

ABSTRACT

Kim M. Moses, BUILD A VILLAGE: CULTIVATING PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARENTS FOR INCREASED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, May, 2024.

When parents and teachers work collaboratively, student outcomes improve. To ensure that African-American parents feel welcome in the school setting, schools must consider the cultural differences that can sometimes prevent successful partnerships. This qualitative participatory action research study was informed by activist research and community learning exchange (CLE) methodology and protocols. In collaboration with a team of co-practitioner researchers (CPR) composed of three teachers, one school psychologist, and one principal, the goal was to examine the extent to which teachers cultivated productive relationships with African-American parents. Over the PAR project and study, teachers and African-American parents shared experiences and ideas to examine current practices and inform strategies to cultivate partnerships. As a result of three cycles of inquiry, the findings indicate: (1) When there is a lack of cultural understanding, partnerships between African-American parents and teachers are negatively impacted, and (2) when there is mutual communication—places and spaces to talk—African-American parents and teachers are better positioned to partner. In practice contexts, there is a need to create inclusive school communities that support the capacity of teachers to build productive relationships with African-American parents. In the research context, these findings complement other research about the creation of culturally responsive school communities (Nieto, 1999) and the need to address systemic cultural barriers to African-American parent involvement (Lareau, 1996). These emerged as critical components to improving the capacity to develop partnerships between African-American parents and teachers.

BUILD A VILLAGE: CULTIVATING PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH
AFRICAN-AMERICAN PARENTS FOR INCREASED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

A Dissertation
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DEDICATION

*for The Moses Family,
and The Fredericks Family*

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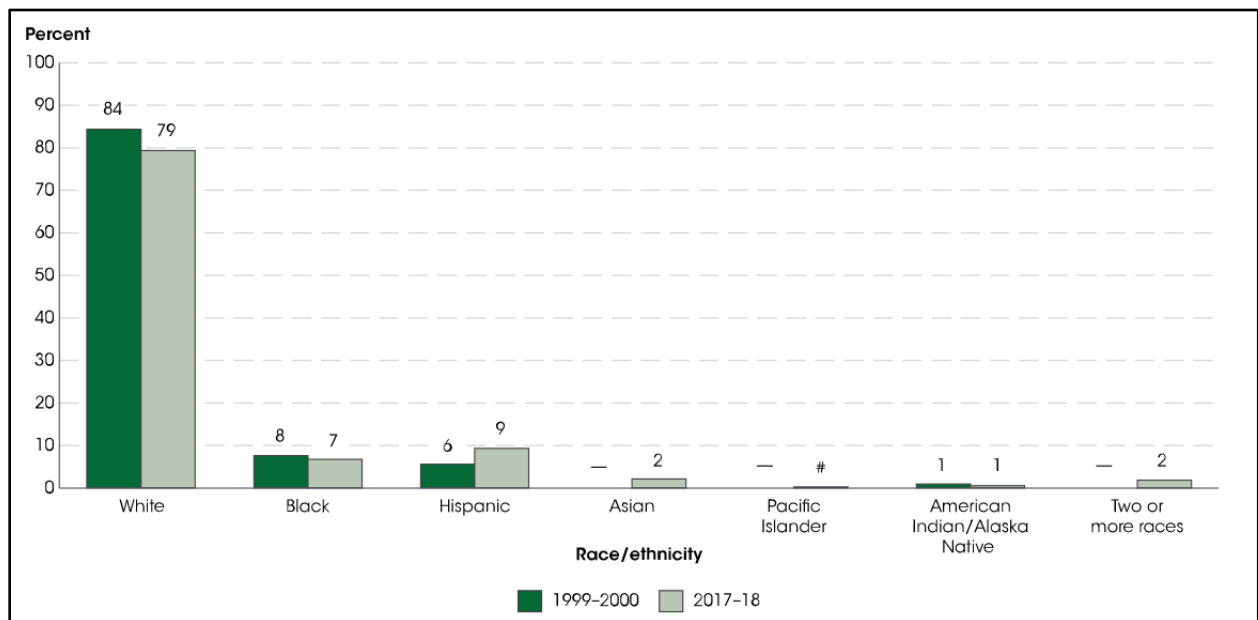
CHAPTER 1: NAMING AND FRAMING THE FOCUS OF PRACTICE

We have 50 years of research showing that what families do matters. Whether it's loving school, college access, good attendance, or academic success, family engagement has positive correlations with all sorts of indicators.

Karen Mapp (theparentsguideto.co.uk)

Historically, American schools were established not just to teach the fundamentals of reading, writing, and mathematics, but also to reinforce the core American values. Those core American values have largely represented the mainstream, White male ideals, which did not value the equal contribution, or accomplishments of diverse populations and women who represent America. Since its inception and through 1954, the structure of public schools was not designed to support an effective education for African-American children or families. In 2024, one hundred seventy-two years after the passage of the first compulsory education law, we are still working to establish effective public schools for people of all races. The historical barriers aimed at decreasing educational opportunities for minorities have contributed to a lack of confidence and trust that African-American families have in our schools.

Historically and currently, African-American children are at the bottom of the performance charts in America's schools. A key element that influences this troubling statistic is the poor engagement of African-American families in our schools. There is a lack of effective, reciprocal partnerships among school staff and African-American families. The absence of these relationships is largely due to the historical design of educational institutions which do not consider African-American history or culture. The design determines the practices and policies within schools, which generally operate within White, mainstream cultural norms while devaluing the cultural norms of African-Americans. In addition to design, another contributing factor that is important to note is that our schools, which largely serve diverse families, are staffed with a majority of White teachers as shown in Figure 1.



Note. Adapted from the National Center for Education Statistics (2020).

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of teachers in public schools by race/ethnicity: School years 1999-2000 and 2017-18.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), 79% of public-school teachers were White and seven percent were Black during the 2017-2018 school year. The lack of diversity in staffing contributes to a lack of cultural understanding, which impacts the relationships among African-American families and the teachers who serve them. When parents do not share a common culture with teachers, it is more difficult to establish a shared understanding and build trust (Wong & Hughes, 2006). Establishing productive, trusting relationships among African-American families and their children's teachers is essential to impacting productive engagement for African-American families in schools. The Focus of Practice aims to positively impact the relationship between teachers and African-American families.

Focus of Practice

A successful school experience is dependent upon the environment, practices, and practitioners within the school. This includes the role of teachers and school staff, the academic and social practices promoted by the school, and the level of school engagement with students and families. When there is a lack of trust or a lack of effective communication between home and school, the partnership needed for student success is negatively impacted. A large body of research indicates that parental involvement generally has a significant effect on children's success in school (Jeynes, 2011). Further, there is significant evidence that family engagement in schools and home-school partnerships are essential to student success (Bouffard & Stephen, 2007).

In the Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, I worked with teachers and African American families to research and define the current practices of parent involvement with African-American families in one school, Lovehall Elementary. More specifically, my Focus of

Practice (FoP) is to increase the capacity of teachers within a school to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents. The experiences and practices within schools, and society as a whole, directly relate to the development of the education partnerships between teachers and parents, especially when the teacher and the family have different ethnic backgrounds. Figure 2 demonstrates that while there was a very diverse student population, there was a lack of cultural diversity among the staff at Lovehall Elementary School. In addition, the level of participation and engagement by African-American families had been significantly less than that of other ethnicities. I believed that the cultivation of trust and the implementation of effective communication among teachers and African-American families would positively impact the school experience for African-American students and families. I also believed that these relationships would be key for ongoing partnerships and increased school participation for African-American families.

Inclusive schools with supportive learning environments shape the experiences of our students and their families. The school experiences of students and families ultimately impact the school success of students. Research studies (Bouffard & Stephen, 2007) consistently document strong relationships between parent involvement and student achievement across all grade levels, but most effectively in the primary grades. A meta-analysis of more than fifty studies of parent involvement (Jeynes, 2007) found that the effect of parent involvement on student achievement in elementary schools is significant and the results held across ethnic and racial demographics. The home-school partnership is an example of a supportive learning environment that is critical to success in schools. According to Fullan (1997), “The research is abundantly clear; nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by schools and families/community working together in partnership. These forms of [parent] involvement do not happen by accident

Lovehall Elementary School

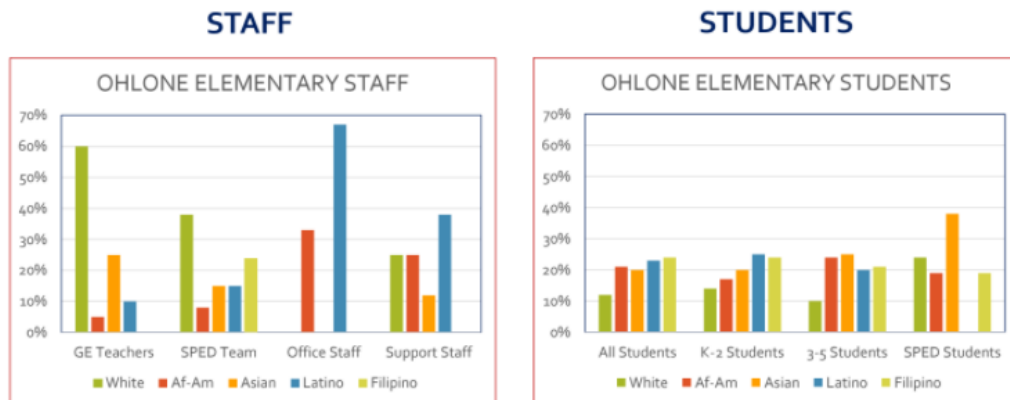


Figure 2. Lovehall Elementary School demographics: Staff and students by ethnicity.

or even by invitation. They happen by explicit strategic intervention” (p. 42). Teachers and parents must work together, purposefully, to support the education of children with clear communication and an academic partnership between home and school. Societal barriers such as stereotype threat, unwelcoming school environments, and lack of effective communication impact schooling and student success within schools. When racial differences or historical obstacles present barriers to productive partnerships, teachers must work strategically to create an environment that is inclusive, reciprocal, and effective for children to promote home-school partnerships.

Analysis of Assets and Challenges

To analyze the potential barriers to productive partnerships with African-American families, we first assessed the assets and challenges prevalent within the school community. To understand the current thoughts and beliefs within the school, the teaching staff, and paraprofessionals of Lovehall Elementary participated in a Community Learning Exchange (CLE) to discuss both strengths and potential barriers to family partnerships within the African-American community. The focus of the CLE was to explore our collective improvement goal, which is to increase engagement with African-American families in the school community. The CLE was not part of the study, and the data were not used for the project. This learning exchange was conducted as a starting point to gather information from our teaching staff and was guided by the following prompt: *Discuss the assets and challenges related to African-American family engagement in the school community at the school level, the district level, and the state and national levels.* This prompt was selected to learn more about the perceived assets and challenges of the focus of practice. This assets and challenges exercise was used to support the development of the research study.

Figure 3 is a summary of the micro, meso, and macro assets and challenges of the Focus of Practice. The micro-level is the school level, which includes the specific teachers who participated in the PAR project. The meso level, or the district level, highlights ongoing professional development on race and equity as it relates to improved outcomes for African-American student achievement. The macro level represents state and national policies and practices that affect schools, such as the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 which sparked national dialogue and called for change in our governmental systems, including the public school system.

The ideas shared by the staff represented their views of our current assets and challenges in the area of African-American parent engagement. The assets included many strong practices already in place that aimed at increasing the capacity of teachers to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents. The staff identified challenges that we aimed to improve. In addition to the areas identified, staff expressed an interest in the following questions regarding engagement: *How do we as a district work together to make sure all teachers are involved in this effort? Do people bring the baggage of bad experiences from other schools to our school? Do parents know what is needed of them to support their child in learning?* Additionally, the questions posed directly relate to some of the major barriers of relational trust: *Is every teacher invested in productive partnerships? Do previous experiences shape current expectations? Are parents aware of the importance of academic partnership and school engagement?* These questions, as well as the assets and challenges, informed our research practices, activities, and strategies throughout the PAR.

Assets and Challenges

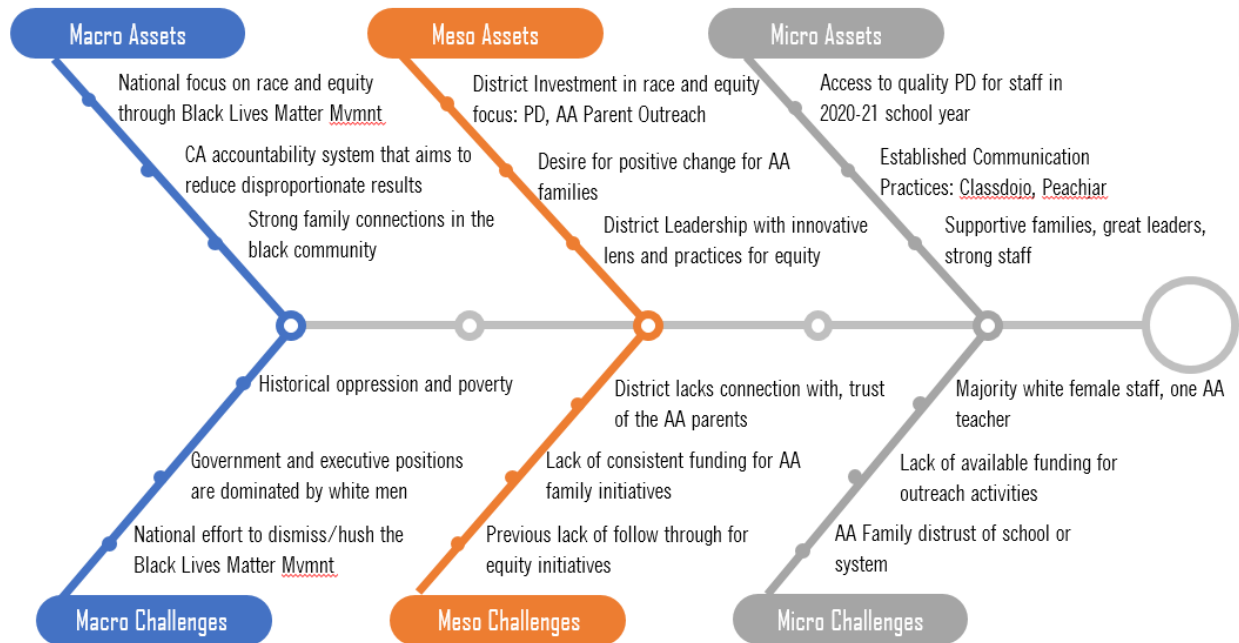


Figure 3. Analysis of assets and challenges of Focus of Practice.

Micro Assets and Challenges

Many assets at the school level support the effort to increase African-American parent engagement. The staff at our school were caring, and they consistently demonstrated a desire to improve responsiveness and try new strategies. During the 2020-21 school year, staff were engaged in weekly professional development aimed at improving the experiences and outcomes for African-American students in our schools. In addition, the staff identified the following assets for the focus of practice (FoP): access to effective communication tools, whole-school enrichment programs, parent volunteer opportunities, great school leaders, and a supportive family community.

We identified challenges at the school level that included a lack of cultural diversity among staff. While 24% of our school population were African-American, there was only one African-American classroom teacher, which represents 4% of the teaching staff. There was also a reluctance to recognize race and/or ethnicity as a barrier to success. Many staff members expressed that all students have equal opportunities and that the data discrepancies are not due to race. Other identified challenges include funding for African-American support initiatives, a parent distrust of the school, limited teacher buy-in for change initiatives, and difficulty reaching African-American parents due to work schedules and blended family structures.

Meso Assets and Challenges

Assets at the district level that supported the focus of practice included three strong initiatives that directly influenced the PAR project. Our district assets were professional development resources, the appointment of a director for the newly formed Office of African-American Student Achievement (OAASA), the formation of an African-American Site Advisory Team (AASAT) at the district level, and the intention to form an African-American Parent

Advisory Committee (AAPAC) at each school within the district. Our school district invested time and resources to increase district-wide professional development to combat racist stereotypes and biased structures that interfere with parent involvement and the achievement of African-American students in our schools. In 2020, our district created OAASA to develop and monitor programs that support engagement and increased academic results and made a public commitment to promote positive social change and racial justice for African-American students and families.

The challenges at the meso level involved the need for district managers to stay consistent in the message and the work of implementing district anti-racist policies. There was a pattern of inconsistency and disjointed implementation of previous policies and programs aimed at supporting the African-American community. We have a large district and historically there has been a lack of accountability for practices and initiatives. This led to a lack of effective systems and inconsistent policies, which contributed to the disenfranchisement of African-American parents.

Macro Assets and Challenges

At the macro level, there were regional, state, and national policies and initiatives that were identified as assets to support the momentum of our PAR project. At the state level, the California Dashboard, our system of school accountability, held all schools directly responsible for the advancement and achievement of ethnic student groups. The state data were intended to support and guide the need for improved practices at the school level. In addition, there was a focus on equity prompted by the national Black Lives Matter movement. This movement, along with the longstanding tradition of strong Black family connections within their dedicated communities, provided broader connections to the work at the school site.

The macro challenges mirrored the historical challenges prevalent in recent and distant history. There were efforts across the country to quiet the Black Lives Matter movement, creating a division within our national political climate. This attempt to dismiss the implications of historical oppression created a barrier to forming trusting relationships between African-American families and schools. Positions of political power continue to be dominated by White males and driven by White dominant culture and policies. These policies and cultural expectations continue to impact the public school system directly through its structure and access to resources. The macro challenges impacted the PAR project as we examined and considered the policies and practices which affected our school community.

Significance of the Focus of Practice

The PAR project and research significantly address the historic issue of disproportionate parent involvement in schools and the impact that has on African-American students. Specifically, within my twenty-five years in education, I have witnessed the disparities of engagement and results for African-American families and students. I have also seen a positive improvement in this area when I worked with specific families and teachers in previous school experiences. This PAR project is significant because, through the action participant research process, the information gathered can inform and influence future decisions and strategies to support positive relationships and increase African-American parent involvement in schools.

Context

At Lovehall Elementary, the community and staff demonstrated interest in partnering with parents across all ethnicities and grade levels. The staff was prepared to analyze their practices and collaborate to improve the home-school partnership with African-American families. Figure 4 demonstrates the disproportionate results from the fall 2021 district reading

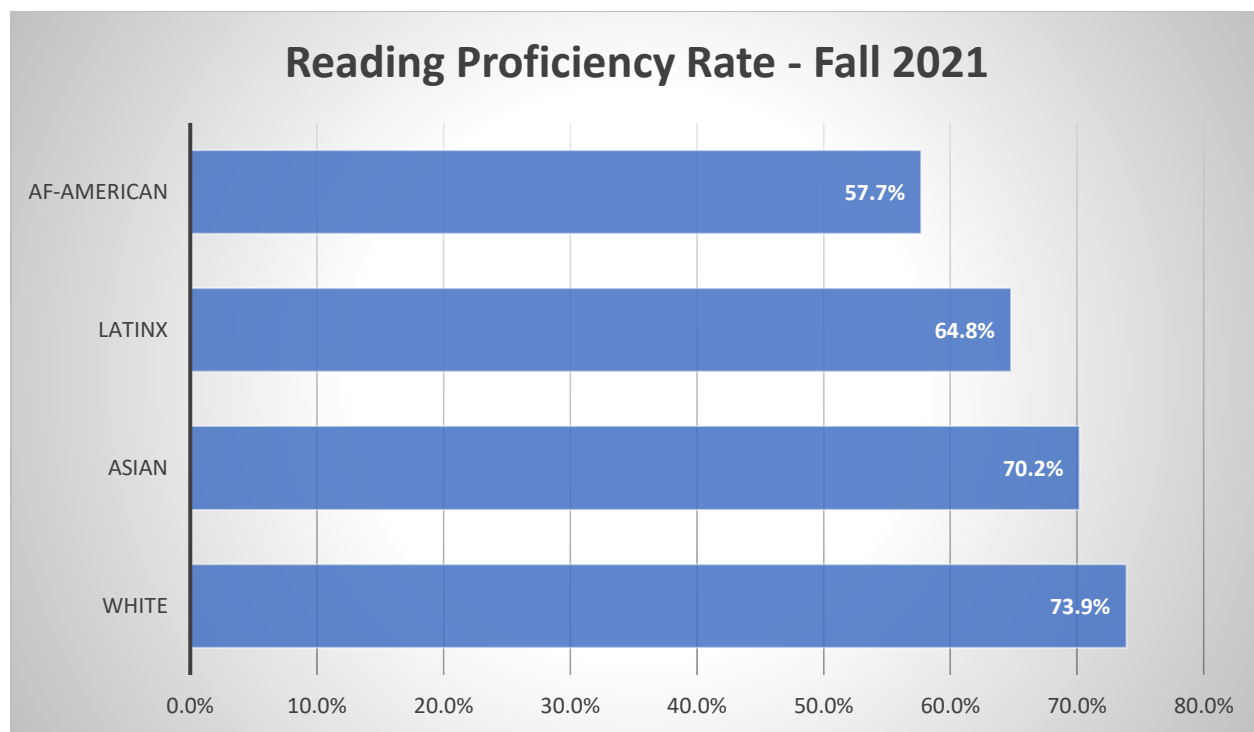


Figure 4. Reading proficiency rates by ethnicity at Lovehall Elementary.

assessment for grades 2–5. This figure is an example of the disparities of school success across other ethnicities.

There was evidence that some African-American parents lack trust in our current teachers. Parents of African-American students had expressed several concerns: incidents exposing a lack of cultural sensitivity, inequitable consequences for Black and non-Black students, and a lack of access to school information. This feedback from African-American parents suggested that stereotype threat and unconscious bias may have played a role in defining the relationship between African-American families and teachers within our school.

Stereotype threat causes people to question the authenticity of interactions. When there is a situation where a negative stereotype about one of our own identities could be applied to us—such as those about being old, poor, rich, or female—we know it (Steele, 2010). Unconscious bias occurs when a person’s actions operate outside of their awareness and can be in direct contradiction to a person’s espoused beliefs and values. The issues of stereotype threat and unconscious bias often lead to situations where African-American families feel alienated or labeled within the school community. This feeling leads to distrust within the community which exposes the need to create supportive spaces for African-American students and families within our system of schooling. For these spaces to be successful, they must make the parents feel supported by their child’s teacher. This can only happen by improving the relational trust between African-American families and teachers. The PAR project aimed to reimagine the partnership between home and school, especially for African-American families who distrust the system and the teachers within it.

Practice, Policy, and Research

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) project was significant to practice, policy, and research in that it had the potential to influence engagement practices for schools and African American families, propose support strategies for improved school structures, and improve the academic achievement of African-American students. Our focus was to increase the school's capacity to establish productive relationships with African-American families. This would serve both to improve the practices within schools and the strategies of teachers, while also increasing the engagement of families. As we examined relationships, communication, and culturally responsive practices, we began to better understand the larger issue of how to create more inclusive spaces for families that would promote increased engagement. The resulting research led us to recommend stronger policies that would ensure effective support for developing partnerships and, thus, improving the performance of African-American students.

The PAR was significant to practice in these three ways: (1) analyzing effective communication structures to support relational trust among African-American families and the teachers that serve them; (2) increasing the awareness of the need for Culturally Responsive Practices with African-American families and students; and (3) supporting school leaders to create effective partnership structures, through inquiry, for system-wide impact. Our focus started with an examination of how teachers and parents engage with each other. We then worked towards identifying effective practices for communication, relational trust, and cultural responsiveness. We also worked to increase the awareness of the need for effective strategies that positively impact the parent-teacher partnership. The results of the PAR provide insight into the best practices that can impact home-school partnerships for African-American families.

The PAR aimed to address significant local and state policy to promote an increase in successful parent-teacher partnerships and inform foundational family engagement practices that can be implemented across the county and state. The policies would serve to support teacher development, effective communication, and improve cultural awareness and relational trust within schools.

The significance of the research design was that the researchers were also practitioners with a unique lens from which to approach the work. The PAR project engaged co-practitioner researchers in inquiry-based, action research. The research team engaged in Community Learning Exchanges that provided a wide range of information and opportunities for learning and analyzing practices and results. Through CLE and cycles of inquiry, this research actively sought to support the identification of effective strategies for improvement as related to the focus of practice. Information gathered from this project would then be shared more broadly to encourage increased effectiveness in the implementation and selection of strategies for African-American family engagement in schools.

Connection to Equity

African-American students are more frequently identified as “at risk” in American schools than their peers. These students and their families are not experiencing success at the same levels as other ethnic groups. Our contemporary schools continue to mirror the historical context of settler colonialism in the United States where the guiding principle was that one race, the White race, is superior to everyone else. This history has led to a system of education in which students and families, depending upon race, experience schools differently, usually resulting in deficit outcomes for African-American families. While many teachers express

frustration about not being able to “get through to” or adequately serve minoritized students, many parents and students feel that they are not able to “get through to” schools (Khalifa, 2018).

The focus of practice directly addresses issues of equity as the experiences of African-American families in our schools impact the outcomes for African-American children. Currently, the school experiences of African-American students demonstrate that these students and their families continue to suffer under current practices. This led to a distrust of schools for many African-American families and to disproportionately poor academic results for African-American students. One way to improve outcomes for these students is to improve the engagement of African-American families in the schools that serve them. We must work to create relational trust with the families and the teachers who serve African-American families if we are to improve levels of engagement. As a result of improving our school’s capacity to cultivate relationships, we can achieve better, more culturally responsive approaches for our African-American students while also improving our partnership with African-American families. School communities in which all people are bonded by a vision to help children—and then actually commit to learning together are necessary for school improvement (Khalifa, 2018).

In this PAR project and study, we focused on improving the capacity of teachers to cultivate positive relationships with African-American families. Two equity frameworks support the focus of practice. First, I discuss the psychological framework, particularly referring to inequities as they relate to unconscious bias and stereotypes. Secondly, I analyze how the socio-cultural framework establishes a system of distrust among African-American Families.

Psychological Framework of the Focus of Practice

Unconscious bias and stereotype threat influence how African-American families are perceived in school spaces and subsequently how they participate in those spaces. Media images

and life experience shape how people see the world and how they participate in it. The media images and stereotypes of African-Americans in schools are generally not favorable; they often focus on students with failed test scores, high suspension rates, and increased discipline problems. Such images imply that African-American students come from households where education is not prioritized, families do not participate in the schools, and parents are difficult to work with. The images and stereotypes might lead one to believe that African-Americans do not value education, a view that is unsubstantiated. Many African-American families view education as the path to future success; however, the African-American school experience often fails to support that view. The thoughts, beliefs, actions, misconceptions, and fears of all stakeholders become barriers for African-American families in schools where staff and school culture do not reflect the diversity of the families. When this occurs, a cultural disconnect can become a barrier to future success and equitable outcomes.

Socio-Cultural Framework of the Focus of Practice

The practices and policies within schools support a socio-cultural framework that is not equitable for minorities. The absence of a multi-cultural lens leads to inequitable experiences for minority students and families. Some policies, practices, and structures in schools reflect bias and create barriers to success for minority students, especially for African-American students. These structures still exist in our school system. As a result of the absence of multi-cultural policies, practices, and structures, there continues to be distrust among African-American families towards the people and structures within our schools. The distrust has resulted in a lack of engagement on the part of African-American families in our schools. There have been protests, litigation, and grassroots movements advocating for the creation of more equitable education spaces for African-American students and families.

The absence of trust in school spaces has created a circumstance where African-American families reject engagement with teachers and school staff. At the same time, the absence of African-American voice in school communities serves to perpetuate the socio-cultural issues that we want to eradicate. These issues exist to breed bias and misconceptions about the institution of schools as it pertains to educating our nation's children. African-American families must feel welcomed and be empowered to actively engage in our schools. In this project, we aim to understand why the parent-teacher relationship is more difficult to cultivate in schools that lack minority staffing. The current school practices and teacher efforts have not successfully engaged African-American families. With a community of practitioners, we sought to better align outreach practices as a way to improve the engagement of African-American families within the school. We examined culturally responsive strategies and practices that build relational trust. Furthermore, by using those strategies, we sought to better align with the needs of our families and thus impact the experience of our African-American students and families.

Participatory Action Research Design

The goal of the PAR project and study was to increase the capacity of teachers within a school to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents. I worked with three teachers, a psychologist, and a principal as co-practitioner researchers throughout this process. Initially, we examined problems of practice and sought to understand the relevant, direct issues through Community Learning Exchanges (CLE) with our African-American family community. The purpose of the Community Learning Exchanges was to bring together teachers and African-American families to share, discuss, and problem-solve the engagement practices and strategies within our school to learn how we might adjust strategies to increase partnerships. CLEs were based on the premise that we learn best from real, lived experiences, and authentic and honest

relationships (Guajardo et al., 2016). The goal of the CLEs were two-fold: to gather information about the hopes and dreams of African-American families, and to build supportive relationships with the African-American community. After the completion of the PAR project, we hoped to offer school-wide strategies that would support effective partnerships between teachers and African-American families.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The PAR project and study purpose was to impact how teachers partner with African-American families. More specifically, we worked to cultivate relational trust and effective partnerships that would support the increased participation of African-American families in schools. The overarching research question is: How does a school develop capacity to cultivate productive partnerships with African-American parents? The sub research questions are:

1. To what extent do parents and teachers cultivate and increase relational trust?
 - a. How do teachers and parents experience community learning exchanges?
 - b. How do teachers and parents engage with each other?
2. To what extent do school policies and teachers' practices change communication and authentic engagement with African-American parents?
 - a. How does the school staff take on more direct and frequent communication with parents?
 - b. To what extent does the shift in teacher practices impact authentic engagement with African-American parents?
3. How does an African-American leader in a racially diverse school engage all constituents in equitably supporting students?

These research questions guided the PAR project and informed the theory of action.

Theory of Action

We recognized a need to create and/or restore the relationships between school staff and the African-American community. Because of the lack of diversity among our staff, the cultural and historical issues with stereotypes, and the need for effective practices to engage our African-American families, this PAR project focused on the development of relational trust between teachers and the African-American families they serve. The theory of action is as follows: If we enact a PAR project that educates teachers about the importance of cultural norms and experiences, then teachers will increase partnerships with African-American families. This partnership will lead to supportive practices that benefit not only the parent-teacher relationship but also the overall investment in African-American children in the school system.

Focus of Practice Description

Our focus of practice (FoP) is to increase our capacity as a school to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents to equitably support our African-American students. I worked directly with the co-practitioner researcher (CPR) team to increase the capacity of our teachers as we worked to engage and cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents. We expected that these effective partnerships would result in more equitable support for our African-American students, both at school and at home. The PAR project was designed and carried out to support teachers by gathering input, listening, sharing, and engaging in opportunities to partner directly with African-American families at our Community Learning Exchanges.

The CPR Team participated in cycles of inquiry to gather input, analyze, and share information, and design experiences for growth and learning. Teachers participated in CLE events with African-American families. The CPR team built upon the Community Learning

Exchanges to suggest opportunities to build partnerships with African-American families and their students.

The focus of practice and research activities were grounded in cultural responsiveness. The Community Learning Exchanges were designed to create safe spaces to share our experiences and develop an understanding of how we can build relational trust through community dialogue. In addition, the CPR Team collected and analyzed data to share relevant culturally responsive communication strategies. The CPR Team used the initial data to guide the development of goals for strengthening the home-school partnership with African-American families. Productive relationships are trusting relationships and we recognized the need to address cultural differences and norms to begin the process of partnership. This was the foundation of our research project.

Project Activities

During the PAR project, I worked with the CPR Team and used Community Learning Exchanges to gather information and input that informed the project activities. A CLE provides an opportunity for diverse community members—leaders, activists, teachers, youth, elders—to come together for a period of engaged, deep learning. In a collaborative forum, these community members openly examine their common challenges and collective gifts, and then freely exchange successful approaches and tools that can drive changes within themselves, their organizations (including schools), and their communities (Guajardo et al., 2016). During the CLEs, we shared stories and information to inform the study. The CPR Team collected input, analyzed data, and planned additional CLEs to work collectively with African-American parents. Table 1 outlines the project activities.

