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Collaborative Action Inquiry: A Tool for, and Result of, Parent Learning and Leadership

Paige M. Bray, Joan Pedro, Erin M. Kenney, and Mary Gannotti

Abstract

This parent information project is grounded in the notion of parental involvement as advocacy that benefits children in the community. Supported by a state-level early childhood foundation in a learning partnership with a national, non-partisan research foundation, this project engaged parent leaders from five communities as co-researchers in identifying assets, listening to citizens, capacity building, and knowledge development. University researchers engaged with co-researchers as essential collaborators enacting this participatory action-oriented project in order to gain insights on family involvement and community action contributing to thriving children, birth to age 8. Creation of a deliberation guide was a tangible product of an iterative cycle of inquiry and grassroots, collaborative process to promote change and empowerment. Co-researcher insights and observations, formally captured in an intentional focus group, are presented with equal importance as author voices. The use of face-to-face time and virtual space is addressed. Implications for parent leadership, transformative knowledge production, and educational change are explored.

Introduction

There is overwhelming support for engaging parents and families in the education of their children as parent involvement is linked to positive learning outcomes. When families are engaged in the educational decisions for their children, the research shows better student achievement and retention in school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005). Parents and professionals working together on a consistent basis provide an opportunity for each group to gain a better understanding of the other. This information underscores an urgent need to engage in reflective dialogue (Stein & Gewirtzman, 2003). The Parent Information Action Research (PIAR), funded by the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, was grounded in the theoretical foundations of parental involvement as advocacy that benefits children in the community. The work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) undergirds the work that took place in this partnership with the parent leaders, who contributed as co-researchers. Additionally, the concepts of family systems, self-efficacy, and agency were also underlying assumptions that were explored as the PIAR team undertook and completed the project.

The project was supported by a state-level early childhood foundation in a learning partnership with a national, non-partisan research foundation devoted to finding ways to increase citizen participation in American society. University researchers enacted this project, collaborating with parent co-researchers to create an Issue Guide. This

participatory action-oriented project methodology uniquely engaged parent co-researchers in a leadership capacity in order to document insights on family involvement contributing to thriving children, birth to 8. The outcome of this research in an accessible Issue Guide is gained insights into key issues in family involvement and community collaboration all presented in a format that fosters seeking strategies to ensure early childhood success. The goals of this research were to: a) engage parents as co-researchers in a participatory action-oriented research process for their own knowledge development, b) create an Issue Guide grounded in actual parent and citizen concerns, and, c) capture the specific vantage point of the parents via focus groups.

The PIAR project emphasis was intentionally on children birth to age 8 and their communities. While not a prescribed relationship between children or parents and schools, the early care and education of children across the early childhood span meant attending to the roles of family as well as informal and formal institutional education in the young child's life. When talking about children or student "education" we are inclusive of early care and education addressing birth through grade 3. The educational aspects of child, parent, and community are layered throughout the PIAR project.

For the purpose of this research parent education is defined as the tools and resources that parents need to pursue new knowledge (Frusciante, 2010). In addition, parent engagement through

parent education is understood to be the incredible power the early care and early childhood education needs to harness. Through directly attending to the child in the context of the family, as well as by supporting comprehensive community resources and systemic support for parenting, we can realize national goals for more children in more families in more neighborhoods in America.

Our participatory PIAR team consisted of 10 parent co-researcher leaders from five communities engaging with the university lead researcher and research assistant in action research to identify issues in community-oriented parent leadership. Not new to parenting, the co-researchers were used to being active members in their community and had either formalized leadership training or community-based leadership experience previously. During this project, the parent co-researchers, drawing from what they heard parents and citizens in their home communities articulate, identified their own questions and practical outcomes, which are expressed in our Issue Guide. The Kettering Foundation Issue Guide, or Issue Book as they are also called, is “for forums that encourage serious deliberation on hard policy choices facing the public” (<http://www.cpn.org/partners/Kettering.html>). The National Issues Forum (Muse, 2009) typically produces and disseminates three such documents each year. The creation of the PIAR Issue Guide is a tangible product of grassroots community work in collaboration with university, state, and national agencies to promote change and empowerment.

