

What Does Partnership Taste Like? Reimagining Family-School Partnerships through Participatory Design Research

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THE FAMILY LEADERSHIP DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

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

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

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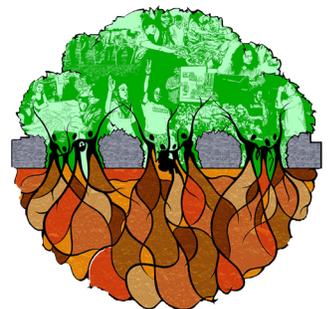
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To cite this report:

López, G. R., Yanagui, A., Kuttner, P. J. (April, 2017). *What does partnership taste like? : Reimagining family-school partnerships through participatory design research*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), San Antonio, TX.



What Does Partnership Taste Like?

Reimagining Family-School Partnerships through Participatory Design Research

Gerardo R. López, Almaida Yanagui, & Paul J. Kuttner (University of Utah)

On August 4, 2016, 20 adults arrived at the Glendale/Mountain View Community Learning Campus in Salt Lake City, UT. They grabbed pastries and coffee from a counter near the door, and sat down in four small groups around square tables. It was a unique gathering in both its makeup and its goal. Half of the group was made up of parents with students in Salt Lake City schools. These parents were mostly Latinx, from low-income immigrant communities on the city's west side, who had involvement in a parent leadership group called the Community Advocate Network. The other half was made up of educators from various levels of the K-12 system: administrators, counselors, teachers, and family advocates. They had come together three times over the course of three weeks to discuss how families and educators could better collaborate around decision making at school sites. Specifically, they were challenged with critically analyzing and reimagining a form of site-based decision making called the School Community Council (SCC).

SCCs are decision-making bodies mandated for all schools in Utah. They are charged with helping to develop and approve a school improvement plan, and to spend funds from a state land trust designated for public schools. SCCs are supposed to consist of the principal and elected parent and employee representatives (Utah Strategic Planning Act for Educational Excellence, 1992/2016). SCCs have the potential to be spaces for authentic parent involvement in school decision making, a valuable and underutilized form of family-school partnership (Epstein et al., 2002). However, the participants who gathered in 2016 agreed on at least one thing: the SCCs were not working in their schools. They reported many of the same issues that plague other well-meaning family decision making efforts: low interest and involvement from parents and teachers, processes that are confusing or alienating to parents, a lack of training on all sides, and no means of holding schools accountable (Malen & Ogawa, 1988). In Salt Lake

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), San Antonio, 2017

City, this had led to a default system of a few parents “rubber-stamping” school improvement plans designed by educators.

Those who gathered that August morning were all committed to strengthening SCCs. They came to the space not only as parents and educators, but as co-researchers in a participatory design research process (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016) aimed at reimagining SCCs as spaces for equitable family-school collaboration. The process was designed and run by us, the three authors, as part of a new university-community-district partnership focused on family-school collaboration. After spending the first meeting analyzing the barriers to effective SCCs, and the second learning about the history and legal backdrop for the councils, participants finally had the chance to re-envision SCCs in a way that would work for their communities. In other words, they took part in a collective act of *critical imagination* (Cartwright & Noone, 2006; Greene, 2000) — critiquing the world as it is and imagining how it could be, while igniting hope for the future. As Gerardo, who played the role of lead facilitator, put it:

If we had an opportunity to redesign this, to rethink this, to create something that would work, what would a functioning SCC look like for you? What would that look like? What would it feel like? As Ann said, what would it taste like? I said it tastes like tamales. That's what it would taste like, but that's me. (Lead Facilitator, August 4, 2016)

In this paper, we take a close look at the design circle process, as well as the findings, products, and next steps that have emerged from it. After summarizing relevant literature and background information, we describe the design circles and some key ideas that emerged from them. Next, we look at the process itself, elucidating moments of learning, collaboration, and shifting power relationships, while also noting drawbacks and missed opportunities in how we designed and carried out the sessions. Finally, we share the next steps already taking place to continue in terms of both research and actions, as we work to enact ideas from the design circles in our schools, in the district, and at the state.

Family-School Partnerships & Site-Based Decision Making

With over 50 years of research documenting the potential benefits of family engagement and family-school partnerships in education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005, 2007, 2012; Sheldon &

Epstein, 2005), the question is no longer *whether* schools should actively engage with families, but rather *how* schools should carry this out to greatest effect for students, families, and the community at large. For example, research demonstrates that family engagement is strongest when it is focused on student learning, when foundations of trust and relationships have been built, and when parents and educators see one another as partners in supporting the education of youth (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). It is important that educators value the cultural wealth families bring with them — including knowledge that is otherwise unavailable to educators — and that they honor the diversity of approaches to involvement (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006; López, 2001; Yosso, 2005). Active presence at the school site is only one of many forms that involvement may take. Supporting student learning and development at home, promoting the importance of education with students, and two-way communication between home and school, for example, are foundational to student success (Epstein et al., 2002). Trust, relationships, and collaboration between parents and schools are an essential piece of improving quality and equity in our public schools (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

Family-school partnerships are not only about parents supporting their own children. Parents¹ can also play important roles as educational leaders and decision makers (Warren, Mapp, & Kuttner, 2015). This can take place through school-based forums such as Parent Teacher Organizations or parent advisory councils (Epstein et al., 2002), through external parent organizing and advocacy groups (Warren, Mapp, & the Community Organizing for Education Reform Project), or some blend of the two. When done well, shared decision making and leadership can improve school climate, hold schools accountable to communities, increase families' sense of ownership over their schools, and support learning and positive development among students (Mediratta, Shah, & McCalister, 2009; Noguera, 2001; Warren, Mapp, & the Community Organizing and School Reform Project, 2011).