Table 1

Cycles of Inquiry

Cycle	Date	CPR Activities	CLE Designs
Pre-Cycle Examining Barriers & Opportunities	Winter 2022	CPR designed CLE opportunities to gather information and input from African-American parents and teachers. CPR analyzed data and resources to inform the next steps	Parents and teachers shared stories and experiences to build understanding and inform needs
PAR Cycle 1 Strategies to Build Capacity African- American Family Engagement	Fall 2022	CPR Team used data analysis to collect further data on building relational trust and culturally responsive communication.	Parents and teachers share experiences that confront barriers and address culturally responsive relationships and partnerships
PAR Cycle 2 Opportunities for Partnering with African-American Families	Spring 2023	CPR designed CLEs to explore engagement strategies with African-American families	Designed opportunities to support culturally responsive partnerships

Confidentiality, Ethical Considerations, and Limitations

In qualitative research, particularly PAR, it is important to examine the roles of the researcher and participants and consider the limitations, the validity of the study, and confidentiality and ethical concerns from the outset. The security of the data and the confidentiality of the participants is of the utmost importance in this study. Pseudonyms were used for all of the participants in the study. In addition, all data including the transcribed interviews and tapes, planning meetings, and classroom observation notes and documents were secured, using passcodes and locks to prevent unauthorized access to data. Finally, none of the materials co-generated with the study participants were replicated or disseminated in any way. All participants signed a letter that was filed for each participant of the study. I discuss the details of confidentiality and ethics in Chapter 3.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the focus of practice for the research study, which aimed to increase the capacity of teachers to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents to equitably support African-American students. In the chapter, I provided the context, rationale, and significance of the desired research. The theory of action states: If we enact a PAR project that involves educating teachers about the importance of cultural norms and experiences, then teachers will engage in stronger partnerships with African-American families. The project activities and the confidentiality and ethical considerations have been outlined in this chapter. The research linked the principles of improvement sciences and Community Learning exchanges to better understand the issue and inform strategies that may impact outcomes for African-American families and students.

Connections to Key Principles

We applied a community-focused approach to learning while supporting both teachers and African-American parents throughout the process, relying on key principles in improvement science and the Community Learning Exchange axioms. Our research design employed the collaborative inquiry cycle and used Community Learning Exchanges to collect data that, in turn, informed our practices. This process was designed to lead to supportive practices that benefit not only the parent-teacher relationship but also the overall school experience for African-American families.

The participatory action research project is grounded in the principles of improvement science. The CPR team engaged together with our school community in the act of learning and improving together. Design impacts how systems influence the way individuals carry out their responsibilities. Improvement science addresses this reality by focusing on the specific tasks people do; the processes and tools they use; and how prevailing policies, organizational structures, and norms affect this. Applying improvement science to education directs greater attention on how better to design and fit together the many elements that shape the way schools work (Bryk et al., 2015). We designed the research practices using the model of a collaborative inquiry-action cycle. The inquiry-action process entails explicating what actions are taken, why, and to what effect—and then learning from and acting on that knowledge. The framework must be lived; an inquiry-minded, action-oriented principal believes, knows, shares, and acts as the framework within the school's communities of practice (Militello et al., 2009). Following the improvement science principles and engaging in the collaborative inquiry cycle allowed the design process and activities to engage all participants in the PAR project.

We designed and facilitated Community Learning Exchanges for teachers and parents and included student voice. Action research dissertations represent an important source of documentation of action research studies as well as knowledge about varying social practices. (Herr & Anderson, 2005). By engaging stakeholders to gather information and share in solution-oriented action steps, we experienced the learning cycles necessary to impact partnerships amongst teachers and parents. Figure 5 is a description of the CLE axioms that guided the CLE.

The chapters describe the research project. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the theoretical, normative, and empirical research surrounding the focus of practice, including parental involvement in schools, culturally responsive family engagement practices, and change leadership systems. Chapter 3 details the context of this action research project, including a description of the project participants, while Chapter 4 outlines the research design as well as the data collection and analysis methodology. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the Pre-Cycle and two cycles of inquiry (PAR Pre-Cycle: Winter 2022, PAR Cycle One: Fall 2022, and PAR Cycle Two: Spring 2023). Chapter 7 provides a discussion of key claims and the theory in action that emerged from the study.

Community Learning Exchange (CLE) Axioms

1. Learning and Leadership are a Dynamic Social Processes
2. Conversations are Critical and Central Pedagogical Processes
3. The People Closest to the Issues are Best Situated to Discover Answers to Local Concerns
4. Crossing Boundaries Enriches the Development and Educational Process
5. Hope and Change are Built on Assets and Dreams of Locals and their Communities

Figure 5. Axioms that guide the CLE.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The participatory action research project and study was designed to increase the capacity of school staff to cultivate productive partnerships with African-American parents. Increased capacity to form partnerships with African-American parents at the school staff level results in productive and meaningful involvement in the education of their children. The three areas of literature that anchored the study to increase the capacity of teachers to cultivate productive partnerships are family engagement in schools, culturally responsive communities, and change leadership within schools. The literature on parent involvement and its impact on student achievement outlined the importance of this work. The examination of culturally responsive communities identified best practices for communication with students and families of color. The research on changing leadership practices supported an understanding of the complexities prevalent when transforming school culture. By reviewing the research and theories captured in these three areas, I better understood the levers of social interaction within schools, the proven culturally responsive strategies for effective engagement, and the systemic considerations for improving school practices that seek to increase partnerships with African-American parents.

An increased understanding of effective practices that promote engagement with the African-American community is necessary to impact partnerships within schools. It is widely accepted that cultural differences make parental involvement more difficult for teachers and school administrators (Denessen et al., 2007). In recognition that the family experience in schools is dependent on teacher practices and school policies, I examined both the relationship between teachers and families and the overall cultural responsiveness in our schools. Recent data demonstrates that across every income percentile, Black families in the United States fare worse than their White counterparts on a variety of outcomes, including educational access and

achievement (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; Reardon & Portilla, 2016). Next, I outline the literature that supported a shift toward increased parental involvement by our African-American parents to improve the outcomes for African-American students. In this chapter, I reviewed the literature as it relates to understanding the relationships between home and school and how those relationships support increased African-American student achievement.

Family Engagement in School

Parental involvement is one of the determining factors of student success in schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (Wirt et al., 2005) concludes that children who have highly involved parents have better academic outcomes in elementary and secondary school. For this project, I extended parent engagement to include extended family members in acknowledgment of the family structure supporting African-American students in schools. The blended family structure often practiced in the African-American community warrants that we use the extended family unit, including grandparents and other family members involved in the daily support of African-American children, while examining this work. In addition, current educational policy about families has shifted from talk of “parent involvement” to a discourse of “family engagement” recognizing it as a popular lever for closing race and class-based educational disparities in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education’s new family engagement framework (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014) has broadened the focus from parents (exclusive to the parent’s relation to the child) to families (including siblings and multi-generational caregivers).

The presence of a home-school partnership is one of the greatest factors in determining the academic success of a student. The educational benefits to children include higher grades and test scores, better school attendance, higher graduation rates, greater enrollment in postsecondary

education, and more positive attitudes about school (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). For this reason, I focus next on the examination of the role of parental involvement in schools and the barriers related to African-American parent involvement.

Parent Involvement

Overall, we refer to parental involvement as the multiple ways in which parents interact with their children and the school to benefit educational outcomes and success. However, parents and educators sometimes define what constitutes parental involvement differently. There is a lack of consensus and “despite its intuitive meaning, the operational use of parental involvement has not been clear and consistent” (Fan & Chen, 2001, p. 3). Researchers have identified various definitions for parental involvement, such as the one given by Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) who define parental involvement as “the dedication of resources by the parent to the child within a given domain” (p. 238). In addition, Larocque et al. (2011) state that “family involvement can be generally defined as the parents’ or caregivers’ investment in the education of their children” (p. 116). While El Nokali et al. (2010), offer a more specific definition that perceives parental involvement as “parents’ behaviors in the home and school setting meant to support their children’s educational progress” (p. 989). For this study, I focused on the specific definition related to interactions, or behaviors, of parents in the home and school setting. This definition addresses that home and school actions that create a complete school experience. By acknowledging and validating how the environments impact student outcomes. I outline the impact of parental involvement as the engagement and experience of families in schools.

Impact of Parent Involvement on School Engagement

The presence of strong family-school partnerships serves to build parental involvement which in turn, supports improved student outcomes in school. Partnerships between schools and

families are essential to build engagement in the mission of schools, which is to educate all children effectively. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary defines engagement as “an emotional involvement or commitment.” In this project, we refer to school engagement as the commitment to demonstrate active involvement in the school’s mission. Parent involvement, or engagement, strengthens the experience and support of the student.

Parent’s involvement in their children’s education is beneficial to students and parents as well as to the educator (Sohn & Wang, 2006). In the United States, federal and state policies have elevated parental involvement in schools to a national priority in part due to a large number of failing schools and the increased achievement gap between White students and African-American and other ethnic minority students (Green, 2001; Lewis et al., 2008). At the policy level, increased parental involvement is essential to tackle the issues related to the academic success of African-Americans and the achievement gap. According to Domina (2005), “The idea that parents can change their children’s educational trajectories by engaging with their children’s schooling has inspired a generation of school reform policies” (p. 245). Concurrently, research shows that there is a positive link between parental involvement and student competence, grades, and achievement scores (Shah, 2009). The absence of a family-school partnership affects the overall level of support available for students to accomplish academic tasks and strengthen their connection to the school. There is a need to strengthen the family-school partnership among African-American families, not only to impact student outcomes but to also improve their experience in our schools.

Impact of Parent Involvement on School Climate

The foundational aspects of the home-school partnership are contingent upon how educators and schools seek to invite parental participation in the education of their children.

Parental involvement includes not only direct involvement at the school site, such as volunteering in classrooms and attending school parent-teacher conferences, but also informal behaviors, such as discussing school and family issues and conveying educational expectations (Epstein & Sanders, 2002; McWayne et al., 2004). The opportunities for parent involvement must also serve to create a partnership between home and school. Engaging families requires that there be a connection and an established common interest.

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students. (Epstein, 1995, p. 701)

Parents have a genuine desire to support the success of their children in school and they have an understanding that their involvement helped their children's educational development. However, many parents are engaged in ways not recognized by educators with a narrow lens of what constitutes parental involvement (Mapp, 2003). The interactions between parents and educators frame the opportunities for family involvement and the expectations of the home-school partnership. A connection between families and schools is necessary to establish and strengthen ways in which families support their children's education. Huang and Mason (2008) conducted a qualitative study and found that parents of preschool-age students are motivated to become involved based on their affiliations in the school, the power to influence their child's learning,

and their belief in education as being the key to achieving success. If parents can experience connections with teachers, other parents, and educational administrators, then actual involvement happens.

Barriers to African-American Family Involvement

The barriers to family engagement among African-American families in schools can be traced through the history of schools in America. Our current structure of schooling, in most cases, continues to emulate the historic purposes of schooling and continues to perpetuate colonial American values. We cannot move forward with transforming our strategies for improved parental involvement without understanding the barriers that impact current involvement levels. These historical barriers have impacted how African-American families view their roles in the act of educating children and the relationship that exists between African-American families and school educators. Next, I examined the historical implications and the relational factors that impact African-American families and their involvement in schools.

Historical Implications

The history of American education bodes a distrust among many ethnic groups, African-Americans in particular. Historically, schools were not created to embrace the diverse ethnic cultures of the families they serve. As a result, there continue to be gaps in the opportunities and achievements afforded to African-American students and families in schools. These gaps are rooted in racism, as they are the direct result of residential and school segregation, implicit biases and overt discrimination, historically grounded wealth and wellness disparities, and unequal treatment in the criminal justice system (Delale-O'Connor et al., 2020). Karen Mapp (2003) states that the social factors emanating from the parents' own experiences and history influence

their participation in schools. This history impacts the current relationships between families, schools, and educators.

The history of school structures and American laws demonstrates the disparities in the school experience for families representing the ethnic minority. In the seventeenth century, education was a privilege, serving the purpose of teaching White children to read the bible and to align themselves with Puritan values in privatized settings. In the nineteenth century, the focus of schools shifted to a model of state-sponsored education to prepare citizens for factory work. African-Americans and other minority children were excluded from admission at most of these schools. In 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a landmark United States Supreme Court decision, upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation in America. This impacted the schooling structures in the twentieth century and laws were created to ensure that African-Americans would not have access to schools for White children. Formal laws and local governance prevented adequate resources and accessible structures for “Black” schools created for African-American children. These laws were enforced until 1954 when the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* declared segregation of schools as unconstitutional. However, in some states, it took many years to implement school desegregation for minority families, with the majority of states eventually creating structures for more inclusive schools by 1965. These events cultivated a distrust of public schooling among African-American families.

Historic events have impacted the mindsets and core values of mainstream America. The implications of this history create barriers to the relationships required to establish an effective home-school partnership. The state-sponsored, racist treatment of African-American families beginning in 1619 and continuing through 1964, continues to impact the educational and economic opportunities for African-Americans in the twenty-first century. Even now, the historic

and contemporary racism and racist structures further shape school environments and influence the interactions between African-American and other ethnic minority caregivers and the education systems that serve them (Delale-O'Connor et al., 2020). These structures serve as barriers that manifest in the working relationships among parents and educators.

One of the most critical barriers to African-American family involvement manifests in the area of relational trust. The issues of trust stem from relational aspects of parent-educator partnerships: cultural norms and values, communication style, previous experiences in schools, and a lack of understanding regarding what is expected. Öztürk (2013) explains that when parents and teachers come from different backgrounds, there are barriers that prevent parent-school relationships. He also states that there are additional barriers that prevent parents and teachers from communicating openly and honestly which include a lack of understanding of the home-school partnerships, lack of understanding of the school system; lack of confidence, work interference, negative past experiences with schools, and insensitivity or hostility on the part of the school personnel. To address these barriers there must be an established relationship, anchored in trust, with both the parents and the educators who serve them.

Parent-Teacher-School Relationship

The education system recognizes the importance of parental involvement in education. However, teachers and parents often have different perspectives on what it means to be involved in the education of a child. Teachers and parents must form relationships to communicate about student support, academic progress, and expectations for schooling. These relationships must serve to meet the established needs of the student, must be predicated on trust, and established with clear norms and goals. According to the parents, when school personnel initiate and engage in practices that welcome parents into the school, honor their contributions, and connect them to

the school community through an emphasis on the children, these practices then cultivate and sustain respectful, caring, and meaningful relationships between parents and school staff (Mapp, 2003). Case studies reveal that when parents have caring and trustful relationships with school staff, these relationships enhance their desire to be involved and influence how they participate in their children's educational development (Mapp, 2003).

How families are invited to participate in schools communicates the expectations for parent involvement. School staff often view involvement as participating in pre-planned activities that center on involvement at schools, such as fundraising, volunteering in classrooms, or participating in school leadership teams. This definition of involvement may limit the opportunities for relationships, and the ways that parents can be involved. These activities may also present an issue for parents who may not feel welcome in the school community. In this way, schools may overlook the different ways that families with diverse backgrounds and cultures are involved in their children's education. By not recognizing diverse forms of involvement that may take place beyond the school building and by not providing different outlets for family participation, schools may unwittingly restrict both the number of parents and the ways that parents can be involved in their children's schooling (Mapp, 2003). This suggests that the lack of opportunities, rather than a lack of interest in involvement, may limit parents' participation and limit the development of relationships.

The importance of the parent-teacher collaborative relationship is outlined in The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships published by the United States Department of Education in 2014. The framework prioritizes building the "dual capacity" of both families and educators to collaborate in supporting student learning. The USDE contrasts the conventional parent involvement approaches in important ways, such as focusing on learning as

a central aim, acknowledging the key role of educators in shaping opportunities for engagement and attending to relational dynamics between educators and families (Ishimaru, 2019). The parent-teacher relationship serves as the foundation for effective partnerships between home and school. To impact the level of parent involvement for African-American families, relationships must be cultivated to establish effective collaboration among parents and teachers.

Cultural Responsiveness in Schools

School systems across the country are increasingly ethnically diverse, serving children from many different cultures and ethnicities. The large majority of teachers are not from minority backgrounds. A survey from 2017-18 estimates that 79.3% of public-school teachers are White, 9.3% are Hispanic, 7% of teachers are Black and about 2% are Asian. The same survey points out that slightly more than half of public-school students are non-White (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). This creates a cultural disconnect for some of the families and the schools that serve them. According to the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCREST), “cultural responsiveness is the ability to learn from and relate respectfully with people of your own culture as well as those from other cultures.” The act of cultural responsiveness supports the need for culturally diverse communities to better connect with the teachers and staff in schools. Next, I introduce the concept of culturally responsive practices. It also examines the impact of culturally responsive practices on family engagement and the identified competencies of a culturally responsive educator.

Culturally Responsive Practices

Culturally responsive practices greatly impact the establishment of positive relationships among teachers and African-American families. The NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools (2020) examines the concept of culturally responsive family engagement. They state that culturally responsive family engagement involves the

practice of authentic, equal partnership with families, rooted in a deep knowledge and appreciation for the rich social and cultural identities, assets, habits, and contexts that families bring to learning (NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, 2020). This is an important concept that addresses the sense of belonging within the educational process.

When there is a lack of diversity among school staff, the school community must engage in strategies that promote a culturally responsive approach to family engagement. Literature from multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching define culturally responsive practices as “behavioral and policy actions that acknowledge stakeholders’ cultures and utilize that knowledge to create an optimal learning environment where personal beliefs and assumptions are regularly examined, cultural identities are nurtured, institutional policies and procedures are interrogated for bias, cultural competency is developed, and social justice is a transformative imperative” (Bradley et al., 2005). To establish this approach, school staff must engage in practices that recognize and validate cultural differences, while also connecting with families and students in a meaningful way. Staff engagement in these culturally responsive practices must include opportunities for ongoing, consistent reflection of policies, practices, and interactions. It is through this process that personal beliefs and professional practices will become more reflective of the diverse needs of the African-American community.

Culturally Responsive Family Engagement

The African-American community has traditionally been underserved in schools. The history of American schooling has many examples of how the education of African-American children was undervalued, underfunded, and in some instances, resented. Further, stereotypes, media images, and unconscious bias are barriers that impact the feelings of African-American

families about school. The current movement of cultural responsiveness and the emphasis on needed improvement in the areas of achievement for African-American students are examples of the need for change.

The interpersonal social exchanges that take place in a group setting are defined as relational trust. When there is a lack of relational trust in schools, relationships are strained, or limited in a way that prevents a true partnership among parents and teachers. A true partnership requires that both parties work together in support of the student. This sometimes represents different viewpoints from parents of African-American families and the teachers who serve them. In some cases, parents believe that they are being judged by teachers and vice versa. The fact that this concern exists solidifies that the issue of relational trust is a barrier to effective partnerships among African-American parents and teachers.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) identified three psychological factors contributing to the problem of relational trust. First, they identified the family's perceptions of their role and responsibility in their children's education as the most important factor predicting parental involvement. They used an example of middle-class parents feeling that they should collaborate with school efforts while low-income families may perceive themselves as outside the school system and feel it is the school's responsibility to do the teaching. Second, they cited that those parental feelings of efficacy may contribute to their involvement in their children's school, for example, parents who believe they can make a difference in their children's education are more likely to visit and participate in school activities than those who feel ineffective. Third, their research explains that some schools are more welcoming than others, and the extent to which schools make parents feel comfortable and valued contributes to the adults' participation in their children's education. They contend that schools serving low-income, ethnically diverse

neighborhoods must make greater efforts to welcome families because those are the parents who often feel excluded because of differences in their ethnicity, income, and culture. These psychological factors impact the relationship between parents and schools.

Effective culturally responsive communication is required to ensure that people who share different cultural identities can both accept and understand the viewpoints, and/or requests, of others. Communication is the key to any good partnership. The cultural and communication differences between the teacher and the families can impact the effectiveness of the efforts. Au and Mason (1981) found that when teachers' conversation styles match that of the community, children are more able and eager to participate in classroom activities. I would argue that this is also relevant to family communication. How people convey their thoughts, feelings, and actions directly relates to the type of partnership that will be formed among the people, largely because people form ideas and impressions based on how they receive the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others.

In addition to verbal communication, the school environment plays a key role in the relationship between African-American family involvement. What families observe and experience within the school, or during school events, can help them to feel a part of the school community, or further distance them from it. Relational trust can only be formed when the communication is transparent and delivered in a culturally sensitive manner. This requires that our teachers, and our schools, understand and employ the competencies of culturally responsive educators.

Culturally Responsive Educators

Cultural diversity is prevalent in educational settings across the country; therefore, teacher preparation programs are expected to prepare teachers by embedding concepts related to

diversity and cultural responsiveness. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) emphasizes the need to prepare preservice teachers to be culturally competent. They state, "Diversity must be a pervasive characteristic of any quality preparation program" (CAEP 2015, p. 21). In addition, Nieto (1999) and Bloom et al. (2000) emphasize that teachers must establish respectful and trusting social relationships with children and families and that this is essential for any efforts to improve urban education. The need for culturally responsive educators is critical to the impact on family engagement in schools.

By implementing these practices in our schools and classrooms, we can better engage families in the mission of the school and improve partnerships to impact student outcomes. Research suggests that it is more difficult for Black parents than White parents to comply with the current institutional standards of schools (Lareau & MacNamara, 1999). In particular, when educators demand that parents display positive, supportive approaches to education. The historical legacy of racial discrimination makes it more difficult for Black parents than White parents to comply with such demands. In some cases, social class influences how Black and White parents negotiate their relationships with schools. The research shows that for Blacks, race plays an important role, independent of social class, in framing the terms of their relationship.

Recent research indicates that family resistance to school involvement can be reversed with culturally responsive actions. The responsive actions must include the willingness of teachers to actively develop an understanding of children's cultural backgrounds. In addition, teachers must make sustained and creative efforts to collaborate with families. One such way to accomplish this is by sharing experiences and learning from one another. Edwards et al. (1999) show how "family stories" can inform classroom teachers about children's backgrounds.

Listening to families and engaging in a shared learning space can help teachers discard stereotyped notions that may impact their cultural awareness.

Culturally competent educators cultivate the necessary relationships with diverse families to form partnerships in our schools. The engagement of African-American families in our schools is predicated on this notion. In a system where families and teachers do not share the same cultural norms, an educator must have a responsive approach to building relationships to sustain the partnership. This extends beyond just one classroom; it is a whole school concept. It is not enough to address the need teacher by teacher, the need for increased cultural responsiveness must be addressed at the whole school level. Only in this way will we have a systematic response to the needs of the African-American community.

Change Leadership

The research on change leadership practices supports an understanding of the complexities presented when transforming school culture. In our system of education, school leaders guide the climate and culture of the schools they serve. Of all positions within a school, the principal is best positioned to promote and support school level reform (Leithwood et al., 2004). This includes the perceptions and behaviors of those who are within the school community. The ability to create change with a culturally responsive lens to address the needs of the school community is essential to guiding the change process. The ability to recognize the need for change is the mark of a good leader. However, change leadership is a delicate process that must be intentionally planned and carried out actively to meet the needs of the community and garner the desired results for the organization. Principals serve as transformational leaders who have the ability to promote successful environments with strong relationships of trust, vision, goals, and a sense of community (Giles et al., 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). The

process of change must be driven by a vision and a clear plan of action to enact the vision. Peter Senge (1990) states that a vision without systems thinking paints lovely pictures of the future with no deep understanding of the forces that must be mastered to move the organization forward. School leaders must employ the resources of improvement sciences and design thinking to engage the school and the larger community in the change process. As we examine the role of systemic change necessary to impact the engagement of African-American families in our schools, leadership actions guide this change process. Next, I examine the design and the practices related to this PAR project.

Improvement Sciences and Cycles of Inquiry

Improvement science is a problem-solving approach that is centered on the inquiry process. Educational leaders engaged in the change process must start with inquiry. The process must examine the needs of the school and parent community, from within, to impact the engagement of African-American families. Anthony Bryk et al. (2015) identifies the guiding questions of improvement science as follows:

1. What is the specific problem I am now trying to solve?
2. What change might I introduce and why?
3. And how will I know whether the change is an improvement?

Cycles of inquiry must be designed and carried out using the guiding questions of improvement science. The cycle of inquiry must incorporate observations and interactions within the school community, identifying potential solutions, and continuous reflection on the policies and practices that impact the school community. Figure 6 shows the use of inquiry to drive improvement (Bryk et al., 2015). The figure shows the action cycle, which is comprised of

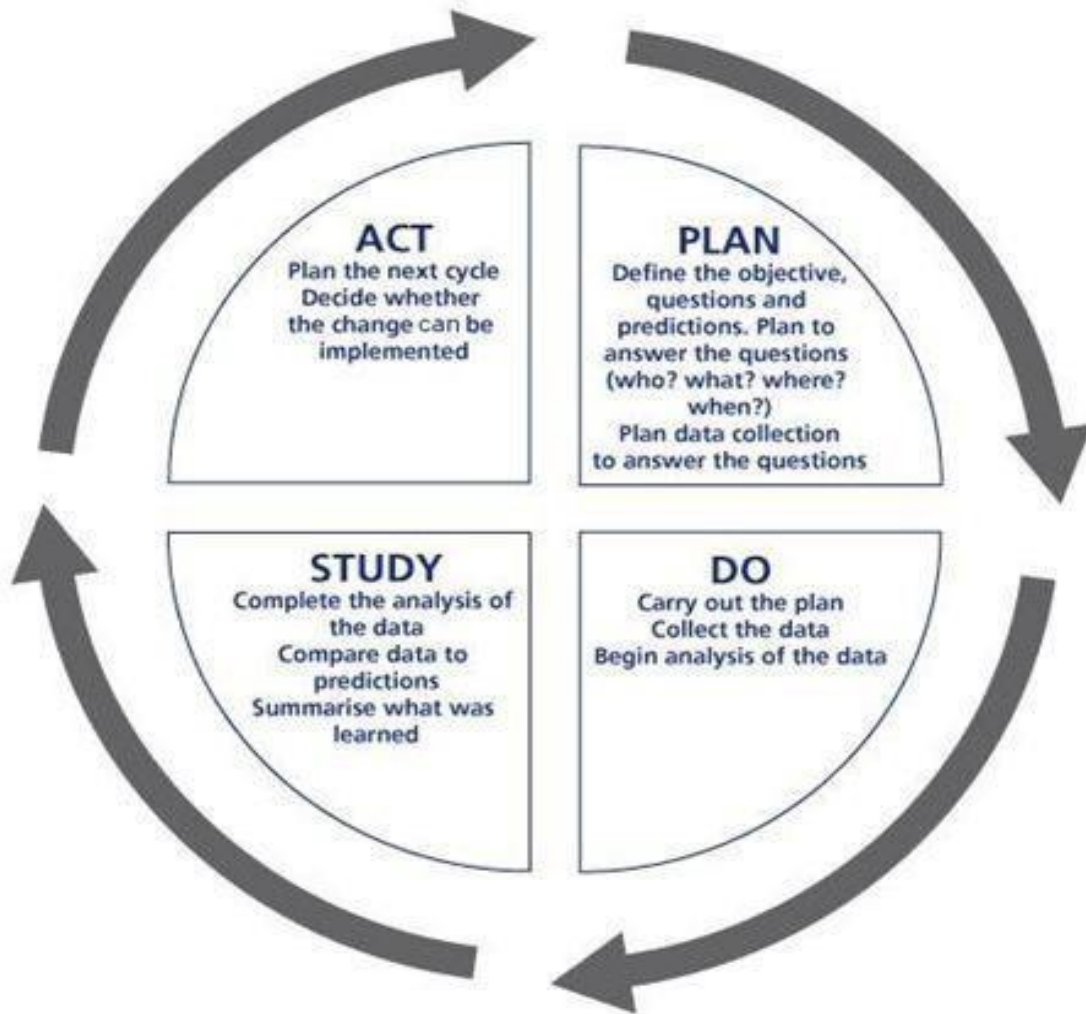


Figure 6. Inquiry cycle to drive improvement.

planning, collecting data, analyzing data, identifying potential solutions, and implementing actions designed to address the specific problem. The cycle is continuous and interactive.

As the original school principal in the study, my role in the inquiry process was to facilitate the cycles of action and reflection, encourage the change process, and support the development of relational trust within the group. Relational trust is only possible when participants show their commitment to engage in the work required for reform and when they see others doing the same. School principals must take the lead and extend themselves by reaching out to others and leading by example (Bryk, 2010). How school leaders approach the transformation process must match the needs of the staff and families that will become impacted by the change. Therefore, Principals must leverage strategies to drive reform with a community-based approach. Community Learning Exchanges are one way to leverage community voices to lead change in schools.

Culturally Responsive Leadership

The role of every school leader is to guide the educational program and to engage the school community to support student needs. Culture plays an important role in matching the needs of the students with the policies and practices within the school. Khalifa et al. (2016) state that the culturally responsive leader must develop and support the school staff to promote an environment that is welcoming, inclusive, and accepting of minoritized students. The authors contend that culturally responsive leadership is needed in all school settings even those not dominated by minoritized students, and a further realization that not all students of color are minoritized. The school leader must not design policy based on few voices, instead it is the responsibility of the school leader to seek an inclusive approach where many voices, opinions,

and ideas are considered and where multiple perspectives are presented when policy decisions are made. This is the culturally responsive approach to change leadership.

A culturally responsive approach to change must include a willingness to set aside the status quo and lead with shared visions and goals that meet the needs of the community while serving the best interests of the students. A learning organization must have a shared vision at the center of its work. An identified shared goal, which people truly want to achieve, can serve to disrupt the status quo, therefore addressing the need for change (Senge, 1990). A culturally responsive systems change requires authentic reflection to identify the interest and goals of the educational system and the community at large. The quote below from Senge (1990) explains the importance of reflection in the change process for community systems:

Reflective openness leads to looking inward, allowing our conversations to make us more aware of the biases and limitations in our own thinking, and how our thinking and actions contribute to problems. Reflective openness is the cornerstone of the discipline of mental models. None of us has a company in our heads, or a family, or a country. But our life experience shapes a rich mix of assumptions, feelings, and at best some well-formed hypotheses about these systems. Nurturing reflective openness leads to a willingness to continually test these views. (p. 261)

The importance of a community approach for culturally responsive leadership changes is apparent for a project such as this one which aims to increase African-American parent engagement. One proven strategy is the establishment of Community Learning Exchanges. Next, I outline the details of this strategy.

A culturally responsive approach to change requires the consideration of the cultures represented within the school. A Community Learning Exchange (CLE) provides an opportunity

for community members to share, reflect, and problem solve together. A CLE brings together different community members, for example community and school leaders, teachers and staff, and students and parents. In a collaborative forum, these community members discuss and share their common challenges, collective gifts, and their ideas to drive changes within themselves, their organizations (including schools), and their communities (Guajardo et al., 2016).

Opportunities to engage the community for collective sharing is an effective approach to change leadership. As an educational leader seeking culturally responsive change, the engagement of the community will be critical to disrupting the status quo and engaging all communities—school, family, and students to drive change.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the three areas of literature that anchored the study to increase the capacity of teachers to cultivate productive partnerships with African-American parents. The three areas examined were family engagement in schools, culturally responsive communities, and change leadership within schools. The literature provided foundational information to inform the PAR study. Through examination of the current research related to parent engagement, culturally responsive practices, and change leadership systems I have multiple viewpoints and references from leading researchers to inform the PAR project. By reviewing the theories captured in these areas, I better understood the levers of parent involvement within schools, culturally responsive strategies for parent engagement, and the systemic considerations for improving school policies to increase partnerships with African-American parents.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

In the participatory action research (PAR) project, I sought to explore and address the barriers that exist between schools and the African-American families they serve. The focus of practice for the project was to increase the capacity of school staff to cultivate productive relationships with African-American families. Positive relationships among teachers and parents create an environment in which the home-school partnership is strengthened. These partnerships serve to increase student support, thereby providing a more positive, productive, and successful experience for the student. The purpose of the project was to influence how educators engage with African-American families.