The process of developing our particular Issue Guide was intentionally structured to parallel the iterative action research inquiry cycles. Our Issue Guide has been disseminated both regionally and nationally. Drawing from selected literature, we now examine theories explaining the value of community context, what significance there is to the concept of capacity building, and lessons learned from partnerships involving parents and families.

Individuals Drawing on Community Context

The relational understanding of family and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) paired with self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) sets the overarching theoretical orientation for this project. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 2005) ecological perspective highlights that families are the most influential factor in child development, centering the socialization of the child within the nested contexts of family and community. Work with

parents can be grounded in the Bronfenbrenner ecological model, which acknowledges that the most important setting for a young child is the family unit because it has the most emotional influence on the child. Bronfenbrenner further contends that all of these contexts can be thought of as environments or settings that hold people, which influence each other and are influenced by culture. Understanding that a child affects as well as is affected by the settings in which that child spends time, the child is at the center. The number and quality of the connections between the settings in which a young child spends time also have important implications for his/her development.

An innovation from the current literature that is deemed to be successful in the United States is the Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) initiative launched by the Kellogg Foundation. This project was developed to promote permanent improvement in the systems that affect early learning, particularly for children ages 3 to 8. This initiative invited parent engagement, public will, culture, and a coordinated service delivery and has partnerships as an important component (Berkley, 2010).

In another of his works, “Rebuilding The Nest,” Bronfenbrenner (1990) lays out five propositions that describe the processes that foster the development of human competence and character. At the core of these principles is a child’s emotional, physical, intellectual, and social need for ongoing, mutual interaction with a caring adult, and preferably with many adults. The effective functioning of child-rearing processes in the family and other child settings requires public policies and practices that provide place, time, stability, status, recognition, belief systems, customs, and actions in support of child-rearing activities not only on the part of parents, caregivers, teachers, and other professional personnel, but also relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers, communities, and the major economic, social, and political institutions of the entire society (Bronfenbrenner, 1990). Bronfenbrenner (1979) states, “Whether parents can perform effectively in their child-rearing roles within the family depends on the role demands, stresses, and supports emanating from other settings...”(p. 7).

This social ecological model is most broadly understood to be the study of the influence of people on one another in a particular environment (Hawley, 1950). When looking at adults, the individual’s roles and the interpersonal features

of a group have been explored further (Gregson, 2001). In contemporary use of this model, Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, & Rinderle (2006) inquire about the role of technology as one of many layers of interactions integrated into our lives.

Capacity Building: To What End?

The family systems theory offers an additional lens on parental involvement and information. It emphasizes the inter-relationships between family members and how a family's psychological and physical health affects the care they give their children with special needs (Odom, Yoder, & Hill, 1988). The family systems (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979), family stress (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), and family life-cycle theory (Turnbull, Summers, & Bortherson, 1986) have all contributed greatly to our understanding of family function. Family stress model (Conger, Rueter & Conger, 2000) demonstrates how stressors the parents experience can cause conflict and disrupt parenting and interactions between the parent and the child, leading to poor outcomes.

There is a great deal of diversity among and within families in how people cope with and deal with different life circumstances. However, there is a body of literature to support specific child and family characteristics as being associated with greater stress. For example, families of children with special health care needs, in general, experience more stress than families of typically developing children (Barlow, Cullen-Powell, & Chesire, 2006). English as a second language, poverty, and level of education are related to increased parental stress and depression, and are associated with child behavior problems (Patcher, Auinger, Palmer, & Weitzman, 2006). PIAR by design kept the complexities of families' lives at the forefront of the work in order to have applied outcomes.