Shared leadership and decision making, however, is one of the most difficult types of family-school partnership to pull off. Involving parents in school or district decisions flies in the face of traditional hierarchies, challenges assumptions of who holds expertise and knowledge about education, and demands that educators truly share power with families. It requires overcoming barriers of trust,

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language, culture, and history between educators and families (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). It involves addressing the forms of racism, colonialism, and inequity that have been, and continue to be, fundamental to the structures of US schooling (Race Forward, 2006). It requires capacity building and learning about how to effectively collaborate, on the part of both parents and educators (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

Some of the more ambitious efforts at shared leadership fall under terms like *site-based decision-making*, *shared governance*, and *community control*. Coming in and out of popular discourse over the decades, site-based decision-making was used as a popular school reform approach in the 1990s, prior to the era of high stakes testing and accountability (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Noguera, 2001). One of the most well known and longest running of these efforts is the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988, which established Local School Councils (LSC) at all public school sites. LSCs include families alongside principals, teacher representatives, and other community members, and have the power to hire and fire the principal and make high-level decisions about curriculum and budget (Luppescu et. al., 2011).

School Community Councils

In this paper we look at a form of family involvement in school decision making called the School Community Council (SCC). Created as part of the 1973 *Continuing Written Agreement Based on the Principles of Shared Governance*, between the Salt Lake City School District and the Teachers Association, the first SCCs were created with “broad jurisdiction” and “formal policymaking authority,” as well as provisions to ensure parity between parent and staff voice (Malen & Ogawa, 1988). In 1999, SCCs were made mandatory at every school in the state, and given control of discretionary funds derived from profits on Utah lands held in trust for schools since it was admitted as a state (School Land Trust Program, n.d.).

Today SCCs are made up of the school principal, at least two school staff, and at least four parents who have students in the school one of the two years of their term. SCCs can change their size, but parents must always outnumber school staff by at least two. Teacher representatives are meant to be

elected by the school's teaching staff, and parent representatives by the parent community. SCCs are to be led by a chair, a parent elected by the full SCC membership. They are tasked with reviewing, revising, and approving a "school improvement plan" that puts forward key areas in need of improvement, along with strategies for addressing those areas and metrics for measurement. They are also asked to take one of the academic priorities from the school improvement plan and make a plan to spend that year's School Land Trust money on that topic. The amount of money received is based on a per-pupil formula. (Utah Strategic Planning Act for Educational Excellence, 1992/2016). SCCs may also have other tasks, which change by district.

When Malen and Ogawa (1988) studied the functioning of Salt Lake City SCCs in the mid-80s, they found that, despite favorable structures in place to encourage parent inclusion in decision making, SCCs ran into a whole range of barriers to collaboration. The bodies were effectively controlled by school staff, attracted only the more affluent and formally educated parents, were used as a way of one-directional communication to parents rather than making decisions, and focused on issues peripheral to the core functions of the school. Thirty years later, the same critiques hold. As we explore below, SCCs at the schools that the educators and parents in our research team attended were simply not functioning in a way that anyone thought was adequate.

A Participatory Design Research Project

This study is part of a multi-site research project led by the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC), based out of the University of Washington School of Education. The FLDC's approach to inquiry is rooted in participatory design research (PDR) (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). Design research in education is aimed at advancing educational theory and practice by enacting, studying, and revising educational interventions amid the messiness of real-life learning situations. Design research allows for the exploration of multiple variables, ongoing design revision, and the engagement of participants in the (re)design process (Collins, Joseph, & Bielaczyc, 2004).

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PDR both extends and challenges the participatory design processes that have emerged from design research and related approaches. Like design research in education, PDR is interested in developing insights into how people learn and what forms of knowledge are generated in co-design processes. At the same time — as with other forms of critical, participatory, and decolonizing methodologies — PDR gives ongoing attention to questions of power and inequity, not only in terms of the topics of study but among co-designers themselves. As Bang and Vossoughi (2016) explain, PDR “links both structural critiques of normative hierarchies of power and imagined possible futures” while at the same time being “committed to consequential impacts in the here and now.”

The project we describe in this paper utilized a specific PDR practice called a “design circle,” which is a participatory take on the traditional focus group (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016). In a design circle, community members come together to co-design theories of change and solutions to pressing community issues. In the context of FLDC, design circles represent a form of both community engagement and data collection, facilitating family leadership while leveraging multiple forms of knowledge. As Ishimaru and Bang (2016) explain:

Design Circles are a way of honoring community leadership and perspectives by creating space for conversations that are focused on co-designing solutions rather than only on voicing and naming challenges (Bang et al., 2010). Design circles are in-depth, reciprocal working groups or focus groups that aim to engage stories, experiences, and expertise within our communities in order to catalyze action within a particular context. (p. 14)

For our local project, we organized a set of three design circles over the course of three weeks. Each was 2.5 hours long. All meetings were audio recorded, video recorded, and transcribed for analysis. We sought to create a space that was welcoming and accessible to both educators and parents, with a particular focus on the kind of barriers that often keep parents out of school activities. We held the sessions at a community learning center attached to an elementary and a middle school, which was highly utilized by, and comfortable for, many parents. We offered food and childcare at all sessions, and engaged in Spanish-English and English-Spanish translation throughout.

We were very deliberate in our invitations. First of all, we planned for an equal number of educators and parents as a way of modeling and encouraging the kind of equal collaboration that we

sought in the design circles, as well as in the SCCs themselves. We invited Parents of Color from immigrant and refugee communities who had at least some experience with SCCs, and with engaging schools as community leaders. These parents were mainly recruited from the Community Advocate Network, a group that supports parents as leaders in west side neighborhoods and schools. In terms of educators, we invited individuals with a range of school staff positions. The final group included one or more principals, assistant principals, counselors, teachers, family advocates, and district leaders. We targeted individuals who had demonstrated at least some investment in family engagement. Many of these parents and educators were from the same schools, and some already had built trusting relationships. In fact, the specific concern with SCCs that drove our effort had originally emerged from conversations with the Community Advocate Network and with these specific schools. With this makeup, the group we invited was able to move relatively quickly into recognizing shared interests and co-designing.

This paper presents a description of the design circle process, and a partial report of the results that emerged from our collective analysis. A full report of the outcomes of the three design circles, prepared for principals and SCC chairs, can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/n23rnb6>. We also present an initial analysis of the design circle *process*. Our three-person lead research team met to share individual observations, re-read transcripts, and listened to audio recordings. In dialogue with one another, we pulled out key processes that helped to move the work forward towards the goals of PDR, as well as missteps or challenges faced along the way. As described in the conclusion, we have plans for additional data gathering and more rigorous analysis moving forward.

