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Families and Educators Co-Designing: Critical Education Research as Participatory Public Scholarship

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Introduction

For the past six years, we—members of the Family-School Collaboration Design Research Project—have been working to understand and transform family-school relationships in Salt Lake City, Utah. Our group includes an evolving cast of scholars, family leaders, professional educators, graduate students, and organizers. We are trying to create spaces where culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD)

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families-families whose language and culture differ from the dominant school culture-have real voice in schools and can partner equitably with educators.

We are a part of a national network of scholars, practitioners, and family and community leaders called the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC). Since 2016, we have been working and learning alongside colleagues across the country, with support from the network's central organizers, Drs. Ann Ishimaru and Megan Bang. The FLDC is carving out new *aperturas* (openings) for research and social change, based on a vision of community wellbeing and educational justice (Ishimaru et al., 2019). You can read more about the FLDC framework, methods, and projects at <https://familydesigncollab.org>.

In the FLDC, we use a form of design-based research we call *solidarity-driven co-design* (Ishimaru et al., 2019). Design-based research advances educational theory by designing, piloting, studying, and revising educational interventions in real-life learning situations (Cobb et al., 2003; Collins et al., 2004). Solidarity-driven co-design takes design-based research and integrates aspects of community-based research and decolonizing methodologies (Bhattacharya, 2009; Beckman & Long, 2016; Strand et al., 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 2013). The result is a critical, participatory process that centers the knowledge, leadership, and creativity of families that are usually kept out of research and decision-making spaces (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Philip et al., 2018).

Solidarity-driven co-design follows an iterative, four-step cycle. In step one, families, educators, organizers, and researchers come together to build relationships, share stories, and theorize together about a topic of concern. In step two, the team designs possible solutions, which are then piloted in step three. In step four, the team analyzes data from the pilot and refines solutions for another cycle. Throughout the process, close attention is paid to critical questions of identity and power in terms of both the topic of study and internal dynamics among the co-designers (Ishimaru et al., 2019). This process shares features with other community-based methods, such as critical participatory action research (Fine & Torre, 2021; Torre et al., 2012). For example, it positions people who are usually the subjects of research as co-researchers, it goes through iterative cycles that include both research and action, and it is committed to social transformation. At the same time, the process of co-design makes much less

of a distinction between the stages of research and action, instead merging the two into an ongoing process of creation. It emphasizes the tools of both reflection (looking at the past and the present) and imagination (envisioning and beginning to craft more just futures for our schools and communities) .

In this chapter, we share a bit about our work in Salt Lake City—our goals and our methods, our challenges and our successes. We discuss how the project emerged, how we facilitated the co-design process, and the products we created in order to reach beyond the academy. We explore some of the tensions we faced and how the project evolved over time as COVID-19 changed the landscape of schooling.

The project began as a partnership between the Salt Lake City School District, the University of Utah College of Education, and the Utah Community Advocate Network, an organized network of primarily Spanish-speaking families of immigrant and migrant background. The partnership was convened by University Neighborhood Partners (UNP), a department of the University of Utah dedicated to building campus-community partnerships. The project is led by what we call the *core research team*, which includes all the authors of this chapter, and has representation from families, educators, academic researchers, and organizers. We take responsibility for facilitating the co-design process. The project is carried out by a larger group of *co-designers*. These co-designers are families and educators from schools in west side Salt Lake City neighborhoods, which are home to the majority of the city's CLD communities. They were recruited through existing partnerships based on their demonstrated commitment to family-school collaboration, as well as representation across neighborhoods and grade levels.

The first phase of our project took place in the summer of 2016. About ten family members and ten educators met three times that summer. They created recommendations for improving a form of shared decision-making called a school community council. These recommendations were used to create training and curricula for educators and a comic booklet that families could use to recruit other families to the councils. Phase two, which began in 2018, brought together around 30 people and led to the development of a pilot study using the comic in three local schools. The pilot launched in fall 2019 but was derailed with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We decided

to pivot our work at that point. We carried out a video-based project sharing family and educator experiences during home schooling (Alvarez Gutiérrez et al., 2022).

Throughout, we have learned much about the challenges and possibilities of solidarity-driven co-design. We share some of these lessons in what follows through an edited dialogue among four of our members. By choosing this method of writing—which has roots in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), storytelling (Lewis & Hildebrandt, 2020), and hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1981)—we were able to make the process of academic publishing accessible to all members of our team. This approach also creates space for multivocality (Fawcett et al., 2008) so that we can share multiple interpretations from different positionalities, rather than tying it all together in a single conclusion. While all members of our core research team listed previously helped to write this paper, we felt that a nine-person dialogue would be difficult to follow, so we selected four members who have been with the project since phase one and have different positionalities within the project. Participants in the dialogue include the following.

- **Laura Hernández** is a Mexican woman and mother of five who immigrated to the United States in hopes of providing her children educational opportunities. She has guided her children from public elementary schools to public universities and has been involved in family engagement to share her knowledge with her underrepresented community.
- **Gerardo R. López** is a professor and critical scholar well known for his research on family engagement and school leadership. He is a Chicano from Boyle Heights, California, and father to two young women.
- **Jennifer Mayer-Glenn** spent her career as a teacher and administrator, and she helped launch Salt Lake City School District's first Office of Family-School Collaboration. She is a Chicana with generational roots in Utah.
- **Paul J. Kuttner** is a community engagement professional at University Neighborhood Partners, where he builds community-campus partnerships. He is a white cisgender man from Massachusetts and father of one elementary school child.

Seeds of the Project

The goal of our project emerged, not from the minds of scholars, but from the priorities of community members (Khalifa et al., 2015; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020). It centered around persistent problems with school community councils, which were touted as a way for families to share school-site decision-making with educators. Research suggests that such councils can be advocates for resources and improved programming and can strengthen understanding and collaboration between schools and CLD communities (Designs for Change, 2002; Marschall, 2006). However, research in Utah and across the country show that such councils often fail to shift power relationships in any meaningful way, privileging educators and white, middle-class families and serving as a way to co-opt CLD families as rubber stamps that legitimate the status quo (Anderson, 1998; Brown & Hunter, 1998; Malen & Ogawa, 1988). Families and educators were seeing very similar issues in west side Salt Lake City schools. So, our project brought this academic critique of community councils together with the experiential knowledge and passion of families and educators working to create something different.

