often heard that (East) Asian cultures didn't know how to express emotion or that we were "emotionless" people. When the parents were asked to articulate their feelings, it was not surprising that there was confusion and uncertainty over what exactly that entailed—despite Peggy's efforts prior to the meetings to explain feelings and emotions in American culture.

Thinking back to my own family, we don't often explicitly say, "I am angry. I feel sad. I am happy." We tell stories and in our stories and in our body language, our feelings are present. The parents expressed a wide range of emotions, such as frustration, hopelessness, isolation and joy through their stories. Yet, when asked outright to identify specific "feelings," they were stumped. It's easy to dismiss this type of response as a cultural inability, but that is simply not true. We just live by a different cultural script.

During the first design session, Jondou asked the parents about their dreams. Like feelings, this seemed to make them pause. One of the first responses was:

Hsiensun: 我都不知道我的梦想。[I don't even know my own dreams.]

Hsiensun: 因为不敢梦想，现你提示我，我开始有梦想。[Because I don't dare to dream. Now that you've prompted me, I've begun to dream.]

This notion was echoed by other parents. Talking about feelings and dreaming almost seemed to be an “American” thing to do, but some parents didn’t even know how to talk about dreams or find the time to dream when they struggled to navigate the simplest of misunderstandings on a daily basis with school staff, teachers or principals. Dreams and feelings are a luxury. Are their dreams and feelings valued?

It’s an interesting juxtaposition: to be told to acculturate in a system so dominated by the idea of individualism, extroverted leadership, using your voice to speak up, and following your dreams, but when you’re an immigrant in America, you’re supposed to follow “the American dream”—one prescribed for you within a system that tells you anything is possible as long as you work hard. Never mind the unique circumstances and struggles that you have brought with you in search of a better life for your family. The system has given you all you need—all it thinks you deserve. This is the “American” way.

I’ll never forget when, at the end of our second session after we had settled on the specific asks these parents had for their schools, the district, the city, and other policymakers, one of the parents quietly said, “Are we asking for too much?” I was personally waiting for it. My parents would ask the same thing. I would’ve asked the same thing. Should they just settle? Will they be reprimanded for using their voices? Will it negatively impact their children? How do they continue to hold their own culture and teach their children to value something when everything around them says that survival and belonging means suppressing those identities?

This process sought to reframe that narrative: our families *can* dream, their hopes deserve to be heard, and these shifts in power can happen without assimilation.

Jondou: ...I think one of the ways that...racial inequality happens is when people can’t even dream anymore. We’re so busy looking for a translator that we can’t think our own thoughts. And so to come together in this space is to hopefully give you time to dream.

It’s time to reframe the conversation to acknowledge that different communities mean different approaches. It is not the communities’ jobs to bend for the system, but for the system to bend for communities if we truly value equity. This is what the design sessions sought to do: shift the perception of who holds the power and knowledge in our schools among those impacted.

This process wasn’t just about teaching them how to navigate the dominant systems. It was about co-designing solutions in a way that helps them realize their own power through storytelling in the language they know and in a culturally-guided way—in a space that sought to intentionally foster their voices and draw from their expertise rather than teach them how to integrate on dominant terms.

Design Session Three: Power through Storytelling

My parents have never told their stories and probably never will. It can be difficult at times to explain why this work is important and relevant to our community, because we got through the system. If they could do it using me as an interpreter and I could figure out how to navigate Seattle Public Schools, why can’t other families? But as I stood in the back of the room at CISC, watching other parents in the room sob as the three parents shared their stories, I wondered if my parents would’ve felt moved.

I wondered if my parents had gone through this experience or even sat in on this third session and had been in a space where people wanted to give them power, if they would've continued to put their heads and push through instead of share their struggles and ask for more. If, for once, someone held a meeting where Cantonese was the primary language and the burden of finding an interpreter and getting others to understand was no longer on them, because the intention was for us to understand them. This space is for them, because of them, and power lied with them.

DahJieh: 好像觉得之前好像是一味只是别人给你东西，但通过这个会议，原来让我们知道可以通过你们，麻烦你们可能会讲到我们的心声，就会想到这方面，因为最初我以为，即然你是只能给我们这么多，我觉得就是这么多了。但现在可能，我会去想一想，我想要什么？真的是有梦想了。[Before coming to this group, I just settled for what was given to me. But after this meeting—after troubling you all to teach us how to use our voices—I know that I can now think about what I want and what I need. I can really dream.]

Blogpost #3: Building Bridges and Brokering Culture

Racial equity takes work and takes time. Even as our design circle process was yet another iteration of folks working together who'd worked together before, and even as our design circle was within the "Asian American" community, our process revealed the need for both time and intentional effort as we sought to move toward community wellbeing and racial and educational justice. Our facilitation team included members of four different ethnic groups: Erin is Japanese/Okinawan-Hawaiian American, Peggy is Cantonese American, Mindy is Cantonese/Toishan-ese (Cantonese/Toisanese) American, and Jondou is Taiwanese American. Each design session involved four different languages (Toisanese, Cantonese, Mandarin, and English) as well as translation and interpretation of body language, tone, and culture. We posit here that these lessons learned are still lessons in process for us as well as lessons applicable to the broader work of building solidarity in racial justice.