The Family Leadership Design Collaborative

FLDC is a national network of scholars, organizers, educational practitioners, and community leaders working for community wellbeing and educational justice by redefining family engagement in a way that centers the lives and knowledges of non-dominant families (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016). One of the goals of the FLDC is to facilitate the development of organic and informed “next” practices that serve the

interests of community wellbeing and educational justice. These “next” practices are fluid, temporal, and community-grounded, often standing in contrast to a rigid set of “best practices” that typically emerge from conventional top-down approaches.

This intentional shift to address “next” practices via a participatory design process allows the FLDC to move away from traditionalist understandings of involvement, and focus instead on the inequitable structures and systems that limit the full potential of family and community interactions with schools and their agents. Towards this end, the FLDC embraces a set of four core principles that drive/inform our collective work:

- Cultivating family and community well-being and educational justice
- Beginning with family and community ecologies (as opposed to school or policy-based initiatives)
- Creating ongoing transformative possibilities
- Building solidarity towards collective action

These four principles inform the focus, scope, and overall work of the FLDC, while providing new avenues and openings/aperturas towards transformative research and practice in the areas of family and community engagement.

The Salt Lake City Design Circle

Over the course of three weeks, we hosted three design circles in Salt Lake City as part of the FLDC’s larger research project. Each one of our circles was intentionally structured to promote dialogue, participation, and critique from all the participants involved. Our lead research team was made up of the three authors: a faculty member at the University of Utah college of education (Gerardo), a local parent turned community organizer (Almaida), and a university staff member tasked with building community-university partnerships focused on educational equity and justice (Paul). Our team met several times over the course of four months to discuss the overarching objectives and goals for each day, while considering

a range of activities and processes that would honor our aforementioned guiding principles. In the end, we decided that our design circles should accomplish the following things on respective days:

- **Day 1:** Discuss the topic of home/school/family relations from a critical perspective (i.e., What does it mean? Why do we do it? What do we hope it can accomplish?). Participants can identify the challenges to home/school/family relations from their respective positions and/or vantage points.
- **Day 2:** Provide participants with a history of the SCC and invite them to probe deeper into the specific challenges they face in having a successful SCC.
- **Day 3:** Engage participants in the SCC redesign process by posing the following question: “How can we rethink an SCC?” In other words, what should a healthy and functioning SCC look like? What should it feel like? Who comes to the table? Etc.

In short, the main objectives of our three design circles were to allow participants to understand the “big picture” surrounding home/school/family relations, understand the aims and specific challenges associated with the SCC, and open a space to imagine and co-design a healthy, functional SCC from the bottom-up. A brief summary of each day of our design circles is provided below, based on the transcripts and other data collected. The sessions were run by Gerardo, as our Lead Facilitator, with support from Alma as co-facilitator and translator.

Day 1

Day 1 began with general introductions, followed by a detailed review of the Informed Consent/IRB process, a brief introduction of the FLDC, and an overview of the Salt Lake City Design Circles. This was followed by a short activity called the “birthday line-up” where participants were asked to line themselves up according to their birth date. Participants were not allowed to speak during the activity, but were invited to use other forms of communication such as hand gestures, facial expressions, or other types of nonverbal communication. Participants then revealed their birth dates and realized that they had successfully accomplished this goal.

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We then debriefed as a group, paying particular attention to how collective goals can be accomplished despite our language barriers. Using this activity as springboard, the lead facilitator moved on to discuss how this activity connects to broader issues of school/community relations:

I think that's important to understand that even though there are barriers with respect to language, there's other ways in which we can communicate.... Language is one variable but it's not the only variable. Oftentimes, we use language as [an excuse] to say: "Because we speak a different language, we cannot either collaborate or we need to have a whole system in place before we can have this happen." Or "I need to have to all my translators and interpreters and all this sort of stuff" before involvement can happen. Yes, language is important. But at the fundamental core, language is one variable-- amongst a host of variables--that are also dependent on the collaboration that's possible. (Lead Facilitator, July 21, 2016).

The facilitator proceeded with a lengthy discussion about the literature base surrounding School-Community relations in general and parental involvement in particular. Using Henderson & Mapp's (2002) research synthesis as a general guide, the facilitator covered many of the major trends, theories, and frameworks on home/school involvement — including time-worn typologies (Epstein, 2001) and other research-based approaches (e.g., Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011). The facilitator then re-engaged participants by posing a series of questions that probed for deeper understandings surrounding the concept of involvement.

Participant responses to facilitator questions were generally critical in nature, suggesting that the wide range of parental involvement activities and/or family engagement processes were either minimized or underappreciated altogether:

As far as I have understood,...this is part of what the school expects. What I have learned is that parent involvement is making sure that your child is on time. Making sure that he or she is wearing uniform. Making sure that they finish homework. Making sure the child hands in the homework and these few [examples] that I have mentioned have been taken for granted, have never been recognized. (Educator, July 21, 2016)

Most of these families have more than two jobs. Coming here and giving you five hours a week or a month in the schools and yet, the parent involvement that they are performing are considered basic parenting and not being considered as parent involvement in the school. (Parent, July 21, 2016)

After further discussion surrounding these points, the conversation shifted to the ways in which the racial and ethnic composition of the US has dramatically changed over the years, yet schools and the

types of involvement/engagement practices they privilege, have not substantially changed in response to this demographic shift. As one school principal put it:

I think our schools were traditionally designed for middle white class families. We have not been able to make that transition to recognize that we're now serving a different community—though our school makeup who are serving those communities, are predominately white middle class. If that is ever going to change, we have to go back to our communities and start building our communities up. Then our school starts to reflect who are communities really are. (School Principal, July 21, 2016)

As other participants chimed in, the conversation became increasingly critical of the narrow ways in which schools come to understand—or perhaps fail to understand—the diverse parents with whom they work. Many participants, especially the parents and community members present, lamented the ways in which schools failed to recognize community strengths and assets. Many believed that school personnel too often focus on community problems such as crime or poverty, which only reinforce the belief that communities are broken or dysfunctional. Many of the educators in the room agreed, suggesting that school have increasingly become alienated from the communities they serve. To this end, the facilitator suggested that even the idea of “school and community relations” itself, suggests an artificial split between these two constructs:

When we think about this concept of school and community relations, even the term itself presupposes that the school somehow exists independently from the community it serves: Schools and community. But the school is a community. The school [functions] as a community. The school is part of the community. Why do we think—even conceptually—that school and community [are separate]? It's like, "Wait a second! We are a community. The school is part of the community. (Lead Facilitator, July 21, 2016).