Most of the work on self-efficacy has been conducted by Bandura, who defined self-efficacy relatively broadly as "people's judgments of their capacities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). He argues that efficacy is a "generative capacity in which cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral sub-skills must be organized and effectively orchestrated to serve innumerable purposes" (Bandura, 1997, p. 36). He defined perceived self-efficacy as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate

themselves, and behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes. They include cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes (Bandura, 1994). Thus what matters to perceived self-efficacy is not the number of skills people have, but rather what people believe they can do with those skills under certain circumstances. This concept is most central to people's everyday lives (Bandura, 1989).

Self-efficacy is understood to operate throughout a family system, in both the parents and the children. Bandura (1986) states that children make choices based on the influence of self-efficacy. Persistence, such as how long children persist when they confront obstacles or failures, is also related to self-efficacy in the ability to define a goal, persevere, and see oneself as capable. Parents and other adults can help children develop self-efficacy by reinforcing their strengths and helping them identify steps or paths to achieve their goals. Witte (2000) defines self-efficacy as "beliefs about one's ability to perform the recommended response to avert the threat" (p. 20). A lack of skills, self-confidence, knowledge, and access are common barriers to performance. Social cognitive theory has outlined two major components of self-efficacy: establishment of goals and the ability to organize necessary skills to achieve the goals. The goals, whether explicitly stated or implicitly harbored, provide major motivations for people to execute their skills. While taking on impossible tasks can dampen self-efficacy, goals too easy to accomplish do not benefit self-efficacy either. Thus helping people to establish appropriate goals or appropriate perception of goals is a good starting point. Bandura (1986) also emphasizes that self-efficacy is behavior and context specific. Therefore the skills recommended should be related to specific target behaviors in the target context. Designed as both modeling and experiential learning through action research, PIAR drew on and built upon the adult parent co-researchers' individual and collective skills and capacities. Community development and knowledge creation, specifically through the development of the skills and capacities of parents, are powerful tools that community organizations, institutions of higher education, and philanthropic institutions can invest in.

Knopf and Swick (2007) share that involving families capitalizes on family strengths to develop an empowering relationship with the families. Empowerment can be defined as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives (Page & Czuba, 1999).

When empowered, people see their skills and capacities and in turn see themselves as knowledge creators as well as critical consumers with the ability to change or grow. A dynamic agency (Bray, 2008) is the development of self-identified capacities that are created in the actions of using talents in multiple contexts. When educational institutions learn about families and develop programs that would encourage parent and family involvement, there are successful efforts to engage public will, culture, and coordinated service delivery (Berkley, 2010).

Methodology: Parent Co-Researchers as Essential Collaborators By Design

What we call community-based action research is methodology that incorporates commitments and practices that put parent co-researchers at the center of PIAR as engaged knowledge-makers instead of as more traditional, passive research participants. Rather than seek answers for more traditional, pre-determined research questions, this research project captures the lived co-constructed experiences of the parent co-researchers (Collins, 2000) and their reflections on this experience, in their own words (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Seidman, 2006).

As articulated in the PIAR Issue Guide, the focus statement is: Connecting parents, who are those with primary responsibility for a young child, and others in the community to information about early childhood is key to the success of young children. Parents who have access to quality information and the supports to use that information can make better decisions regarding children. The Issue Guide is a tangible outcome of this research using a community-based (Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Horton, 1998; Stringer, 1999, 2008), participatory action research model (Freire, 1970; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Maguire, 1987). The model, our methodology, and the Issues Guide are located in an explicit set of social values and assumptions including: a) engaging “with” people in a process, not “for” or “on” research subjects; b) a democratic, inclusive process that enables participation of all parent co-researchers while developing critical consciousness; c) an equitable process recognizing human capacity and an individual’s ability to contribute; and, d) a liberating and life enhancing activity with the express commitment to practical outcomes that transform structures and relationships.

Process of Community Partners Selection

The PIAR project was funded through parent co-researcher stipends, researcher time, and community honoraria in five Discovery Network communities (<http://discovery.wcgmf.org>), a decade long initiative of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund. The community selection process was designed to encourage Discovery communities to propose and support parent co-researchers in their communities and to provide a grounded leadership development experience so that those parent teams could help in both understanding and addressing parent information needs in communities. Eligible communities were those designated as having a completed community plan for early care and education. In the application process, communities needed to demonstrate that they had at least two parents interested in working on the project and willing to make a multi-year commitment. The communities also were asked to describe how the notion of parent information fit within their community blueprint plan and what their interest was in working on action research with university support.