The context of the study was Lovehall Elementary School (LES), located in a small city outside of Richmond, California. LES serves a diverse community of approximately 500 students, with nearly 90% of the student population representing a balanced cross-section of African-American, Asian, Filipino, and Latino students. The school has an ethnically diverse student body, but a predominantly White female staff, as demonstrated in Table 2. The academic and social events throughout the school year are well attended by families from all demographics, except for the African-American parent group. The school philosophy, adopted circa 2015, reads “We believe in excellence in everything we do. We believe everyone can learn to be excellent, given time and opportunity.” In addition to a school philosophy rooted in excellence, we have an experienced and results-driven teaching staff committed to understanding and strengthening African-American parent partnerships to positively impact student achievement. The commitment of the staff is a strength that we built upon as we sought to explore and learn more about how to positively impact the parent participation of African-American families in our school.

Table 2

Lovehall Elementary Demographics Data for Students and Teachers in 2020-21

	White	Asian	Filipino	African- American	Latino	Total Number
Students	56 (12%)	100 (21%)	113 (23.50%)	100 (21%)	108 (22.50%)	480
Teachers	15 (68%)	4 (18%)	1 (4.50%)	1 (4.50%)	1 (4.50%)	22

If we enact a participatory action research project that involves teachers learning the importance of cultural norms and experiences, then teachers will engage in a stronger partnership with African-American families. This theory of action guided the research of our team. The qualitative research design was used to understand how a school with a staff of predominantly White female teachers can increase its capacity to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents. A description of the methodology is outlined in this chapter.

Qualitative Research Process

Qualitative research is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem in a natural setting. The qualitative process that was used for this study is participatory action research. The action research process consists of systematic procedures completed by individuals in an educational setting to gather information about and subsequently improve the operation, practices, and results within the educational setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Throughout the study, we engaged in action cycles that sought to build relational trust, develop a deeper understanding of the needs of the community, understand needed adaptations, and plan for the implementation of culturally relevant strategies aimed at increasing engagement among African-American families within our school.

The qualitative research for the participatory action research study was designed to analyze evidence collected during Community Learning Exchanges, as we explored root causes and potential strategies related to our focus of practice. The PAR process emphasized research that contributes to social change within a community. The qualitative approach was used to improve the quality of our organization, community, and family partnerships. The overarching goal was to improve and empower parent-teacher partnerships and school structures.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research is a dynamic, flexible process guided through inquiry and problem-solving. The methodology involves identifying a problem, or focus, to study, identifying resources and people to help address the problem, and analyzing the information, or data, you will need to best inform the study. A PAR study requires consistent data collection, actions, analysis, and reflection to examine the problem and seek answers to the research question.

During the PAR process, research cycles are conducted while the lead researcher is also participating in the actions being studied. This process involves learning from the actions, interactions, and cycles of change throughout the project. All iterations of PAR research are grounded in cycles of inquiry using a community approach to gather information and analyze the qualitative data collected. The participation of other practitioners engaged in activities related to the PAR is crucial to both the understanding of the community issue and the study of how to support improvement. The PAR research design is grounded in improvement science where the research participants are actively involved in the actions and tasks related to the focus of practice.

Improvement Science

Improvement science is a promising strategy for true school reform. This scientific reform strategy centers on specific actions and tasks performed by people, the processes, and tools they use, and the impact of organizational policies, norms, and structures. Improvement science focuses on a learning journey. Its central focus is to learn from true experiences and use reflective practices to plan and implement new strategies for improved outcomes. Throughout the history of American schools, reform efforts aimed at improving student outcomes have

lacked the results needed for systemic change within schools. A recent example of this is the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Rowley and Wright (2011) state that:

Government policies aimed at reducing the differences in test scores between Whites and Blacks have thus far accomplished very little. The United States has the most decentralized education system in the world, which allows for discrimination to take place based on race and socioeconomic status. In addition, there is a tendency for Blacks to have higher rates of poverty than Whites although the actual number of Whites in poverty is large. While the intended purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is to make public education equal for all students within each school, this study shows that Black and low-income students are still being left behind. (p. 103)

Many reform efforts have lacked clear strategy and professional capacity to execute and implored a quick turnaround for results. The lack of a clear structure or plan has resulted in many failed attempts at school reform (Bryk et al., 2015). By applying improvement science to educational research, the team of teachers and I engaged in inquiry-focused improvement cycles aimed to better understand and identify strategies that support improved functionality in schools.

Activist PAR

Participatory activist research refers to the use of the PAR process to support social change for an improved solution to an issue impacting social awareness and equity. A participatory activist research project and study takes an active stance in the research process. It requires that the researcher identify the deepest ethical-political convictions and let them drive the formulation of the research objectives (Hale, 2001). In an activist PAR, participants seek to better understand social issues and their root causes which may impact the overarching research question.

For the purposes of this research project, an activist approach helped us better to understand the root causes of inequality, oppression, and related conditions of human suffering. Activist research is conducted, throughout each cycle, with the direct participation of an organized group of people who themselves are subject to these conditions. The inquiry process is used, together with the people in question, to formulate strategies for transforming these conditions and to achieve the power necessary to make these strategies effective.

Community Learning Exchange

A Community Learning Exchange (CLE) is both a methodology and protocol for understanding the PAR and using data to answer the research questions with community input. It provided an opportunity for people to come together and share ideas about a topic or a collaborative goal. A CLE focuses on a topic that is relevant to the particular community. As the CLE organizes around a certain topic, participants share individual and community stories and experiences around topics of interest. This dialogue is shared and discussed by the participants. This process fosters a creative agency that helps people find their power and voice, and the process responds to the need for local communities to own their destiny, though not in an individualistic manner (Guajardo et al., 2016). The CLE process highlights that the people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to local concerns. It is based on the premise that we learn best from real, lived experiences, and authentic and honest relationships.

The work of the CLE begins with five guiding values, called axioms (Guajardo et al., 2016). The first axiom is that *Learning and Leadership are Dynamic Social Processes*. A Community Learning Exchange is organized with the belief that learning is a leadership act, and that leadership is at its best when it is in action. This frames the pedagogical process and values the active contributions of all participants. The second axiom is that *Conversations are Critical*

and Central Pedagogical Processes. Safe spaces for active participation are at the core of social learning theory. The need for healthy relationships is critical to the learning process, and storytelling and conversation are the mediating tools. This safe space, or *Gracious Space*, is critically important for honest conversation and storytelling. The third axiom is that *The People Closest to the Issues are Best Situated to Discover Answers to Local Concerns*. Inviting the school community members fosters a creative agency that helps people find their power and voice. The community-oriented process responds to the need for local communities to own their destiny, not as individuals, but rather as a collective group. The fourth axiom is that *Crossing Boundaries Enriches the Development and Educational Process*. This axiom refers to people's ability and willingness to experience a world that is outside their daily comfort zone. Traditional boundary-crossing generally refers to geographic borders, economic borders, age, culture and racial borders, gender, faith, and differing abilities. It is necessary to break the isolation of people, teams, and organizations to consider future possibilities for positive change. The final axiom is that *Hope and Change are Built on Assets and Dreams of Locals and their Communities*. As a community, participants tell their own stories; they begin to map their gifts, ideas, hopes, and wishes. This reflective process of mapping includes ideological, relational, and geographical skills. The identification, naming, and construction of these assets allow CLE participants to view their work and their community in different ways. In this way, they can reflect and transform issues into opportunities, invitations, and points of action.

The CLE participants provided insight into the issues impacting African-American families' and teachers' relationships and identified opportunities for change. The CLE was a major component of the PAR study with participants sharing personal narratives, building relational trust, and exploring strategies to increase African-American family engagement.

Role of Praxis

The process of reflection that precedes action, or praxis, is a critical component of the learning cycle. The PAR project required frequent reflection to understand and inform the experiences and actions of the participants. According to Kolb (1984), learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Using the Kolb cycle of experiential learning process, we worked to fully understand the experiences of self and others by reflecting on our current perspectives and knowledge.

The six characteristics of experiential learning, according to Kolb (1984) are:

1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcome.
2. Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience.
3. The process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world.
5. Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge.

The role of praxis, as outlined in the experiential learning process, is to emphasize the process of adaptation and learning, to recognize that knowledge is a transformation process, and understand that learning transforms experience in both its objective and subjective forms. The element of reflection was important to the PAR project as it guided the process of inquiry throughout the research cycles of the project. Participants in the study were asked to reflect and share learning experiences throughout the study. The input provided guided the course of the research study.

Research Questions

The PAR focused on answering key research questions regarding the role of cultural relevance in establishing working partnerships among African-American families and teachers. The overarching research question we sought to answer is: How does a school with predominantly White female teachers increase its capacity to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents to equitably support African-American students? This focal question targets the issue of cultural relevance from an equity lens to increase partnerships among African-American families and educators within the school setting. The overarching research question was How does a school with predominantly White female teachers develop a capacity to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents? The sub-questions that guided the research process were:

1. To what extent do parents and teachers cultivate and increase relational trust?
 - a. How do teachers and parents engage with each other?
 - b. In what ways did parents and teachers engage with each other?
2. To what extent do school policies and teacher practices change communication and authentic engagement with African-American parents?
 - a. How does the school staff take on more direct and frequent communication with African-American parents?
 - b. To what extent does the shift in teacher practices impact authentic engagement with African-American parents?
3. How does an African-American leader in a racially diverse school engage all constituents to equitably support students?

The research design utilized cycles of inquiry in which I used CLE's as an opportunity to collect and analyze artifacts related to these research questions. By engaging with teachers and parents in the school environment, we examined the issues of relational trust, policies and practices, and school leadership strategies that support students equitably.

Action Research Cycles

The action research cycle is an iterative process designed to provide opportunities to observe, learn, and refine practices. We used the book *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better* (Bryk et al., 2015) guiding questions for improvement cycles to guide the data collection and action design process:

1. What is the specific problem I am trying to solve?
2. What change might I introduce and why?
3. How will I know whether the change is an improvement?

During the PAR project, participants sought to better understand the root causes for the lagging participation among African-American families and the current conditions under which we operate. Together, we collected and analyzed data and strategies to seek answers to the research questions. The effectiveness of the strategies was studied throughout implementation and refined, throughout each cycle of inquiry, to support the creation and implementation of strong practices that provided insight to answering the research questions outlined in the PAR project.

The PAR project included three research cycles. During the Pre-Cycle, we cultivated relational trust as a group and examined school-wide strengths and challenges in the area of communication with African-American families. In Cycle One we designed learning exchanges to provide insight into the previous experiences of teachers and parents, as well as barriers to

successful partnerships. In Cycle Two we used effective engagement strategies to design and deliver a community learning exchange for African-American families and teachers. A description of the action research cycles is outlined in Table 3.

Participants, Data Collection, and Analysis

The participants and processes related to the PAR are the focus of this section. The PAR project and study was grounded in interactions between African-American parents and school staff to develop student academic support for their students. The methods of data collection and analysis included the protocols and tools that I used to conduct the study.

Participants

The participants engaged in the PAR research include the co-practitioner researcher Team included three classroom teachers of grades kindergarten through second grade, a school psychologist, and the African-American families participating in the Community Learning Exchanges. Starting in PAR Cycle One, the new principal at the school joined the CPR team. Essential to the PAR project were the co-practitioner researchers (CPR). The CPR Team worked collaboratively with school leadership throughout the research process. The other participants included the staff and families participating in the Community Learning Exchanges, as well as staff participating in grade-level planning meetings as a part of the PAR research process.

Co-Practitioner Researcher Group

The co-practitioner researcher Team, the Villagers, participated in the project and study. The Villagers included three teachers and a school psychologist. We worked through continuous cycles of inquiry and served to actively engage, collect, and analyze data, and provide continuous feedback throughout the project. As co-practitioner researchers, the team sought to design and implement culturally responsive strategies with the families of students in

Table 3

PAR Research Cycles

Research Cycle	Time Period	Activities
PAR Pre-Cycle and Context	January – March 2022	• CPR Team engaged in PAR activities to gather information and build trust • CPR Team discussed the purpose and process of Community Learning exchanges
PAR Cycle One	September – November 2022	• CPR Team engaged in CLE Activities • CPR Team designed CLE activities to gather information and input from parents • CPR Team analyzed data collection artifacts from CLEs to inform the next steps.
PAR Cycle Two	March 2023 – May 2023	• CPR Team designed and lead African-American family CLEs • CPR Team designed and lead Lovehall teacher CLE • Design joint CLE for Teachers and African-American families

kindergarten through second grade. We focused on the families of young learners to leverage the potential of engaging families early and creating lasting partnerships. The Villagers were selected based upon their grade level, varying years of experience, and ethnic diversity. The focus of the project was families of young learners. Therefore, only teachers of the primary grades, K, 1, and 2, were considered. The school psychologist and the new principal were part of the CPR team. The Villagers agreed to join this work to improve current conditions in the area of equity for African-American students and their families in our school. All co-practitioners completed IRB consent forms before engaging in the project (see Appendix D).

The Villagers worked closely throughout the project to offer guidance, co-facilitate Community Learning Exchanges, generate interest, and provide leverage for the project. At our school, each grade-level teaching team meets twice monthly to plan instruction and review student data. The Villagers collected and shared meeting notes from the grade level teams during these bi-weekly grade-level meetings, as needed, throughout each cycle of inquiry.

Other Participants

In addition to the Villagers, there were additional participants in the PAR project. To collect a wide sampling of qualitative data, we invited all teachers and students in grades kindergarten, first, and second to participate in a Community Learning Exchange. The parent level of participation included attending CLEs. Most were not directly referenced; however, there was a sampling of parents included as active participants throughout the PAR. The target parent participants were the parents and caregivers of African-American students in those grade levels. Our first CLE consisted of a small group of parents from the newly formed African-American Parent Advisory Council. We expanded to two additional CLEs with a wider range of the parent population. Parents in attendance who agreed to have their information used signed a

consent form (see Appendix D). There are one hundred African-American families at our school, which makes up 21% of our student population. A sampling of African-American parents in grades kindergarten through grade two were included in this study. They were representative of approximately 45 families at our school, which makes up 17% of the students in grades kindergarten, first, and second. Additional classroom teachers were invited to participate in the CLEs and school planning meetings. The teachers participated in CLEs, held grade level planning meetings and conversations, and I collected evidence from them, but the teachers were not identified throughout the study.

Data Collection

I used a variety of data collection instruments throughout the PAR project. The instruments served to consistently analyze data and inform the research. Data collection was guided by the research questions as shown in Table 4. These were sources for data collection: CLE artifacts, documents, and reflective memos. The defined instruments are protocols.

CLE Artifacts

Community Learning Exchanges and artifacts were essential to our data collection. The CLE was designed to explore and understand how parents and staff frame the issues that may be barriers to African-American parental involvement. We sought to learn from the perspectives of others and propose collective strategies to improve the relationships and engagement of our African-American families. This reflective process served to inform the cycles of inquiry. The data collected through shared community experiences was designed to inform the cycles of inquiry at the onset, and as we moved through the PAR project. We collected culturally relevant activities implemented in CLEs, experiences shared through protocols, and conversations conducted during the CLE for data analysis.

Table 4

Research Sub-Questions and Data Sources

Research Sub Questions	Data Source (Metrics)	Triangulated With
To what extent do parents and teachers cultivate and increase relational trust?	• CLE artifacts • Document Collection	• Reflective Memos • Member checks
To what extent do school policies and teacher practices change communication and authentic engagement with African-American parents?	• CLE artifacts • Document Collection	• Reflective Memos • Member Checks
How does an African-American leader in a racially diverse school engage all constituents in equitably supporting students?	• Reflective memos • Document Collection	• Member checks • CLE artifacts

Documents

As a component of data collection, a variety of meeting notes and reflections were collected to inform and analyze potential issues related to African-American family engagement. Collecting information from teachers in their meeting environment and capturing their ideas and strategies was useful data to examine the effectiveness of current and future practices in the area of parent engagement. I collected and coded meeting data from grade-level team meetings and CPR team meetings.

Reflective Memos

Reflective memos were used to inform the process and progress of the PAR project. I engaged in the reflective memo process to reflect on my leadership, and to record observations and events from the co-practitioner researchers, Community Learning Exchanges, and various participant activities throughout the research project. Reflective memos were written frequently to record the experience, reflections from the experience, identify connections that could be derived from the experience, and suggest potential actions.

Reflective memos also captured key conversations with teachers, parents, and students about engagement experiences. Reflective memos also concentrated on interactions with teachers in the instructional setting; for example, in conversations with grade-level teams regarding student engagement, family interaction, and student progress. reflective memos chronicled the journey of the lead researcher throughout the project. Reflective memos included continuous journaling of the actions, behaviors, and experiences with the PAR participants.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data using the coding method for qualitative research. A code is a researcher-generated construct that translates and attributes interpreted meaning to data collected

for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, assertion development, theory building, and other analytical processes (Saldaña, 2016). Through the process of coding data, categories were created that led to themes in the research process. The themes became assertions and findings which contributed to a new theory to examine. The cyclical nature of this study allowed the participant researchers to both participate and learn throughout the study. Buss (2018) asserts that action research is a powerful technique that fosters the development of skills allowing students to conduct an effective inquiry as practice in their work settings. This technique was used to collect and analyze data throughout the study. The data instruments were carefully examined to identify and organize patterns, or categories, within the data. The coding patterns were analyzed for larger meaning and used to develop larger concepts of exactly what the data demonstrates. The analysis led to general themes within the research. By identifying patterns, similarities, differences, practices, and strategies, the general themes led to assertions and claims about the data and the research questions. Figure 7 demonstrates coding using Saldaña's (2016) terminology.

Analysis of CLE Artifacts

As the lead researcher, I analyzed the data and the Villagers discussed data patterns from the artifacts and experiences shared during the CLE. The data analysis served to engage the Villagers in assessing community needs, potential barriers, and potential areas where growth and opportunity exist. The analysis took place both during and after the CLE as the CLE provided in-person experiences and created opportunities to actively research areas of community engagement. The Villagers used the process of member checking to validate the collection and analysis of data. I then transcribed and coded the artifacts and data to identify the patterns and themes present in the findings.

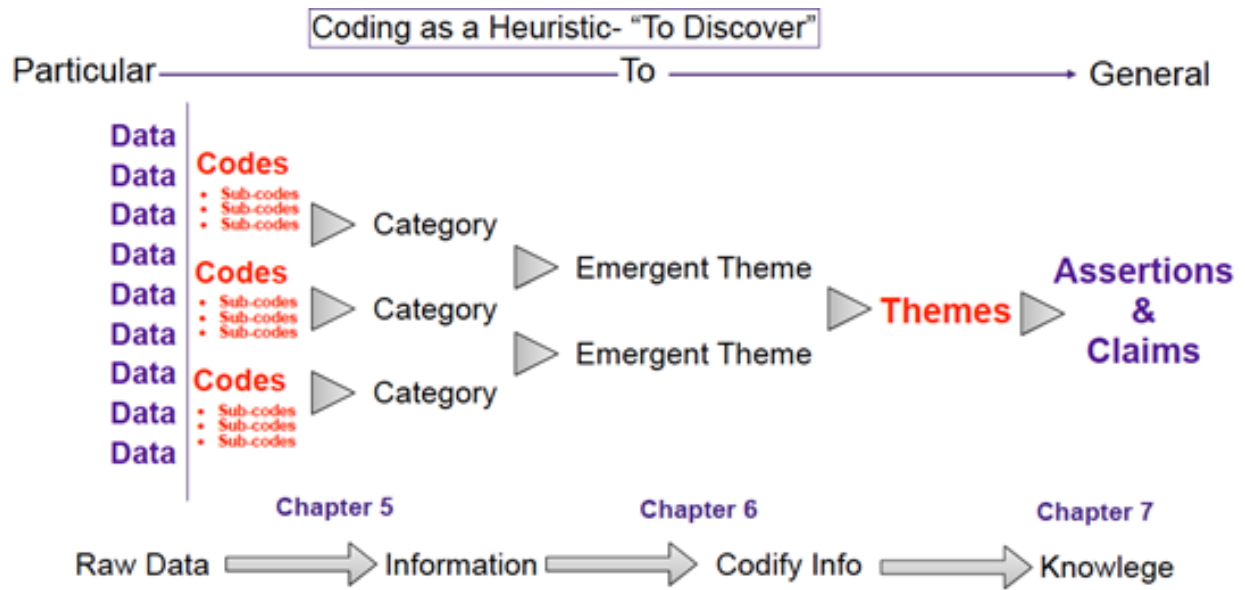


Figure 7. Saldaña coding terminology and process.

Analysis of Documents

The collection of agendas and meeting notes served to inform the lead researcher of the patterns that exist as related to the research topic. The lead researcher transcribed and coded notes from the grade-level team meetings, CPR meetings, meetings with teachers, as well as meetings with families and care/givers. Participants engaged in dialogue, problem-solving, and sharing information. The data analysis from these meetings and conversations related to parent engagement provided specific data on how participants frame the issues and related solutions. I transcribed notes and coded to assess patterns within the data.

Analysis of Reflective Memos

Reflective memos were analyzed during the study. The reflective memo provided insight into the actions, behaviors, and experiences of me, the lead researcher, and the PAR participants. The reflective memos were coded to assess the patterns and emerging themes throughout the PAR project and to address the research question on leadership: How does an African-American leader in a racially diverse school engage all constituents in equitably supporting students? Data was analyzed using coding processes. Throughout the process, we conducted member checks to ensure consistent feedback from the Villagers to help improve the accuracy, validity, and credibility of the study.

Study Limitations

Throughout the cycles of action, research students are afforded opportunities to develop and use practice-appropriate inquiry as they engage in transformative actions in the workplace setting (Buss, 2018). Although the qualitative research process has been proven effective for use in research design, possible limitations such as researcher bias and difficulty in generalizing data exist within the process. While there are clear advantages to action research, there are

disadvantages that must be addressed throughout the research process. For example, the observation process is very time-consuming and requires the collection of data in real time. Also, difficulties may arise while documenting observations within a large group setting. Another limitation is that the sample size is small and includes only lower grade teachers and parents which may not necessarily transfer to the whole school. Also, I was both the lead researcher in the project and the school principal, so balancing the role of unbiased researcher and yet being an African-American school leader may be a potential limitation. The potential limitations were addressed throughout the PAR by examining both internal and external validity.

Internal Validity and Trustworthiness of Evidence

The internal validity of the PAR project was addressed by the co-practitioner researcher Group. The research questions guided the qualitative process where a collection of documents and reflective memos from a variety of data sources supported the analysis of evidence throughout the inquiry cycles. The group engaged in research strategies that included, but were not limited to, prolonged engagement, persistent observations, and triangulation. By using triangulation of evidence, we utilized multiple sources that converged and served to substantiate the evidence or analysis. Additional measures to enhance internal validity included the use of member checks, long-term observations, collaborative conversations with colleagues on the findings as they emerged, involving participants in all phases of the research from conceptualizing to data analysis, and clarifying the Villagers world views and biases.

The trustworthiness of the research evidence is important to evaluate its worth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During this study, we established the importance of the specific research elements throughout each PAR cycle. The credibility of the findings was analyzed and confirmed by multiple sources, specifically the evidence and coding documents. The transferability of

findings indicates that the findings may apply to other contexts. The dependability of findings demonstrated their consistency and the potential for repetition. And finally, we established confirmability, or the degree of neutrality where the findings of the study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest.

External Validity

The external validity was not fully addressed at the onset of the study. Due to the nature of action research, there could not be advanced generalizations related to the context of the study. However, the method of collecting and analyzing data was consistent and transferable to other contexts.

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

The confidentiality of all participants was established and safeguarded throughout the PAR project. All memos, notes, and artifacts collected were void of personal identification markers for this study. All data and materials related to this study were managed and stored by the lead researcher only. Participants and the Villagers were required to keep all matters related to the study confidential. Throughout the study, the Villagers conducted member checks and peer reviews of data to limit potential bias. Participants in the study completed a consent form (see Appendix D) that included confidentiality and ethical requirements. I completed the CITI certification process (see Appendix B) to ensure ethical research practices would be adhered to. A letter of support was obtained from my school district and they approved this research study (see Appendix A).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described the methodologies that informed this study and outlined the three cycles of inquiry from the improvement science model of experiential learning. I

explained how we will use the community learning exchange processes, participatory action research (PAR), and qualitative methodology to answer the question of how to develop a capacity to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents. I have presented the data collection tools, methods, and processes for the analysis of the qualitative data that ensured that data was triangulated for validity. In Chapter 4, I describe the actions we took in the Pre-Cycle and explain the results of our initial coding process in which we developed a coding system of categories that support the entire PAR study. In Chapter 5, I describe the actions we took in Cycle One and explain the results of our data collection and coding. In Chapter 6, I describe the actions we took in Cycle Two and explain the results of our data collection and coding. In Chapter 7, I provide an overview of the research study, with examples and an explanation of the findings.

CHAPTER 4: PAR PRE-CYCLE

In the Pre-Cycle of the participatory action research (PAR) study, I worked with a group of teachers, and they engaged with me as co-practitioner researchers to understand their previous experiences working with African-American families. More specifically, we adopted a focus of practice (FoP) that was designed to increase the capacity of teachers to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents to equitably support African-American students. As a result, the PAR is based on the following theory of action (ToA): If we enact a participatory action research project that involves educating teachers about the importance of cultural norms and experiences, then teachers will engage in a stronger partnership with African-American families. I refer to the group of co-practitioner researchers as the Villagers in the chapter.

In this chapter, I present the Pre-Cycle of the PAR project, which includes the PAR context, the process of developing the team of Villagers, data collection methods and analysis, and a reflection of the Pre-Cycle that guided the planning of Cycle One of the study and project.

PAR Context

The PAR context describes the characteristics of the place and the people that will be involved in the research project. All names and places used in this dissertation are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity throughout the research process. Understanding the PAR context provides a greater understanding of the study and will inform the reflective process throughout the research cycles.

Context – Place

The study was conducted at an elementary school. We called this school Lovehall Elementary, a pseudonym created for the PAR project. Lovehall is located in a middle-class,

diverse community in the San Francisco Bay Area. The school serves 480 students attending kindergarten through fifth grade. The student body is ethnically diverse, composed of 20% each Asian-American and African-American students, 23% each Filipino and Latino students, and 12% White students. The school staff is less ethnically diverse with approximately 70% of the staff identifying as White. Fifty percent (50%) of the school's teaching staff reside within the school's enrollment boundaries. Table 5 shows the ethnic demographics of Lovehall Elementary and the school district as a whole.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2019) data show the diversity of the surrounding community which includes 45% Asian, 15% African-American, 19% White, and 16% Latino. This community is a mid-sized city with a population of approximately 25,000. However, the entire city spans approximately six square miles and operates more like a large town. Forty-three percent (43%) of residents aged twenty-five or older have a bachelor's degree or higher and the median household income is \$117,000. Residents are very proud of the community and there is a community focus on the student academic performance among the schools in the area.

Lovehall is a school boasting great pride among staff, students, and parents. The school has a very active Parent Teacher Association, composed of ethnically diverse parents who are dedicated to supporting school events and school projects. The greater community emphasizes the positive results of our standardized state tests in which the majority of our Asian, Filipino, and White students demonstrate proficiency at high levels; however, many of our African-American and Latino students are consistently underperforming.

Context - People

The co-practitioner researchers, the Villagers, are credentialed educators who have demonstrated an interest in the process of examining the engagement between African-American

Table 5

District and School Ethnicity Demographics for 2019

Ethnicity	District Student %	District Staff %	School Student	School Staff
African-American	14.10%	11.40%	21%	0
Asian American	10.10%	9.20%	21%	20%
White	10.10%	55.30%	12%	64%
Filipino	4.70%	6.70%	23.50%	8%
Latino	55.30%	13.40%	22.50%	8%
Two or More Races	3.60%	1.20%		
Pacific Islander	0.60%	0.10%		
American Indian	0.30%	0.80%		

families and the school staff. The Villager's focus was on the engagement of families at the start of their child's formal schooling. As the lead researcher, I worked closely with the Villagers to lead and support the development and implementation of inquiry cycles. We sought answers to the research question of how school staff can build productive relationships with African-American families to equitably support African-American students. Table 6 describes the Villagers which two kindergarten teachers, a first-grade teacher, and the school psychologist. Next, I describe each Villager.

Natasha

Natasha is a novice kindergarten teacher. During her first year of teaching, she volunteered to represent our school as the Race and Equity Lead Teacher. When asked about her interest in the lead position, she explained that her experiences as a child and her recent experiences as a mother and teacher had motivated her to support more diverse and equitable school structures. She is participating in a local university's social justice leadership program designed to explore educators' positionality to increase the outcomes of underserved students. Natasha grew up in a small Midwestern town of 8,000 residents where her stepfather was the only African-American man. Her experiences, as a White person with personal experiences of racial prejudice, bring a unique perspective to our research group.

Serena

Serena is a veteran educator with over twenty years of teaching experience, all with early learners. She is very knowledgeable and has served the Lovehall community for nearly ten years. Serena is Asian American and shares her experiences both as a minority student and elementary school teacher. She is a school leader and a resident of the community that we serve. She also serves on the school's instructional leadership team and is an active community participant

Table 6

Co-Practitioner Researchers, The Villagers

Member	Ethnicity	Grade Level	Description
Natasha	White	K	Second-year teacher, race and equity lens
Serena	Asian	1	20+ year teacher, prideful, results-driven
Christine	White	1	First-year teacher, liberal approach, optimist
Michelle	White	Psychologist	10+ year psychologist, equity-driven, change agent
Davena	Black	Principal	First year as principal at Lovehall was in PAR Cycle 1

supporting both the community library and the community education foundation. Serena teaches first grade.

Christine

Christine is a first year, first-grade teacher. She is entering education as a second career and was drawn to the profession by her desire to teach young children. She states that she wants to positively impact children and families while serving the community. Christine is an optimist; she always looks for the positive in her approach to situational problem-solving. She is also self-reflective in the learning process. Instructionally, she is a warm demander, pushing students to perform at their best, and is very aware of the social-emotional needs of her students. She is consistently focused on the whole child's development. She has expressed an interest in learning more about supporting our diverse families and students. Christine is aware of cultural differences and, as a White female with an ethnically diverse classroom, she is eager to learn more about the community and the families we serve.

Michelle

Michelle is a school psychologist. She has been serving schools for approximately ten years. Michelle has served the Lovehall community for approximately seven years and has experienced situations where cultural differences impact the relationships within the community. Michelle works closely with staff, students, and families. I have worked with Michelle over the past four years and we have wondered over many conversations about the root causes of the trust issues surrounding African-American students and families within our school. Michelle brings a wider perspective to the group, given her experiences working with the school staff, students, and families in the areas of social-emotional support over many years and multiple leadership structures.

Davena

Davena succeeded me as the principal of Lovehall Elementary during Cycle One of the research project. As a first-year principal with a background in teaching and coaching, Davena was excited to be appointed as the educational leader of Lovehall. Davena brought fresh perspective to the CPR group due to her Southern upbringing in Louisiana and Mississippi. She relocated to California six years prior and was eager to get to work engaging the African-American families in her new school community.