Participants agreed that when we treat schools and communities as separate entities, it only reinforces an “us” versus “them” mentality.

Participants were then divided into two groups: A group comprised of educators/school personnel, and another group comprised of parents/community members/advocates. Each group discussed the many challenges they faced in forging strong school/community relationships, and what some of the barriers they felt were hindering this process. As a whole, parents felt that (a) language was barrier, (b) teachers were not motivated to do this work absent financial incentives, (c) that their charter school counterparts simply demand parental participation while traditional schools have no such policy, and that

(d) far too often, parent volunteers were taken for granted by schools to “rubber stamp” school policies and other school-driven initiatives. On this last note, some parents stated their frustrations accordingly:

PARENT 1: You're expected to ...

PARENT 2: Sign it.

PARENT 1: Agree with it. Yeah.

PARENT 3: At SCC, I sign a document of a plan that I won't agree with.

PARENT 1: Yeah.

PARENT 2: That you don't understand.

PARENT 1: Basically what happens is that it goes by vote. They bring it up and then that's it. You could say whatever you want, they'll write it down but what happens is that they will make a vote... They get their way, they're getting their way. They always do.

In contrast, the educator group generally felt that the following challenges made it difficult to forge strong relationships with parents and the broader community: (a) Not knowing the community because many of the children they've taught have now grown up and moved away, (b) not knowing the community because many teachers choose not to live in local neighborhoods, (c) being discouraged from getting to know the community by existing district policies that discourage home visits, (d) the overall mindset of teachers that view communities as dysfunctional, crime-ridden, etc., and (e) lack of time on both the teachers as well as the parents. On this last note, the teachers had the following exchange:

PRINCIPAL: We're teachers and it's a reality-- like we're working our asses off. I swear to God! to put one more thing on our plate is hard and administrators too! We have...60 colleagues that aren't here [at the design circle] today. You have to be willing to give that time.... It takes a lot and it's hard to undertake.

EDUCATOR: I'll say the same but on the side of families. The hustle and bustle of life... [We] give them one more thing to do. [We should] be able to maybe fit their needs a little better by doing the meetings in certain places, like going out to their complexes... It's just that, as a single mom with a lot of kids, your head is just spinning from sports, to different grade levels, through the light bill! Then there's a parents conference and it's only at a certain time and at a certain location? I mean, how can we come into each other's schedules for the sake of empowering each other?

At the end of Day 1, the two groups were reconvened. They shared out their respective notes surrounding their perceived barriers, and engaged each other in a very thoughtful and sensitive way. The

facilitator ended the day with recap of the day's events, and the overarching summary that both parents and educators are equally frustrated and that current practices, policies, and behaviors are only contributing to a deeper sense of alienation and distancing—as opposed to increasing trust, collaboration, and understanding.

DAY 2:

Day 2 began with a recap of the work we did the previous week, including substantive lessons, “take-aways,” and “A-ha!” moments that participants had gleaned from our first design circle. Generally speaking, educators indicated that parent and community members were frustrated with playing perfunctory roles in schools. They also noted that there was a need to know the parents and communities they serve in a more reciprocal and genuine manner. As one school counselor summarized:

I think that what I took away was that as educators, we need to find a way where we are part of the community, versus just driving in for your job and driving home. Being part of that community, becoming part of that community. We talked about home visits, which may be very vital to educators becoming part of that community, because now we're in their homes and we get to know the families and we know them a little bit better. I also learned that families need more understanding of what their role is in the School Community Council and they need to have a voice there. They don't just sit there at the meetings, because we need to have parents by mandate. We do need to have parents on this council, but they need to have an actual role on that committee. I also took away that parents need to have a better understanding of our system and what their rights are in the school and in their community. I also felt passionate that we really need to validate parent's work and all that they're doing at home...and all that work that they're doing at home to get their kids prepared to be in school. (School Counselor, July 28, 2016)

Similarly, parents noted that two-way communication was a key component of effective collaboration, and that getting school-based information in a language that was accessible was as important as parents communicating with schools about what's going on in the home and/or community. As one parent commented:

Yo aprendí que la llave de todo esto es tener comunicación. O sea, todo lo que se le da a la vuelta-- todas las problemas que resultan de todo lo que vivimos de día a día en las escuelas --es la comunicación. [*I learned that the key to all of this is communication. In other words, everything that surrounds [the school]-- all of the problem that we experience on a day-to-day basis in schools--(can be solved) through communication.*] (Parent, July 28, 2016).

After our reflection activity, we introduced an administrator from the School Children's Trust at the Utah State Board of Education. The Trust is the state office that ensures School LAND Trust funds are being disseminated and used in accordance with state laws. The office also provides information, training, support and resources- not only to the SCC's directly, but to the local school boards who provide SCC's with administrative oversight at the local level. The School Children's Trust also maintains a website for the various constituents with information and supporting resources for site based SCC's.

As a whole, the presenter's PowerPoint presentation was quite lengthy and detailed—consisting of 45 slides that covered the history of the School LAND Trust program, the legislative history of the SCC, the responsibilities and duties of the SCC as defined in state law, the organizational structure of the SCC, and the election process that determines how SCC officers and council-members are selected. Participants learned about the legislative and fiscal mechanisms that created the SCC, and the compulsory requirements that are legislated for all schools and districts in the state of Utah. Participants took copious notes, and engaged the presenter with thoughtful questions throughout her presentation.