Paul: The project started in a few places, and there was a kind of synergy that brought things together. One place it started was here at University Neighborhood Partners (UNP), where I work. I was in ongoing conversations with Alma (a local parent and organizer with UNP) and the Community Advocates, a network of Hispanic/Latinx families who work together to access resources, take classes, advocate for their children, and play liaison roles between communities and schools in the Salt Lake City School District. We were trying to figure out where to put our energy, and the idea of school community councils (SCC) came up.

SCCs are school-site decision-making bodies made up of families and educators, legislated by the state but run by each school. We looked at it as a potential place where parents could have formal power—parents are legislated to be a majority on the council and there's actual money that they are deciding how to spend. We thought it might be a good leverage point for making sure that families have an actual say in how schools are run, how their

children are taught. It had been part of the work in the past, but never a major effort.

The second place it started was with you, Gerardo. You showed up in Utah about the same time I joined UNP. I'd read your work as a student and was really excited to connect with you.

Gerardo: It seemed as though it almost happened coincidentally. We were both doing separate work with the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC), and Ann Ishimaru said, "Hey, you both are in the same place. Why don't you all start working together?" The FLDC was funding small design research projects at the time, and you pitched the idea that these parents wanted to do some work with SCCs. I was still not very familiar with SCCs, so I had to learn what they were. Since I was a bit of an outsider, I began to ask questions like, "What is the SCC supposed to be doing? Is it fulfilling its intent? Is it successful? Do parents actually have power or voice-or is it just window dressing?" And those became a lot of the impetus for the research questions that we began to formulate.

Laura: In 2009, I was invited to attend the SCC meetings for the first time at my son's elementary school. All the people participating in the SCC were white, and they just made decisions. That's when I started learning more English, when I started learning about how I can help in the school. There were a lot of things that I didn't know-and I learned. And I started asking the parents, "What parts of the school do you know?" And I realized that a lot of parents didn't even know where the main office is. Because the thing is, our culture is different from the United States culture. We just send the kids to school and the teachers are in charge of them. Here it is different. We need to know what is really happening in school. *¿Para que nuestros hijos tengan una mejor educación, que es lo que tenemos que hacer nosotros?* [What do our children need to have a better education, and what can we, ourselves, do?].

In 2014, I was in the Westside Leadership Institute, a leadership course run through the University of Utah that is taught in the community in collaboration with local residents. During the course, I created a project to teach parents about parents' rights

and responsibilities in school. Although you and I had been doing different things, I now see the connection between our work. I had seen Alma a couple of times in the presentations of our class projects. Then, in 2016, I met Josie, my son's high school counselor, and I started showing up to the SCC meetings. One day, Josie saw me at school, and she wondered if I would be interested in attending a couple of meetings to talk about my experience in SCC. I remember she told me "You are going to like it" and I just said "Yes!" and I was able to attend the second design circle that summer. After that, in 2018, I took the Community Advocate class with Alma and became a Community Advocate.

Jenny: I had been an administrator in a school, and we had done a lot of work to try to make SCCs work better. We wanted to have meaningful, authentic input from families. But we were struggling with this rigid list of things we had to get through in the SCC meetings according to the law. Then, I became the director of Family-School Collaboration for the Salt Lake City School District. I was creating this brand new department and new position, and coming at it like, "We need to make systemic change" at the district level. What I learned through this process is that changing SCCs from the top down does not work. So, this was really a good opportunity for me. Even though I've been working directly with parents for a lot of years, we hadn't had the opportunity to have this kind of discussion with families, which was: talk about the SCC experience from your perspective. How are we going to shape this thing that could potentially be a really useful tool for collaboration between schools and families?

Launching the Design Process

The first phase of the project took place in the summer of 2016. With support from the national FLDC team, we ran a series of design circles. Design circles are "in-depth reciprocal working groups" in which participants identify, analyze, and craft solutions to educational issues, drawing on diverse forms of knowledge and expertise (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016, p. 14). This method has roots in indigenous research

approaches and circle practices (Drawson et al., 2017; Wilson, 2008). We brought together families and school staff at a local community center three times over four weeks to share their experiences, learn together, and “redesign” SCCs as places for authentic parent power and collaboration. Along the way, we struggled with nervousness and the uncertainty of doing something we had never done before. We confronted complex power dynamics and began to see them shift. In the following exchange, as the design team recalls the first phase of the design circle process, we see important themes emerge. Tensions surrounding issues of representation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), voice (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009), positionality (Srivastava, 2006), reflexivity (Mauthner, 2003), and power (Pillow, 2003) are key themes that permeated throughout this initial phase, and required careful attention by the research team.

Gerardo: When we started, there were tensions in terms of where we wanted to put our focus. I remember the big discussions that we would have. Who was going to be invited, and what was going to be the emphasis? What were we going to study? I remember that Alma kept saying, “We need to talk to parents. We need to listen to parents. We need to include those voices.” And I kept saying, “Yes, but we also need to understand who the gatekeepers are, who’s preventing this from happening, and what schools are doing or not doing to prevent parents from showing up to the SCC.”

Paul: I remember having some really deep conversations about who needed to be in the room. And we also had some disagreement. Were we bringing together the most diverse group possible? Were we bringing together the people who had already done this work and knew the most about SCCs? What should the numbers be? We ended up coming to agreement on inviting about ten people who worked for the schools and ten family members who didn’t work for the schools, in order to model a balanced dialogue. The families we brought in were mostly Community Advocates, so they already had some experience with SCCs. Then we invited educators who wanted more family voices in schools—because we had heard from both educators and families that SCCs were broken.

We ended up with about 20 people, though the number evolved over time, with new people, like Laura, joining. The first week, we introduced the project and focused on helping people get to know each other. We had families and educators share their stories and perspectives on family-school dynamics. The second week, we focused on learning together, studying more about how the SCC laws work. Finally, the third week, we moved into reimagining SCCs, drawing with markers on big sheets of paper and discussing what SCCs could be.