The Villagers were selected because they work directly with early learners and their families. The research effort is concentrated on early learners and the early school experiences of families. These teachers all volunteered to become a part of the co-practitioner researcher Team. The teachers are all familiar with one another and have an interest in positively impacting the home-school partnership with the families of their African-American students. The Villagers engaged together in the PAR Pre-Cycle process.

PAR Pre-Cycle Process

I designed the Pre-Cycle to establish protocols, explore the research questions related to our focus of practice, and build relational trust among our co-practitioner researchers for the participatory action research (PAR) project and study. I began by designing activities in which the Villagers could share and gain an understanding of our personal and professional experiences. We discussed the impact of those experiences on our view of family partnerships in schools and were able to identify areas of commonality and areas of differences that existed among us and our experiences. Together we established professional norms that guided our PAR project and helped to solidify our working relationships as a group. We did this through a series of on-going, interactive activities.

Activities

The Villagers participated in Pre-Cycle activities which included CPR meetings where we shared artifacts, engaged in discussions, and wrote reflective memos. Our initial meetings were structured to create a safe space for sharing and learning together so that the work ahead would be meaningful, purposeful, and personal to the Villagers. We met five times during the twelve-week Pre-Cycle and I also held informal meetings with African-American families and teachers in my capacity as principal. These Individual Learning Plan (ILP) meetings, African-American Parent Advisory Council (AAPAC) meetings, and Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CCEIS) meetings were not direct CPR activities but served to support my understanding of the work ahead building capacity and partnerships among African-American families and teachers. The Pre-Cycle activities shown in Table 7 helped to build a foundation for supporting the work ahead.

During the first meeting, we discussed the name and intention of our project, which we titled Build a Village. The title came from the African Proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” because it focuses on the importance of a community effort when supporting children. Our project’s goal was to explore strategies to promote and develop the partnerships necessary for communal support with our African-American families. We reviewed the project’s overarching research question and the related questions to focus our future PAR activities. During the second meeting, the Villagers engaged in storytelling and created artifacts that described their previous and current experiences with parent engagement in schools. During the third and fourth CPR meetings, we used the PhotoVoice Protocol (see Appendix E) to collect artifacts, share ideas, and discuss our previous experiences as related to partnerships with African-American families. During the final meetings of the Pre-Cycle, I shared all collected artifacts from the photovoice

Table 7

Activities: PAR Pre-Cycle & Informal Meetings

Cycle Week	Weeks 1-4 January 3-28		Weeks 5-8 January 31- February 25		Weeks 9-12 February 28 – March 25	
Meetings with CPR team (N=5)	*		*		*	*
ILP Meetings with African- American families (N=9)					*	*
Coordinated Intervention Meetings with African- American families (N=7)	*	*	*	*	*	*

activity with the group for discussion and used the activity to gather additional data. We reviewed the evidence-collection protocols to establish a transparent and ethical process. During the discussion, the Villagers reflected on the questions: What has been your experience working with African-American families to support the progress of the students? And what new information or ideas do we now have about working with African-American families? After the discussion, we identified commonalities using the photovoice images. This series of meetings and activities provided the initial data for the Pre-Cycle.

Throughout the process I recorded reflective memos to capture the ideas and reflect on the learning process, as well as the leadership implications. Memos were written after each Villager meeting and were also written to record events and ideas as they related to the research questions, including parent meetings.

Parent meetings during the Pre-Cycle were informative and useful to the Pre-Cycle process. African-American families and school staff as a part of the school's focal scholar program for African-American students attended the meetings. The family meetings were not used as part of the data collection, but the information discussed during these meetings was deemed useful when considering the design of future Community Learning Exchanges and laying the groundwork for our upcoming research cycles. The majority of data collected in the Pre-Cycle emphasized the Villagers' previous experiences, professional work, and current values.

The artifacts from the Pre-Cycle activity provided information for data collection and emphasized the power of the Storytelling and PhotoVoice protocols as demonstrated in Figures 8 and 9. During the storytelling activity, Villagers drew pictures as an artifact to share previous experiences with parent involvement in the childhood and as an educator. The participants then

PARENT INVOLVEMENT – Write a memory or draw a visual model

Name or draw a memory of family involvement when you were a student in elementary school? 	As an educator, what's your first memory of a successful parent partnership? Brittany 
One word, or phrase, to describe successful family-school academic partnership: trust	One word, or phrase, to describe a challenging family-school academic partnership: ⊗ cultural mismatch

Figure 8. CPR Activity – Storytelling protocol, January 2022.

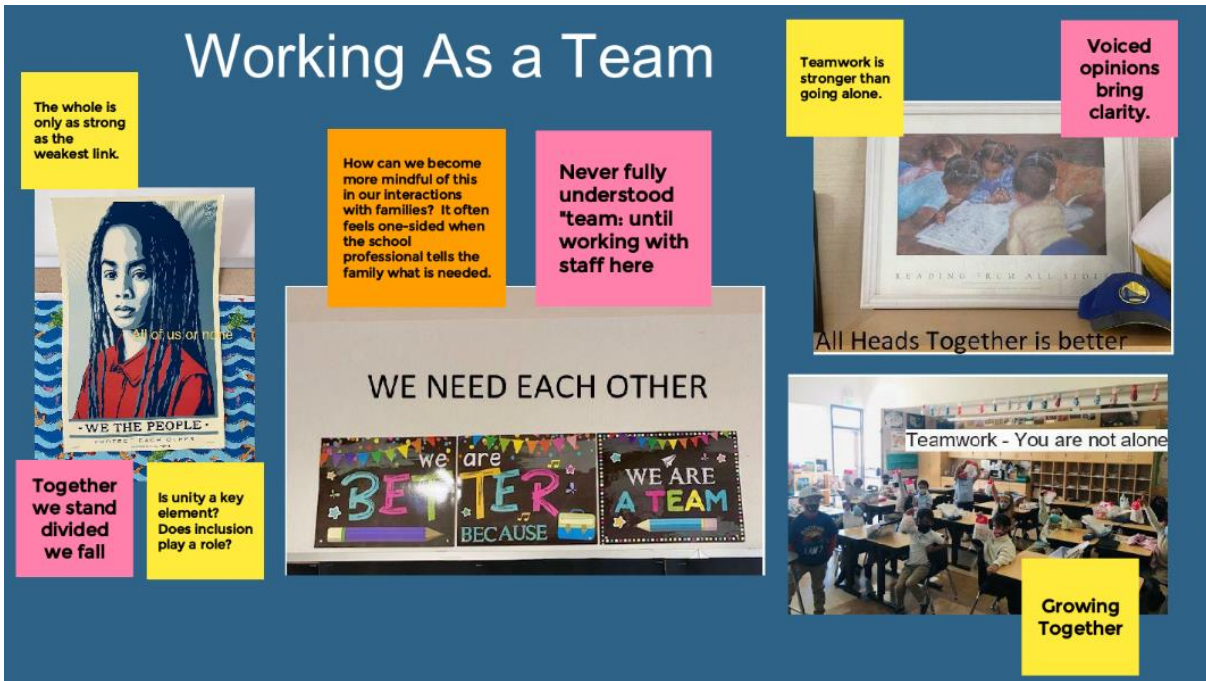


Figure 9. CPR Activity - Photovoice protocol, March 2022.

shared the artifact with the group and further explained through storytelling what the images represent. They also shared responses to their professional expectations and experiences with parent partnerships. A second artifact was created during the photovoice protocol. Villagers used cameras to take pictures that represented experiences or possibilities of parent partnerships. Participants assigned captions to their photos that demonstrated the meaning of the artifact.

Photos were displayed and everyone gave feedback during a gallery walk of all photos. A discussion of the artifacts and their meaning followed the gallery feedback. I coded and analyzed these artifacts and the data represent the evidence.

Evidence

I collected evidence such as notes from CPR meetings, reflective memos from the Villagers, transcriptions of the CPR group discussions, artifacts from the CPR activities, and my own reflective memos. Using the lens of the researcher, I reviewed and analyzed all of the written, visual, and verbal evidence collected to prepare for coding the data. The coding process involved assigning a code, or label, and then categorizing the qualitative data. Coding is not a precise science but rather an interpretive act that requires repeated cycles of analysis and review (Saldaña, 2016). Using evidence to create codes requires many iterations of analysis. This is necessary to ensure an in-depth analysis of the data collected.

I created a codebook using the open coding process as characterized by Strauss (1987) and using the qualitative data collected during the research activities. I assigned descriptive codes to the collected artifacts, meeting notes, discussion transcripts, and reflections of the research team. After collection, I reviewed the data using three rounds of analysis. During each round, I analyzed and coded the data using techniques from Saldaña's (2016) *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. I used inductive coding to classify the qualitative data, and the

classifications were then grouped based upon similarly coded data. Initial codes and the related evidence shown in Table 8 were recorded in the codebook during each round of analysis. Final codes were assigned based on the third analysis of the collected data. This process is essential to understanding the intent of the subject and the context of the information collected. Once final codes were assigned, I reviewed the evidence, and the codes were tallied based on their frequency of use. Tally marks were used to record the frequency of use. Finally, I analyzed the frequency of the codes to understand the prevalence and patterns in the codes. I included all qualitative data collected from the Pre-Cycle in the codebook.

The next step in the evidence-collection process was to review the codes and search for patterns in the data. I reviewed the codes and cross-referenced with the evidence to analyze and compare the codes. I found similarities in the data. For example, I discovered a pattern related to partnerships by grouping the codes of teamwork, relationships, engagement, advocacy, and unity. I analyzed all codes listed in the codebook and categorized groups of codes. I then sorted the data by frequency. The coding patterns were named and tallied based on their frequency and context of use. I identified three emerging categories within the data. Next, I share the emergent categories. .

Emergent Categories

The process for identifying emergent categories involved an in-depth review of the qualitative data and the assigned codes. By observing the patterns of the data, reviewing the commonality of artifacts, and reflecting on the Villager discussions, I identified three emergent categories in Table 9: (1) home-school connection, (2) previous experiences, and (3) systemic influences. These emergent categories are discussed next. The identified categories are

Table 8

Codes, Pre-Cycle

Code	CPR Meetings	Reflective Memos	Artifacts	Tallies
Unity with parents	17			17
Trust	11	5		16
Negativity	13	1		14
Valuing others/ appreciation	9	1	4	14
Experiences matter	8	1	3	12
Collaboration/ teamwork	6	1	4	11
Distrust	8	2		10
Listening	9	1		10
Differences/ disconnect	7		3	10
Culture	9			9
Positivity	6	2		8
Emotional response	8			8
Build & bridge	4	4		8
Understanding	3	1	4	8
Engagement	3	5		8
Relationships	6	1		7
Caring	6	1		7
Barriers	4	2		6
Change	1	1	4	6

Table 8 (continued)

Code	CPR Meetings	Reflective Memos	Artifacts	Tallies
Academics	5			5
Fear	4			4
Trauma	4			4
Judgment	4			4
Reflections	3	1		4
Authenticity	3			3
Time	3			3
Communication/ connections		2		2
Silence	2			2
Racism	1	1		2
Expectations	2			2
Advocacy	2			2
Outside control	1	1		2

Table 9

Emerging Categories

Emerging Categories	Codes	CPR Meetings	Reflective Memos	Artifacts	Frequency
Home School Connection	Unity with Parents (17) Valuing Others (14) Collaboration (11) Support (11) Teamwork (8) Engagement (8) Relationships (7)	56	12	8	76
Previous Experiences	Negative Experiences (56) - <i>Trust</i> (16) - <i>Negativity</i> (14) - <i>Distrust</i> (10) - <i>Confrontation</i> (8) - <i>Fear</i> (4) - <i>Trauma</i> (4) Positive Experiences (25) - <i>Positivity</i> (8) - <i>Understanding</i> (8) - <i>Caring</i> (7) - <i>Expectations</i> (2)	65	12	4	81
Systemic Influences	Cultural Differences (40) - <i>Culture/Race</i> (11) - <i>Established Differences</i> (10) - <i>School Culture</i> (5) - <i>Relationship Barrier</i> (6) - <i>Change</i> (6) <i>Outside Factors</i> Communication (25) - <i>Listening</i> (10) - <i>Reflection</i> (4) - <i>Communicate</i> (2) - <i>Silence</i> (2) - <i>Judgement</i> (4) - <i>Time Constraint</i> (3)	49	9	7	65

outlined in the Emergent Categories Table with the accompanying codes. Next, I reference the most frequent codes.

Home-School Connection

The Pre-Cycle evidence strongly suggested the Villagers believe that the home-school connection is important to creating parent partnerships. Having a connection is the equivalent to a partnership in the sense that the two parties, in this case parents and teachers, must connect on a common goal or a shared outcome. Teachers named the importance of having partnerships with the families of the students they serve (n=76). The importance of the home-school connection was evident in three areas:

1. Teachers understand that parent partnership is needed for student success.
2. Teachers value parent partnerships.
3. Teachers have the desire to form parent partnerships.

Next, I highlight the frequent patterns supporting the evidence of the emerging category of home school connection.

Throughout Pre-Cycle activities, teachers understand that parent partnership is needed to best support students. The Villagers spoke of the need for parents and teachers to work together. The most frequent codes the Villagers recognized within the partnerships were: unity and valuing others. Unity with parents came up as a code seventeen times during CPR meetings. Teachers described a home-school partnership as parents being responsive and available to provide suggested support to students and teachers. Teamwork was identified as a form of unity and was coded eleven times during the photo voice activity. For example, one teacher captioned her photo: Teamwork is stronger than going alone. Another caption created by a different teacher stated: Teamwork - you are not alone. The comments demonstrated the significance placed upon

parents and teachers working together. Weiss et al. (2011) recognize family involvement as an effective strategy for school improvement. Throughout discussions, the Villagers agreed that parent partnerships are needed to best support students. The evidence suggests that teachers strongly value partnerships between families and schools. Villagers identified valuing others, collaboration, and engagement as patterns that are important components of parent partnerships. The code of valuing others was identified fourteen times in reference to working with parents.

Collaborating with parents was discussed during the debrief of the photo voice activity as a valued strategy for helping students and supporting educators. I found an expectation of active family engagement expressed by the Villagers. Engagement was identified eight times in the data referencing school needs in relation to parent support. The term *build and bridge* (n=8) is a strategy to establish better partnerships with African-American families as a culturally responsive tool. This was informative because it was brought up as a solution to demonstrate to African-American families that they are valued as partners. Christine shared her ideas on the need to work together with African-American families. She said, “But I think there are special families that need us to continue our relationship with them just from beyond our room, maybe even farther.” This expression demonstrates the level of partnership that teachers perceive is needed to support African-American student achievement.

A desire to form home-school connections with African-American families was evident in the data collected from the Villagers. The need for support and relationships was highlighted as a pattern within the Villagers' discussions. Support was named eleven times as a critical component needed among families and schools. There was a dedicated conversation about the lack of trust experienced by some teachers when working with African-American families. Relationship was coded seven times as a need for teachers. In particular, a desire to form

relationships was identified as a need among the Villagers. Throughout the Pre-Cycle, teachers referenced the partnerships that they would like to have with African-American families and not the actual current state of African-American family partnerships. While the Villagers expressed that teamwork is desired, they also expressed that they have experienced strained, or difficult, partnerships with African-American families. There were two captions named by the Villagers during the photo voice activity that captured the essence of this challenge: *We Should all be on the Same Team* and *Fight hate with Love*. These captions speak to previous experiences of the Villagers that may impact the formations of partnerships with African-American families. This concept is discussed in the next emergent category.

Previous Experiences

The data indicate that teachers' previous experiences inform the formation of partnerships among teachers and African-American families. Teachers expressed intense feelings, related to prior experiences, when describing their interactions with African-American families. The feelings ranged from fear of returning a call to an African-American parent to the feeling of joy that a meeting was non-confrontational. The evidence suggests that previous experiences personally impact teachers, thereby impacting the teacher-parent partnership (n=86) their previous experiences. The Villagers identified negative experiences (n=56) and positive experiences (n=25). These most frequent codes included trust (n=16), negativity (n=14), distrust (n=10), positivity (n=8), and confrontation (n=8). These experiences were connected to positive and negative feelings expressed by the Villagers as related to previous attempts to partner with African-American families.

The data suggest that the Villagers' previous negative experiences with African-American families and stereotypes of African-Americans impact the ability of teachers and

families to form trusting partnerships. Natasha spoke about the impact of her prior experiences when communicating with African-American families, stating, “Sometimes there's a disconnect, sometimes there's just learning that needs to happen, a misunderstanding. And sometimes it's great and just very authentic and organic” (March 3, 2022). The statement refers to potential challenges when communicating with African-American families. The element of fear was cited four times during one discussion regarding an interaction with African-American families. Similarly, trauma was coded four times in the same manner. The Villagers cited instances where African-American parents expressed anger or resentment towards the teachers. The Villagers expressed strong feelings from previous encounters that created an expectation of unpredictable interactions with African-American families. As a result, the teachers expressed some reluctance when attempting to interact with African-American parents. However, all Villagers named improved interactions with African-American families as a professional goal.

The data demonstrate that there were positive experiences and feelings of hope and a desire to build relationships with African-American families. The Villagers acknowledged a desire for unity. Feelings of understanding (n=8), caring (n=8), and shared expectations (n=2) were recorded when the Villagers described their previous interactions with African-American families. The systemic influences that relate to these challenges are addressed in the next emergent category.

Systemic Influences

Systems, or expected protocols, guide the flow of an organization, and set the parameters for how people interact. The data suggest that systemic influences interfered with effective engagement of teachers and African-American families. Throughout Pre-Cycle activities, two patterns emerged as systemic influences on effective engagement with African-American

families: cultural differences and communication (n=65). These elements directly relate to systemic influences in that the system does not directly acknowledge or manage these elements for families or teachers. The impact of these elements led to challenges that may have interfered with or prevented consistent, effective engagement among African-American families and teachers. I discuss the evidence about cultural differences and communication.

Cultural Differences

As evidenced in the data, cultural differences have an impact on effective, consistent engagement with African-American families. This is generally true in the case that culture, or lack of cultural knowledge, can lead to unintended harm during interactions. Cultural differences (n=40) relate to a disconnect in communication or expectations. Culture and race (n=11) established differences (n=10) and school culture (n=5) were codes referenced during the Pre-Cycle as they pertained to teachers sharing some of the challenges with African-American family partnerships.

Lovehall Elementary staff does not have any African-American teachers, and the Villagers shared that they have had few opportunities to learn about African-American culture outside of historical figures or events. As a result, media images seem to drive their beliefs about African-American culture. The lack of relational understanding impacted the way in which the teachers understood the intentions of African-American parents. During a CPR meeting, one of our Villagers, Serena, shared that the African-American parents are defiant with her and defensive when she calls them to discuss student behavior issues. She shared her belief that communication is difficult with the parents because they tend to express negativity during conversations and that speaking directly with them is difficult. As a result, Serena said she rarely contacts her African-American parents unless she absolutely has to. In this case, rather than

reflecting on why the parent might be upset, the teacher assumed that parent defensiveness was defiance. Another villager, Christine, stated that she has only ever been “cussed out” by African-American parents, but that she also has some Black parents who treat her well. Through further conversation Natasha was able to share with the group that she has learned about some cultural differences in the communication styles used by African-Americans. She went on to say that their tone, expression, and posture might be misunderstood as confrontational and that she has never been cursed by any African-American parent because she first establishes that she cares about them and their kids.

This conversation about cultural differences led to a new conversation about the importance of trust during communication. Teachers established that they are unable to trust that there will be positive interactions with African-Americans and this negatively impacts the communication between African-American families and teachers. The importance of effective communication with all families is valued by the Villagers; however, this evidence consistently shows that there are cultural barriers impacting effective communication with African-American families.

Communication

Effective communication is essential to any partnership. During the Pre-Cycle, communication was coded twenty-five times in the data. According to Oxford’s dictionary, communication is the successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings. One’s communication can greatly impact the way in which messages are delivered and received. Maya Angelou spoke of communication in this way, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel”

(http://goodreads.com/author/quotes/3503.Maya_Angelou). The feelings conveyed during conversations are a key determiner of the success of future interactions.

The way in which you communicate is an important aspect of any partnership. During the Pre-Cycle, three codes were identified as essential to communication: listen (n=10), Reflection (n=4), and Judgement (n=4). Listening was identified as an element needed for any good communication, while reflection and judgement were used in regard to trying to problem-solve when communications with African-American parents were challenging. Silence (n=2) was identified as a strategy for teachers to avoid, rather than engage, with African-American families. Teachers cited instances of disengaging by ignoring issues of student behavior or poor academic performance because of their reluctance to communicate with African-American parents to include them in the problem-solving process. This silence promotes the exclusion of families in the education process and impacts the social and academic support for students. Another communication strategy was identified as “lip service” by the one of the Villagers. This was described as keeping conversations safe by telling the parent only what you think they wanted to hear and not addressing student issues that require partnership, or collaboration, to address. The ability to communicate with people from different cultures is an essential component to building relationships between teachers and parents. Understanding more about the cultural differences and communication challenges will help to inform new ways in which we can improve partnership with African-American parents.

The Pre-Cycle showed three emergent categories (1) home-school connection, (2) previous experiences, and (3) systemic influences -- all of which are impacting effective engagement with African-American families. Collectively, these categories have identified the ways in which the experiences of teachers and a lack of systemic focus on addressing cultural

differences can impact the ability of teachers to improve partnerships with African-American families. The Villagers will continue to examine current practices and explore new ways to increase the capacity of teachers to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents. As we moved into PAR Cycle One and began to design research activities, I used the emergent categories to provide insight into the study.

Reflection and Planning

The reflection process during the inquiry cycle was key to my learning. I used Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycles to guide my reflection throughout the research work. The cycles required that I engage in the actual experiences, reflect on the experiences, learn from the experiences, and try out what was learned. To discuss my leadership reflection in the Pre-Cycle and the planning process for Cycle One, I rely on my role in the process.

Reflection on Leadership

During the Pre-Cycle, my goal was to build relational trust with the research team and establish a supportive, safe environment for exploring the PAR project. Our overarching research question centered on how to cultivate productive relationships and I wanted to model the creation of trusting, productive relationships during CPR meetings. In order to establish this, I designed activities that would promote comfort and mutual acceptance within the group and would also build trust. In doing this I had to meet people where they were without judgment. This approach was necessary for me to ensure the need for cultural understanding and mutual acceptance.

During CPR meetings, the Villagers learned about each other and shared ideas through the process of storytelling. The analysis of the data gave me an indication of the mindset and experiences of each Villager. The Villagers had distinctly different experiences in their childhood and upbringing. I began to understand the connection between personal experience

and professional practices. I had to accept some level of personal vulnerability during these activities. This was essential because as an African-American leader and the only African-American on the CPR team, I needed to share openly and listen intently to learn about the experiences and actions of others while sharing my experiences and understanding of African-American culture. The Villagers were a mixture of different ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, years of professional experience, and ages. I learned that there was immediately an understanding that although we shared our dedication to education, our paths had been vastly different. Sharing our differences and our previous experiences helped me to frame the work. Acknowledging these differences helped us as we worked to understand how to best engage African-American families in our school.

Leading for equity requires objectivity which means that I must listen without judgment. During this Pre-Cycle, I learned the importance of being an intentional listener. As the only African-American member of the group, I realized that my transparency and vulnerability could provide them with a new lens leading toward objectiveness. As I designed Cycle One, I focused on strengthening my facilitation skills in order to bring a variety of voices forward. It is through these varied voices that we continued to learn more about how to cultivate these partnerships with African-American families.

Planning for PAR Cycle One

The initial work of the Villagers set the stage for continued learning. The next step was to design at least two Community Learning Exchanges that would allow both the African-American families and the Villagers to share their personal experiences. The purpose of sharing among the two groups was to analyze their needs and desires for a partnership while building relational trust

between African-American families and school staff. Through the exploration and trust-building process, we became better able to explore the research questions:

1. To what extent do parents and teachers cultivate and increase relational trust?
2. To what extent do school policies and teachers' practices change communication and authentic engagement with African-American parents?
3. How does an African-American leader in a racially diverse school engage all constituents to equitably support students?

Conclusion

The Pre-Cycle activities provided valuable insight for moving forward with the PAR project and study. Ultimately the Pre-Cycle data emphasized defining the parent-teacher partnership, the intense feelings teachers bring to the work, and a reluctance to communicate with the families. We realized that we would need to continue to explore ways to establish relational trust, gain an understanding of the experiences of others, and bring together the Villagers and the African-American families. I, in the role of facilitator, recognized that this will take patience and grace. We agreed to continue to create a gracious space that supports and commands respect, continue our CPR meetings monthly, and extend the meeting times in order to ensure enough time to dig deep into ways to create meaningful partnerships.

In addition to monthly CPR meetings, we designed two Community Learning Exchanges. The first CLE included the members of the African-American Parent Advisory Committee. The purpose of this CLE was to collect information from African-American families related to their school experiences and their needs. CLE agendas and activities were designed to encourage storytelling and building trust. We used the information from the first CLE to create a second CLE. The second CLE was designed for the parents of the CPR teachers' classrooms. During

CLE two we designed experiences that related directly to the newly identified practices of the Villagers and their relationships with the African-American parents they serve.

CHAPTER 5: PAR CYCLE ONE

In Cycle One of the participatory action research (PAR) study, I worked with co-practitioner researchers to understand their personal experiences and expectations in developing partnerships with African-American families. More specifically, the focus of practice (FoP) was designed to increase the collective capacity of teachers to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents to equitably support African-American students. As a result, the PAR is based on the following theory of action (ToA): If we enact a participatory action research project that involves educating teachers about the importance of cultural norms and experiences, then teachers will engage in stronger partnerships with African-American families. In PAR Cycle One, the Villagers and CLE participants engaged in activities designed to better understand the relationship between teachers and the African-American families and identify ways to deepen the partnership.

In this chapter, I present the Cycle One process which included the CPR activities, the data collection methods and analysis, emergent themes, and my leadership reflection that served to guide the planning of Cycle Two PAR project and study.

PAR Cycle One Process

I designed Cycle One activities to further examine the research questions and the focus of practice, and to gain insight about the relationships of the Villagers (co-practitioner researchers) and the African-American families they served. I identified three emergent categories in the Pre-Cycle: (1) home-school connection, (2) previous experiences, and (3) systemic influences. The categories served to inform the Cycle One process. I began by designing activities for the Villagers and CLE participants to share their personal experiences and their thoughts and ideas about home-school partnerships and how they best support students,

teachers, and families. We discussed the impact of their beliefs and experiences on family partnerships in schools, identified areas of need and how cultural differences impacted family-school partnerships. I used evidence to identify the emergent themes.

Activities

The PAR Cycle One activities were designed to promote authentic information gathering through the co-practitioner researcher team meetings and community learning exchanges. During the CPR team meetings, the CPR members, or Villagers, participated in discussions and utilized protocols where we shared experiences, new ideas, and reflection. The Villagers helped to design two community learning exchanges. The community learning exchange (CLE) was an opportunity for community members to come together to exchange ideas about a topic or a collaborative goal. The central premise of the CLE acknowledges that the people closest to the issues are best situated to discover answers to positively impact the issue (Guajardo et al., 2016). The CLE activities were designed to inform our current partnership practices and examine ways to promote positive relationships among teachers and African-American families. We held three CPR meetings and three CLEs during Cycle One as listed in Table 10. The data collected throughout Cycle One activities was coded and analyzed.

Co-Practitioner Researcher Meetings

The Villagers are participants of the study with me, as the lead researcher. Together, we participated in PAR activities, reflected on our actions, and examined the collected evidence to make iterative decisions about next action steps. During the initial meeting of Cycle One we reviewed the Pre-Cycle data and on-boarded a new team member to the project. The new CPR team member is the newly assigned principal of Lovehall Elementary who replaced me. I am no longer serving as the Principal of the Lovehall and work as an administrator in the special

Table 10

PAR Cycle One Activities and Data

Meeting	Date	Activities	Data Collected
CPR #1	September 27, 2022	• Review of focus of practice and PAR Design	• Agenda • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
CLE #1 with Villagers	October 20, 2022	• Emulation Poems • Reflection Protocol	• Agenda • Poem Artifacts • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
CPR Meeting #2	October 27, 2022	• Personal Narratives • Reflection Protocol	• Agenda • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
CPR Meeting #3	November 3, 2022	• Personal Narratives • Reflection Protocol	• Agenda • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
CLE #2 with Villagers	November 11, 2022	• Chalk Talk	• Agenda • Gallery Walk Artifacts • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
CLE #3 with Parents	November 15, 2022	• PhotoVoice Activity	• Agenda • PhotoVoice Artifacts • Field Notes • Reflective Memo

education department. The new principal joined the Villager team because she now led the work of supporting increased partnerships among parents and teachers. During the review of the Pre-Cycle data, the Villagers recalled experiences and events that aligned with the emergent categories. At the second CPR meeting, we shared personal narratives and discussed multiple perspectives and experiences such as their concerns about the success gap, their desire for improved communication with parents, and a realization that perhaps they are so consumed with professional goals that their conversation with parents may be impersonal. The reflections of the Villagers informed the planning of the first community learning exchange. During our final CPR meeting of the cycle, we planned the African-American parent CLE. In particular, we examined the Villagers' personal reflections and identified questions to generate insight and support the parents during the African-American parent community learning exchange. The information provided insight to the research questions.

Community Learning Exchanges

The three community learning exchanges in PAR Cycle One were designed to be interactive and provide meaningful experiences that support the sharing of ideas, experiences and community needs in a safe environment. Two CLEs were conducted with the Villagers, and one was conducted with the African-American parents. We shared personal narratives and discussed experiences and ideas that would provide insight into the following three research questions: To what extent do parents and teachers cultivate and increase relational trust; to what extent do school policies and teachers' practices change communication and authentic engagement with African-American parents; and how does an African-American leader in a racially diverse school engage all constituents to equitably support students?

During the CLEs with the Villagers, we used two protocols, Emulation Poems (see Appendix F) and Chalk Talk (see Appendix G). The purpose of writing and sharing the emulation poem was to gain greater knowledge of the experiences and background of others. This activity allowed all of us to reflect on our personal journeys and examine how the journey impacts our relationships with others. As a result, the Villagers began to know one another on a deeper level. During the second CLE with the Villagers, we used the Chalk Talk protocol to examine communication and systemic barriers to developing partnerships with African-American families. During the third CLE, I gathered a group of African-American parents and engaged in personal narratives and the photovoice protocol to hear their experiences and concerns in partnering with their children's teachers. This learning exchange was facilitated by me and the new principal but did not include the other Villagers. Many parents from the African-American Parent Advisory Council (AFRICAN-AMERICAN PAC) expressed that they wanted the learning exchange to be parents only in order to have a safe space for parents to share feelings without judgment. The information gathered from the Villagers and the parents at the CLEs provided great insight to the current state of partnerships among teachers and African-American families, as well as ways to deepen the partnerships within the school.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process throughout each cycle was guided by the participatory action research process. Action researchers conduct research in a natural setting and collect qualitative data from multiple sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The authors add that the qualitative researcher engages in self-reflection/reflexivity and includes comments about their role, biases, values, and personal background—areas that “shape their interpretation formed during the study” (p. 183). With these ideas in mind, the qualitative data collection and analysis includes the

experiences of the co-practitioner researchers and the parents who participated in the CLE.

During Cycle One of the PAR project and study, I facilitated the CPR meetings and Community Learning Exchanges and used the reflection process to document my role as an insider working with other insiders.