The presenter stated at the start of her presentation that she had given this presentation “many times” in the past. Indeed, she was quite comfortable with the content, and her presentation was rather predictable and routine. Despite Mrs. Plant's good intentions and positive energy, much of the content was detailed, rather, arduous and drawn-out, as though her intended audience was current (or prospective) SCC members. Stated somewhat differently: the presentation was rather bureaucratic and technical. We believe this served to alienate many of the participants who were present. Parents, for example were a bit disoriented as Plant rifled through her PowerPoint slides in English. In contrast, educators seemed somewhat put-off by Plant's legalistic and officious tone.

After the presentation, everyone gathered around a large table to debrief with our presenter. Many of the comments that emerged from participants suggests there was deep sense of frustration—especially among the educators who were present. Many of the school personnel felt that SCC monies were overly

tied to academic programming, which stifled their ability to use these moneys in ways that benefitted parents and communities other ways. The following exchange provides some insight:

COUNSELOR: This supposed to be a site based decision making model. But if our school really felt like we needed to have a Spanish speaking liaison in our school to help bring in some of our families, we couldn't do that [with the SCC] because it's not under "academic success"...But it's imperative that we have someone there to bring in our community, which brings academic success in the long run. That's my question and frustration: The SCC is not really site based. I mean, it is, on the one hand. But if there's a real need in our school [and it's in a non academic area] and we need some funding, we have no access to that money....

PRESENTER: We have to use it for academic and direct instruction of students. That's what the law says. So what I'm telling you is: if you want it to be something broader than that, you have to convince the legislature.

FAMILY ADVOCATE: (sarcastic tone) In your spare time?

COUNSELOR: This is my own perspective. I think it's very narrow. With all that money, we can have such a success as a community if only we were allowed to say, "This is what our community needs." (July 28, 2016).

This exchange not only details the deep exasperation among school personnel, but highlights the rather dismissive attitude from the presenter, who insisted that the SCC is an deeply inflexible institution and was very skeptical of the possibility for policy change. After further discussion, it was clear that the school personnel in the room were deeply bothered by the presentation and general demeanor. A school principal noted her frustration as follows:

Putting that academic piece also alienates because our communities don't always know how to inform the academics of their kids. And I would say that of any community. People think they can fix education because we all went through a system, right? That discredits us as educators! We're educated in this. Our hands are in this. This is what we need to do. And if we have an opportunity to spend money—this money that's our community money—on things that are truly going to serve our community and our kids, then that is a different conversation than trying to say, "Okay, so we have this money that can only be spent on academics. What do you think?" I'm over my head in academics, every day, trying to figure it out! The last thing I can do ... I mean, I get so frustrated. I have done my due diligence with the LAND Trust and I am so frustrated in trying to get it to work in a white middle class system. (School Principal, July 28, 2016).

Many of the parents who were present also expressed great frustration. However, their overall frustration was not with the SCC in particular, but with the entire schooling enterprise that seems to prioritize bureaucracy and efficiency over student success. The presentation was a cogent reminder of the

how administrators far too often gloss over student and parent interests when discussing school policies and procedures.

In one particular example, a parent was confused about whether her child, who attends a charter school, could have access to a tutor with SCC funds. The presenter indicated that the child could if the school applied for SCC funding. The parent replied that her child's school did not have an SCC in place. The presenter informed the parent about a particular rule governing charter schools, and said that her child's school may qualify for SCC funding if they follow the proper protocols and guidelines to establish an SCC. The parent replied that the school's principal indicated that even if they did qualify for SCC moneys to hire tutors, those moneys would probably target student who were extremely low performing. In other words, her child might not qualify for tutoring services even if the school qualified for SCC funds. In effect, the parent was merely asking for clarification surrounding how funds should be used at the local school site. The exchange below picks up on this conversation:

FACILITATOR: Just to provide some context, what [this parent] talking about is a specific situation that happened to her and in her school and to her child. It sounds like the priorities of the school were not aligned with her priorities as a parent. Who did the school want to focus on? Those that are at the cusp, i.e the "bubble kids." I guess the question then becomes: "How do the concerns of the parents become closer aligned to the priorities and concerns of the school, and how can the SCC become a forum for us to think through those issues and work out those differences?"

PRESENTER: That's why parents should represent the students at the school. You don't want to have a population of students who are not represented on the council.

PARENT #2: But what if there's no SCC at her school, where can she go?

PRESENTER (to Parent #1): Are you on the council?

COFACITATOR (to Paula): Do you mean the SCC?

PARENT #1 (confused): No. Pues yo siempre he estado en las juntas. Pero como las hacen en inglés, pues no las he entiendo. Pero estoy allí, como dicen, ocupando una silla. [*"She's not. She just listens in on different meetings, but she feels that she's only occupying a chair because she doesn't understand what's going on. They don't provide translation."*]

PRESENTER (to Parent #1): Oh. That's a problem. It alienates people. I mean, I don't understand what you're saying [when you speak to me in Spanish]. I have to rely on her to tell me what you're saying. So I understand what that feels like. It's like: you don't know what's going on. That feels alienating. Where can you go? You either need to be on the council, or you need

someone on the council who feels the same way you do, who thinks the things that are important to you are important to them, so that they will say something.

In this particular exchange, the presenter is attempting to be genuine and sincere, but her empathy falls a bit short. Her main advice to the parent was to simply join an SCC, completely ignoring the fact that the charter school in question does not have an SCC in place. More importantly, she avoids the larger concern of the parent: i.e., why the school principal told her that her child may not qualify for tutoring services should the school apply for and receive SCC monies.