The parent co-researcher team consisted of nine women and one man from five distinct communities. Of the co-researchers nine were parents and one a grandparent in the role of primary care providers of a child or children. The co-researchers’ children ranged in age from early childhood to adulthood. The parent co-researchers self-identified as African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, and multiracial. All co-researchers reside in urban areas, be that a large urban center or more isolated city with rural surrounding, and suburban communities in Connecticut.

Process of Parent Co-researcher Selection and Training

The knowledge development and capacity building opportunities for parents have driven the design of this project. True to the legacy of the methodology, this project was designed to inform and provide multiple opportunities to act on and internalize new information with the support of the project team. The PIAR Issue Guide is the first concrete product resulting from the parent co-researchers being in the role of knowledge producers.

The 10 parent co-researchers represented five communities located across Connecticut. Team interactions were designed to a) transmit key training information and knowledge-building experiences, b) foster collaborative exchange

among and between team members, and c) provide supported practice for new skills with a problem solving lens. Distance and time concerns made frequent PIAR team meetings of the parent co-researchers, the primary university researcher, and research assistant impractical. A virtual space was created to augment the monthly PIAR team meetings. This web space included basic project information, contact information, and a discussion board with technical assistance and monitoring by the research assistant. The specific discussion board feature allowed for the constant contact of parent co-researchers with one another as well as priority access to the lead researcher and research assistant. In addition, the primary researcher, often with the research assistant, would travel to each community specifically to meet with each community team in between the larger group meetings. Given the generative nature of the project, the consistent face-to-face contact, the coming to know each other through collaboration, and the virtual space discussion board, there was a relatively uninterrupted stream of communication for parent co-researchers to discuss process and grapple with producing tangible outcomes.

In addition, the discussion board was used as a capacity building forum for co-researchers. Weekly discussion board assignments included introduction to action research models, reflections on various stages of the project, and other related topics. The discussion board quickly became a sounding board for all co-researchers, allowing them to support one another in various stages of the project and continually reflect on the action research process. Additional particulars about parent co-researcher training are explicated in the data collection and documentation section that follows.

The lead university researcher/primary facilitator had credibility with the parent co-researchers as a parent, as an early childhood educator, and as a linked community member. While a central and visible presence in the work, by design the facilitator role evolved from central to marginal as part of parent capacity building in ways that are sustaining and sustainable. As a team we found that the greatest challenge of this participatory, collaborative approach was the tyranny of time.

Data Collection and Documentation—Iterative Cycles of Inquiry

The pages that follow capture the chronological sequence of the first year of the PIAR project:

a) learning the landscape: listening to parents and community members, b) moving from process to product, and c) reflection on process and the Issue Guide production. In the next section, the results, including themes and parent co-researcher insights, are explored.

Learning the Landscape: Listening to Parents and Community Members

The first task before embarking on creating the Issue Guide was to listen to parents and citizens in each of the five communities about their concerns. Before one-on-one conversations and small group discussions, each parent co-researcher was trained in community interaction and individual approach. Community interaction training consisted of naming, locating, and engaging with key individuals and entities in one-on-one meetings or in a group setting. Co-researchers were then given the opportunity to role-play concern gathering interactions (Kelley, 2008). In addition, the group brainstormed various venues where the concern gathering might happen: Where would such a discussion be fruitful? Where would time and context allow for forthright answers? What locations would provide a cross section of the community or how many specific locations would be needed to capture a cross-section of the community? After cross-examination of locations, the consideration of which stakeholders, and sub-groups, would be approached was fully vetted by the PIAR team.