Educational equity efforts have tended to focus on equalizing outcomes without first acknowledging historic oppression and trauma. At the same time, professional development around such systemic oppression often lectures without providing enactable directions for substantive change. Individual actions then are just that: actions taken in order to present individuals as "good" or "nice" people, even as they do little to shift community or systems-level practices. Bringing people together to enact social justice must move beyond these limitations. Building the politicized trust necessary to effect change requires critically acknowledging past histories and engaging in equitable and ongoing relationship building in order to cultivate future possibilities and solidarities.

When FLDC team member Jondou Chen first met with SESEC executive director Erin Okuno three years ago to discuss UW partnerships with the community and a certificate program, Erin immediately said, "Don't do it." When Jondou asked why, Erin continued, "Because we don't need more people trying to save or fix or learn from us at our expense. That isn't equity, it's fakeequity (fake equity)." Upon acknowledging the risk and even likelihood of this, Jondou then asked Erin, what (admittedly arbitrary) success rate would be necessary for it to be worth it to have UW partner with SESEC and its community partners? Erin responded, "90%." Jondou committed to not moving forward with community work until he could ensure

this success rate and their meeting ended without any additional contracts or commitments. Several months later, Erin invited Jondou to join a SESEC planning group for SESEC's first annual summit, when then was followed by the initial co-design process facilitated by Erin and Jondou and joined by Peggy Kwok and CISC.

Similarly, when this FLDC design circle process began, even as we had already met a number of family members before this design circle process, we began as facilitators by acknowledging our positionality as facilitators who didn't speak the primary dialects of the family members in the room. We all had to consider when it was appropriate to use different dialects, when to translate, with whom and when to make eye contact, and when it simply listen, when to affirm, and when to push back on statements that we considered problematic. For several of us, we needed to acknowledge that our role not only as facilitators but as professionals in particular roles meant that we had class privilege relative to the families in the group. Additionally that Erin is read as Japanese because of her name and that Jondou sometimes used Mandarin to communicate brought colonizing dynamics into the space given the history of Japanese-Chinese tensions as well as the use of Mandarin as the imperializing dialect of power in the Chinese diaspora. Even Mindy, who grew up in the mixed-Chinese-Toisanese community faced power dynamics as an in-group member because of her age and because she is not a parent. Implicitly and explicitly acknowledging these ethnic differences and dynamics was critical to building our racialized identity and the possibility of solidarity. From the beginning, facilitators worked to acknowledge that we were gathered to co-design around the experience of Toishanese families. Again, three of us had to acknowledge that three of our facilitators base our work outside of Asian American communities, and this was a move we sought to make throughout each session.

Having done this, we could more authentically offer our own experiences of being racialized as Asian Americans. In doing this we could name that we were moving toward solidarity not out of cultural sameness but politicized resistance. We were able share in stories of perpetually being treated as foreigners, of wanting to pass on our cultural heritage, of struggling to be heard for our concerns and dreams for our young people. In moving toward a more earnest solidarity, we were able to strategize around the strengths of the Toishanese community.

Perhaps most powerfully, we recognized that despite Toishanese communities being in the plurality of only one or two Seattle public schools, that there were Toishanese families associated with CISC at least a dozen schools. As Toishanese families sought policy and practice changes at these dozen schools, they could use their CISC network as a place to share stories of strategies and successes. Once success had been achieved at one school - perhaps a principal agreeing to commit funds for additional family-teacher conferences - families at other school would report these successes to their school, leveraging this news for change at their own children's schools. And as principals became aware of Toishanese families incorporating this strategy, they became more likely to either check in with one another on new strategies or to preemptively adopt the policies that the CISC families sought for.

Building authentic and equitable solidarity also required us to look beyond our pan-Asian design circle. Several times during our sessions, design team members would enviously reference the success of another cultural or racial group in effecting change. This was about perceptions of other groups "always complaining" or receiving dietary accommodations for religious beliefs. These were the moments where we as facilitators weighed and spent down the capital we built with our group members to interrupt the lateral violence that our members were committing against other peoples of color. Speaking candidly, I'm not sure that we actually

changed people's minds with these interruptions, for we sought to redirect focus to our stated goals, and only time will tell whether our design group folks will revert to openly participating in oppressive systems.

All told, the work described here spanned two years and countless hours of relationship building for the sake of political change. We offer here accounts of what it meant to build pan-Asian solidarity for the Toishanese community in Seattle, including the need for a commitment to translation and the corrective intention of advancing solidarity without bringing down other folks of color. These efforts have results in a range of changes from CISC families going to train as community organizers with One America and testifying in Olympia to, most important, Toishanese families advocating for themselves, their culture, and their children in schools.