In short, Day 2 revealed many of the frustrations that both parents and administrators have about the SCC in particular and educational bureaucracy in general. School officials were generally frustrated by the bureaucratic hoops and policy constraints brought forth by the SCC, while parents were generally frustrated by a bureaucratic educational apparatus that largely ignores their specific needs and concerns while viewing them only as rubber stamping agents when it is convenient. One principal summarized the overall sentiment of Day 2 as follows:

I'm going into my third year as principal and my School Community Council is something that I feel like I have completely failed at, and that's, like, as a human, it's sucks to fail. I know it's important, but I feel like other community work that we're doing, it matters. We're doing home visits. We're getting buses for our kids. We're trying to build a bridge across the Jordan River. We're trying to connect to our families and our kids. We're trying to do so much work that when it comes to School Community Council. And...we've tried to make it work in our school, but it ends up feeling like compliance, and no one likes compliance because the focus is lost. I think we all learned that today. We understand that there's a good purpose behind it, but it gets lost in all the bureaucracy. It doesn't feel like meaningful work. It feels like something that is on my list that I hate and that I don't do well at. How do we make that meaningful? I don't know, because I feel like there's so many barriers. That's my frustration. I understand the purpose behind all of it, but, on the ground, in my school, it doesn't look like that. It doesn't make sense. I don't know how to wrap my head around it and how to feel successful at it. I'm hoping that something will come of this [design circle]. I know it's not about answers, but I don't know how to do this. I failed. I'll be the first person to tell you. And it feels like crap (School Principal, July 28, 2016).

DAY 3

Our third design circle began very much the same way as our previous design circles: recapping some of the major themes/ideas that came up the previous week. To spark discussion, and to get participants engaged in conversation, we decided to do an activity where small groups read a few select quotes that emerged from our previous design circles and discuss these quotes in small groups. The

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), San Antonio, 2017

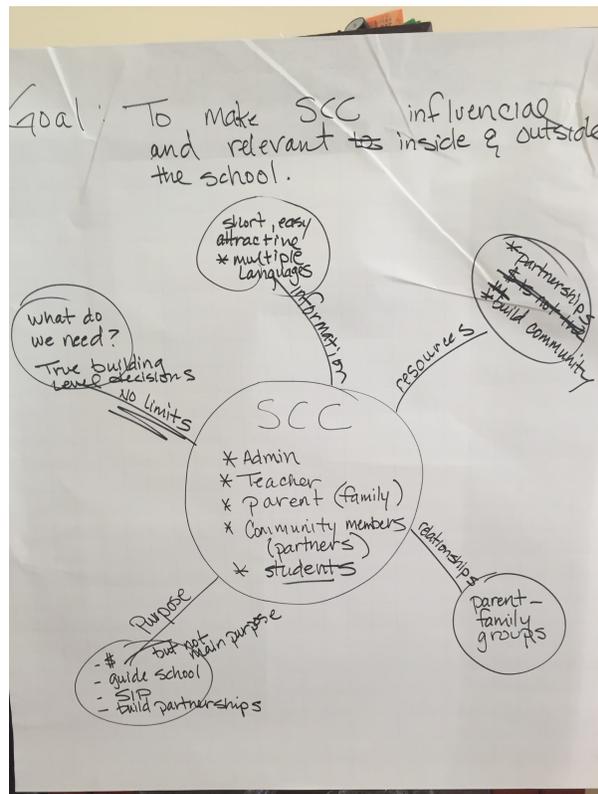
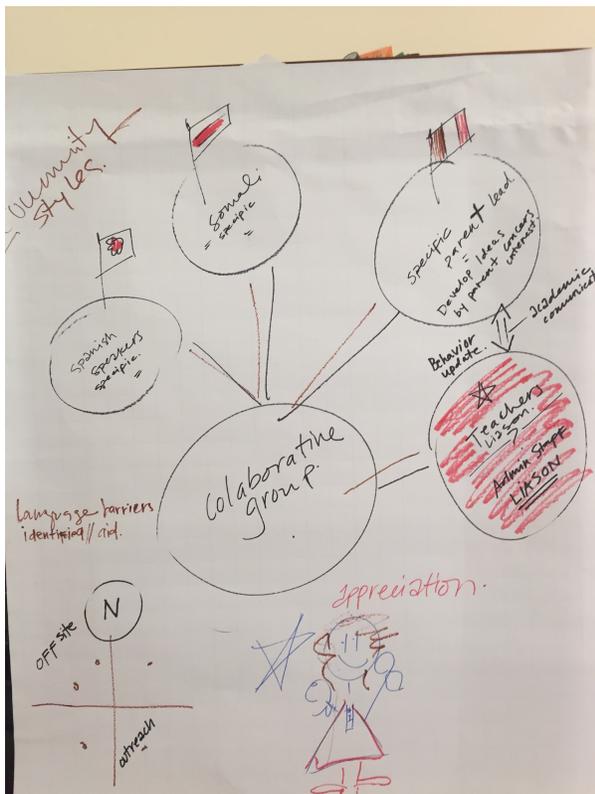
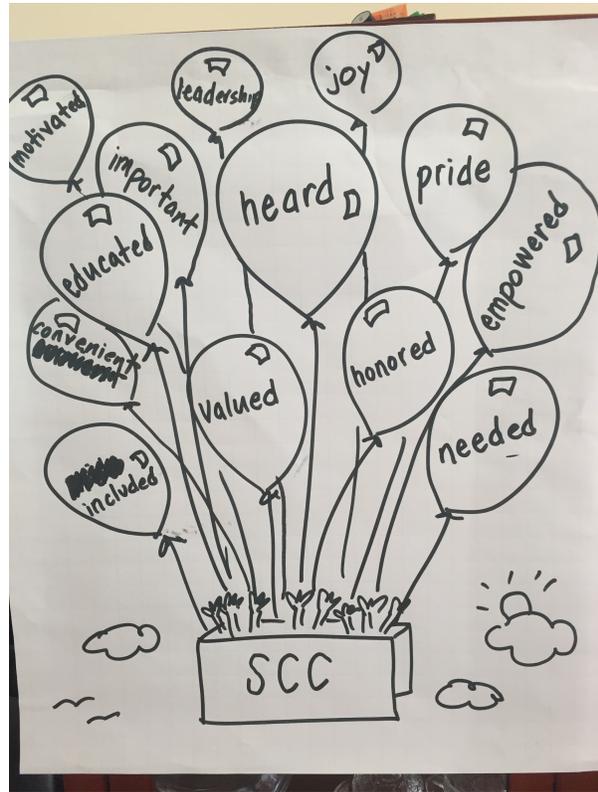
quotes that were selected were mainly from parents who were feeling alienated by the bureaucratic process of the SCC, while feeling as though their voices and perspectives were not genuinely valued or respected in schools. One of the quotes selected was the following:

I signed a document of a plan that I don't agree or I do not understand. Translation of documents, as a parent, I feel is not present. I should be part of this plan, of creating this plan. When I'm at the SCC I'm only given a document that is barely explained me and then I'm asked to sign it...I'm asked to be in a place where I should share my mind and share my ideas, but its not valued. I'm not heard. I'm not understood. I'm not part of the process. We need to have interpreters that look like me.