Each pair of parent co-researchers went back to their communities to listen and gather information, perspective and options from various individuals, some already established community committees or collaborative-related groups, and a cross-section of stakeholders. The question presented to each interviewee was: What concerns you about nurturing young children (birth to age 8)? Parent co-researchers documented the responses, which in turn informed the content of the Issue Guide.

Through our virtual space discussion board format co-researchers were able to discuss the process, post successes, and offer support to each other around challenges related to concern gathering. The concern gathering was a two-fold capacity-building opportunity. First, the co-researchers gained communication experience by listening to others—not just talking to others—around the issues for young children. Second, the co-researchers learned to collaborate with each other. Both of these capacities were overtly introduced and then consistently modeled by the primary researcher/facilitator in the face-to-face

meetings complementing the agreed upon group norms and anticipating transfer to the virtual space.

The first capacity building experience in communication not only expanded and affirmed the co-researchers' understanding of the issues around young children but also formalized the act of listening and talking with community members. The validation of listening to everyday citizens as a form of contextualizing inquiry and valuable data gathering was critical at this initial stage. This validation then integrated into the co-researchers' understanding of their own knowledge, possessed and newly acquired, as valuable. The second capacity, collaboration with each other, could be understood as key contributions from each individual and to the success of the team of co-researchers as well as to the shape of the project with the subsequent completion of the Issue Guide work. The power of collaboration was further underscored by grounding of the community-based nature of the concern gathering and linkage to strategic community work. These understandings would not have been possible without the virtual space discussion board complementing the face-to-face team meetings.

Process to Product

After one month of intensive listening to over 100 citizens' concerns, the co-researchers came back together to report what they heard. Each co-researcher shared the concerns expressed in their community. Then, as a full PIAR team, including the parent co-researchers, the University of Hartford lead researcher and research assistant, the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund Knowledge Development officer, and the Kettering Foundation facilitators' coach in the Issue Guide production, reviewed the concerns and grouped them based on relative themes. This naming and framing process (Kelley, 2008) looked for common patterns and themes among the concerns and across communities. By the end of the session three distinct components for the Issue Guide were identified: parental responsibility, systemic problems, and societal value of parenting.

These three distinct components were utilized to develop the Issue Guide grid, a visual summary of the identified components with three action options. Each action option considers the stakeholders and possible action locations along with the inevitable drawbacks that come with any possible action or solution (<http://discovery.wcgmf.org/lookingforanswerstogether>).

The grid development enabled citizen member checking of the ideas and iterations of the concepts without becoming bogged down in lengthy text. In most cases the draft grid was presented to the same individuals who expressed the concerns during the concern gathering. Once again, forums were typically semi-structured response group opportunities created by existing committees, organizations, or ad-hoc community events. Each semi-structured response group was designed to gather feedback on the grid including word choice, questions regarding the action options or stakeholders, and any concerns not heard or represented by the grid. The information gathered was used to reshape the grid, clarifying statements and reworking concerns.

The culmination of this multi-month iterative process was a restructured, well-vetted Issue Guide grid used in a statewide structured focus group forum. This three-hour statewide event drawing 28 people from 8 communities and inclusive of parents, concerned citizens, early care educators, community service providers, and activists engaged people with the grid. This forum was facilitated by the project's lead researcher and was audio recorded with participant permission via an IRB-approved informed consent. The initial portion offered a sample forum for how the grid might be used in a community to promote discussion and link people to information. The rest of the forum was used to respond directly to the grid word choice, clarification of options and drawbacks, and any concerns that arose. Thus this forum utilized the grid in the intended capacity, to foster discussion related to concerns of nurturing young children.

Ultimately the lead university researcher, consulting with a journalist experienced in the Issue Guide format, wrote the Issue Guide text that was brought back to the parent co-researchers and funders for multiple rounds of vetting. The foundation-to-foundation learning agreement enabled this multi-layered collaboration.

Reflection on Process and Issue Guide Production

Intentionally and by design, this first year was modeling the iterative process of action research and engaging the parent co-researchers in the experience of data collection and documentation for the Issue Guide in preparation for their own future community-specific work. This initial "performing" has led to a negotiated experience, or what Daiute (2004) calls "contesting" of the norms and moving toward a process-end "centering", which

is at least the integration of the new knowledge if not a completely transformative event resulting from engagement.