Data Collection

I collected qualitative data consistent with the research questions that guided the PAR project throughout PAR Cycle One. The research question and primary and secondary data sources are listed. The sources of data for the PAR project included CPR meeting agendas, CPR artifacts, notes, CLE artifacts, leadership reflections, memos, CLE debrief notes, and member checks. Throughout Cycle One, data was collected during the meetings and CLEs conducted with the Villagers and the African-American parents. As facilitator, I co-constructed the parent CLE agenda with the Villagers, took the notes, and conducted member checks with the Villagers after my analysis of CLE artifacts. CLE artifacts included photos, stories, emulation poems, and chalk talk posters created by participants. I listened constructively and kept notes to document all activities and discussions. I found that my reflective memos were essential to the data collection process as they represent the importance of *praxis*, or reflection, in order to act in ways that interrogate and transform schooling (Freire, 1970). Guajardo et al. (2016) emphasized that taking time to reflect on the process and lessons learned is important when working in schools and doing community work. I wrote analytic memos using a first-person perspective to document my reflections about the process of supporting the development of effective partnerships between our teachers and African-American families. I reflected on the activities and the impact of openly sharing the feelings and experiences of the CPR participants and the families.

Analysis

During PAR Cycle One, the analysis of the artifacts helped me to identify the three emergent themes. I also developed some understanding of the barriers that impact effective partnerships between African-American families and teachers. Action researchers analyze qualitative data in an iterative process that requires multiple steps at the same time as they are implementing other changes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Throughout PAR Cycle One, I collaborated with the CPR group to analyze our work together, as well as the data collected from the African-American parent CLE. After I coded the qualitative data, I looked for general patterns and themes (Saldaña, 2016). I used an open coding technique (Saldaña, 2016) to analyze all data collected. Then, I arranged those patterns into emergent categories and generative themes. In Freire's (1970) words, we looked for the "generative themes" through praxis, self-reflection, and action, which occur only when people engage in dialogue and reflect critically about the evidence. I conducted a member check with the CPR team once I identified some generative themes. Member checking allows the researcher to check the accuracy of the evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Figure 10 shows the emergent themes from Cycle One.

Emergent Themes

Three themes emerged during Cycle One relate to interpersonal elements that support building relational trust among teachers and African-American parents. The themes emerged during our inquiry to define partnerships with African-American families. The themes identified are: (1) trust and communication are essential to partnerships (2) a lack of cultural understanding, and (3) negative experiences of teachers and African-American parents. Parents and teachers both agreed that trust and communication are essential to partnerships. Further,



Figure 10. Emergent themes: PAR Cycle One.

the lack of understanding cultural norms and the negative experiences of the teachers and parents emerged as areas of concern negatively impacting the partnerships of teachers and African-American parents. Next, I present evidence to support and expand upon the emergent themes.

Trust and Communication are Essential to Partnerships

Establishing trust and good communication were identified as essential to building partnerships and emerged as a theme in PAR Cycle One. The ability to establish relationships is required with any partnership. During the PAR Pre-Cycle, the desire for a home-school connection emerged as a category. As we progressed to PAR Cycle One, support, trust, and communication emerged as categories that address the essential components of establishing a partnership, or home-school connection, among teachers and African-American families. Figure 11 represents the emergent theme of trust and communication being essential to partnerships, and the categories of support, trust and communication and codes that support the theme. Next, I discuss the categories and provide evidence that demonstrates the emergent theme.

Support

The need for supporting each other in schools was expressed by both the Villagers and African-American parents and trust and communication were identified as essential to building home-school partnerships. While both groups identified needed support structures to help students and shared stories of the lack of support available, they suggested a lack of trusting relationships between the teachers and parents but did not talk about ways to build the needed trust. In Cycle One data, parents indicated that support structures are lacking and that this leads to a feeling of teachers not being interested in supporting students. Likewise, the Villagers indicated that parent support at home is desired, but that it generally falls short of what is needed. The Villagers and the parents reported feeling a lack of support from the other; however, both

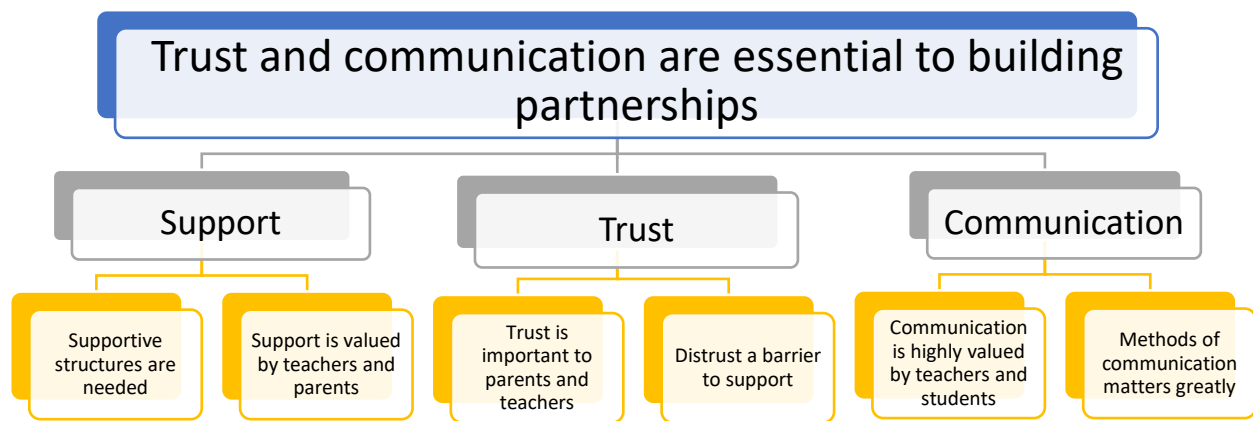


Figure 11. Emergent theme: Trust, communication, and support.

shared a need for this to improve. Table 11 demonstrates the codes and categories related to this category of trust and communication being essential to build partnerships.

Provide support to students was cited frequently by the Villagers and parents throughout Cycle One (n=31) as one of the ways increased partnership is needed. The need to support students was prominent during Villager activities (n=27) and during the parents' CLE (n=4). The teachers had more opportunity to express their needs at the CPR meetings, so the data implies that the teachers felt more strongly in the need for student support than the parents. However, I had one CLE with African-American parents this cycle compared to five meetings with the Villagers, and their comments were just as powerful. During CPR meetings, the Villagers expressed the need to increase parent engagement (n=10) while the African-American parents expressed the need for more parent engagement 7 times. They both stated the need for support. The Villagers verbalized that they need support from parents (n=11) while the parents stated the need for support from teachers 3 times. Serena, one of the Villagers, spoke directly about what she called "absentee parents," referring to parents who do not contact the school frequently and for whom a strategy like required parent hours could improve their participation (Villagers CLE, November 3, 2022). Villagers shared examples of the desired parent support—for example, homework support and home projects—as well as the need for behavior support for some students (Villagers CLE, November 11, 2022). During the parent CLE, parents questioned whether teachers cared enough about outcomes for their children; however, the Villagers directly referenced that they care a great deal for their African-American students and families (n=10). Teachers expressed a desire to improve the support for students and increase parent engagement, but the idea of what this partnership of support looks like had not been discussed. There is a need

Table 11

Emergent Theme: Trust and Communication

Emergent Theme	Categories	Villager Codes	Parent CLE Codes
Trust and communication are essential to partnerships	Support (81)	• Support for students (27) • Support from parents (11) • More engagement (10) • Caring teachers (10)	• Academic support for students (4) • Support from teachers (3) • More engagement (7)
	Trust (36)	• Importance of trust (15) • Trusting Relationships (15) • Repairing trust (6)	
	Communication (38)	• Effective communication (9) • Positive staff communication (8) • Limited communication (7) • Communicating expectations (5)	• Consistent communication (4) • Limited communication (2) • Rude communication (2)

for teachers and parents to come together and talk to one another. They agreed on the need for support but could not agree on what support looks like. Teachers had a deficit mindset about parents, and parents say teachers do not understand.

During the African-American Family CLE, parents cited the need for more academic support for their children (n=4) and expressed a desire for increased school engagement (n=7). The parents framed school engagement as providing consistent communication with teachers and having opportunities to participate in classroom activities. During the CLE discussion one parent expressed that they perceived a lack of caring on the part of the teacher because of the expectation that parents would teach their children the concepts that students had not mastered during classroom lessons (Family CLE, November 15, 2022). The perception of the parents seemed to be that teachers were not available for support (n=3) for students who need help. One father said, “Teachers nowadays just don’t care. If the kids do not learn what they are teaching they just leave them behind. There is no tutoring offered or anything. At least when I was in school, teachers would tutor you” (Family CLE, November 15, 2022). This comment sparked a conversation where parents expressed that the teachers are interested in results but not necessarily in helping students who have fallen behind catch up (Family CLE, November 15, 2022).

While the need for additional support was evident in the data and although the Villagers and the parents shared the desire to have more support from one another, both sides indicated that the support structures are not in place when defining partnerships. There is a misconception in defining support, and trust is a factor contributing to that misconception. Both African-American parents and teachers have different ideas of what support looks like, and teachers seem to assume that African-American parents either do not want to help or are unable to help. This is

a common misconception about parents of marginalized students, particularly African-American parents. Teachers assume that they do not value education and this creates a barrier to successful partnerships between families and schools (Baker et al., 2016).

Trust

Trust was a factor that contributed to building effective partnerships. The Villagers value trust (n=36) in developing family partnerships. However, during the CLE, the parents did not directly state trust as an essential element of partnerships; however, although they did not name trust specifically, they named numerous examples of mistrust. Throughout Cycle One Activities Villagers spoke of the importance of trust (n=15) and trusting relationships (n=15). One of the Villagers shared an example of what may impact the process of building trust when she said, “Trust is built over time by showing families that you are receptive to them” (Villagers Meeting, October 27, 2022). The Villagers also spoke of the need to validate the feelings of families and the need to repair trust (n=6) as a means to achieving partnerships. Villagers shared that they do not feel trusted by many of their African-American families and that communication feels strained (Villagers Meeting, October 27, 2022).

Although the Villagers recognized trust as a key component of partnerships, there were few examples of what established trust looks like among teachers and African-American families. One Villager referenced her experience with establishing trust with parents at a charter school. She said, “Charter schools have studied how to quickly fix [issues of trust], and that's why they make some stuff mandatory, like doing home visits. And they tell you, go to the home or go to a coffee shop, go to the park with them. And then [parents are] like, whoa, this White woman came to the park for the barbecue” (Villagers CLE, November 11, 2022). The Villagers indicated that trust is both a need and a barrier. The data suggest that the assurance of trust from

African-American parents is important to the Villagers. This is evidenced by the frequency of codes related to valuing and seeking trust. The issues of trust were directly connected to issues of communication with African-American parents. Next, I explore the role of communication in these partnerships.

Communication

Effective communication between home and school positively contributes to partnerships and student success. Both parents and the Villagers agreed on the importance of communication (n=38). Parents expressed the need for better communication when describing the inconsistent communication and lack of availability of the teachers. Limited communication was a common theme among both groups. The Villagers referenced limited communication with African-American parents (n=7), while the African-American parents also referenced limited communication with teachers (n=2). In general, parents wanted to know more about their student's academic needs and the Villagers wanted more effective communication when discussing specific student concerns. The Villagers described effective communication as parents being available and receptive to teacher contact, which matches the parent description of what better communication would be. Effective communication is established as a need for both; however, the Villagers want to communicate about getting support from parents and the parents want to communicate about getting support for students.

The Villagers viewed communication as a way to garner support for students. The data indicates that they value effective communication (n=9) and understand the importance of positive communication with parents (n=8). Examples such as classroom newsletters and text messages to parents were cited as effective and positive. However, when discussing the nature of the communication, the Villagers referenced communicating expectations to parents (n=5) and

limited communication with African-American families (n=7). The Villagers' focus centered on teachers getting parents to participate in a specific way, namely by telling parents what support is needed at home; however, this request was overwhelmingly related to fixing student issues like classroom behaviors or missing homework.

The parents spoke of communication in terms of how helpful it was to navigate and support their children's progress. They cited the need for consistent communication from teachers (n=4) and current challenges such as limited communication from school (n=2) or rude communication (n=2). Parents cited examples of communication that convey the need to fix student behaviors but fail to communicate about academics. However, one parent recalled a positive experience and shared her gratitude for a specific first grade teacher who had a great communication system. She shared that the partnership with that teacher was positive and supportive (Family CLE, November 15, 2022). She felt well served by this teacher because all parents received the same consistent, meaningful messages about instruction and feedback on student progress. The discussion of this experience led parents to compare their individual experiences with teachers at Lovehall and they shared agreement on the experience with this first grade teacher, whereas the parents of older children stated that they had not received the same level of communication as their children progressed through the other grade levels.

Overall, the need for consistent and positive communication emerged from this category as being essential to building relationships from both the teachers and parents. While parents and teachers both desire better communication, there needs to be an agreement about what that looks like for both. In order to make progress towards better communication, we must also examine the

role of culture, or cultural norms, in the process of building partnerships among teachers and African-American parents. I address a lack of cultural understanding as an emergent theme.

A Lack of Cultural Understanding

A lack of cultural understanding emerged as a theme in PAR Cycle One as it relates to understanding the importance of culture as a central element to creating effective partnerships. Cultural understanding is defined as the ability to understand and communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds (Keengwe, 2020). The data support a lack of cultural understanding suggest that there is a need for cultural responsiveness and increased cultural awareness when defining relationships among teachers and African-American families. The staff at Lovehall Elementary is predominantly White and female; their lack of exposure to the cultural norms of African-Americans leads to a disconnect of their expectations and intent when attempting to communicate with African-American families. Figure 12 represents the emergent theme, a lack of cultural understanding, and was further defined in the two categories: cultural disconnect and cultural awareness.

In PAR Cycle One, cultural disconnect and cultural awareness emerged as categories to support the theme of the lack of cultural understanding among teachers and African-American families. The need for both teachers and African-American families to understand, and respond to, their respective cultural norms is essential to developing relationships and home-school partnerships. Table 12 demonstrates the codes and categories related to this emergent theme.

Cultural Disconnect

Both teachers and African-American parents cited a lack of cultural connection related to the African-American community (n=54). The key types of disconnect were lack of cultural connections (n=17) and unconscious bias (n=23).

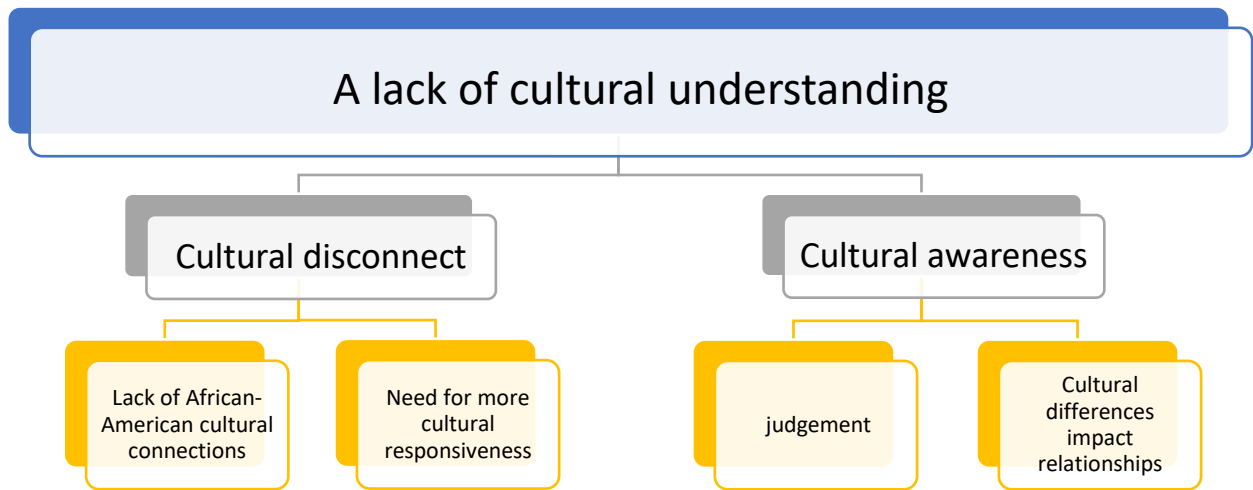


Figure 12. Emergent theme: Lack of cultural understanding.

Table 12

Emergent Theme: Lack of Cultural Understanding

Emergent Theme	Categories	Villager Codes	Parent CLE Codes
Lack of cultural understanding	Cultural Disconnect (54)	• Unconscious Bias (23) • Lack of cultural connection (13) • Teachers desire for equity (7) • Lack of home support for African-American students (6)	• Lack of cultural connection (4) • Bias (1)
	Cultural awareness (33)	• Judgment by parents (11) • Stereotyping (8) • Cultural judgment (7) • Cultural differences (5)	• Judgment by teachers (1) • Cultural differences (1)

During the Family CLE, African-American parents shared that they feel disconnected from the school and the school staff. Over the course of PAR Cycle One, the Villagers expressed a desire for equity among parents (n=7); however, they accepted stereotypes and unconscious bias throughout their discussions. Over the course of three meetings, the Villagers openly discussed the idea that African-American parents do not value education in the same way as other ethnic groups. During one discussion Natasha shared that she avoids conversations with African-American parents because they are likely to get angry about student behaviors (CPR Meeting, October 27, 2022). These are examples of stereotypes, or possibly unconscious biases, which lead to deficit thinking on the part of teachers.

The relationship between unconscious bias (n=20) and the actions of the Villagers further demonstrates the lack of cultural awareness that exists between teachers and African-American families. One example of unconscious bias was the assumption that there is no home support for African-American students (n=6). One of the Villagers shared that she was afraid of interactions with African-American mothers because of previous problems. She said she avoids contacting African-American families because she never knows when she might get the angry Black woman who will be aggressive with her (Christine, CPR Meeting, October 20, 2022). This led to a conversation about why Black women are perceived as angry or aggressive. A cultural disconnect (n=13) was evident among the Villagers. One Villager made a connection to historical and systemic racism and how this impacts the ability of non-Black teachers to communicate comfortably with Black parents (Natasha, CPR Meeting, October 20, 2022). She named the idea that parents, just like teachers, may have unconscious bias related to the teacher's treatment of them and their children. Teachers indicated a desire for more equity (n=7) but did not seem to understand how culture, or history, plays a role in achieving this. Teachers and

parents need to acknowledge that this disconnect related to culture exists in order to begin the process of developing partnerships.

African-American parents expressed feelings of disconnection during the Family CLE. Parents referenced cultural disconnect (n=4) and bias towards African-American families (n=4) when sharing their narratives during the CLE. During the African-American parent CLE (November 15, 2022) parents spoke about the lack of connection. One parent stated that this was her sixth year in the school and she had not felt a connection with any of her child's teachers. A father asked the question, "How can we expect a connection when nobody understands us or our needs?" Another parent shared her belief that teachers at Lovehall treat parents like students, instead of treating them as adult partners. This led to a conversation about parents feeling judged and that they feel that teachers view them as a part of the problem and not partners in their children's education.

The cultural disconnect that exists complicates the development of partnerships. In recognition of both parents and Villager perspectives about issue of culture, I recognized that the lack of African-American teachers contribute to the lack of connection experienced by parents. We lack colleagues who could identify the need for and support the development of cultural responsiveness. The underlying issue is related to a need for cultural awareness when connecting with African-American families.

Cultural Awareness

The data indicates that a lack of cultural awareness (n=26) impacts the ability of the teachers and parents to form meaningful partnerships based on relationships. The act of being culturally aware includes understanding how people acquire their cultures and culture's important role in personal identities, life ways, and mental and physical health of individuals and

communities (Georgetown NCCC, 2007). The codes most common were judgment, stereotypes, and cultural differences. It was apparent that growth is needed in the area of cultural understanding. The lack of cultural awareness experienced by both groups directly relates to cultural misunderstandings. For example, African-American parents were judged by teachers during attempts to communicate because of their style of communication. Teachers viewed elements such as posture, loud tone, and facial expressions as threatening, even when the conversation was non-confrontational (CPR CLE, November 11, 2022). African-American parents made references to teachers treating them like students during communications by telling them what to do and where they see needs for improvement (Parent CLE, November 15, 2022). In each instance, it appeared that both had good intentions, but the lack of cultural awareness caused the situations to be misjudged.

Judgment (n=15) that stems from a lack of cultural awareness negatively impacts the relationships among African-American parents and teachers. For the Villagers, the element of judgment (n=11) was related to the fear of causing unintentional conflict during communication. A teacher shared that she never knows whom to call to address issues with her African-American students because “Black families live together in multi-generations” and it is hard to tell which relative to communicate with (Serena, CPR CLE, November 11, 2022). She feared that calling the wrong person might result in conflict. Parents’ reference to judgment (n=4) related to how they perceived their treatment by teachers. One parent shared her belief that teachers at Lovehall treat parents like students, instead of treating them as adult partners. This led to a conversation about parents feeling judged and that they feel that teachers view them as a part of the problem and not partners in their children’s education (Family CLE, November 15, 2022). This judgment

of African-American families reinforce the misconceptions and serves as a barrier to promote cultural awareness by way of increasing stereotypes among African-Americans.

The lack of cultural awareness, and subsequent misconceptions, was identified through stereotypes. The Villagers identified stereotypes (n=5). Stereotypes were coded when teachers made blanket statements about all African-American families based on isolated incidents or common misconceptions. For example, Christine said to the group, “Some African-American parents do not want to be reached out to” during a discussion about challenges (CPR CLE, November 11, 2022). When pressed to explain, she shared a story about an African-American parent who was not happy to get a call about her student’s behavior. After discussion, Christine realized that she had over-generalized based upon anecdotal comments she had heard about communicating with African-American parents. In this case, the overgeneralization had caused this teacher to make fewer calls to African-American families.

Creating partnerships with people from different cultures requires knowledge of cultural norms. Parents cited cultural differences (n=3) as a barrier to partnerships. One parent framed it by saying she thought our teachers did not understand Black parents because they “. . . have a lack of experience with Black people” (Family CLE, November 15, 2022). The same parent spoke of not feeling valued when discussing matters related to their children. The Villagers also cited cultural differences (n=3) while acknowledging the need for improvement in this area. The Villager group as a whole owned that they do not have experience with the African-American culture, but that they are willing to learn. Natasha stated that teachers need “. . .structured opportunities to start the effort” of learning how to build relationships with African-American families (CPR CLE, October 20, 2022). Acquiring cultural knowledge, or becoming

more culturally aware, is a process that requires access and opportunities to learn from people immersed in the culture that is different.

It is critical that teachers understand how to better connect with African-American families. An improved connection would support better communication which could decrease stereotypes and negative experiences resulting from issues of cultural differences. The CLEs provided valuable insight into what needs to be accomplished to improve partnerships and create space for improved cultural understanding. In the next cycle, we explored how this can be best accomplished to support strong relationship building between teachers and African-American families. For the final theme, I outline the role experiences play when framing opportunities for partnerships.

Negative Experiences and Negative Feelings

The negative experiences and the feelings related to those experiences play a role in how beliefs about partnerships are formed. Figure 13 represents the emergent theme of negative experiences and negative feelings and describes how they relate to the development of partnerships among teachers and African-American families. To understand the impact of the attitudes and beliefs related to potential partnerships, we must first examine the beliefs and attitudes of teachers and parents. Our experiences in education shape what we believe and understand about the educational system and the people within it. This is true for teachers and parents alike. Table 13 represents the codes related to the emergent theme of experiences shape attitudes and beliefs about partnerships, and we will examine the beliefs and attitudes through the two categories: negative experiences and negative feelings related to the experiences. Then I examine the impact of the attitudes and beliefs on potential partnerships. Next, I discuss the categories and provide evidence that demonstrates the emergent theme.

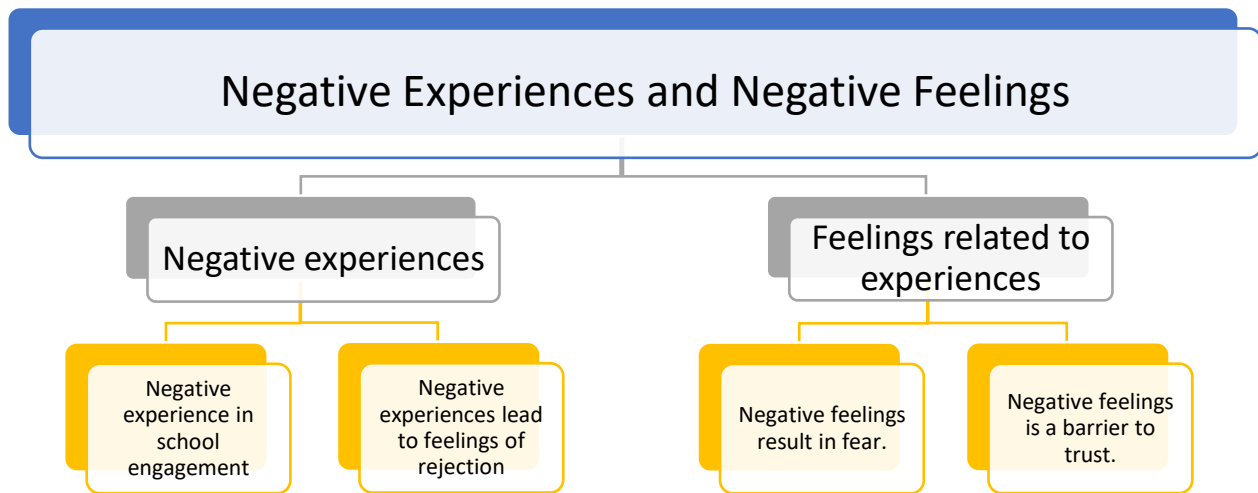


Figure 13. Emergent theme: Negative experiences and feelings.

Table 13

Emergent Theme: Negative Experiences

Emergent Theme	Categories	Villager Codes	Parent CLE Codes
Negative experiences and negative feelings	Negative experiences (37)	• Confrontation towards teachers (7) • Rejection, Unwelcomed (5) • Negative experiences with African-American families (3)	• Rejection, Unwelcomed (11) • Negative experiences with staff (11)
	Negative feelings related to experiences (44)	• Negative feelings, teachers (10) • Teachers fear African-American parents (14) • Defensive actions (5) • Hesitant communication (3)	• Negative feelings, parents (9) • African-American parents fear teachers (3)

Negative Experiences

Collectively, the data demonstrate that negative experiences have impacted the attitudes and beliefs of both African-American parents and teachers and the school partnerships. Negative experiences were identified as a category in the data collected from both the Villagers and African-American parents. Teachers and African-American parents had negative experiences (n=44) when referencing interactions at school and how they lead to feelings of rejection (n=14). Throughout PAR Cycle One activities, participants shared their experiences of attempted school partnerships. Parents shared some experiences that have shaped the way in which they view their role in school. These experiences were negative encounters with school staff. The data from the parent CLE referenced rejection by staff or feeling unwelcome (n=11) and negative experiences with staff (n=11). The experiences cited by parents included one parent's story of how she gets blank stares from her child's teacher when picking up her student. She expressed her desire to be acknowledged as a parent with a general greeting (Family CLE, November 15, 2022). African-American parents cited a desire to be accepted, respected, and regarded as partners to promote student success.

The Villagers shared experiences that have shaped the way in which they view partnerships with African-American families. The data from Villagers CLE referenced confrontation towards teachers (n=7), feelings of rejection (n=5), and general negative experiences with African-American families (n=3). Although many instances involving families of African-American students did not end in confrontations, the recollection of the Villagers focused on negative experiences with African-Americans. All the Villagers recalled an experience when a Black parent was upset with them and verbally reacted in a negative way (CPR Meeting, October 20, 2022). One teacher shared that she feels anxious when she meets a

new African-American family because she does not know how they receive her so she was guarded with her words (Christine, CPR Meeting, October 20, 2022). The data indicate that the negative experiences have created a condition of fear for both teachers and African-American families. The fear impeded the formation of partnerships. The cultural differences may play a role in the way in which parents and staff experience the interactions. Both parents and staff have indicated that they want a stronger partnership; however prior negative experiences seem to impact how families and teachers interact in the school environment.

Negative Feelings

The data indicate that negative feelings from previous experiences impact how teachers and African-American parents' partner in schools (n=44). Parents cited negative feelings as a result of interactions with school staff (n=9) while the Villagers cited negative feelings as a result of interactions with parents (n=10). Teachers and parents both indicated feelings of fear (n=17) and defensiveness as a result of previous experiences (n=5). Teachers cited hesitation to communicate with African-Americans (n=3) as a result. While teachers fear confrontation, parents fear rejection. These feelings of fear impact the ability to build a partnership. This dynamic of fear was apparent in the stories that were shared in both CLEs. Negative feelings become barriers to building relationships.

In order to build effective partnerships, trust must be established. Parents and teachers must have good intentions and feel the mutual commitment to supporting their students. Prior negative experiences can be replaced with more positive experiences if opportunities are created with the intention of increasing cultural understanding and building relational trust. Fear of the unknown is natural; for this reason, we must focus on educating and informing our school communities about ways to build positive experiences that result in home-school partnerships.

Reflection and Planning

The reflection process throughout PAR Cycle One allowed me to expand my own thinking and listen constructively. I continued to follow Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycles and wrote leadership reflections on new learning and then applied that learning to my research. This was most prevalent when considering data to establish categories and emergent themes. To conclude, I discuss my leadership reflection for PAR Cycle One and the planning process for Cycle Two.

Leadership Reflection

Throughout PAR Cycle One I learned that the dynamics of culture play a strong role in transforming partnerships in schools. In my Cycle One facilitation, I tried to listen deeply, rather than contribute heavily, due to my need to better understand the issues from the perspectives of the participants. It was apparent that teachers and parents have the best intentions and want better partnerships, but the issues of cultural differences and the lack of knowledge about the different cultures impedes relationship building in many cases. I learned that opportunities must be provided to both parents and teachers to support inclusion among both groups. Inclusion refers to the opportunity to acknowledge and value other cultures. These opportunities must include clear and consistent communication about students and opportunities for teachers and parents to build relationships and share stories. One example is providing a safe space to talk about hopes and dreams, interact with one another, share ideas, and participate in learning opportunities to increase cultural awareness and address stereotypes. I believe this is what teachers need to do if they really want to effect change. They have to examine their own beliefs and practices. They have to listen and develop a new conception of what partnerships with African-American parents look like.

During the Community Learning Exchanges, I learned what was most important for the Villagers and the parents. I learned that both groups have a desire to work together and support children well. I also learned that they have different ideas about what this looks like. For parents, effective and relevant communication was essential. Parents expressed the desire to have more information about the performance of their children and information about how to best support their learning. For the Villagers, trust seemed to be the concept that most captured their needs. Teachers want to be trusted by parents, and they want to trust that African-American families communicate positively with them. I learned that trust and communication are foundational to establishing the cultural understanding that support stronger partnerships. I am learning that I am a cultural broker—a bridge for creating spaces where culture can be examined, addressed, and ultimately valued by both parents and teachers. As a result, in the next cycle I researched best practices that promote opportunities for both groups to understand, accept, and demonstrate relational trust while building partnerships.

Action Steps for PAR Cycle Two

Par Cycle One provided insight into the previous experiences of teachers and parents, as well as barriers to successful partnerships. Next, I designed Community Learning Exchanges and explored best practices that promote relational trust and partnerships among African-American families and the school staff. During PAR Cycle Two, I refined the data, identified nuances, and fortified emerging themes. The exploration and information gathering process provided the opportunity to explore the research questions more deeply: (1) To what extent do parents and teachers cultivate and increase relational trust; (2) To what extent do school policies and teachers' practices change communication and authentic engagement with African-American

parents, and (3) How does an African-American leader in a racially diverse school engage all constituents to equitably support students?

CHAPTER 6: PAR CYCLE TWO AND FINDINGS

In this chapter, I discuss the themes from PAR Cycle Two and present the findings from the participatory action research (PAR) project and study. The focus of practice was to increase the capacity of teachers within a school to cultivate productive partnerships with African-American parents. I continued the iterative process of understanding how to increase partnerships between teachers and African-American parents in one California school. I engaged in a second PAR Cycle process and analysis to fortify the emergent themes developed in the previous cycles. This chapter highlights the culmination of the data to offer two findings.