After some discussion, individuals were invited to “share out” their small group reflections with the larger group. This yielded rich information about the many challenges posed by the SCC.

Given this feedback, we then began the process of re-imagining the SCC's. The facilitator posed set of related questions: “What would a flourishing SCC on the West-side look like? What would it feel like? What would it taste like?” Groups were encouraged to dream about their ideal SCC and to visualize an SCC that was healthy, functioning, and effective. They could use any medium of their choosing: it could be visual, it could be an act/performance, it could be a metaphor. Our hope was to open a dialogic space that was both empowering and transformative. Below are the images created by the small groups.

- Ideal-SCC - promoted!
- Evening event with food, -pride student activities (fiesta)
 - All languages translated (heard-understood)
 - SCC chair/comm sets agenda and run the meeting (empowered)(needed)
 - Small groups representing comm. (collaborative) (honored)
 - Pay SCC members for their time
 - No mandated (state, district) tasks-requirements (empowered)
 - Opportunities to see/identify what is needed (educated)
 - Off site meetings (convenience)
 - Everyone participates (important)



After sharing out these representations to the larger group, individuals then had an opportunity to personally reflect on the larger discussion, and write down their thoughts on sticky notes. Participants were asked to think about the similarities that cut across all of the new SCC representations. We gathered these individual reflections and sorted them out by major themes.

We then asked groups to think about what “steps” needed to be taken in order for schools to arrive at these idealized configurations. This would include an understanding of who needed to be involved, how these individuals would be involved, the resources necessary to allow this to happen, and capacity needed to permit healthy SCC’s to flourish and thrive. The results were later written up in a report aimed at school principals and SCC chairs, presenting basic principles that should guide SCC design along with concrete actions steps (López, Mayer-Glenn, Yanagui, & Kuttner, 2016). These principles included:

- Create a welcoming, community-oriented environment;
- Develop an inclusive process for incorporating parent and educator voice; and
- Engage in regular communication and reciprocal learning

By day’s end, we noticed that the group had a different type of energy/feel. Participants were hopeful and excited. Many were hugging each other, having had a “shared” experience, and having produced something that was within their grasp. For a brief moment, participants realized their collective potential, and the possibilities of what could happen when people work together in an authentic collaborative fashion towards a common goal.

Initial Analysis of the The Design Circle Process

Finding Common Ground

At the beginning of this design process, it is fair to say that parents and school officials were a bit cautious of each other. They were equally cautious of the research process and, perhaps, a bit wary of the

research team. Far too often in the past, participants had made good faith efforts to bridge the school/community chasm only to find that the journey was much more difficult and vexing than they had ever imagined. Their individual and collective experiences, let downs, and frustrations often gave rise to fabricated assumptions, excuses, and allegations about why the school/community relationship was broken or not working. Eventually, the frustrations grew deeper—often turning into resentment, antipathy, and lost hope.

Parents were deeply frustrated at a school system that saw them as mere “rubber stamping” agents; a system that failed to understand, recognize, and validate their educational concerns as well as the complexity of their lived realities. Educators were frustrated with their inability to fully understand and connect to communities in deep/authentic ways—despite their best intentions. They were equally frustrated with a bureaucratic educational system rife with rules, codes, policies, and regulations that often constrained their ability to rely on their judgment as professional educators to make sound educational decisions regarding their limited resources. Needless to say, frustration levels were high, as was their level of skepticism and suspicion.

The presentation on day 2, however, not only elevated these frustrations but also opened an ontological space for mutual understanding. Somehow, both parents and educators realized they were equally frustrated with a bureaucratic system that prioritized rules and policies over human interactions and shared-relationships. Although the frustrations of the parents and school personnel were not targeted at the same source, there was, nevertheless, a shared “moment” where everyone in the room—including members the research team—felt angry, powerless, and frustrated. Indeed, Paula Plant’s presentation proved to be a significant turning point in our design circle process. We feel that we would not have accomplished as much on Day 3, had we not gone through the shared experience and collective frustrations on Day 2. As an addendum to this experience, expression frustration with the presenter herself — who had her own frustrations with the bureaucracy she had so long been a part of — opened up a line of communication that has grown into regular collaboration and, potentially, an avenue for policy reform.

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Building Relational Trust

The Design Circles were rooted in, and actively promoted, trust among participants. According to the research conducted by Bryk and Schneider(2003), a particular kind of trust they refer to as “relational trust” is a necessary ingredient in well functioning schools. According the Bryk and Schneider, trust is a combination of several vital points that include relationship, validation, mutual benefit, inclusivity, respect, ability to listen and understand.

Relational trust is grounded in the social respect that comes from the kinds of social discourse that take place across the school community. Respectful exchanges are marked by genuinely listening to what each person has to say and by taking these views into account in subsequent actions. Even when people disagree, individuals can still feel valued if others respect their opinions. Without interpersonal respect, social exchanges may cease. People typically avoid demeaning situations if they can. When they don't have this option sustained conflict may erupt. (p. 42)

The Design Circle provided the opportunity for ongoing, strong conversations of a difficult nature without damaging already established relationships and/or relationships that had not yet began. As research has demonstrated in the past, relationships go hand and hand with trust, due to the fact that obligations and expectations of one another are commonly present. The trust that individuals give each other minimizes the high risk that come with sharing perspectives when addressing an important issue. Trust is a particularly important factor when having conversations of disagreement. Respect and understanding of each other's different perspectives are directly involved in the trust that has been put into place by individuals. Brewster and Railsback (2003) make a strong argument for this in their research, stating, “If there is nothing at stake, or if no party does not require anything of the other, trust is not an issue.”