A parent co-researcher specific focus group was conducted in December 2011 as an opportunity to reflect on the first year of the project. Parent co-researchers were presented with specific questions and offered the opportunity to reflect and chart responses for the group. The initial questions presented by the primary researcher for this focus group were: Reflecting on the last months, what have you learned? What skills, capacity, knowledge, confidence have you gained? What continues to be a challenge? Some overview is provided here and fuller capturing of parent co-researcher themes are found in the results section that follows.

After eight months of engaging in this new work, parent co-researchers relayed a newly found appreciation for working in the action inquiry process and how the process demands slowing down to reflect throughout the action research cycles. "Taking time doesn't mean you're behind," stated Carmen. Another parent co-researcher, Rubis, reflected that she had learned to push herself, to go out and get connected with the community, and make things change. William stated what he gained most from the first year was the coaching, the direct training, and time to practice what he learned. Collectively, the PIAR team was experiencing the acquisition of information as power gained. This developing understanding informed a deepening meaning of the parent information project itself. In addition, co-researchers commented that they appreciated the opportunity to work with other communities throughout the state. The specific community resources and project support structures served as models for each co-researcher and across the five communities. Discussion and collaboration provided insight and input on the various methods and sources. Finally, the valuing of collaboration and the strong relationships built among team members was overwhelmingly identified when responding to "what have you gained?"

Challenges of the project reflected frustration by some with the ambiguity of time and lack of formula or prescription for the action research process. The act of learning the action research process while engaging in the research was irritating to some co-researchers, especially those who favor looking ahead and knowing the final outcome at the beginning or what we came to name as degrees of tolerance for the "process-product tension."

A related but distinctive challenge was co-

researchers managing their time. For the co-researchers having boundaries about the amount of time given to the project, precisely because the work was compelling, became an on-going how-do-we-manage-this conversation. Precisely because the project activities related to real concerns and linked directly to known community faces and articulated community struggles, the co-researchers engaged in an ongoing struggle to balance responsiveness and self-care. From the beginning of PIAR, the expectations of 12 hours per month over the course of 18 months for the co-researcher were clear and documented. The desire for bounded work in the complex lives of the parent co-researchers was often in direct competition with doing-what-it-takes to address community and project needs. From the outset it was clear the co-researchers would be fundamental to the creation of the Issue Guide.

While it was anticipated the co-researchers would find common ground and rallying points in their communities, the full understanding of how individuals impacted the work was intensely experienced. What we came to call "pivot people" or key stakeholders, were those who could change the course of events by either being "blockers," "facilitators," or both. The extent that some projects threatened certain stakeholders in a community and their attempts to "shut-up" or shut-down co-researchers was not fully expected. Since not an issue of paramount danger, it was unforeseen affirmation of the co-researchers getting to the weighty issues. And as a co-researcher articulated, "...that just makes me keep moving forward and keep going."

While community involvement and interaction is ideal, it is not always easy with busy schedules for parents and children. In particular, Carmen spoke of the challenge of realizing there were at least four distinct sub-sections of her city all struggling in different ways and needing different responses. The challenge of balancing home, work, family, and the project made realities of the depth and scope of the work overwhelming at times. This challenge was echoed by many of the parents, often noted to include the intensity of the listening and responding required by the work. These demands were empathized with and understood by the university researchers.

In combating the intense depth and scope of need, the project design supported both physical meetings and trainings as well as the virtual space interactions, including the project discussion board. Responding to all participatory attempts

by using physical and virtual spaces created a different challenge along with the intense 18-month time commitment. Parents at different points contested the need for systematic documentation and data collection throughout the process, stating it was often frustrating and too time consuming. While the discussion board in virtual space clearly enabled communication that strengthened team collaboration, the time to attend to high volume posts on the discussion board could be a burdensome project demand. The essential integration of this virtual layer became a conflict between assisting communication and a burden of time the access created.