In the Pre-Cycle, I began the project by designing activities to develop relational trust among the co-practitioner researcher group, called the *Villagers*. These activities were designed for the Villagers to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about their partnerships with the African-American parents. In the Pre-Cycle, the data revealed that communication and trust were the two areas of concern affecting the Villagers' partnerships with African-American parents. Then, in PAR Cycle One, I engaged the Villagers in exploring how their experiences, thoughts, and ideas were connected to how they engaged with African-American families. I also engaged African-American parents and learned about their perspectives in partnering with school staff and their efforts to develop effective partnerships with teachers. The themes that emerged from the PAR Cycle One data were: (a) Trust and communication are essential to partnerships, (b) Lack of cultural understanding impacts relationships, and (c) Negative experiences and negative feelings are barriers to forming trusting relationships. The Villagers expressed that the teachers need to establish trust and communication between themselves and African-American parents, that teachers do not understand African-American culture, and that their previous negative experiences and feelings impeded their ability to engage in an effective partnership.

In PAR Cycle Two, I facilitated Community Learning Exchanges with the Villagers, African-American parents, and the teachers at Lovehall Elementary. The analysis of Cycle Two data fortified the emergent themes identified in PAR Cycle One. I also learned that teachers and African-American parents defined partnerships differently. Through the inquiry process, I identified two key findings of the PAR project and study:

1. When there is a lack of cultural understanding, partnerships between African-American parents and teachers are negatively impacted, and
2. When there is mutual communication—places and spaces to talk—African-American parents and teachers are better positioned to partner.

In this chapter, I outline a detailed analysis of the final PAR cycle and the overall research findings. The chapter is divided into two primary sections: In section one, I discuss the PAR Cycle Two process and analysis, and in section two, I outline the participatory action research study findings.

PAR Cycle Two Process and Analysis

The process for Cycle Two (March–May 2023) was designed further to inform the PAR study and the overarching research question: *How does a school develop collective capacity to cultivate productive partnerships with African-American parents?* The evidence collected throughout Cycle Two fortified the themes that led to the findings for the study and project. The activities and data collected for each meeting and activity are shown in Table 14.

Activities

PAR Cycle Two included two CPR meetings and three Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs). I began in March 2023 with an initial CPR meeting with the Villagers. We reflected on the emergent themes from PAR Cycle One and designed PAR Cycle Two activities.

Table 14

PAR Cycle Two Activities and Data

Meeting	Date	Activities	Data Collected
Villagers Meeting #1	March 8, 2023	• Constructivist Listening Protocol	• Agenda • Notes from shared information and storytelling
CLE with African-American Parents	March 22, 2023	• World Café Protocol	• Agenda • Artifacts from discussion rounds • Notes from parent storytelling
Villagers Meeting #2	April 24, 2023	Reflection Protocol 1	Agenda Notes from shared information and storytelling
CLE with Teachers, including Villagers	May 1, 2023	• Reflection Protocol • Constructivist Discussion	Agenda Notes from shared information and storytelling
CLE with Villagers	May 11, 2023	• Reflection Protocol • Constructivist Discussion	Agenda Notes from shared information and storytelling

based on examining those themes using a constructivist learning protocol. The Villagers gave input on the agendas for the CLE's to generate ideas on how to improve partnerships with the African-American families. We gathered comprehensive data in each of the Community Learning Exchanges: one with African-American parents, one with the teaching staff and Villagers, and the final one with only the Villagers. In each CLE, the participants shared their previous school partnership experiences, what they needed in a partnership, and their desires for future school partnerships. We engaged in storytelling, discussions, and constructivist listening to learn from each other and share ideas.

For the African-American CLE, the parents participated in the World Café Protocol (see Appendix H) to share their experiences and ideas about ways to improve parent-teacher partnerships. The questions asked during the CLEs are in Table 15. Eighteen African-American parents participated in the CLE; their input was coded in the codebook. Twenty-one teachers attended the Teacher CLE. Teachers wrote responses to the same questions presented to the African-American parents. After writing their responses, the teachers were presented with the responses from the parent CLE, and then the teachers discussed the two sets of responses. We planned a third CLE intended to create space for collaborative sharing among teachers and African-American parents. This CLE was attended by 6 teachers but no parents; therefore, there was no data collected during this activity. The last CLE was the final activity with the Villagers. We reflected on the data sets collected from the CLEs and throughout the three cycles of the PAR project. We also engaged in the Constructivist Listening Protocol, giving each member of the team an opportunity to share their learning across the research project.

Table 15

Research Questions Presented in the CLE

Date	Questions
African-American Parent CLE - March 22, 2023	1. What does parent engagement in school mean to you? What does it look like? Feel like? 2. How can Lovehall portray, and/or promote, high levels of partnership with parents of color? 3. What has been your experience partnering, and/or communicating, with teachers at Lovehall?
Teacher CLE - May 1, 2023	1. What does parent engagement in school mean to you? What does it look like? Feel Like? 2. What has been your experience partnering and/or communicating with AA Parents as an educator? 3. As a teacher, what do you view as the most important aspects of partnering with parents?
Villager CLE - May 11, 2023	1. What does the data collected tell us about trust and communication? 2. What does the data collected tell us about the role of culture and previous experiences? 3. Given what we have learned, what are the implications for future actions?

Analysis

I analyzed data from PAR Cycle Two and combined the data sets of all three PAR cycles of inquiry using the Saldaña (2016) coding method. Saldaña (2016) stipulates that data is "recoded" and involves the comparison of "data to data, data to code, code to code, code to category, category to category, and back to data" (p. 58). I organized the codebook to assign codes to the collected data to fortify categories, amplify the themes, and create the findings across the three research cycles. The coding process allowed me to build on the codes collected in Pre-Cycle and create categories and emerging themes in Cycle One. I analyzed the Cycle Two data by each participant group: Villagers, staff, and African-American parents, to understand the separate and similar needs of each group.

The analysis from PAR Cycle Two fortified the three themes identified in PAR Cycle One: (a) Trust and communication are essential to partnerships; (b) Lack of cultural understanding impacts relationships; and (c) negative experiences and negative feelings are barriers to forming trusting relationships. In the data analysis from PAR Cycle Two, I found that teachers and African-American parents both expressed a need for good communication and trust (43%); and continued to express concerns related to their cultural differences and the negative experiences in developing partnerships previously (35% of responses) as barriers to forming a partnership. A new idea that emerged from the Cycle Two data was that African-American parents and teachers defined the home-school partnership differently (22%) and the different definitions also presented a barrier to forming the partnership.

The analysis of Cycle Two data identified elements that were important to participants and areas where teachers and African-American parents held different viewpoints. As shown in Figure 14, the areas examined fortify the themes identified across Cycle Two. The data show

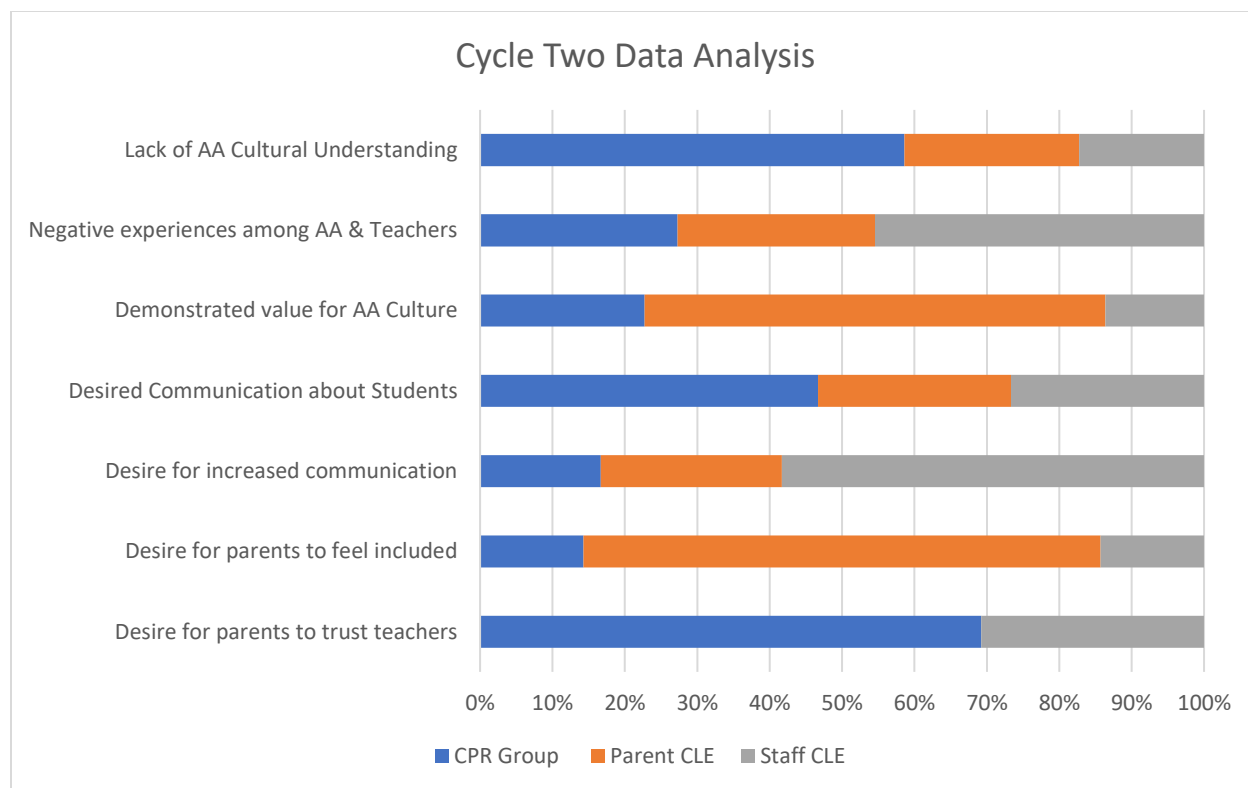


Figure 14. Cycle Two data analysis.

that staff has a desire to be trusted by African-American parents (100%) while African-American parents cite a desire to be included (71%). During Community Learning Exchanges, teachers related experiences when African-American parents questioned the teachers' intentions, while parents shared examples of what they perceived as avoidance behaviors from teachers. In the area of communication, teachers stated that they valued increased communication with African-American parents but expressed that they are frequently questioned by African-American parents during communication. Teachers expressed that the parents should trust, not question, the information shared. African-American parents shared their belief that a lack of cultural understanding contributes to the lack of trust teachers receive. Teachers agreed (76%) that they have a lack of understanding of the African-American cultural norms.

The data analyzed over the three cycles of inquiry led to my assertion of two key findings: (1) When there is a lack of cultural understanding from the teachers, partnerships between African-American parents and teachers are negatively impacted, and (2) when there is mutual communication—places and spaces to talk—African-American parents and teachers are better positioned to partner. Next, I present the data summary across the PAR project that supports the findings.

PAR Data Summary

Data collection and analysis across the PAR project included three cycles of inquiry. Table 16 shows the data collection activities throughout the research project. The action research began in January 2022 with the Pre-Cycle work of the CPR group. The twelve-week Pre-Cycle established a shared understanding of the focus of practice, served to build relational trust within the research group, and provided data needed to inform the design of the project. During the Pre-Cycle, I designed activities to understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences

Table 16

PAR Data Summary

Meeting	Date	Activities	Data
Pre-Cycle CPR Meeting	January 5, 2022	• Introduction to PAR	• Agenda • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
Pre-Cycle CPR Meeting	January 26, 2022	• Personal Narrative	• Agenda • Narrative Artifacts
Pre-Cycle CPR Meeting	February 16, 2022	• Photo Voice Protocol	• Agenda • Photo Voice Artifact • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
Pre-Cycle CPR Meeting	March 2, 2022	• Gallery Walk	• Agenda • Gallery Walk Artifacts • Activity Debrief Notes • Reflective Memo
Pre-Cycle CPR Meeting	March 23, 2022	• Debrief/Reflection on PAR Activities	• Agenda • Activity Debrief Notes • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
Cycle One CPR #1	September 27, 2022	• Review of focus of practice and PAR Design	• Agenda • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
Cycle One CLE #1 with Villagers	October 20, 2022	• Emulation Poems • Reflection Protocol	• Agenda • Poem Artifacts • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
Cycle One CPR Meetings #2 and #3	October 27, 2022 November 3, 2022	• Personal Narratives • Reflection Protocol	• Agenda • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
Cycle One CLE #2 with Villagers	November 11, 2022	• Chalk Talk	• Agenda • Gallery Walk Artifacts • Field Notes

Table 16 (continued)

Meeting	Date	Activities	Data
Cycle One CLE #3 with Parents	November 15, 2022	• Photo Voice Activity	• Agenda • Photo Voice Artifacts • Field Notes • Reflective Memo
Cycle Two CPR Meeting	March 8, 2023	• Constructivist Listening Protocol	• Agenda • Notes from shared information and storytelling
Cycle Two CLE with AA Parents	March 22, 2023	• World Café Protocol	• Agenda • Artifacts from discussion rounds • Notes from parent storytelling
Cycle Two CPR Meeting	April 24, 2023	• Reflection Protocol	• Agenda • Notes from shared information and storytelling
Cycle Two Staff CLE	May 1, 2023	• Reflection Protocol • Constructivist Discussion	• Agenda • Notes from Activity • Storytelling Notes
Cycle Two CLE with Villagers and Staff	May 10, 2023	• World Café Protocol	• No data collected
Cycle Two Villagers CLE	May 11, 2023	• Reflection Protocol • Constructivist Discussion • Storytelling	• Agenda • Notes from Activity • Storytelling Notes

of the Villagers that related to home-school partnerships with African-American parents. The Pre-Cycle research identified emergent categories in three areas: (1) Home-school connection, (2) previous experiences, and (3) systemic influences. The data identified that the previous experiences of teachers impacted their ability to improve partnerships with African-American families and that the systems established in schools guide the strength of the home-school connection.

PAR Cycle One included data collected from Community Learning Exchanges attended by the Villagers and African-American parents between September and November 2022. The data collected from CLEs and CPR activities informed the experiences of staff and African-American parents at Lovehall school and established the assets and challenges of building partnerships between teachers and African-American parents. Cycle One data identified that trust and communication are essential to forming partnerships with African-American families. Further data showed that the lack of understanding cultural norms and the previous negative experiences of the teachers and parents were negatively impacting the development of partnerships of teachers and African-American parents.

During the final cycle of the project, PAR Cycle Two, data collected from the Lovehall staff, African-American parents, and the Villagers were openly shared to generate dialogue and collective understanding of how to best improve partnerships. The data in Cycle Two demonstrated the need for community building through effective communication and cultural understanding to increase partnerships between teachers and African-American families. The data collected across the research cycles led to two key findings derived from the data presented. Next, I present the findings and evidence from the three cycles to support the findings.

Findings

Across the three research cycles, the data showed that African-American parents and teachers articulated pathways and barriers to home-school partnerships. This led to two findings:

1. When there is a lack of *cultural understanding*, partnerships between African-American parents and teachers are negatively impacted.
2. When there is *mutual communication*—places and spaces to talk—African-American parents and teachers are better positioned to partner.

While mutual communication supports the potential for increased partnerships, a lack of cultural understanding presents barriers to the formation of partnerships among African-American parents and teachers. Figure 15 demonstrates the categories assigned to the data collected across the PAR project that fortifies these findings. The collective data identified cultural understanding and mutual communication as key findings within the research related to cultivating effective partnerships with African-American parents. During the Community Learning exchanges, African-American parents frequently stated that mutual communication is needed to form partnerships and felt communication was lacking. Similarly, teachers expressed that they would like to communicate more with African-American families but that communication was difficult due to a perceived lack of availability and interest. The data showed that a lack of cultural understanding was a key factor in establishing partnerships and communication.

African-American parents and teachers described a lack of cultural understanding and previous negative experiences as barriers to forming productive partnerships. Both groups named establishing effective communication and building trust as potential pathways to creating places and spaces to form partnerships. Figure 16 shows the data collected across the project related to

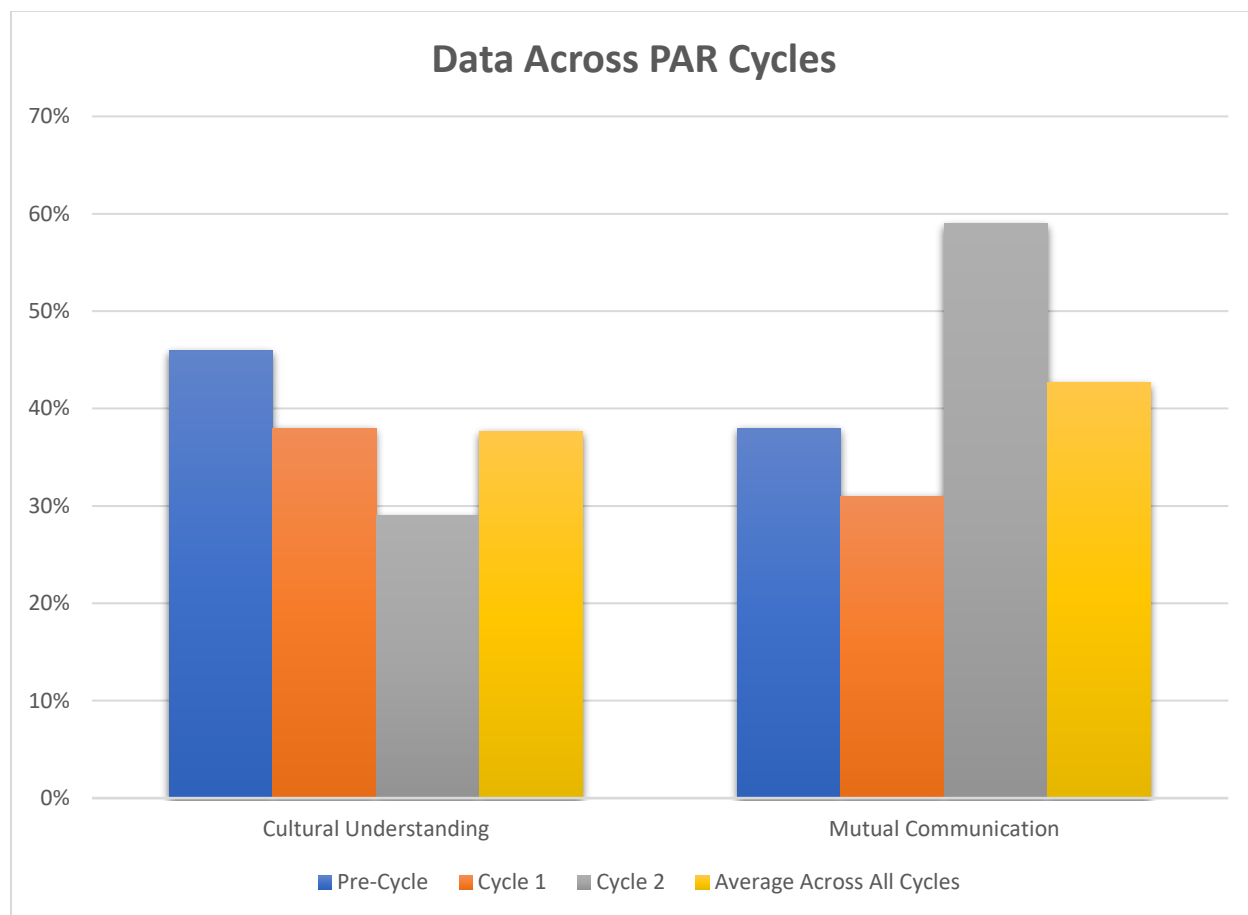


Figure 15. Data across PAR cycles.

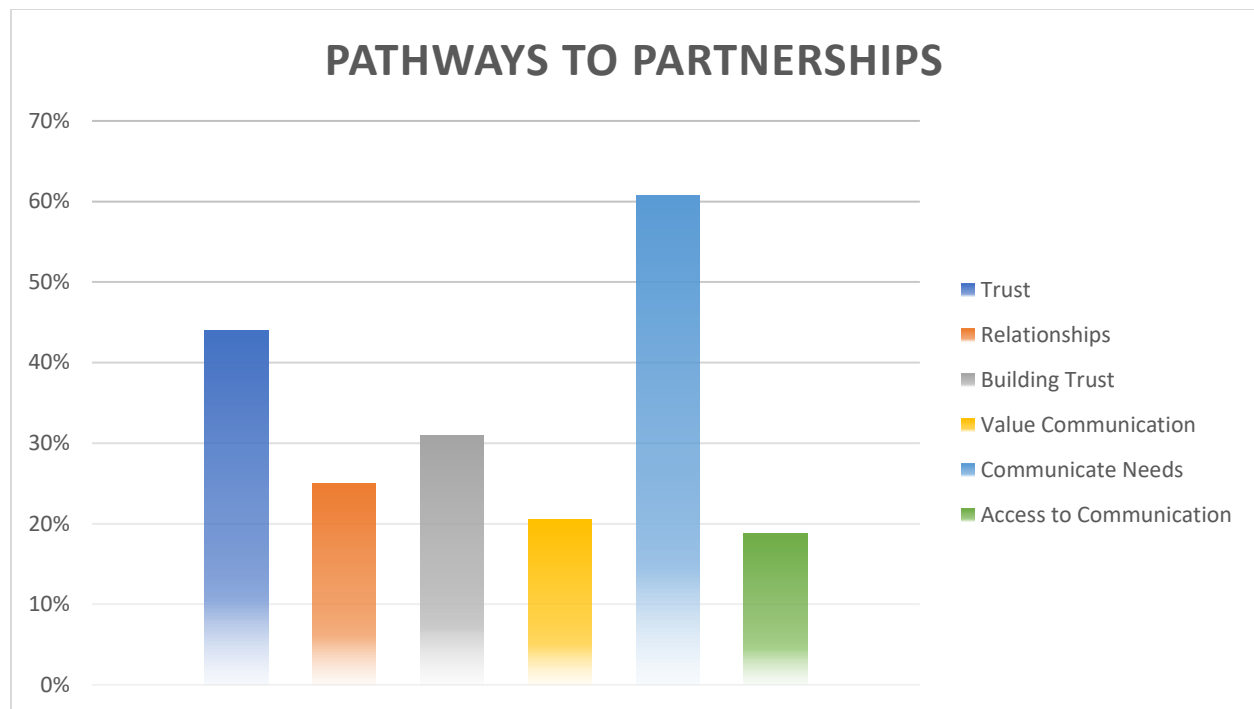


Figure 16. Pathways to partnerships.

pathways and Figure 17 shows the data related to barriers to partnerships. The data was analyzed, coded, and categorized to support the key findings. During the Community Learning Exchanges, four areas were recurring themes from parents and teachers. Teachers and African-American parents shared a desire to support student academic achievement, and both recognized that increased partnerships would support increased student success. Next, I discuss two key findings and the supporting data.

Cultural Understanding

When there is a lack of cultural understanding, partnerships between African-American parents and teachers are negatively impacted. Teachers and African-American parents acknowledged that cultural differences impacted the development of parent-teacher partnerships at Lovehall Elementary. The school serves an ethnically diverse community: 20% of the students and families are African-American and 90% of the total school enrollment is composed of students from ethnic minority cultures. The cultural representation of the staff includes White teachers (64%) and representatives of other ethnic minorities (36%); however, there are no African-Americans on the teaching staff. Figure 18 represents the cultural barriers to forming partnerships. Three areas emerged from the data: (1) Lovehall teachers do not know African-American culture (39% of responses), (2) Lovehall teachers do not hold value for African-American culture (38% of responses), and (3) Lovehall teachers have not been culturally responsive in developing partnerships (23% of responses). During activities with the Villagers and CLEs across the PAR cycles, staff and parents shared experiences and feelings related to the identified lack of cultural understanding. When sharing stories about previous interactions, parents expressed feelings of “suspicion” and “caution” from teachers during interactions.

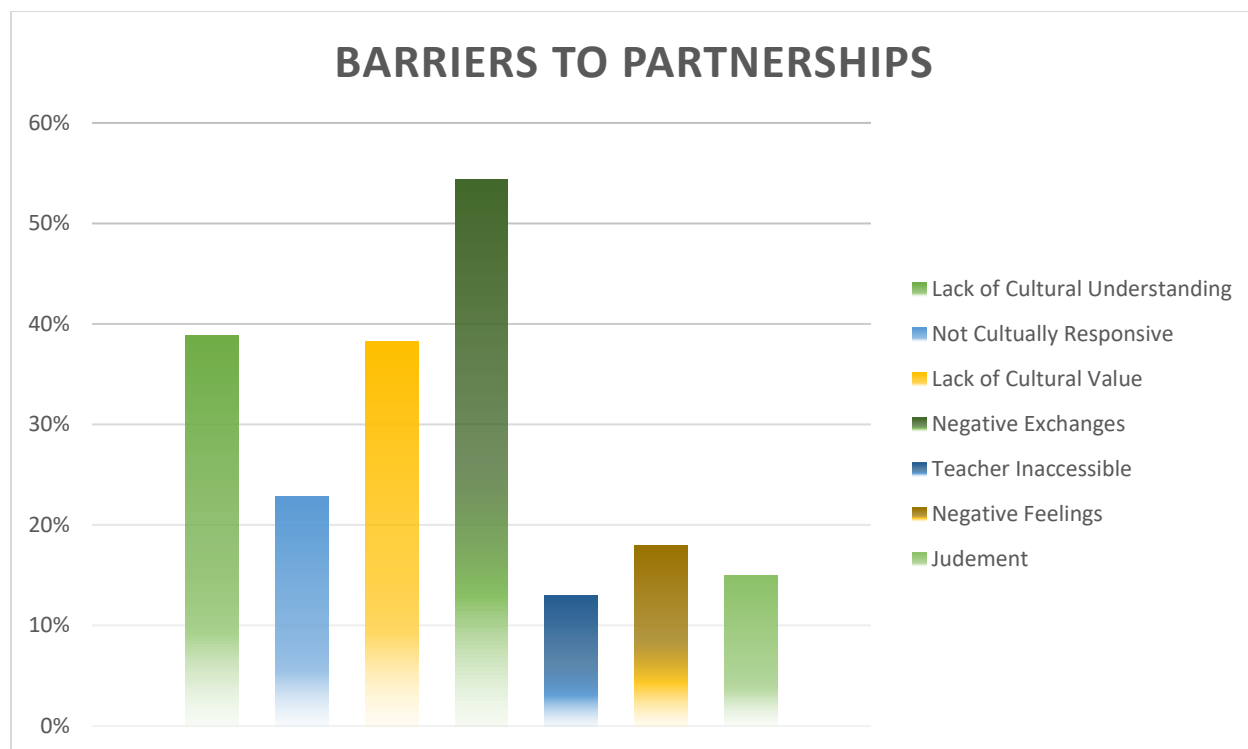


Figure 17. Barriers to partnerships.

LACK OF CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

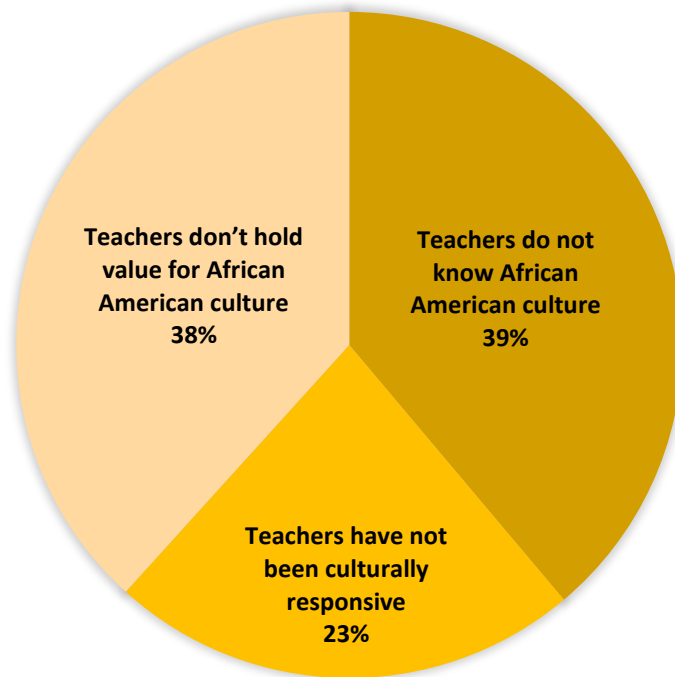


Figure 18. Barriers related to lack of cultural understanding.

Likewise, teachers shared that they were unsure of the intention of African-American families, citing conversations that were “spirited,” “unproductive,” or “confrontational” (CLE May 1, 2023). One teacher recognized that the communication style of African-American parents is “different” and that rather than being suspicious, teachers should assume best intentions even when parents were overly expressive with gestures, personal space, or volume when engaging in dialogue (CPR Meeting, March 23, 2022). Next, I present evidence of the cultural barriers to forming partnerships identified during the limited research study.

Teachers Do Not Know African-American Culture

Lovehall teachers do not know or understand African-American culture (38%). Cultural norms can present a barrier to partnerships due to differences in lifestyle, values, and experiences (Morris & Taylor, 1998). Teachers expressed that they struggled to connect with African-American parents. They specifically mentioned that African-American parents questioned their intentions during communication, were overly expressive when they communicated, and did not make themselves available for phone calls or meetings. These assumptions are related to the historical and current experiences of African-Americans within schools (Lareau & MacNamara, 1999). Teachers did not connect any historical or social implications in their narratives about partnerships with African-American families. They acknowledged problems with the comfort level of African-American parents with teachers, and they named that African-American parents seem distrustful of teachers, but they had not made any attempts to analyze or understand the barriers to relationships or the lack of partnership with these families.

The Villagers expressed that African-American families were misunderstood and, in some cases, feared by teachers. Although there were limited examples of interactions between teachers and African-American parents that resulted in conflict, the Villagers believed that the

Lovehall teachers had generalized these occasional conflicts as applicable to all African-American families. For example, teachers were judgmental when parents did not know how to help their kids with reading or when homework was incomplete; or when they felt dismissed in situations of student conflict or behavioral issues. Teachers found tone and hand gestures during conversations as areas of concern. The expressive nature of African-Americans during in-person communication was deemed “unnecessary emotion” (CLE, November 11, 2022). The teachers’ lack of cultural understanding impacted their ability to build relationships and make connections that are required of partnerships.

Teachers Do Not Hold Value for African-American Culture

Teachers do not hold value for African-American culture (38%). Teachers used words such as difficult, defensive, judgmental, and negative in the descriptions of their interactions with African-American families. Teachers who feared dealing with an angry Black parent experienced a barrier to partnering with them. Teachers generalized that the African-American parents act as if school is not valued and teachers are not trusted. Through analysis, I found that the teachers characterized all African-American families in this way and shared that the parents were “just not interested in education.” The generalization implied that African-American families did not value school. This devaluing of the African-American cultural expectation of education was grounded in preconceived notions and unconscious bias. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2015) suggests that preservice should help teachers understand biases they may hold, citing these biases as barriers to relationships with and expectations for diverse learners and their families.

Teachers acknowledged a need to better understand the African-American family experience in schools. For example, one teacher expressed that she would like to better

understand how to reach her African-American parents, but she recognized that she had offended an African-American parent when discussing the student's behavior or performance. She expressed worry that the parents felt talked down to, and she was trying to find simple words to get her point across. When asked why she needed simple words, she replied that she did not think the parents would understand her academic terms. This was an example of unconscious bias towards African-American parents, which led to devaluing their worth or the parents' contribution to the school.