In setting down the ground for working in collaboration within the Design Circles. Trust was a fundamental element for open and honest conversations to take place. All participants were invited by someone that already had a relationship with the participants. Gerardo, Paul, and Almida made the first invitations to teachers, principals, school staff, and parents. The second round of invitations were made by the participants previously invited. As participants entered the room on all three days that Design Circles

took place, a familiar face was either at the door to greet them or somewhere in the room. Conversations would start immediately upon arrival of participants. This served as an icebreaker, with social conversations taking place throughout the room. As one parent shared in conversation almost a year after his participation in design circles, “Design Circles was well thought out even the before and after social conversations that took place gave me a sense of belonging. I felt I was at the right place with the right people at the right time” (Community Advocate, April 20, 2017).

Shifting Power Relationships

PDR seeks to do more than simply *include* previously marginalized perspectives in the research and design process. It seeks to challenge power hierarchies and foster new kinds of equity and accountability in relationships (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). This work requires close and ongoing attention to relations of power — among participants, facilitators, forms of knowledge, and ways of communicating — which have an uncanny ability to reassert themselves even in supposedly equitable spaces. From the beginning, we recognized that our work was being carried out within a context of long-running institutionalized inequity. Each of our choices leading up to the design circles was made to at least slightly mitigate this inequity by establishing the space as one for educator *and* parent voice, as well as for all involved to take ownership over the process. For example, we ensured equal numbers of educators and parents, and educators who were west side parents and/or Latinx; having the circles led by a Latino faculty member and supported by a local parent/community organizer; and selecting a location familiar and comfortable to parents, and inviting parents and educators who already had relationships and experience engaging one another.

That said, traditional researcher-participant and educator-parent hierarchies did reassert themselves and required ongoing attention. On Day 1, in our effort to ensure that everyone had access to some general information and understood the nature of the research project, the lead facilitator largely dominated the conversation, giving the initial proceedings the feel of a more traditional focus group. It

was only when we split up the group into parents and educators, and gave the opportunity for people to share personal stories with peers and communicate as a group that we saw a more equitable back and forth with multiple perspective being shared, listened to, and honored as valuable contributions. In addition, our translator chose to translate from a table directly to those who needed it. This had the unintended effect of marginalizing the one participant who took advantage of the translation. We ameliorated this in Days 2 and 3 with translation at the table and in front of the room, and by ensuring some parts were translated from Spanish to English, rather than vice versa.

On Day 2, although all participants were frustrated with the presentation, educators seemed on average to be more comfortable engaging in critique than parents (though some vocal parents did engage.) We also noted comments from some parents that seemed to be “off-topic” — for example, one parent wanted to discuss struggles getting a uniform policy passed at her school. This tension between our plan (to address policy-level questions) and the priorities of some parents (practical, school-level questions) was a difficult one to balance in the moment. In some ways, we had reinstated the dynamics of traditional SCC trainings and meetings, which often marginalize parent concerns in order to “stay true” to the agenda.

On day three that we saw a qualitative shift toward equitable collaboration in the space. We were able to dispense with information sharing, and move on to collective imagination, which sparked far-ranging conversations among mixed groups of parents and educators. In the transcripts we see parents and educators sharing air time, listening, and demonstrating interest in one another's ideas. Parents were authentically engaged, and took the opportunity to challenge the very culture of SCCs. School personnel were thoughtful and conscious of their own positionality throughout these small group discussions. The products that emerged from these small group discussions were quite powerful. Participants not only demonstrated that they had thought deeply about the work that we had done up to that point, but their final products truly represented the collective voice of everyone involved. While normative power relationships were not banished altogether, it was a level of shared control that is very rare in our public schools. This led the co-facilitator, Almada, to give a tearful closing speech to the group:

I wanted to share one thing with you guys...For the past 12 years I've worked with families in the community and time and again I would come to administrators, or come to this group of people that wanted to make a change in the community, and I would say, "Well, we need to bring groups together. We need to bring parents, teachers, and administrators together, we need to talk this out. And they said, "It could not be done." But you are history in the making. It was able to be done. We did it here. We came together, we talked about a topic that affects everyone, that affects our children, that affects the education that our children are receiving, and our voices were heard all around the table. When they said it could not be done, we did it. Thank you. Give yourself a hand. (Community Organizer, August 4, 2016)

Conclusion

As a result of the conversations that took place within Design Circles, a number of next steps were catalyzed. At the school level, two of us (Almida and Paul) have been working partnership with parents and administration at some of the participating schools to implement ideas from the design circles. During the summer of 2017, we will be re-engaging design circle participants through a social gathering. This will be a way to reconnect with participants, and to follow up on where they're at with the process of reimagining the School Community Councils in their individual school sites.

The design circle report was created quickly, in order to share findings with administrators and SCC chairs. At the same time, we began a second, smaller design process to create a product that would be useful to parent leaders. We brought back five parents from the circles, along with two social work interns, to take part in the design. The result will be a comic booklet that provides a visual explanation of School Community Councils for parents. The idea is to provide the comic booklet to parent leaders in schools as a tool that they can use to invite other parents to become involved with School Community Councils at their student school sites.

At the district level, the office of Family-School Collaboration will be conducting a professional trainings for school staff, using the design circle report as a starting point. The training will focus on increasing and improving family engagement in schools, working in partnership, being inclusive with

families and building relationships with parents and families. This training will take place on May 12, 2017, and we are hoping to expand it to a year-long series of workshops.

At the policy level, two of us (Gerardo and Paul) have joined a task force focused on improving engagement in SCCs. This task force is coordinated by the presenter that we brought to the original design circles. We are using it as a chance to support our local work with the comic booklet and ongoing research, and to explore avenues for changing state policy to be less burdensome for SCCs.

Finally, we plan to continue analysis of the design circle process itself. Collection of data will take place through one on one recorded interviews with all participants that were present at the design circles. Interviews will be taking place during the summer of 2017. This will be a way of collecting richer data about the design experience and what individuals feel they got out of it. In this way, the design circles were an important catalyst, as well as part of a much longer-term effort to support parent leadership in schools.

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¹ In this paper we use the term “parents” inclusively, to refer to any caretaker of a child.