From that first circle, they were strikingly open with one another. For example, I remember teachers sharing some of their fears about home visits and changing their practice, and then families saying how much they appreciated the honesty. That kind of mutual openness is not very common in our schools. To some extent, we relied on existing trust and relationships built over years of partnership work through University Neighborhood Partners (UNP). But we also put a lot of work into building trust in the room. I think storytelling was a big part of that. I also think it was important that we talked openly about issues of power and discrimination and didn't try to paper over differences among the experiences of families and educators as we built solidarity.

Jenny: We recognized that, if we were engaging community members, we had to honor the fact that they are humans with needs like food to eat and places for children and spaces where they feel like they belong. So, the original design circles took place at a community learning center that the community knows and loves. We made sure that there was plenty of food for everybody to eat and that we had childcare. That way, it was a space where people could engage intellectually and emotionally, without worrying about life stuff. We set the tables up in small groups so people could get to know each other and develop relationships. I think it was really important that there was an opportunity to build trust, because clearly, all of us were a little nervous walking into the space together.

One of the useful things that we did was having different configurations. We started with all of us together, administrators and teachers and parents at the same tables. Later on, we split up into

one group of just parents, and another group that was just educators. It gave an opportunity for people to speak in their affinity group, and I think that there was some power in being able to process what was going on with other people coming from a similar perspective.

Laura: The part I liked was that there were principals, parents, vice principals, and teachers. There were a lot of different opinions and we heard from different perspectives. The group was very diverse. At the beginning, I felt a little confused, thinking “How is this going to work?” I didn’t know many of the people, and I was thinking that if there were administrators there, maybe they were going to have the power. But it went well. Every meeting, I felt more comfortable, and I realized that I could say something to a principal, and that the people who were there were listening and trying to make the changes they needed to make. During the circles, the teachers and administrators learned a lot about what parents think, and in that moment it was something like a fusion—parents and educators agreeing that parents need to be more welcome in the schools.

Gerardo: From the researcher side, I was not very familiar with design-based research as a methodology before embarking on this process. So, I was trying to figure out, “Am I doing this correctly?”, while at the same time being hyper-aware of everybody who was entering the room. I remember thinking there were so many power dynamics present in the room, and wondering how I, as a facilitator, was going to give everybody a voice. I was also aware of my own power position as facilitator and as a researcher. And I was thinking, “What is the final product going to look like at the end of the day?” It wasn’t going to be a traditional paper, though it could be. But that wouldn’t be useful for anybody in the room. What were we designing, and how could I make sure I wasn’t pushing what I thought the outcome should be, or an outcome that makes me comfortable?

Paul: The idea of solidarity-driven co-design was new to all of us. We had been studying the methodology with training and resources

from the national FLDC team. For example, one of the foundational readings for us was Megan Bang and Shirin Vossoughi's piece on participatory design research (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). But the approach was still emerging, and none of us had actually done it yet. Ann and Megan were hesitant to give us too specific of directives because they wanted us to figure out what it needed to look like for our local context and culture. It meant that, early on, we were relying on many of the facilitation and research and community work skills that we already had.

Gerardo: I'm actually very thankful that Ann and Megan were intentional in not giving us too many directives. I don't think we would have gone as far as we did if it was very scripted. And I think that that was kind of the genius of this. It took courage on their part to say, "We need to give this team enough information, but not make it too prescriptive. We need to trust that they're going to pick up on the process and they're going to take it wherever it needs to go." It was kind of a scary space for us, to be figuring it out as we were going. But I think it forced us to have a different kind of dialogue. Our initial response to figure out how to follow the "right method" may have been in part because we've internalized the norms and dispositions of academia. Following and citing research traditions is important. However, our use of design circle approaches, along with careful guidance from Ann and Megan, helped us realize that we can be more imaginative in doing this research.

Laura: After I joined the core research team and had to run design circles with you, I was very nervous before each circle. I didn't have experience doing design circles. But I realized that I had been in a lot of SCC meetings. So, I have a lot of experience to talk about: how see is supposed to work, if it is working or not, how to make the meetings better. So, I didn't feel afraid to talk too much in front of people. I knew what I was talking about.

Jenny: What Laura said is important. We're creating new knowledge together, and at the same time, there's knowledge being built by individuals, and as that knowledge is built, there is also confidence

being built to be able to participate more and to be able to speak more-and that takes time. We always had more planned than we had time for. It is a time investment, and that's an important piece of it. You need time to build the relationships and build that knowledge that helps to deepen conversations.

Paul: We also put a lot of thought into what analysis looks like in co-design. We recorded everything in audio and video and had someone taking field notes. Later on, we were able to transcribe and analyze those recordings to write a traditional journal article. But the idea was not just to take the knowledge in the room and go off somewhere else to analyze it. We wanted the participants to be co-analysts, to analyze their own ideas in the room. One way we did that was that Ann Ishimaru and the FLDC team would help us identify rich pieces of data and quotes from the transcript of one design circle so we could bring them back the next time and hand them out to the participants to be read and discussed. That, to me, was fascinating because participants were actually learning about research through the co-design process in a way that was scaffolded and accessible to the whole group.

Jenny: I remember one discussion between a teacher and a community member about what the word “respect” means. It got a little intense, but not in a bad way. And so, we used that transcript later. We read it together, out loud, in one of the following design circles and debriefed it. The important point is that this moment stood out and we didn't just ignore it and let it go. We actually debriefed it—brought it back into the design circle to talk about it and learn from it.

Gerardo: Going through the design circle process was very humbling. Traditionally, it is the researcher who goes in and collects the data. It is the researcher who analyzes the data. It is the researcher who writes up the reports, and it is the researcher who's controlling the whole process. Yet, here was a process where not only did we have multiple co-researchers, but we had individuals who were multiply positioned within the research team. We had parents who were assuming the role of co-researcher. We had

community advocates and school personnel who were assuming the role of co-designer. No longer was knowledge in the head of the researcher. Everybody was contributing-and in some respects, the power dynamics were flipping.