Teachers Have Not Been Culturally Responsive

Although African-American parents defined a need for home-school partnerships that reflect their cultural norms and expectations, they said that teachers needed to be culturally responsive (23%). During CLEs, parents, teachers, and the Villagers were asked what an effective parent-teacher partnership looks like. African-American parents defined partnerships as parents being connected to the school community and working together with school staff while teachers defined partnerships as parents supporting the academic programs at home. The differences stood out because while the parents expressed a need for a connection with the teachers, the teachers focused more on the parents trusting them to do their jobs and supporting them with homework at home. Parents defined partnerships as relational and interactive, while teachers defined partnerships as functional and providing direction. The African-American cultural norms in defining partnerships centered on social interactions, storytelling, or learning by listening and engagement. The teachers' ideas of a partnership centered on academia and directives to produce. These differences are rooted in defining cultural expectations that must be understood to find effective ways to partner. The lack of consensus regarding a definition for parent-teacher partnerships results in a disconnected relationship between the two (Fan & Chen,

2001). The disconnection occurs when teachers are not being responsive to the partnership and the needs of African-American parents.

The lack of cultural responsiveness from the teachers is also related to the negative impact of their previous experiences. During the staff CLE, several teachers spoke of difficulties connecting with African-American families because of the teachers' own previous negative experiences. They stated that relationships with African-American parents are inconsistent and that they struggle to communicate with some of their African-American parents due to fear of conflict or verbal confrontation. Parents described other negative experiences that included having teachers treat them as students, not partners, or that teachers "talk down" to African-American parents when they ask for guidance in matters of discipline and academic support strategies. One specific example was a parent's emotional response to trying to get help for her student. She said the teacher brushed her off and told her that she just needed to help her child with the assigned homework each night. She said, "My child cannot complete the homework that she assigns, and she doesn't seem to care" (CLE, March 22, 2023). The parent believed that the teacher would have been more responsive to the needs of White or Asian parents. She stated that the teacher did not want to discuss the problem with her because Black parents are always treated differently. Negative past experiences have been proven as a barrier that prevents parents and teachers from communicating (Joshi et al., 2005). This example demonstrates a lack of cultural responsiveness between teachers and African-American parents and a barrier to communicating. Both viewpoints must be considered and addressed to improve partnerships. The parents expressed that they experienced teachers engaging in behaviors of avoidance and judgment, rather than being responsive problem solvers, which negatively impacted their view of the

partnership. The issue of cultural barriers can be best addressed with improved communication, the second finding.

Mutual Communication

When there is mutual communication—places and spaces to talk—African-American parents and teachers are better positioned to partner. Communication and trust among teachers and African-American families was stated as necessary to form a true partnership. Figure 19 demonstrates the role of trust and communication. Throughout all cycles of the project and study, trust and communication were consistent themes related to forming partnerships. The evidence suggests that teachers and parents need places and spaces to interact to build structures for effective communication. The facilitation of these opportunities to interact must include an intentional focus to create a safe space where African-American parents and teachers are willing to take risks and speak their truth. The interaction must include opportunities for collective listening and reflecting to build understanding through the sharing of their truth. When there are spaces and places to gather and build trust, they build the partnership that is needed to support students. Next, I present evidence to show that communication and trust are essential to establishing the places and spaces that can lead to effective partnerships. These elements are developed through opportunities to interact, share experiences, and learn from each other. Then, I further examine the role of communication and trust as it relates to this finding.

The Role of Communication

Teachers and African-American parents expressed a need for clear and consistent communication in a home-school partnership; however, the data needs to demonstrate that there is a divide in the type and purpose of the desired communication for teachers and African-American parents. Figure 20 identifies the three areas related to communication needs in the

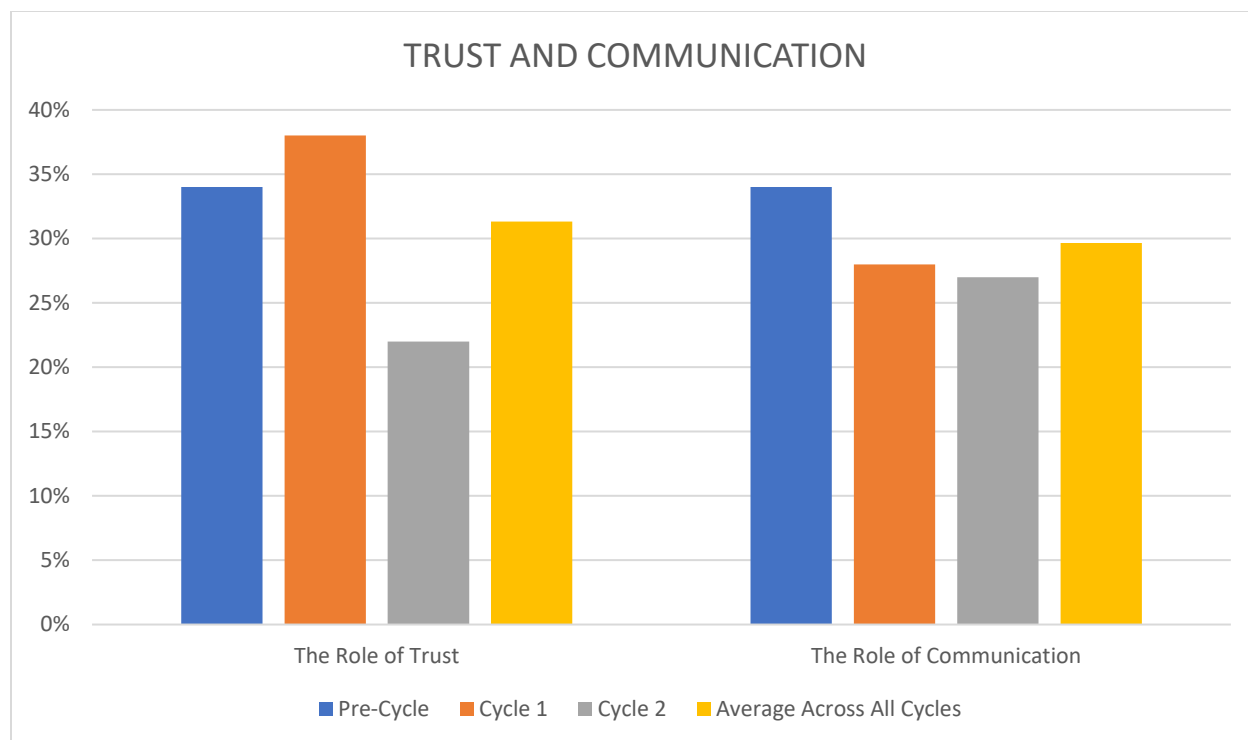


Figure 19. Trust and communication data across PAR cycles.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN PARTNERSHIPS

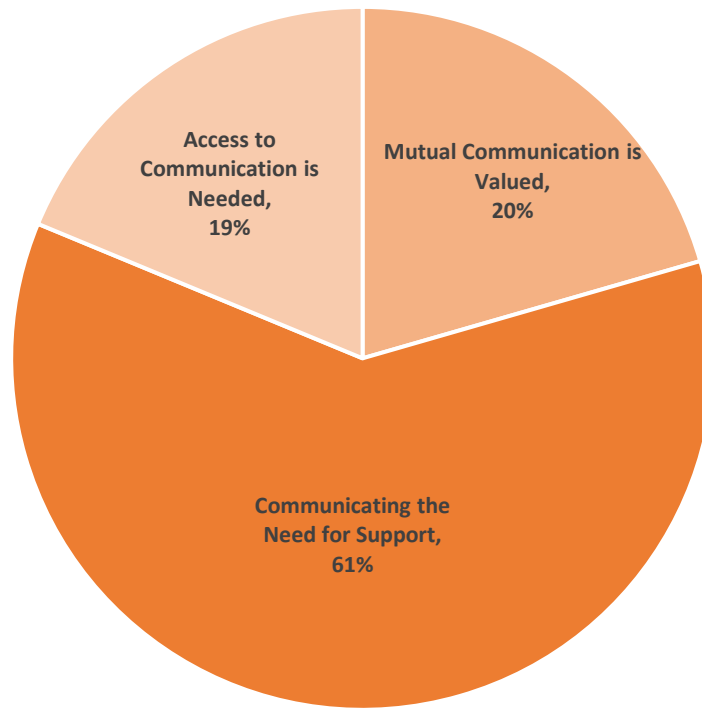


Figure 20. The role of communication in partnerships.

stories of teachers and African-American parents: (1) Communicating the need for support is important to teachers and African-American parents (61%); (2) Communication between teachers and parents is valued (20%); and (3) access to communication was expressed as a need for African-American parents (19%). While parents expressed a desire for more information regarding their student's individual needs and progress, teachers cited a more formalized communication need related to the general classroom events and instructional goals. The differences in desired communication led to a lack of alignment between school and home. The data indicate that when teachers and African-American parents build opportunities to communicate together, they were better positioned to build partnerships.

During the parent CLE, African-American parents were asked what their experience partnering, and/or communicating with teachers at Lovehall School has been. Similarly, teachers were asked the same question about African-American parents at the staff CLE. Both groups were also asked about their current needs for communication. Overall, both parents and teachers established that communication is valued and needed; however, African-American parents expressed a concern regarding limited access to communication and shared desires for more opportunities to interact and build communication. Parents resist school partnerships and have difficulty engaging when cultural and communication differences are not considered (Au & Mason, 1981).

Communication about student progress was established as a necessity for building partnerships. African-American parents emphasized the need to communicate with teachers regarding potential student support and updates on student progress. The parents shared an example of great communication with one Lovehall teacher; that one first grade teacher sent weekly updates about the lessons and described what students were expected to learn by the end

of each week (CLE, November 2022). Parents felt that the communication was an effective way to support their children and they had a clear indication of what their children should master.

Parents understood through the weekly communication that the teacher was invested in the success of every child. The same parents shared that their children were now older (grade four) and that they had yet to experience that level of communication since grade one.

The teachers acknowledged that African-American parents were interested in the success of their students but found it difficult to maintain frequent and detailed communication. Teachers shared that rather than weekly newsletters, many shared short messages on the community chat with reminders to parents about classroom projects and reminders. Further discussion revealed that this method of communication was less about getting support for students, but more about informing parents of classroom expectations. Teachers shared that they relied heavily on parent conferences and report cards to update parents on the progress of all students but recognized that the communication on student progress was infrequent. Teachers demonstrated a reliance on standard structures of communication and expressed difficulty initiating conversations with African-American parents due to a fear of being misunderstood in their messaging.

Communicating the need for support is essential to forming partnerships and meeting the needs of African-American students who consistently underperform according to school data. Parents expressed that the yearly parent-teacher conference was an effective space for communication but shared a concern that the experience did not occur throughout the year. Parents expressed that the formal conferences were a “one and done” experience, but it was the only in-person experience they could count on to discuss academic concerns with teachers. This demonstrates the need for increased spaces and places for parents and teachers to communicate and support the needs of the students.

Although teachers and African-American parents both expressed a belief in the value of communication, the parents did not experience that belief from the teachers. Indeed, the parents

shared that they felt a lack of access to teachers and information. The parents shared that the absence of in-person communication seemed intentional, and that school policies appeared designed to prevent in person interaction. For example, parents were not allowed to go beyond the office, nor could they step onto the school playground to have questions or concerns addressed. As a result, parents at Lovehall are limited to written or phone communication unless a teacher chooses to come out to the parking lot and engage in communication. In this way the school policy was a barrier to access and amplified the issue of teachers and African-American parents not having the opportunity to verbally communicate. When there is access to mutual communication—places and spaces to talk—African-American parents and teachers are better positioned to partner. Trust was identified as essential to building partnerships. To describe the evidence of how the partnerships work, I examine the role of trust.

The Role of Trust

Trust was described as an essential element to establishing communication in home-school partnerships. African-American parents and teachers expressed a desire for mutual trust; however, both groups agreed that trust was not well established. Figure 21 shows that across the project teachers and African-American parents defined the role of trust in partnerships by placing an emphasis on opportunities to build trust (31%), establishing trust as important to the process of partner in (44%), and demonstrating a desire for a trusting partnership (25%). The opportunities for trusting interactions—places and spaces to talk—play an important role in establishing partnerships among African-American parents and teachers. African-American culture is grounded in social interaction and therefore, the opportunity to build trust is important to developing partnerships. Further, Schneider (2003) asserts that relational trust is grounded in social respect.

THE ROLE OF TRUST IN PARTNERSHIPS

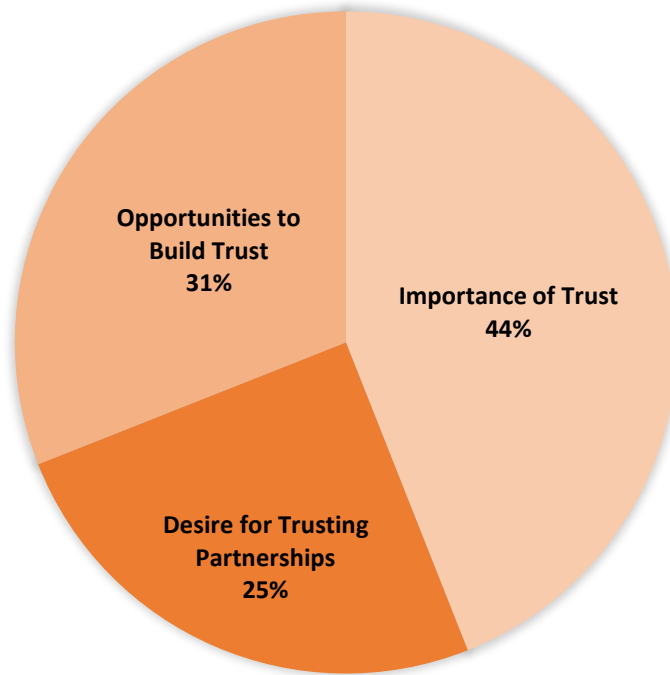


Figure 21. Evidence across the findings.

The evidence from the PAR study suggests that teachers and African-American parents have differing ideas on the role of trust in the partnership and yet, trust is essential for both groups. In addition, African-American parents and teachers had different definitions of parent-teacher partnerships and expressed the need to define their respective roles. The establishment of clear expectations and roles within the partnerships would serve to build relational trust among both groups. Bryk and Schneider (2002) refer to this relational trust as a “social lubricant” in the work of school improvement. An important aspect of school improvement is parents and teachers working together. When parents and teachers trust each other, they are more likely to engage in mutual communication. The development of this trust requires places and spaces that lead to opportunities to establish trust.

African-American parents and teachers identified that developing trust was important to the process of partnering. Teachers expressed the need for parents to trust them unconditionally as professionals, while parents identified trust in terms of their interpersonal relationships with the teachers. Parents expressed a need to build trust with teachers—to trust that teachers were supporting their students’ needs, to trust that they were welcome partners at school, and to trust that information would be provided about their students’ needs and progress. African-American parents cited a distrust of teachers as partners, and teachers confirmed that African-American parents were reluctant to trust them, asserting that parents did not trust their words nor their advice. Parents cited the lack of access to teachers and the lack of social interaction as two barriers to establishing trust. Nieto (1999) and Bloom et al. (2000) have emphasized that teachers must establish respectful and trusting social relationships with children and families, which is essential for school improvement. The data over the three PAR cycles indicate that African-American parents want more interaction with teachers to build trusting relationships. One parent

expressed a concern that teachers do not have an opportunity to get to know her because there are not enough opportunities to socialize and become familiar. The evidence collected during this limited study indicates that trust plays an important role in establishing partnerships and trust is built when there are opportunities—places and spaces—to communicate.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I detailed the PAR Cycle Two process and activities and the two key findings: First, when there is a lack of cultural understanding, partnerships between African-American parents and teachers are negatively impacted, and second, when there is mutual communication—places and spaces to talk—African-American parents and teachers are better positioned to partner. The PAR project engaged teachers and African-American parents in the process of examining how to increase productive partnerships. The project and study identified that the key components for establishing increased future partnerships are to learn about and address the cultural differences that exist between African-American parents and teachers, thereby increasing cultural responsiveness to their partnership needs, and create more spaces and places for these parents and teachers to communicate with each other to build trusting partnerships. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings and the literature to support my findings, my reflection on leadership and its implications for practice.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

When teachers and families come from different ethnic backgrounds, establishing home-school partnerships are more difficult. The experiences and practices of teachers and parents within schools typically dictate their potential to establish partnerships with one another. This is especially true of African-American families (Delale-O'Connor et al., 2020). Throughout the research project, I sought to understand better how to improve parent involvement with African-American families in schools. The focus of practice (FoP) for the participatory action research (PAR) project was to increase the capacity of teachers to cultivate productive relationships with African-American parents. Through such partnerships schools can increase support for African-American students. The theory of action for the PAR project was: *If we enact a participatory action research project that involves teachers learning the importance of cultural norms and experiences, then teachers will increase partnerships with African-American families.*

This chapter summarizes the PAR process and key findings from data collected and analyzed throughout three PAR inquiry cycles through the lens of the research literature. The findings of this PAR study supported the theory of action and reinforced the idea that culturally responsive strategies benefit the parent-teacher relationship and the overall investment in African-American children in the school system. The PAR project and research validated my twenty-eight years of successfully partnering with African-American families for student success as a teacher and educational leader. These findings aligned with the literature highlighted in Chapter 2. In this chapter, I discuss key research findings, a conceptual framework developed as a result of the findings, implications for practice, policy, and research. I conclude with a reflection on my leadership learning through this project.

Build a Village: A Participatory Action Research Study

A major barrier to successful school partnerships with African-American parents is more diversity in school staffing. When the school experience does not reflect the norms of the diverse cultures in the school, communication, trust, and access to support may not meet the needs of the families and students. A successful school experience depends on the environment, practices, and practitioners within the school. Jeynes (2011) indicates that parental involvement generally has a significant positive effect on children's success in school. This is especially important for African-American students who would greatly benefit from increased support through parent-teacher partnerships. Building a diverse staff at a school cannot be immediately solved, but it is a goal for school leaders to pursue. However, the culture and systemic structure of the school are both in the purview of the school leader and can be immediately addressed.

As an African-American, and educational leader, I am well aware of the challenges experienced within the African-American community and have a natural connection to African-American families. This connection supports effective communication and effective relationships with African-American families. Throughout my years in education, I have witnessed teachers struggle to engage and build partnerships with African-American parents. Regional and national data indicate that the absence of partnerships with African-American families contribute to the diminished success of African-American students. Conversely, when relationships are established and where partnerships exist, students achieve at higher levels and have more positive school experiences. Through the PAR process, I was better able to understand some of the challenges involved in creating these relationships and identify strategies to address the barriers to increased partnerships with African-American parents.

I sought to identify how a staff that lacks cultural diversity can build relational trust to increase partnerships with African-American parents. While the student population at Lovehall was twenty percent African-American students, there were no African-American teachers in the school. The lack of diversity among the staff required adoption of effective practices to engage African-American families, as evidenced by the lack of trust between teachers and the African-American families they served and the lack of effective communication between home and school for African-American students. For example, the school staff created a policy that required parents to wait behind a fence during arrival and dismissal, effectively barring parents from the schoolrooms and school grounds. Teachers created this policy out of concern for safety, but African-American parents expressed a belief that it was done to keep them out. The perception expressed by African-American families was that they were considered outsiders to be kept at a distance. Teachers, in response, acknowledged a barrier to communicating with African-American parents, but believed it was due to lack of availability or lack of interest on the parents' part. These competing perceptions are an example of the issues with trust, equitable access, and the need for cultural understanding.

I designed the PAR project to support the development of partnerships among teachers and African-American parents by gathering their input, listening, sharing, and providing opportunities to engage with one another at Community Learning Exchanges (CLE). I worked with a co-practitioner researcher group, the *Villagers*, to collect information to inform the PAR. The Villagers included me, three teachers, and one psychologist—all members of the school staff. The Villagers collected and analyzed data through all research cycles and planned the Community Learning Exchanges, which included activities such as Chalk Talk, Photo-Voice, and World Café protocols as well as Gallery Walks. The goal of the CLEs was to share, listen,

and learn from the experiences and perspectives of others and to build partnerships. We engaged in three cycles of inquiry during the research process as shown in Table 17. During the Pre-Cycle, conducted over twelve weeks beginning in January 2022, I worked to create relational trust among the Villager group. I designed activities to promote understanding through sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences centered on developing partnerships with African-American parents.

I participated in meetings with African-American parents and teachers to observe their interactions during discussions about student support plans, and to better understand existing perceptions of the parent-teacher partnership practices at Lovehall. During Cycle One (ten weeks beginning in September 2022), I continued to explore ways to build relational trust, develop strategies for communication, and promote an open, honest sharing of experiences and ideas. To support open and honest sharing, we first established a safe sharing space for the Villagers to be honest about their experiences and feelings. This was created through grounding our work in collective goals and sharing personal experiences with one another.

I planned and held two CLEs, one with African-American parents and one with the Villagers. I asked parents about their experiences partnering with school staff and I asked the Villagers for ideas on how to improve communication and partnerships with African-American families. In the final cycle of PAR Cycle Two, conducted over ten weeks beginning in March 2023, the Villagers explored ways to continue to build trust and improve partnerships through the CLE protocols. The results of the data collected and analyzed from these activities led to the key findings of this study.

The results of the project and study found that to establish trusting partnerships, there were two key components: Teachers need to be aware of the cultural differences that exist

Table 17

Research Cycle Activities

Activity	PAR PRE-CYCLE (Winter 2022) (Jan - Apr, 2022) Week 1-12			PAR CYCLE 1 (Fall 2022) (Sept – Nov, 2022) Week 1- 10			PAR CYCLE 2 (Spring 2023) (Mar – May, 2023) Week 1-10			
CPR Meetings with the Villagers (n=10)	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Meetings with African-American Parents (n=4)				*	*	*	*			
Community Learning Exchanges (n=7)							*	*	*	*

among African-Americans that require culturally responsive partnerships, meaning partnerships that consider and respect the norms and experiences of other cultures; and schools must create more opportunities, spaces and places, for these parents and teachers to communicate and support building trusting partnerships. The two key findings from the PAR project are: (1) When there is a lack of cultural understanding, partnerships between African-American parents and teachers are negatively impacted; and (2) when there is mutual communication—places and spaces in which to talk—African-American parents and teachers are better positioned to partner. Next, I revisit the findings through the lens of the literature related to this PAR study.

Discussion

In this section, I examine the two findings from the study to show how the literature connects to the findings as shown in Table 18. In Chapter 2, I outlined literature on family engagement, culturally responsive practices, and culturally responsive change leadership. Karen Mapp's (2003) research emphasizes the importance of family involvement for student engagement and achievement while presenting ideas about bridging the barriers to home-school partnerships. Mapp's research on engaging parents in the school environment focuses on social factors that influence why and how parents participate in their child's education. Creating culturally responsive school communities (Nieto, 1999) and addressing systemic cultural barriers to African-American parent involvement (Lareau, 1996) emerged as critical components to improving the capacity to develop partnerships between African-American parents and teachers. As a change agent and cultural broker of this project, I learned the importance of developing relational trust (Bryk, 2010) and creating spaces for reflective listening (Senge, 1990) when building partnerships. Khalifa and colleagues (2016) emphasized the need to make intentional, systemic changes when building culturally responsive schools. The connections

Table 18

Literature for this PAR Study

Family Engagement	Culturally Responsive Practices	Culturally Responsive Change Leadership
Parent Involvement (Epstein, 1995; Henderson, 2013; Mapp & Kuttner, 2014)	Cultural Responsiveness and the African-American Community (Senge, 1990; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2020; Green, 2001)	Culturally Responsive Leadership Moves (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2014)
African-American Family Engagement (Banerjee et al., 2017; Delale-O'Conner et al., 2020; Mapp, 1999, 2003)	Competencies of Culturally Responsive Educators (Gay, 2010; Lareau, 2003)	Community Engagement and Leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016; Bryk, 2010)
Parent-Teacher Relationship (Epstein, 1986; Ozturk, 2013; Mapp, 2003)	Culturally Responsive Communication (Au & Mason, 1981; Henderson & Mapp, 1999)	Community Learning Exchanges (Guajardo et al., 2016)

between the literature review and the research project findings supported the context and analysis of this study, including the need for developing and building partnerships through communication.

Developing Culturally Responsive Partnerships

A culturally responsive partnership requires the consideration of cultural norms, and further requires that the terms of the partnership be predicated on trust and understanding. In the PAR project and study, I identified two culturally responsive conditions needed to increase partnerships between African-American parents and teachers: an awareness of African-American culture and the establishment of relational trust. The PAR study—how to increase partnerships between African-American parents and the teachers who serve the community—began with the realization that the cultural differences and subsequent lack of understanding of the others’ perspectives created a communication barrier. Communication styles, expectations regarding student achievement, and the parents’ lack of access to the school community contributed to the disconnect at Lovehall Elementary.

During the Community Learning Exchanges, both teachers and parents expressed concern about how they would be perceived by each other. Teachers cited a fear of being misunderstood, and parents shared their concern of not feeling welcomed in the school environment and their fear of being judged on the basis of their children’s academic and behavioral challenges. I observed assumptions at play on both sides due to differences in culture—African-American culture and the expectation of mainstream culture—especially as it relates to traditional schooling (Perry et al., 2003). This limited study found that previous school experiences, a lack of cultural awareness, and a lack of opportunities to build relational trust

interfered with developing productive partnerships. Next, I examine the role of cultural awareness and relational trust among teachers and African-American parents in relation to the potential to form productive partnerships.

Developing Cultural Awareness

A requirement for productive partnerships is that the parties feel comfortable working together to accomplish a goal. Understanding and respecting the cultural norms and expectations of the people within your community serves to build trust and comfort in social situations. The experiences shared during the Community Learning Exchanges with teachers and African-American parents demonstrated that while teachers desired a partnership with African-American parents, they often misunderstood cultural cues during conversations. Teachers shared that they were unsure of the reaction of African-American parents if their attempt at communication was not well received. Similarly, parents shared that they could feel the hesitancy of teachers to communicate with them. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) identified three factors contributing to the difficulty in establishing partnerships for parent involvement in schools: (1) the family's perception of their role in the school system, (2) the parent's belief in their ability to contribute to the educational process, and (3) the extent to which parents feel welcome in the school setting. For African-American parents, these factors directly relate to the culture and educational history of African-American people; some African-Americans perceive themselves as outside of the school system, others feel that it is the school's job alone to do the teaching, while still others distrust the educational system and the school staff. It is typically more difficult for Black parents to comply with the institutional standards of school due to the historical legacy of racial discrimination. The history of racial discrimination bred distrust of the institution which leads African-American parents to distrust the teachers within the system. Therefore, race plays

an important role, independent of social class, in forming the terms of home-school relationships (Lareau & MacNamara, 1999). These challenges stemming from historical racial inequity must be addressed to move forward with productive partnerships.

Much of African-American culture centers on social interaction, storytelling, and an expectation of shared responsibility. This presents an issue when the culture of the school, or mainstream culture, emphasizes a hierarchy with the teacher at the top, and the primary source of communication is print-based. Print based communication refers to the written letters, emails, and internet-based communication from the teacher to the parent. This form of communication does not allow for personal interaction, which can result in misinterpretation of meaning and tone. For African-Americans, direct interaction is preferred, and this creates a disconnect in the method of communication expected from each partner. During the study, teachers cited frequent communication as a strength, using examples of classroom newsletters and internet-based communication as an effective way to communicate with parents. However, African-American parents expressed that there was a lack of communication about their students' performance and that verbal communication was limited to calls about student behavior or negative experiences unrelated to academic performance. The data demonstrates the need for increased understanding of desired methods of communication and a need to adapt to the needs of the parents. To accomplish this, teachers and African-American parents need opportunities to learn about each other. More specifically, teachers need opportunities to learn about all communities of color, and the people in those communities need to learn about the teachers and what happens in the classroom.

The data from the study indicate that school staff, particularly school leaders, need to create an inclusive community by crafting experiences that support authentic social interactions

between parents and staff and presenting frequent opportunities for shared learning. The key to developing cultural awareness is to first create an acceptance of differences and then ensure that there are opportunities to learn about one another, from one another. This was an effective strategy used by both the Villagers and the African-American parents to bridge the gap between what is culturally accepted by both the parents and teachers to support the desired outcomes for students. Mayfield and Garrison-Wade (2015) analyzed the complexity of culturally responsive practices, stating that “While culturally responsive practices are not a revolutionary concept, they remain a radical conception for traditional school systems that have failed to examine the overarching influence of institutionalized racism in America and how it manifests in schools” (p. 3). This analysis emphasizes the importance of addressing the systemic influences that families of color encounter in our traditional school systems. Our schools are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, and this requires a shift in systemic systems to ensure that all families feel welcome in the school environment.

During the PAR project, the African-American parents shared observations that other racial groups were being welcomed by school staff while they were treated as unwelcome visitors. This is directly related to the lack of relational trust between these parents and the teachers. Teachers expressed a belief that they treated all parents the same; however, the African-American parents overwhelmingly felt that they were treated differently and cited negative experiences. Our study concluded that this was due to a lack of cultural understanding and acceptance. Establishing relational trust is a key element to demonstrating acceptance and cultural awareness. Next, I examine the concept of establishing relational trust.

Establishing Relational Trust

Relational trust refers to an agreement concerning each group's understanding of its and the other group's expectations and obligations. Relational trust in schools is built through day-to-day social exchanges in a school community. During the PAR project, African-American parents and teachers expressed concerns about a lack of shared understanding concerning the parameters and expectations of home-school partnerships. Consistently, this negatively impacted their ability to establish successful, trusting partnerships. There was a clear need to develop a shared idea of what the partnership would entail and what results were desired. Establishing shared ideas and expectations would support the building of relational trust and increase the likelihood of partnerships among teachers and African-American parents. Bryk and Schneider (2002) refer to relational trust as a critical "social lubricant" of school improvement, establishing that this trust is needed to improve the opportunities for teachers and parents to partner. Bryk (2010) further contends that relational trust can emerge only if participants show their commitment to engage together in the work of reform and see others doing the same.

Establishing relational trust requires that schools intentionally create opportunities to develop shared goals among African-American parents and teachers. The school principal must lead this effort, and the expectation to prioritize partnerships must be a clear goal of the organization as well. Conversations during CLEs revealed the need to improve relational trust. One parent expressed that she thought the new principal was "working to build stronger connections with the community," but she also stated that parents "didn't feel heard by teachers." (African-American parent, CLE, March 27, 2023) During the staff CLE (May 1, 2023), one teacher shared her beliefs with colleagues saying, "You have to be open to actually being accepting of other cultures: smiling, being kind, welcome-greeting. It is very important. Lines of

communication need to be respected and fostered.” Parent sentiment was similar to this staff member's perception; one parent stated that teachers at Lovehall “overcommunicate with no depth.” She expressed frustration that teachers were not available for conversations but frequently sent “directions” to parents and general updates about the class through electronic communication. However, there was no specific information for her about her student’s progress. Schneider (2003) contends that relational trust requires an establishment of social respect that results from the tenor of social discourse that takes place across the school community. Such discourse must be grounded in respectful exchanges and genuine listening, and by taking others’ views into account in subsequent actions. Sharing expectations, listening, and being intentional with opportunities to build partnerships requires frequent, effective communication between teachers and African-American parents.

Building Partnerships through Communal Connections

Effective communication in schools requires that interactions be mutual and inclusive of families: Teachers and schools must provide information to inform parents and create conditions where parents feel heard as members of the school community. Establishing effective communication requires that parents feel respected (Mapp, 2003). For this reason, establishing relational trust is foundational to the partnership process. Data collected throughout this PAR project determined that for African-American parents, there was a need for increased communication related to their children's progress. African-American parents, during Community Learning Exchanges, complained that while teachers were often unavailable to discuss how to help their children academically, they would frequently call to discuss behaviors that the parents viewed as minor; for example, talking in class or being late to the line after recess. Parents also stated that their students were receiving excessive homework that they often

needed help with, but the parents had not been given guidance to provide the needed help. Most of all, parents expressed frustration with the lack of availability of the teachers; they asserted that phone calls and emails were going unanswered unless initiated by the teachers. Teachers contended that due to the volume of students they did not have time to respond to parents, citing lack of preparation time and the need to prioritize planning for instruction over speaking with parents. I realized, along with the CPR team, that parents and teachers needed spaces and places to share, listen, and learn about the communication needs and how to mutually address them. As a result, having time and opportunity to establish meaningful communication emerged as essential for increased partnerships.