As part of the dissemination and roll-out of the Issue Guide, conversations are under way about how to continue the work with parents as lead facilitators and respond to requests from other Connecticut communities wanting to engage in a forum. In keeping with the project's commitment to access, English and Spanish versions of the Issue Guide are accessible online as well as in print form (<http://www.hartford.edu/parentii>). This project's process and the Issue Guide product are compelling for the continued learning about the experience of parents working with other parents in communities in the development of parent leadership and to improve outcomes for all children.

Results and Co-Researcher Reflections

The parent co-researchers are core contributors to the content of this work. This results section addresses themes from the first year of the project illuminating how the process connected individuals to a deeper understanding of the notion of participatory research and prompted the team to continue inquiries of community action. Thus of equal importance as our author voices are the insights and observations of the co-researchers as they reflected on the first year of the project in the December 2011 formal focus group. This focus group was audio recorded with the informed consent granted by each co-researcher. The themes around the collaborative inquiry experience illuminated by the parent co-researchers are presented in Table 1.

At the end of the first year, the co-researchers accomplished a tangible outcome of their collaborative participatory action.

Discussion of Implications

This project is unique for the grassroots grounding fostered and funded by a state-based foundation committed to early childhood im-

provement. The state-based foundation partnering with a national foundation championing democratic deliberation and a university for research methodologies and rigor make the project not only unique, but a compelling project for replication. The layers of engagement, the iterative cycles of action, and the parent co-researcher contributions while building capacity make this project translatable to endless contexts and topics. Due to the process-to-product progression, there is a perpetuating momentum that builds during the life of the project, a desirable energy in any community change action project. Finally, the sustainability of investment is quite high as the knowledge acquired and capacity built are located within the individual co-researchers and carried forward with them into the work. Possessing the tools of inquiry, the discipline of documentation, and the capacity to articulate the knowledge produced, the co-researchers turned to application through action projects in their specific communities.

PIAR underscores the importance of participatory work occurring over time in locations at least familiar to if not "owned" by the parent leaders such as the 10 co-researchers on this project. For the parent co-researchers to draw upon their possessed leadership skills and community connections, the work needed to be located in physical places that honored their efforts and contexts that made visible their existing knowledge. The project design deliberately balanced the validating of the parent co-researcher expertise in their community, building their self-efficacy, with the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. The project facilitator consistently modeled skills as well as made visible individuals' talents to the team. The responsive pacing of capacity-building exercises and scaffolding product requirements were intended to optimize internalization.

Implications for methodological choices and community change

PIAR makes visible the repercussions of research design and methodological choices enacted. The transformational nature of this work occurs when efforts go beyond transactional researcher engagement with a community. The commitment to cycles of engagement that authentically build levels of individual parent leadership capacity is paramount. The subsequent fostering of a dynamic agency (the active interplay among and between entities) was not only through interaction with the methodology but also the capturing of the individual's power to transform