Laura: Right. You are looking from your perspective as a teacher, as a researcher, but on the parent side, we are the ones who are living the situation, we are the ones who want to change the situation, and we are the ones who can say, “This will work; this won’t work.” We are the ones who are a bit more concerned about this, because it is about the future of our children. They are two different points of view, the person who is studying it and the person who is living it. It’s wonderful that we want to have these big discussions of theory and power within the design circles, but what does it mean for us as parents? How does what we research translate into real changes for our communities?

Research Products and Impact

We knew that one outcome of this project would be publications for academic audiences, like this one. But a more immediate concern was how to share what we learned and designed with the people involved, and others who could use this knowledge to make change. The first product we created, immediately after the circles, was a four-page report called “Reimagining School Community Councils” (López et al., 2016). It shared three overarching principles for redesigning an SCC, along with specific strategies and ideas from the circles. Jenny, in her role in the district, took this report and began turning it into curricula and materials for professional development. But the families involved wanted something else, something that they could use in their work with other families. That led us down a creative path to co-designing a comic booklet about SCCs and parents’ rights. The following exchange highlights issues raised within the research team during this process, associated with the broader purposes/goals of research (Darder, 2018), community empowerment and self-determination (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013), and the importance of “making space” for marginalized voices to emerge within the research process (Tuck, 2013, p. 365).

Jenny: I definitely wanted to actualize our first report fast, because I could see that there were things we could learn and potentially implement right away. So, there were four things that I did. The first was just to share the report in the Family-School Collaboration professional learning community (PLC), which included administrators, teachers, counselors, paraeducators, anyone who was working with families. I was simply using the report as a piece of new information, having people reflect on it and talk about what they could maybe implement—and I got a lot of great feedback from people, but I don't know that I saw a lot of change.

The second thing that I did, which I wish had worked better, was to create a PLC focused on SCCs. I invited all principals and SCC chairs, who are parents, to come to this PLC. What's written in the law is that the SCC chair is supposed to come up with the agenda and work with the principal. In a lot of schools, it just defaults to the principals doing the agenda themselves. It is not always driven by parents as intended, especially in schools where parent~ don't know the law or the power they actually have. In the PLC, we used the report as the foundation of our discussions. Participants would identify a few different items on the "SCC Timeline"—a school district document that lists out all the topics that must be included on SCC agendas—and we would review the principles from our article. I would say, "Write out some actions that you'll take to do what is on the timeline while making it more accessible to families." I think that could have been really useful, except that the law and all of the requirements that schools have to adhere to often overwhelmed the ability for there to be very many changes. The agenda couldn't fully be driven by parents because it is based on these checkboxes that the school has to do.

So, at the same time, I was on the Trust Advisory Committee to the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) advising how the School Land Trust law is implemented. That committee gives recommendations on how schools can use funds from lands the state owns, the funds that SCCs control. Because of the design work we had done, I shared the report and pushed with the amount of influence I had, and got changes made to the formal guidance around Sec. We didn't solve the issue of the overburdened agendas, but

we shifted some of the language around the roles and definitions. I also pushed for schools to be able to use the funds from the SCC for family engagement. Schools are now able to start using trust land funds to pay teachers to do home visits, to engage families more in SCCs, etc.

Through these discussions, I recognized that there was not a lot of clarity about what the SCC did other than what people had observed by going to an actual SCC meeting. Collectively, we didn't know. So, I put together an "SCC 101" PowerPoint and then translated it into Spanish so that we could provide an overview of what SCCs are supposed to be doing—so the impact went beyond just using a report. It also changed how I was thinking about things, and changed how I talked about things, as well—and there was a ripple effect.

Gerardo: At the end of the day, what we created with the report was something that would be used for schools, right? Then I remember Alma coming back to us and saying, "Hey, I've been hearing from the parents that they would like something, as well. What you all created was great, but it is very school-centric." It opened up a discussion about how to create something different.

Paul: Right, the conversation became, "What would parents want?" They didn't just want a different kind of report. And the spirit of the design circles was, rather than trying to create something for other people you bring the people together who know it best and ask, "What would you design?" So, we brought about six or seven of the families who were most involved back to the UNP office in the upstairs room and had a series of smaller design circles based on the question, "What kind of product would be helpful to you in your work as parent leaders?"

Gerardo: There was a lot of creative stuff going on. I remember we put poster boards around the room, and I was documenting our discussion. I had gone into the space wanting to respect the parents' voices, so I was going to be the one listening and writing what they said. I thought it could serve as a form of validity check: "Did I get this right? Am I listening to you correctly?" Then, at some

point, one of the parents grew frustrated. So, Alma and Viviana (another Community Advocate) took charge. It was like, “Let me let me tell you what I want to say. I can’t communicate that to you. I need to show you what’s in my mind.” I wasn’t expecting parents to take charge in that way, and it caught me by surprise! But I was really happy that they did. It made me very conscious of my own positionality. I knew I needed to step back, because I wasn’t allowing the community folks to create the story that they wanted. I thought that that was a pretty cool moment. It was no longer about me driving this or UNP driving this. It was the parents wanting to drive this!

Laura: Most of the parents had already known each other for a long time, and that’s why there was a connection. That is why they felt the confidence to say, “I don’t agree with this.” That’s the key. If you know the people around you, you feel more comfortable. You feel like you own the space and that you can say things that you really do feel and think. That helps a lot.

Gerardo: The parents liked the idea of trying to do something different. I mentioned the idea of doing a *telenovela*. Somebody pitched the idea of a *revista*, like a little booklet. Someone mentioned the little comics they sell in newsstands in Latin America. And I remember somebody suggested that it be like an Avon book that parents would give to each other. I was still functioning [on] the belief that the schools would print and disseminate these books to parents. And the parents were like, “No, we want to be able to give these to other parents.”

Paul: Laura, I remember you being particularly skeptical of creating another school handout. You said something like: “It doesn’t matter if you have a booklet or flyer. It is just gonna sit there and no one’s gonna read it. But if it was something that I could hand to someone to have a conversation, then maybe that would be helpful.”