Communication that considers not only the needs of the parents and students but also meets the community's needs is key to building productive partnerships among African-American parents and teachers. Schools must be intentional in their practices to promote welcoming environments that cultivate and sustain respectful, caring, and meaningful relationships between parents and school staff (Mapp, 2003). This is especially important for African-American families who have experienced both contemporary racism and racist structures within school environments (Chavkin & Williams, 1993, Leonardo, 2002). In the next section, I outline a framework developed from the PAR project about the intersection of culture, communication, and community.

The Three Cs of Partnership: Culture, Communication, and Community

Each cycle of the PAR project generated data that I coded and analyzed to yield the study findings. A cyclical analysis of the findings using the literature in the discussion section led to a framework grounded in the components essential to building productive partnerships with African-American parents. The Three Cs of Partnership Framework shown in Figure 22 outline

the areas of focus needed to increase productive partnerships among teachers and African-American parents. The graphic demonstrates the phases necessary to establish productive but also responsive, reciprocal, and inclusive partnerships. The sequence of the Three Cs of Partnership Framework is intentional as each phase is a prerequisite of the next. Each phase is listed in sequential order:

1. Awareness of culture – the initial phase begins with building an understanding of culture, cultural norms, and the expectations of the individual partners to inform and support effective communication.
2. Effective communication – the establishment of cultural awareness supports the next phase of developing effective communication structures and practices.
3. Inclusive school community – policies and practices are the focus of the next phase and made possible by the foundation of culturally responsive communication.

Enacting the Three C's produces productive partnerships with African-American families: the establishment of the initial three phases supports the end goals of partnerships that address the ways in which teachers and African-American parents can support the increased achievement of African-American students.

Creating an educational partnership among teachers and African-American parents support the student academic success; however, partnership conditions dictate its productivity. Throughout the research cycles, the CPR group recognized the need to analyze and address potential barriers influencing the partnership of African-American parents and teachers. The result produced a framework design that reflects the identified barriers to productive partnerships among teachers and African-American parents, resulting in more productive partnerships and emphasizes prioritizing the areas that set the foundation for productive partnerships.



Figure 22. The three Cs of partnership framework.

These foundational areas emphasize the need to (a) ensure that teachers are aware of cultural practices, norms, and expectations of African-American families to address the need for African-American families to feel included in the school community; (b) establish communication structures that consider cultural norms and promote intentional sharing of information, ideas, and opinions; and (c) through the initial establishment of awareness, trust, and communication, build and implement school policies and structure that promote inclusivity specific to African-American families. These three areas of emphasis are foundational to the PAR project findings in that they emphasize the need to establish partnerships through community building and intentional inclusivity with parents. The research findings outlined the need for culturally responsive practices and more effective communication; the Three Cs of Partnership Framework expands upon these concepts to address the bigger issue of community, more specifically learning to be equal partners in the school community to better serve students and families. These foundational elements should be addressed not only with teachers, but also within school leadership and policies. Khalifa et al. (2016) states that, “Moreover, culturally responsive leaders develop and support the school staff and promote a climate that makes the whole school welcoming, inclusive, and accepting of minoritized students. Finally, we recognize that culturally responsive leadership is needed in all settings including those not dominated by minoritized students, and that not all students of color are minoritized” (p. 1,275).

The importance of inclusive learning communities is outlined in the U.S. Department of Education’s family engagement framework (Mapp & Kuttner, 2014). This framework prioritized building the “dual capacity” of families and educators to work together to support increased student achievement. It reveals that, “in order for family-school partnerships to succeed, the adults responsible for children’s education must learn and grow, just as they support learning and

growth among students” (p. 27). The framework focuses on learning as a central goal, acknowledging the critical role of educators in shaping opportunities for engagement and attending to relational dynamics between educators and families in schools. The Three Cs of Partnership Framework further contends that great attention must be given to the policies and practices related to community engagement and communication with African-American parents. The co-practitioner researcher team, the Villagers, focused on research questions that would inform the current conditions and the potential for building productive partnerships among the teachers and African-Americans at Lovehall School.

Questions Guiding the Research

This study began with a theory of action: If we enact a participatory action research (PAR) project that increases our teachers’ capacity to create productive relationships with African-American parents, then family engagement will increase in our school community, resulting in increased student achievement. The Three Cs of Partnership framework was developed as a result of data collected throughout the PAR cycle as it applied to answering the research questions. Through shared learning and activity design, the CPR group gathered data based on the overarching research question and two guiding sub-research questions: *To what extent do parents and teachers cultivate and increase relational trust?* and *To what extent do school policies and teacher practices change communication and authentic engagement with African-American parents?* After conducting Community Learning Exchanges with the CPR group, school staff, and African-American parents, the 18-month PAR study confirmed the challenges related to building partnerships but also identified strategies to support the desired increase in productive partnerships. The framework presents insight into the necessary conditions to create productive partnerships for African-American parents and teachers.

A key learning that emerged was that creating a school environment that cultivates relational trust requires intentional practices and a shared desired outcome. The research from this limited study confirmed that while both parents and teachers want students to succeed, they shared limited ideas of how to work together to improve outcomes, particularly if cultural differences are not taken into regard. During Community Learning Exchanges, we learned that teachers have clear expectations and a desire for parents to support student learning at home. However, parents expressed that teachers' ineffective communication and the resulting lack of knowledge about their student's performance created a barrier to helping at home. The ineffective communication from both teacher to parents and parents to teacher affected the ability to trust the support and intentions of the other partner. Further, we learned that the communication structures were ineffective because of cultural differences: parents wanted direct social communication and the teachers preferred written communication. In many cases, teachers expressed difficulty communicating directly, specifically with African-American parents, due to what teachers cited as the parents' "emotional responses" to basic information. The Villagers deduced that we must focus on creating a common understanding grounded in cultural awareness to effectively address the communication barrier.

School leaders' decisions related to school practices and policies drive the culture of the institution. Throughout the research project, we relied on that knowledge as we sought to understand how practices and policies at Lovehall influenced the engagement of African-American parents. The data showed that the African-American families at Lovehall felt like outsiders, primarily because of longtime practices that African-American families perceived were designed to keep them away or limit their access to school services and school staff. An example of this is opportunities for study trip chaperones. Many African-American parents

complained that they were not selected to chaperone classroom study trips. Because there were no written policies to guide the selection of chaperones, the parents believed this was solely the teacher's decision. In another example, African-American parents perceived that the teachers limited them to written communications only, while the teachers chose to have in-person conversations with other parents.

Implications

This PAR study had a clear focus with a small number of participants. The intent was clear: *How does a school develop collective capacity to cultivate productive partnerships with African-American parents?* The answer to this question is complex and grounded in opportunities for teachers and African-American parents to connect, communicate, and better understand how the differences between African-American and current school cultures can create barriers to student success. We understand that building partnerships with these parents in schools requires a personal approach (Epstein, 1986), organizational change (Senge, 1990), and a shift in institutional structures (Mapp, 2003). On a policy level, a lack of focus on cultural inclusivity influences the norm in our educational system. This PAR study has clear and relevant implications for informing policies and improving the practices related to building productive partnerships with African-American parents. Next, I explain these concepts and emphasize additional research in this area.

Practice

The practical implications of this study identified a need for inclusive school communities to support the capacity of teachers to build productive relationships with African-American parents. The data demonstrates that two conditions are foundational to establish inclusivity in school settings, the consideration of culture and communication. To truly consider

an environment inclusive of African-American culture, the teacher and the school staff must first establish an understanding of the culture. Schools must be intentional in creating spaces and places for teachers to authentically engage with African-American families to begin to build acceptance and understanding of African-American culture. Teachers must have authentic opportunities to learn through storytelling and social interactions with African-American families.

It is imperative that school leaders drive this effort and establish a culture of inclusivity within the school community. School leaders must bridge the gap between African-American families and teachers through messages of equity and intentional practices that lead to the establishment of welcoming environments and increased partnership opportunities. These practical strategies have the potential for producing the conditions for improving relational trust and creating educational partnerships among African-American parents and teachers. I encourage those involved in building capacity in culturally responsive teaching to adapt these strategies to meet individual school needs along the equity journey.

Policy

Educational institutions are guided by policies on many levels. There are local, state, and national policies that dictate how the educational system operates and what is important in the field of education. At all levels, the need to increase parent engagement has been named as a priority, yet all entities approach this differently. We must begin to align the policies and intentionally promote an expectation-inclusive, welcoming environment for African-American parents at all levels of education.

Local policies must establish inclusivity as a rule and invest in intentional practices to promote increased partnerships with African-American parents. Also, the systems of

communication must reflect inclusivity on all levels, especially when it comes to access to information. At the state level, government leaders must adopt policies that validate and affirm the need for partnerships with the African-American community. This should also include the assignment of additional resources to support a focus on intentional opportunities for parents and staff to engage through community outreach events and learning opportunities. At the national level, officials must enact policies that provide guidance and funding for further research and training on ways to develop partnerships such as Community Learning Exchanges.

Research

The PAR study contributes to the scholarship of community engagement strategies that promote partnerships to increase equitable outcomes for African-American students. First, this study validated the usefulness of the Community Learning Exchange axioms (Guajardo et al., 2016). The data demonstrates the need for teachers and African-American parents to share stories and experiences to build understanding and awareness. The CLE strategies and meeting protocols provided an inclusive space for all participants. It allowed for authentic opportunities to learn and grow together. The participants were empowered to speak freely and share their needs and desires in a non-judgmental setting to establish common goals and actions. This PAR study focused on using CLE strategies in a small group setting. Large-scale surveys or comprehensive qualitative research designs may generate additional insights into this topic.

Additional research could focus on how to build upon the CLEs to design opportunities for shared leadership that incorporates cultural responsiveness, especially in schools where the student community is ethnically diverse, but the school staff is not. Additional research questions that would contribute to this work of building partnerships could include a focus on building

relational trust and effective communication structures to build shared goals and name common interests. For example,

1. How can the assets of the African-American community enhance the partnerships among parents and teachers?
2. What strategies could serve to increase welcoming environments for African American students and families?
3. How can we clearly define the roles of parent and teacher in these partnerships to serve African-American students?
4. What communication strategies can serve to bridge the cultural disconnect among African-American parents and teachers?

A continuation of relevant, parallel studies can further examine the questions posed in this PAR study. Additional qualitative research across multiple regions could bring greater insight into the specific needs of diverse communities. Finally, the research design can be altered to explore other perspectives.

Limitations

Throughout the PAR project and study, the Villagers developed and used protocols of inquiry as we learned more about how transformative actions in the workplace setting (Buss, 2018) could bring about changes in practice and systems. Although the qualitative research process has been proven effective for use in research design, possible limitations existed within the process, such as researcher bias and difficulty in generalizing data. While there were clear advantages to action research, there were disadvantages throughout the research process. For example, the community learning exchanges required data collection in real-time. I had difficulty with documenting and observing as both a practitioner and a researcher within a large group

setting. Another limitation was the small sample size of the research. As the lead researcher in the project there were limitations within my perspective roles; my role as researcher and school leader proved difficult as I facilitated the process of collecting data but served as a decision-maker within the system at the same time. The major limitation was the size of the study. This was a short research study with a small sampling of subjects. I recommend that this research be continued within other communities to extend the research study and results.

Leadership Development: Cultural Broker for Change

Throughout the cycles of this PAR project, I learned many things about myself as an educator, myself as a leader, and myself as an African-American woman entering a space with opportunity for change. Specifically, I learned that some of my assumptions about the lack of relationships among teachers and African-American parents were incorrect; I learned that as an educational leader, I must place community at the center of every decision, and I learned that although relationships come naturally for me, others need to work to build them. These lessons were not all learned in the 18 months of research, but also through deep reflection on my life's work through the lens of this research. Overall, when reflecting on all the components of the project, I have come to realize that the true meaning of change is leading others towards opportunities to learn from taking risks, engaging in reflection, and promoting an understanding and acceptance of African-American culture in every space. Creating the conditions for African-American parents and teachers to speak their truth and creating a safe space to share was essential to the work of this project and study. These spaces supported teachers and parents to take risks and move closer to effective partnerships. While this remains a work in progress for the new principal to undertake, the study provided clear evidence about the challenges and how to address them.

While analyzing the thoughts, ideas, and actions of others, I realized that the connections I can make immediately with African-American families do not come easily to others. Though they have the desire, they lack the comfort level or understanding to make connections with African-American people. I have always held my colleagues in high regard but wondered why they seemed deliberately hesitant to engage with African-American families. Through listening and reflection, I found that the root of the issue is that many of my colleagues had not been in spaces with African-American people. I heard from the Villagers that they desired stronger partnerships but felt rejected by African-American families. They understood that they needed to do something different but had no idea what that “something” was. What was immediately familiar to me was foreign to them. I could anticipate how communication exchanges would go, but they could not predict how conversations might be received or reciprocated, so opportunities to engage were ignored or avoided. I assumed that unconscious bias or stereotypes hindered my colleagues’ desire to build these relationships. I now understand that the fear of the unknown produces much of the hesitancy. Unconscious bias and media-driven stereotypes play a role in some of the hesitancy—for example, teachers feared being “cursed out” if they approached conversation in the wrong way with African-American mothers; however, these same teachers acknowledged that this was the exception, not the norm. This fear was addressed with the Villagers using simple communication strategies that apply to everyone: approach with kindness, ask “how are you,” and lead with an offer of support before addressing the problem. I found it relatively easy to identify a misconception, but not at all easy to override its effects. I could not readily arm educators with the courage needed to take risks with conversations and potential partnerships with a group of people they had not had the opportunity to learn about or become familiar with. During this project and study, I took on the role as facilitator of these

conversations and a became a warm demander for both groups to take risks and listen to one another. I realized that this is the true equity work needed for cultivating these partnerships.

Regardless of fear, or unanswered questions, there must be intentional opportunities between teachers and African-American parents to build understanding and to share and listen. My true role as an equity warrior (Leverett, 2002) is to guide and create opportunities—to create the spaces and places for teachers who are not African-American to have authentic opportunities to learn about and accept the differences of those who are. This must be done in a safe manner so as to promote growth and not lead to further disconnect among these teachers and the African-American families they serve. These opportunities, facilitated by someone who continues the work of a warm demander to promote understanding and increased acceptance, will lead to more equitable experiences and outcomes for African-American students and create culturally responsive and inclusive school communities for African-American parents.

One year into this research project, I was promoted to a central office position and became the mentor to my replacement, a first-year African-American female principal. My new position meant that I was no longer the driver of the change effort at Lovehall Elementary. My role shifted to advisor and I became an outsider within the system. However, throughout the completion of the project, I used my own reflections to ask intentional questions of the new first-year principal. If I had continued the role of principal, I would have created the intentional spaces to build these necessary relationships; for example, I would have restored the monthly coffee chats with parents and provide classroom releases for teachers to attend, and I would have increased the number of community learning exchanges held with both teachers and students. One of the great take-aways from this research project is the power of sharing, listening, and problem-solving in a community format to build collaborative relationships. Offering community

learning exchanges more frequently can transform partnerships and evolve into the north star of our vision to increase the engagement with African-American families.

As I move forward, I must continue to own the role of cultural broker—someone who intentionally works to build cultural awareness and acceptance among educators so that African-American parents have opportunities to own the role of educational partners for their students. I am now in a new role and am responsible for allocating and monitoring resources for all schools in our district. This research project has solidified the importance of equity in partnerships for increased effectiveness as a system for educating children, especially African-American children. As I continue the work of cultural brokering by being intentional with practices that are inclusive of parents and educators, I will make decisions ahead that will include the elements of The Three Cs Partnership Framework developed as a result of this work: building cultural awareness among educators, communicating with transparency through effective practices, and focusing on inclusive practices that bring communities together in service of educating our children.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the key findings of this project highlight the need to build understanding through culturally responsive communication and connections between teachers and African American parents. The African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child,” uplifts the communal aspect of partnership in providing for and interacting positively with children and promotes experiences and environments that engender positive growth and well-being. I named this project “Build a Village” in the spirit of creating partnerships in our schools with African-American parents that foster that same concept of shared responsibility for educating African-American students. Through research and reflection, I have learned that the “Village” concept for communities serving African-American families is applicable to our schools.

As an African-American educational leader, I advocate for increased partnership among teachers and the African-American families they serve. The time has come for intentional, systemic practices to improve academic outcomes for African-American students. The key findings resulting from this research cite this need for intentionality. The first finding, that when there is a lack of cultural understanding, partnerships between African-American parents and teachers are negatively impacted, highlights the need to intentionally consider cultural implications of partnerships. The lack of exposure and a lack of opportunity for all teachers to learn about and build an acceptance of the differences of African-American culture is a barrier to creating inclusive spaces that welcome these families into our schools. The second finding emphasizes the need to address this by stating that when there is mutual communication—places and spaces to talk—African-American parents and teachers are better positioned to partner. This speaks to the need to create policies and practices that promote trust through communication and familiarity. These key findings are critical to ensuring that the desire for increased partnerships among African-Americans in schools is met with the appropriate foundation to move society closer to acceptance and equity for African-American communities and the schools that educate their children. This work is long overdue and is greatly needed. For African-American students to experience increased success in school, they must be given a school structure that embraces the entire community. As leaders, we must intentionally “Build the Village” to increase the partnerships among teachers and African-American parents to enhance the experience of students, teachers, and parents in our schools.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building- Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 [☎](tel:252-744-2914) · Fax 252-744-2284 [☎](tel:252-744-2284) · rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Kim Moses](#)
CC: [Matthew Militello](#)
Date: 12/9/2021
Re: [UMCIRB 21-001657](#)
BUILD A VILLAGE

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as **exempt** on 12/9/2021. This study is eligible for **Exempt Certification** under category # 2c.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for **exempt** status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Build A Village Informed-Consent-Docx(0.01)	Consent Forms
Kim Moses Proposal 11 3 2021.pdf(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Kim Moses_ Teacher Interview Protocol.pdf(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Kim Moses_Community Learning Exchange.pdf(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Kim Moses_Parent Interview Protocol.pdf(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Kim Moses_Script for Recruitment_Final.pdf(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: CITI TRAINING CERTIFICATE



Completion Date 02-Jan-2021
Expiration Date 02-Jan-2024
Record ID 40143377

This is to certify that:

Kim Moses

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification
through CME.

Human Research

(Curriculum Group)

Group 2.Social / Behavioral Research Investigators and Key Personnel

(Course Learner Group)

1 - Basic Course

(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

East Carolina University

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w576d6dc0-f9d3-4f25-acf6-8a469aeebdf2-40143377

APPENDIX C: DISTRICT PERMISSION



WEST CONTRA COSTA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

1108 Bissell Avenue | Richmond, CA 94801-3135

Office: (510) 231-1101 | Fax: (510) 236-6784

www.wccusd.net

Kenneth C. Sr., Ed.D.

Superintendent

July 20, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

West Contra Costa School District recognizes the benefits of participating in relevant, well-designed research studies proposed by qualified individuals. Approval for conducting such studies is based primarily on the extent to which substantial benefits can be shown for WCCUSD Schools and its mission of educating students. The purpose of this letter is to notify you of the **approval** to conduct your dissertation study titled, Build a Village: Cultivating productive relationships with African-American parents for increased family engagement. We also give permission to utilize space in district offices and schools to collect data and conduct interviews for his dissertation project: Build a Village: Cultivating productive relationships with African-American parents for increased family engagement.

The project meets all of our school/district guidelines, procedures, and safeguards for conducting research on our campus. Moreover, there is ample space for Kim Moses to conduct her study and her project will not interfere with any functions of WCCUSD. Finally, the following conditions must be met, as agreed upon by the researchers and WCCUSD:

- Participant data only includes information captured from the state data collection strategies.
- Participation is voluntary.
- Participants can choose to leave the study without penalty at any time.
- Any issues with participation in the study are reported to the school administration in a timely manner.
- An executive summary of your findings is shared with the school administration once the study is complete.

In addition to these conditions, the study must follow all of the East Carolina University IRB guidelines.

We are excited to support this important work.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kenneth C. Hurst Sr.", is written over a faint, larger version of the same signature.

Kenneth C. Hurst Sr., Ed.D.
Superintendent

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM: CPR GROUP ADULTS



Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: Build A Village: Cultivating Productive Relationships with African-American Parents for Increased Family Engagement

Principal Investigator: Kim Moses

Institution, Department or Division: Department of Educational Leadership

Address: College of Education East 5th Street Greenville, NC 27858-4353

Telephone #: 252-328-4260

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to study parent school involvement research ways to impact increased involvement for African-American families. The research is being conducted to support increased support and success for African-American students in urban schools. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are either a teacher, or parent, supporting an African-American student at Lovehall Elementary School. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn how to support teachers to increase their capacity to develop ongoing partnerships with African-American families to best support the outcomes of African-American students.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 50 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

I understand that I should not volunteer for this study if I am under 18 years of age, or if I am not a teacher, or parent, supporting an African-American student in elementary school.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at Lovehall Elementary School. You will need to come to school community meetings three times during the study in the school library. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is six hours over the next twelve months.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in Community Learning Exchanges which are community events designed to collect and share information.
- During Community Learning Exchanges (CLE), questions may be asked to inform participants of relevant previous and current experiences and culturally specific concerns and issues.
- Information shared during the CLEs will be used to inform the study.
- Participate in a recorded interview.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research.
- The University & Medical Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) and its staff have the responsibility for overseeing your welfare during this research and may need to see research records that identify you.

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

All information will be kept confidential throughout the study. All information will be stripped of identifiers and used in future research without anyone knowing it is information from the participant. Information will be limited to print sources only void of any identifiers.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at (510) 231-1443 Monday – Friday between the hours of 8:30 AM – 3:30 PM.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

Is there anything else I need to know?

Your information collected as a part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future studies.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above, and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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APPENDIX E: LEARNING EXCHANGE PROTOCOL: PHOTOVOICE

LEARNING EXCHANGE PROTOCOL PhotoVoice (PV)

GUIDING QUESTION: *What has been your previous experience in working with African-American families to support the progress of your students?*

PURPOSE: *This protocol is useful to discuss responses to research questions. It supports the development of a deeper understanding of a concept, topic, or question.*

PROCESS

STEP ONE: Review the guiding question and discuss, as needed

STEP TWO: Explain the PhotoVoice process and purpose to participants

STEP THREE: Participants take 2-4 photos related to feelings, experiences, or current ideas based upon the guiding question. They send the photos WITH CAPTIONS to the facilitator. The facilitator prints (if possible) in color with captions and puts on a large piece of poster paper so that participants can make comments in the gallery walk. If not possible, the facilitator constructs a virtual gallery (i.e., jam board) of photos on a virtual response board so that participants can leave post-it comments.

STEP FOUR: Participants take a gallery walk, looking at photos and captions. If in person, the participants use post-it notes to comment, react, question, or draw connections. If virtual, use the same process for virtual post-it comments.

STEP FIVE: **Once all post-it notes are completed, take a final gallery walk to read what others wrote, drew, or connected.** Discuss the learning about the concept, topic, or question. Debrief about the process, especially asking key questions that emerge from the PhotoVoice evidence. The facilitator has to develop questions by looking carefully at the data. Some suggested general questions:

- **What new information or ideas do we now have about _____?**
- What does the evidence from the PhotoVoice tell you/us about the next steps individually and collectively?
- What is the usefulness of this process to our PAR work?
- How could you import this process to a classroom?

APPENDIX F: STORYTELLING PROTOCOL: EMULATION POEM

STORYTELLING EMULATION POEM: Build A Village

EMULATION POEM

I come from a place where...
I am in a place where or I went to a place where...
I am going to a place where

To emulate is to copy or use as a guide; it is to echo what you have read or heard or seen. The emulation poem is an opportunity to use a facilitator's example poem(s) to write your own poem.

Listen to the poem and then for 10 minutes (put on timer), write your own poem. Try to stick to the time.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENTS

- **THIS IS A DRAFT POEM THAT EMULATES THE EXAMPLES BUT IS YOUR OWN STORY REFLECTING ON OUR FOCUS FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP.**
- **STAY ENGAGED.**
- **ASSUME BEST INTENTIONS.**
- **LISTEN TO OTHERS' POEMS AND OFFER ONLY WARM FEEDBACK ABOUT A CERTAIN PART OF THE POEM THAT TOUCHED YOU. HOWEVER, DO NOT TELL YOUR OWN STORY IN RESPONSE.**
- **AFTER COMPLETING ALL READING, DISCUSS IN TRIOS OR QUARTETS THE EXPERIENCE OF DOING THIS.**

Respond to these three parts of the prompt

**I come from a place where ...
I am in a place where (or I went to a place where) ...
I am going to a place where ...**

APPENDIX G: LEARNING EXCHANGE PROTOCOL: CHALK TALK

LEARNING EXCHANGE PROTOCOL Chalk Talk

Chalk Talk is a silent way to do reflection, generate ideas, check on learning or thinking, or solve problems. A Chalk Talk can be an uncomplicated silent reflection or a spirited, but silent, exchange of ideas. It has been known to solve vexing problems, surprise everyone with how much is collectively known about something or uncover new ideas without any verbalizing. We encourage thoughtful contemplation and sharing connections to others' ideas.

Time: Varies according to need, but generally plan on 15-20 minutes.

Materials: Chalk/White board and chalk or paper roll on the wall and markers or virtual Whiteboard (e.g., jam board).

CHALK TALK QUESTIONS

- *What challenges impact effective communication among AFRICAN-AMERICAN parents and school staff?*
- *What strategies might help to decrease the impact of communication barriers with AFRICAN-AMERICAN parents?*
- *What systemic and/or procedural supports can positively impact partnerships with AFRICAN-AMERICAN families?*

PROCESS

The chalk talk is a silent activity. No one may talk, and anyone may add to the chalk talk as they please. You can comment on other people's ideas and/or draw connecting lines to the comments or make other notations about connections. You may also pose more questions. I suggest you make initial comments on the question and then return to read the responses of others and make additional comments or draw connections.

POST ACTIVITY

Discuss the learning and debrief about the process, especially asking key questions that emerge from the chalk talk evidence.

- What new information or ideas do we have about AFRICAN-AMERICAN Family Engagement/Communication?
- What does the evidence from the Chalk Talk tell you/us about next steps individually and collectively?
- What is the usefulness of this process to our PAR work?
- How could you import this process to a classroom?

APPENDIX H: LEARNING EXCHANGE PROTOCOL: WORLD CAFÉ

LEARNING EXCHANGE PROTOCOL World Café



Note: All protocols have multiple origins. The strength of a protocol is in the ability of facilitators or planners to adjust/revise for use in your context. <http://www.nsrharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z> is a good source of multiple protocols for school, district, community and organizational use.

Outcome: Design and implement an interactive world café process in which the participants co-construct understandings and knowledge through iterative experiences with diverse participants and perspectives.

Description: As the graphic suggests, there are multiple purposes of the World Café. The process fosters gracious space ("create hospitable space"); it draws on diverse perspectives and sets up a space for equitable access/participation and diverse perspectives in the conversation. The salon atmosphere of the world café presumes that the participants will not remain at one table, but circulate (often more planned than might happen in a typical café situation) to other tables and ideas.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The World Café offers a tangible process for enacting opportunity to learn principles to promote equity and excellence. It promotes constructivist learning principles because it is interactive and relies on inter-subjectivity and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) from diverse people and multiple settings, the necessary components for complex authentic and experiential learning.

Resources

- http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/KBS-FRB/Files/EN/PUB_1540_Toolkit_13_WorldCafe.pdf
- <http://www.theworldcafe.com/method.html>
- <http://www.therightquestions.org/the-world-cafe-workshop-facilitation-method-principles-and-etiquette/#.VEAZWUtRFEo>

Process

As with all processes, the specific implementation should be based on the principles and general design, but be customized for use by facilitators to achieve outcomes.

From http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/KBS-FRB/Files/EN/PUB_1540_Toolkit_13_WorldCafe.pdf (p. 187)

The job of the Café facilitator(s) is to see that the guidelines for dialogue and engagement are put into action. It is not the specific form, but living the spirit of the guidelines that counts. Hosting a Café requires thoughtfulness, artistry and care. The Café facilitator(s) can make the difference between an interesting conversation and breakthrough thinking. The responsibilities of the Café facilitator(s) include the following:

- *work with the planning team to determine the purpose of the Café and decide who should be invited to the gathering*
- *name your Café in a way appropriate to its purposehelp frame the invitation*
- *work with others to create a comfortable café environment*
- *work with café hosts to design an appropriate question* **A Powerful Question**
 - **is simple and clear**
 - **is thought provoking**
 - **generates energy**
 - **focuses collective inquiry**
 - **surfaces unconscious assumptions opens new possibilities**
 - **seeks what is useful**
- *welcome the participants as they enter*
- *explain the purpose of the gathering*
- *pose the question or themes for rounds of conversation and make sure that the question is visible to everyone*
- *on an overhead, flipchart or on cards at each table, explain the Café guidelines and Café etiquette, and post them on an overhead, an easel sheet or on cards at each table*
- *explain how the logistics of the Café will work, including the role of the 'table host' (the person who will volunteer to remain at the end of the first round and welcome newcomers to their table) move among the tables during the conversations encourage everyone to participate*
- *remind people to note key ideas, doodle and draw*
- *let people know in a gentle way when it is time to move and begin a new round of conversation*
- *make sure key insights are recorded visually or are gathered and posted if possible be creative in adapting the Café guidelines to meet the unique needs of your situation.*

Implementation

Preparation: Each table has a large sheet of poster paper for participants to write on. If you want to go “all out”, you can set up a café environment with tablecloth, flowers, and/or refreshments. There is typically a facilitator/host at each table. However, you can decide if the table host remains for all conversation rounds. As with all movement protocols, it is important to make accommodations for persons with disabilities so they have access to full participation.

Groups of 4-6 join the conversation clusters.

- There will be **progressive** (three) **rounds of conversation** of approximately 8-12 minutes each the questions/topics co-designed with hosts of each table.
- **Questions or issues or thoughts that pertain** to the designated topic are explored.
- At each conversation cluster table, both hosts and members **WRITE, DOODLE AND DRAW KEY IDEAS** on the paper in the center of the group. Group members may take notes to “travel with”.
- Upon completing the initial round of conversation, one person remains at the table as the “host” while the others become travelers or “ambassadors of meaning.” The **TRAVELERS CARRY (CROSS-POLLINATE) KEY IDEAS, THEMES AND QUESTIONS INTO THEIR NEW CONVERSATIONS** that may inform meaning of the remaining chapters.
- **Table hosts** should welcome the new guests and briefly share the main ideas, themes and questions of the initial conversation. Guests should **LINK AND CONNECT IDEAS** coming from their previous table conversations—listening carefully and building on each other's contributions.
- By providing opportunities for cohort members to move in several rounds of conversation, **ideas, questions, and themes begin to link and connect.**

After the three rounds of conversation, share discoveries and insights in a **whole group conversation**. This is a town meeting-style conversation in which patterns can be identified, collective knowledge is “harvested”, and possibilities for new and applied meanings emerge.

Café Etiquette

Focus on what matters

Contribute your thinking

Speak your mind

Listen to understand

Link and connect ideas

Listen together for insights and deeper questions

Play, Doodle, Draw – writing on the paper is important!