Table 1. Co-Researcher Inquiry Perspective—Shared and Particular

Theme from Collaborative Inquiry Experience	Sub-Theme from Co-Researcher Team: Shared Perspective	Parent Co-Researcher Perspective: Particular Voices
How can the co-researchers voice what they learned, including navigating what action and non-action was required to move the project forward?	More specifically, managing the complexity of the widespread, diverse Issue Guide audience?	<p>Karla named how important earnest, respectful communication is.</p> <p>Rubis spoke to the commitment to marginalized, arguably invisible, parents such as non-documented workers.</p>
Importance of valuing children	Importance of child-to-child interactions, those organic opportunities where children learn from each other, mentor each other and learn to collaborate, communicate and be part of a larger group.	Carmen clarified it is the information a parent needs to nurture their child as well as information citizens at large need to support children and parents in feeling/being valued.
	Importance of childhood and valuing the playful, imaginative, creative energy brought by children through age 8.	<p>Yury emphasized this point by reflecting on how little value school holds for creative, imaginative, inventive, autonomous, problem-solving children. In school such traits or talents are often seen as “off-task” or “distracted.”</p> <p>Timeca spoke of her own pre-school aged daughter being asked to eat her lunch with a timer, because she was “taking too long to eat.” How are we valuing each child and supporting their growth toward autonomy when we do not welcome them as people or trust them to pace themselves in even the most basic things?</p>
	An extended notion of parent responsibility. What might be responsible behavior and decisions to one person or in one family might seem incorrect to others.	Doreen asserted what we could agree upon is parents who learn and improve their parenting are acting responsibly and with regard for their children. This recognition of growth and integrity is thus devoid of judgment or particular individual choices while holding the adults in children’s lives to a standard.
Pushing ourselves to ask: Whose values are being recognized?	The unspoken alert to the possibility of privileging certain values was in the air throughout our working together and was overtly acknowledged during the formal focus group, which offered the space for reflection.	<p>Monica spoke to the importance of honoring different values, naming whose values we are talking about, and are they person, community, or culturally specific.</p> <p>Yury recognized specific values but that given the diversity and reach of the audience beyond our communities and state, it would be impossible to know and include everyone.</p>
		Pivotal group realization: Values recognized or disregarded were directly linked to whose voice was heard.
For whom is this Issue Guide written?	Is it about children, about parents, or a more elusive citizen?	<p>Cheryl identified that it is the citizen who is a parent caring for a child and that the parent and child cannot be separated as our focus is the well-being and nurturing of young children done primarily by parents who operate in a community and cultural context shaped by all citizens.</p> <p>Crystal included the responsibility of educators and care providers being heightened: “Every adult, every role model, needs to take responsibility....”</p>
Addressing systematic changes made vivid the need for action by the larger citizenry.	Co-researchers were unanimously clear about the need for action by the entire citizenry to stand up, listen actively, and not lay back or become complacent.	As Rubis stated so powerfully, “Civic engagement is the way to change...(C)hildren don’t have a voice.”

the community institutions, practices and norms. This project draws on the legacy of community-change work, understanding that sustained change occurs from the individual and his/her interactions with the layers of community and institution (as seen with the individual at the center of the ecological model). The process of engaging parent co-researchers in a participatory, iterative process offers not only experience but also the acquisition

of tools by which one utilizes the capacity built in additional contexts. The conceptualization and two distinctive applications of this methodology engaged parent stakeholders as contributors not observers. Uniquely, each individual saw himself/herself as participating in pivotal, not marginalized, ways as knowledge producers.

Implications for Transformative Knowledge Production

From the beginning when parent co-researchers engaged in performance of tasks, the group norm supported the ubiquitous contesting of assumptions. The nuances in the methodology were then contested as particular context realities demanded questioning and re-examination. The practice-oriented performance tasks and the norm of contesting were pivotal in the knowledge productions being transformative and integrated.

Dissemination has included the parent co-researchers making their first public sharing of their community-specific action projects in March 2012 at a regional early childhood conversation conference drawing parents and providers as well as a subsequent state-wide parent and community network conference in October 2012. The parent co-researchers' learning that has occurred in particular communities will be shared across multiple communities via multiple forums over the remaining time of the project by the co-researchers themselves. The necessity for ownership and a dynamic, responsive process informs the notions of replication of this work.

Implications for Educational Change

This research informs current educators and educational leaders by capturing work with parent co-researchers as community leaders. Of significance is using this research as a means for pre-service teachers and early care educators to see parent capacity in action. This research is informing the preparation of teachers in one university teacher preparation program with a long legacy of early childhood education, a field understood to engage children, their families, and the community. Further dissemination of this research to educational leadership doctoral students as a methodological example contributes to the understanding of application and use. Engaged research with parent co-researchers gives texture to the rhetoric of why educators need parents to engage in the early education process in and out of schools. This research contributes to the literature linking parent involvement to positive child outcomes and the power of a supportive, nurtured, and informed citizenry both shaping and being shaped by our nation's living democracy.

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