Laura: Yeah, that’s right. It needs to be face-to-face, because that’s our culture and how we do things-and you start with people that

you know. If the information is on paper, it needs to be something that, if you look at it, you understand right away, so that if you don't speak the language, you still know what the message is about. When I did my Parents Rights and Responsibilities project, I created a pamphlet with mostly pictures, including a picture of parents and educators sitting around a table, which I think inspired a similar image in the comic. Another thing that works is *teniendo la informacion de lo que vamos a hablar en el meeting* [having information about what is going to be talked about in the meeting], so parents understand the topics that are going to be brought up that month.

At my son's elementary school, the see meetings were held next to the Pre-K classroom. So, one time I asked the Pre-K teacher, "What do you think if I invite the Pre-K parents to the see meeting?" And she said, "Oh, that's a good idea." So, I started talking to them, and I realized that those parents were very engaged in their children's activities. For most of them, it was the first time their children had attended school. So those were my target parents. My main goal was to talk with more parents and invite them to the meetings so that they could know more about the school. I would hand out my pamphlet, and write little notes about the meeting dates, subjects, key points, and hand them out three days before the meeting. The day before, I would do it again to remind them.

Gerardo: So, because of the work that you had already done, the idea of doing something like the comic was very familiar to you. What you are highlighting, Laura, surrounds the importance of relationships-not just the relationships between schools and parents, but the relationships between parents and parents. I think those ideas worked themselves into our discussions of the comic and really influenced the final product-not just what it looked like, but also its purpose and how it was going to be used. It was a product by parents and for parents to serve an educative purpose.

Paul: We decided to bring in someone who had experience creating comics, who could really take what all the families said and turned them into comic narratives.

Gerardo: We had another design meeting with the parents to storyboard the comic: what stories are we going to tell? And I remember that they wanted to tell more than one story.

Paul: Right. We didn't want to just have one story because there is no one story, so we tried to have two very different stories about two families with different concerns. I remember we were very careful about asking, "What issues do parents actually care about? Why would a parent decide to go to the SCC? Not why the school thinks they should go." And the parents wanted it in two languages, so you could flip it over and read it in Spanish or English-and it continued to evolve as we used it. After one design circle, we added a page on parents' rights. That was a long process.

Laura: Yeah there were a lot of changes, even the size of the letters and *La apariencia de las personas que van a estar en el comic. Parece que lo cambiamos tambien porque se vean muy "white."* [the appearance of the people who were going to be in the comic. It seemed like we changed them because they looked very white]. There was a lot of, "I don't like this. This looks like he doesn't represent us," and stuff like that. Yeah, a lot of discussions, but finally the comic was finished.

Piloting the Comic

Through another set of design circles in 2018-2019, participants made plans for a pilot project to engage more families in SCC. They chose three schools in the Salt Lake City School District (one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school), and teams of 3-4 parents to work at each school. The teams used the comic to do parent-to-parent outreach, and they studied what happened-taking field notes, recording their reflections, and gathering attendance info and other documents, as Laura describes in the following exchange. The results varied widely across the schools. Along the way, we all wrestled with the tensions of combining research and action (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021), working on a team of co-researchers holding very different positionalities in the world, and bringing our multiple selves to the table (Luttrell, 2019).

Paul: So, the teams started handing out the comic and talking with families at the schools. They tried out different times-before school as families came in, at school registration when families were already there, after school. For some team members, this was the first time taking on such an active, public role. They said families were intrigued by the comic because it was made by parents and it was easy to read.

Laura: It was a lot of work. One of the things that I realized is that we needed to have someone from inside the school supporting the project and helping with the communication between the parents and the school. For middle school, we first shared the comic at a meeting of parents that Andrea (a teacher and later administrator at the school, who was also a co-design participant) had set up. Andrea, along with parents Sarahi, Monica, Christina, and I met to talk about how we were going to present the comic. The team decided that Andrea would explain the comic to parents who speak English, and the rest of the team would stay with the parents who speak Spanish and explain it to them.

We read the comic to the parents, then we asked them if they'd been in a situation like the ones in the comic. That was like an icebreaker! They began to talk about similar things that had happened to their children, and how they didn't know what to do in those situations. They told us that they even went to the school and no one could help them. I think it was very successful. The parent's responses were very good, and I think that from then on, they knew what to do or where to go in situations like those. After we discussed the comic, they felt more interested in going to the next SCC meeting. However, after the first time that we introduced the comic, we didn't talk about it anymore. We used it like an introduction to SCC, but it stops there. So, I would like the comic to be used more. It is as if we forgot about the comic. But yeah, I remember it was a very good introduction.

When we first started recruiting families to the SCCs at the middle school, a lot of parents came. School staff, teachers, counselors, and the vice principal came, too. The school staff was very happy to see so many people for the first time at the meeting. I think there were around 30 parents. Andrea made flyers and she was giving academic incentives to the students who returned the

flyer signed by their parents, [meaning] that they read the flyer. For the first meeting, Andrea asked parents if they could bring food to share with the other parents. Many parents attended and brought different types of food, desserts, and drinks. After the first meeting, with the parents' information and their authorization to remind them about the next SCC meeting, Sarahi, another parent, and I called the parents one day before the meeting. Most parents confirmed their attendance. I kept track of every person, and in every meeting, I checked if they came back. If new parents came, we would introduce the comic to them. Some of the parents didn't come back because there was miscommunication between the school and the parents. The school was not in contact with those parents and did not send them any reminders about events or special dates at school. That was one of the reasons the parents didn't show up or come back.

Paul: Can you talk about the experience of collecting data, since I don't think you'd done that for a research project before?

Laura: Yeah. I remember seeing everyone taking notes at the design circles. Ann Ishimaru was taking notes, and I saw her notes and I thought, "I can do that! But, how?" I remember we had a conversation at one of our meetings about taking field notes. I think it was Gerardo who shared the different ways or methods of taking notes. So, I tried it at the SCC meetings. It was a little hard. I wrote down as much information as possible, and I tried different methods.

I realized that writing down who spoke and some keywords that person said helped me a lot. Each time it became a little easier. After the meeting was finally over, it was time for me and the group to reflect on what had happened at the meeting. I usually started by asking the group how they felt in this meeting. What did they think about the meeting, and what had they learned from today's meeting? We were answering one question at a time. That was the way we handled it. We gave everyone their time. And I began to record and transcribe the conversation.

One thing I learned was to stay still and calm, take notes, and listen to others, because when you are an observer, you must give

the opportunity to others to speak, and sometimes you could complement or add if something was not said. I remember on one occasion somebody was commenting that a couple of students were selling candies, chips, and sodas at school, and these students were bragging to others, telling them, “I have a lot of money because I’m selling stuff.” At that moment, I thought it was time for me to talk, because I knew from talking with my children that they could be selling something more than just candies. In another conversation they were talking about vaping and that kind of stuff. On that occasion, I decided to just take notes. It was a little hard for me because most of the time at SCC, I am acting like a parent. In this case, I was acting like a researcher. That’s why I said to myself, “No, I need to take a step back and be more aware of what I do. I must take this to the next design circle meeting. It is something that I need to report, not just from my parent perspective, but from my researcher perspective.” That was hard for me.

Gerardo: So, one of the things that I’m hearing is this tension between the different roles that you had, Laura. On the one hand, you have this advocacy role that you’re bringing in because you’re aware of some of the issues that are going on in the sees and in the district. You also have this kind of liaison role that you’ve played in the past, between parents and community. And then you had this role as a researcher. And you’re wearing all of these hats at the same time. And what I’m hearing is how you had to sort through some of these different roles. Like, “Right now, I’m a researcher, so I have to put those other hats away so that I can be a researcher.” But then there are points in which you felt that you needed to speak up.

Laura: That’s how it was. If the parents didn’t say anything about a specific point, that was when I thought, “Stop! Stop taking notes and get into the conversation because no one is making certain comments, and this is an important topic.” If I comment on something, maybe other parents will feel confident to continue talking about it more. And that’s exactly what happened with the conversations about students selling food. Other parents started talking about situations they had gone through. That was the moment for

me to stop talking and go back to taking notes and report what happened here.

I have been to many see meetings and I have acted the same as other parents, just listening and not saying anything, with the fear of saying something wrong. Over the years, I realized that my voice must be heard. If I do not agree with something, I must say so! Yeah, it takes time to think that way.

Jenny: That's definitely a bigger burden than anyone else had to bear, right? Having to navigate all of those roles and feel the responsibility to all of them too must have been hard.

Gerardo: Researchers generally have to deal with that tension, too, especially those of us who advocate and use our research for change. There's a couple of different perspectives about research, right? On the one hand, you can say that researchers are supposed to be objective. You're just supposed to observe, take notes, and be a fly on the wall-the notion that if you interject or insert yourself into the conversation, then you are changing the dialogue and how things evolve. On the other hand, there are some of us who believe that research is not a purely objective enterprise. You change the conversation by your very presence, and you also filter what you see or observe because you are interpreting information-not merely reflecting it. It is a fascinating tension that is always present, because you have to figure out, "How much of myself am I bringing into that space?" The tensions that Laura was experiencing as an emerging researcher are not that much different than a lot of the challenges that those of us who are more seasoned are still facing.

What's coming to the fore for me is this tension that we're experiencing because we bring different parts of us into this space. We have knowledge and insight that we bring, not just from the project and the data, but also from our own positions that we occupy or have occupied. There are tensions between the parts of us that are researchers, the parts of us that are advocates, [and] the parts of us that are just regular human beings going on with our daily lives-and so, we are always trying to figure out how to make sense of these different roles. That process may not be easy.

It is not easy to bracket Gerardo the advocate from Gerardo the researcher from Gerardo the professor from Gerardo the guy who deeply cares about community issues. I don't parcel those things out. I bring all of that into these spaces, and I think that this idea of the researcher being purely objective is not just a falsity, but a misperception.

Jenny: The whole time that I was working with the core team, I don't know if I ever really identified myself as a researcher. I was a practitioner participating in this space and bringing what I could to it.

I think it is important to add to this conversation the tension within the core research team, between the traditional researcher perspective and a community perspective that was about getting to action, making change happen. Do you remember that conversation?

Gerardo: That was a really big tension within our group. The frustrations that Alma would bring, saying, "I'm tired of just talking about this and analyzing this. I want to do something!" And I was like, "Yeah, I understand. I'm with you. But also, we need to gather data." And so, there's another tension that's present: a kind of research/practice tension. Like Alma would say, "It is great that you want to understand something, but when are we going to change it?"

Paul: There was also interpretive tension, as well. There was that moment from the second series of design circles, when one participant took a really strong role in the conversation. When we analyzed that person's comments, we had really diverging opinions. Both gender and race played into it really strongly, with him being Latino. Some of us interpreted the transcript as him using deficit language about families, putting them in categories of "good" or "bad." But community members on our core team interpreted it differently. From their perspective, they put more weight on the fact that he's doing the work. Parents like him. He's got the relationships. He's part of the community. And I think the different perspectives were valid. People were seeing different parts of this interaction based on where they were situated.

Gerardo: A lot of the parent~ were like, “No, you’re misunderstanding him. You’re not really understanding the nature of what he does and the importance of what *he’s* doing and you’re unfairly criticizing him.” So, I’m not sure whether it was a defense of the person or if parents felt that we as researchers just didn’t get it.

Paul: Gerardo, I’m curious what your experience was coming into this work as someone who’s had a lot of research experience and is a well-known critical scholar. I think some of the methods, though, were new to you. How did this mesh with what you already did? In what ways did this give you new ideas?

Gerardo: It is a question that I’ve thought about, but I haven’t really sat down and tried to process the entirety of my learning and experiences. I will say that this has been very interesting and, in many respects, life-changing. I have always grounded myself in community voice. But actually being immersed in a project where we’re sharing researcher roles and challenging our own expertise—that was a fascinating experience. As a researcher, I’m used to being the one calling the shots. I’m used to being the one who owns the knowledge and who controls the process and determines the next steps. Being jarred from that was an “aha” moment for me. It forced me to reflect on assumptions that I had about the role of research and some of those really deep-seated understandings about who is an expert.

While I can theorize that expertise rests in different spaces—there’s parent expertise and community expertise and researcher expertise and educator expertise—it is one thing to say that and it is another thing when you’re confronted with it. For example, when Alma was pushing back and saying, “Hey, you’re exercising some sort of hidden power here,” it really forced me to pull back and re-examine my own positionality and ideologies that I was bringing into this space. Because if I truly believed in sharing knowledge, if I truly believed what I espouse about parents and community members, then I wouldn’t experience tension or nervousness surrounding my letting go of the process. The fact that I was hesitant to let go of the process forced me to ask, “Why am I experiencing this tension? Why am I experiencing this sense

of nervousness? How much was I still holding on to the roles of parents being passive in this process of research?” Even though I talked about advocating for parents, I never had envisioned a parent as a co-researcher. The fact that we were doing a process that allowed that to happen was powerful on many fronts.

I’m so impressed by the work Laura and the other Community Advocates have done. I’m just in awe, like “Wow, they’ve got so much amazing knowledge, talent, and genius that remains untapped.” Yes, I have an advanced degree, but that doesn’t make me more “learned” than the parents. It just makes me have a degree. The parents that we worked with are some of the smartest, wisest, and most amazingly talented folks that I’ve ever learned from. I’m very grateful for that. It was necessary and an important part of my research journey. I’m always learning with every research project that I take on. But in this particular project, I’ve learned a lot about myself as a researcher-while at the same time, learning about the kind of work I value and want to do going forward.

Pivoting During COVID-19

In the midst of our pilot project, the COVID-19 pandemic swept the United States. Schools closed and SCC meetings were momentarily put on hold. Our team wrestled with how to move forward, ultimately deciding it was more important to be responsive to community and partner priorities than to continue with what we had planned. We let the project evolve into co-designing a series of videos sharing family and educator experiences during COVID. The videos we produced can be found on the UNP website: <https://partners.utah.edu/resources/videos/>. In the following exchange, we discuss how the videos came to fruition, while also highlighting the shared sense of alienation and frustration experienced by both teachers and parents in schools—an issue that we’ve raised in our previous work (Kuttner et al., 2022).

Paul: We got hit by COVID, and all of a sudden, we couldn’t really do what we planned to do. I was thinking we could just buckle down and analyze the data we have, do some additional interviews or

another design circle. But multiple voices on the team felt that no one was thinking about SCC. It wasn't that important.

Jenny: In addition to that, there was the importance of documenting what was going on at this crazy time. It was like, "This is important. This time is important. Somebody needs to be documenting what's going on."

Laura: With the COVID-19 emergency, the parents felt there was sort of an emergency to keep parents involved in the school. "Don't go far. Stay here, because we need to keep you informed." That's how the idea of making a short video came about. Gerardo had just finished one, so we had an expert!

Gerardo: I remember that. Somehow the conversation shifted to, "How do we gather information about what's happening right now? What are parents, students, teachers, and communities experiencing during COVID?" No one was gathering that data. And I said, "Hey, we just did this project with my faculty where we created a video on Zoom. It was a short message to all our program graduates. It didn't take that much time to create that video, and it seemed like an interesting way to convey a message." That jogged some excitement about how our team could do something similar.

Laura: We decided to do a video with Community Advocate parents, where they could express their experience and feelings towards online schooling. It was a new experience for me. The parents had not experienced meetings in Zoom before, and neither had I. It was something really new for everyone. We were all very excited to do it. Each person expressed what they really felt. I could feel them become relaxed, although I'm sure everyone was nervous. I felt that they were comfortable because they already knew the people around them and felt confident to speak. They were in a comfortable space.

Paul: To me, it was really important that we didn't have a raw conversation and then share it. We didn't treat it like a focus group or a discussion. We facilitated it so that families worked in small

teams to discuss questions and pick something very carefully that they wanted to share in the video. In that way, they were curating their own voice.

Gerardo: Once the parent video was done and we put it out there on the web, the immediate tension that I remember were the teachers who pushed back. There were several teachers who said “Hey, this is not accurate” or “This doesn’t represent what we’re doing in schools.” I remember I got defensive because I wanted to defend the parents, like “This is what the parents are saying, and we’ve got to honor that.”

Paul: Facebook was where we got a lot of our feedback from the teachers. A lot of people just really liked the video. Teachers got on there and said, “I want to hear more, What specifically did the families want?” But we did have some teachers who got defensive and felt that somehow we had led parents astray. On the one hand, it was frustrating because parents have the right to have their own space and speak their own truth without having to always include an educator perspective. They seemed to be trying to de-center families. At the same time, I heard in those comments that teachers were having a really hard time and they didn’t feel heard, and they probably had a story to tell as well. And so, I just kind of threw out the idea of creating a similar video from the teachers’ perspective. Of course, that then evolved into videos with families of African background, administrators, and who knows who else in the future?

Jenny: Definitely, I agree that the larger number of teachers who commented wanted to know more and wanted to learn from it and be responsive. But I also realized that when they were speaking defensively about it, is that in and of itself a barrier? If they are upset and uncomfortable hearing parent voices authentically, what does that look like in practice, and how does that impact what goes on in a school?

Gerardo: This conversation makes me realize that the teachers who got defensive were probably really frustrated. They’re like, “Hey,

we're working really hard here, and our students aren't coming in because of COVID and that's no fault of our own. We're trying the best we could, given the circumstances." They're feeling like either the school district or somebody from higher up is telling them, "You're not doing your job well enough", only to turn around and hear parents basically saying, "You're not meeting our needs, either."

Paul: That brings up one of the tensions we've had all along—this idea that teachers and parents both felt alienated and not listened to in school. Both groups feel they don't always have a voice, that school policies or life experiences or jobs constrict them. Both have that frustration, but not in the same way, particularly when we're talking about Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Pacific Islander families. How do you honor both these experiences, while also noting that, in comparison to the families, predominantly white teachers do have more of a say in how schools are run? They have a form of power. I think that's been a core tension in family engagement, and one thing I like about this project is that we've been able to tease that apart.

Gerardo: I think that both teachers and parents are part of a bigger system in which they've got a lot to say to each other and need each other, but there [are] these bigger systems and discourses that are almost artificially pitting them against each *other*. And some of *these* issues are real. But all of these pressures that are placed on teachers—like worrying about test scores—didn't actually come from teachers. Teachers are trying to respond to what they're being told to do. At the same time, it is fomenting tension between themselves and the community, because teachers are saying, "In order for us to meet these expectations, we need parents to help us." And so, in some respects, both parents and teachers are locked in this tension that they didn't create.

Framing it that way helps me understand that the voices that we're capturing are expressing frustration about something bigger, although in very different contexts—and this project is helping me understand what's locking all of these different players in these spaces that are basically in conflict with each other.

Paul: I think that's true. Both teachers and families are shaped by these larger systems and pitted against each other, but we're not going to get buy-in by ignoring the fact that teachers and parents have power differentials—and I think the design circles were a space where we could dialogue honestly about that. We had a great talk in our first series of design circles where both teachers and families agreed that teachers weren't paid enough. Parents were like, "Absolutely, you're not paid enough for this hard work you're doing. *And* you're paid a lot more than me. You're sitting at the sec being paid \$25 an hour, and I go to work being paid \$10 an hour. What *does* that mean?" I loved that that discussion happened. That was beautiful to me.

Laura: There are different perspectives among parents, as well. I have had experiences very different from other parents. I never had problems with teachers. When I worked part time, my oldest daughter and my mother-in-law took care of my children for three or four hours, three days a week. My daughter was in middle school. I stopped working to pay more attention to my children and dedicate more time to them, because I could do it. Other parents' situations are different, because they both work a lot of hours and they cannot take care of their children as they would like. They need to work really hard to bring food to the table, and it is very difficult, and their wages are very low. I remember that one time in a community advocate meeting, we talked about the pre-K class and why many parents did not enroll their children. Some mothers said that it was difficult for them to pay, even if the fees were \$25, although other parents tried to make the effort to pay for their children to start learning from an early age. There are always different points of view!

Gerardo: That is another kind of tension that we don't often recognize and that we need to pay closer attention to. And, Paul, you're exactly right—these tensions were present from day one. But we're having a different, more robust, understanding of these tensions now that we've been in the project for a couple of years. We're really beginning to see how these tensions have played out as the project has evolved.

Paul: I agree. It is really important how long this project has gone, that people like you, Gerardo, are still involved--even though you've moved to a new institution. The fact that we're changing and adapting and doing new projects but staying together as a team makes this more meaningful, and I think long term, we'll have more of an impact. When I started pulling people together for this project, I was still in the mindset that you can think up a great idea for a project and do it, then it will be over and you can do the next thing. What I've learned is that you cannot predict where it is going to go. It is going to evolve and there's going to be moments where things don't work, and that's OK because that's what pushes people to do something different. I think about the challenges we've had. I think about the times [when] a design circle didn't go all that well and we let some people dominate the conversation; the times where we went months stuck in the same discussions and not taking action; the times when I heard from a school that two years after the circles they were still struggling to get traction with their SCC. But it is a process. It is a set of relationships, and there is a core idea that's held us together: that any time we weren't sure about where to go next, we needed to bring educators and researchers and families together. As we reflect back, I feel very proud of how much happened, but I couldn't have predicted or controlled it if I had wanted to.

Gerardo: We've come a long way. And then I think that there's so much more we need to go and there's so much more to do. And I couldn't imagine working with a more interesting group of individuals--individuals who care as passionately about these issues as I do, and are dedicated to working differently so that we can get to different kinds of outcomes--and that is what sustains me. This group is really thinking creatively and forcing me to think creatively about this work that I have been doing for 20 years. It gives me renewed energy.

Conclusion

As we conclude our chapter, we wanted to reflect on the primary “takeaway” for each of us through this design circle process. Although we recognize there are multiple lessons that we’ve learned, we wanted to hone in on the key lessons that stood out to us personally and professionally through our journey together. The following exchange, while? brief, provides some insight into what we are walking away with-both individually and collectively-after six years of working together on this project.

Laura: One of the things is that people need to be connected. Principals, parents, and school staff need to be working on the same page. *Tenemos que trabajar todos juntos y tratar de seguir trabajando en esa unidad, no bajar la guardia* [We have to all work together and continue working in unity. We can’t let our guard down.] We have to keep moving forward. It is important that parents get motivated, so that they continue working to improve schools and their communities.

Gerardo: One of the big takeaways for me from this research process was that it was a humbling experience. I was honestly humbled by the deep knowledge and passion that parents and community members brought to the design circle, and the energy and vision that they brought. There was a lot of wisdom that I took away from the process. The design circle process really does provide us with a powerful tool to engage others. From a methodological standpoint, it taught me the importance of patience and the importance of letting the process breathe and letting the dialogues go where they needed to go. It reminded me about the importance of not providing too much structure or guidance, but to trust the process and the people who are part of that process-because when you let go and work and truly work with others, you can arrive at more powerful conclusions. That was probably the biggest lesson that I took away from the design circles: to let others step into that space that is traditionally occupied and driven by researchers and allow myself to be guided by others (Tuck, 2013). When we do that, we have the potential to arrive at more powerful solutions to very complex problems within education.

Paul: Going through this process has shifted my understanding of research. It showed me that research can be a process of imagination and creation. By combining the creative process of design with the systematic inquiry of research, we have a chance to exercise our critical imagination (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010). We can say, “Things don’t have to be the way they are. Let’s try something new.” And it’s hard. We often get stuck in our old ways of thinking. We default to the things we think we know. So that’s the most exciting part of this work for me.

Jenny: My biggest takeaway is witnessing the potential for systems to learn and transform based on reciprocal learning in a co-design research space. It is the most authentic and quality way to build relationships and learn over time how to best change policy and practices that marginalize communities. As educators, we continue to come up with our own ideas and interventions to close opportunity gaps. Our ideas fall short when we do not have our families at decision-making and learning tables. This requires a large investment in relationships and time. Without this, we will not make the progress that could be made.

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