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Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your community/communities?

Our engagement process began in January 2017 with the King County Early Learning Coalition (KCELC) asking permission to contribute to the King County Black community. For 4-5 months we reached out to Black-led well-established organizations, newly-formed social entities, and community stakeholders in King County. In each outreach effort we shared about who KCELC is, our focus on family engagement, and the purpose of the Black Family Voice Project. After answering any clarifying questions about the project goals and process, we then asked if they thought it was a favorable idea. If they did not, they were asked to share their reservations.

Overall feedback was positive, and people offered suggestions and/or contacts for who else we should talk to. There was also some push-back from people/organizations that were skeptical about KCELC's desire to focus on the Black community in King County, as neither the coalition nor SOAR, its convener, had existing strong relationships with that community. To counter the concern, we shared the project's accountability to the process of Community Based Participatory Research. We also shared the personal commitment to facilitate this process with the upmost respect and care.

During project implementation we convened several listening sessions throughout King County. On average, each session had 6 to 8 families represented, including parents, grandparents, aunties and other caregivers. Every family's time was honored by providing dinner, child care and a gift card stipend of \$50. The sessions were 3 hours, including time for dinner and introductions. In each listening session the same 11 questions were posed to and discussed by the families. The questions ranged from how families define who and what family is, to what a perfect world would look and feel like for them.

Because of our focus on creating respectful, reciprocal relationships with Black community members, we intentionally selected Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) as our process for the Black Family Voice Project. CBPR is a process that engages those who are most affected by a community issue to conduct research on and analyze an issue, with the goal of devising strategies to resolve it. It presumes the existence of knowledge and wisdom within families and communities. It is important to pose strength-based questions, listen and collect stories and identify common themes.

BENEFIT OF CBPR

- People will speak more freely to peers than to strangers.



- Researchers who are members of the community know the history and relationships surrounding an issue, and can place it in context.
- People experiencing an issue know what's important to them about it – what it effects, what parts of their lives it touches.
- Findings may receive more community support, because community members know that the research was conducted by people in similar circumstances.
- Citizens can take more control of the work.
- Community voices come to be viewed differently by professionals and those in positions of power.

After the first round of information gathering there is a return to the same families to share out our findings. Also being sure to ask the question of "Did we get it right?" We will co-create messages and proposals for solutions and ask families and partners to form advocacy and action groups.

After completion of the listening sessions we hosted a gathering in January 2018. This gave us the opportunity to share a film that recorded 4 group conversations and several individual interviews. The purpose of the gathering was to re-connect with families and stakeholders and ask "Did we get it right? Did we represent your stories well?" Community feedback and our responses are shared in the next section.

How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your community/communities?

At each listening session held, families shared their own stories about how they have prepared their children for kindergarten. The last question asked in each session is "What would the ultimate/perfect environment look like for you and your family to have all that they need to successfully prepare children for kindergarten?"

Their responses have given us great ideas for what strategies we could develop and co-create with Black families in King County.

Several themes emerged strongly from the conversations; one is the isolation that many Black families feel living in King County, where the Black community represents only 8.9% of the total population. In response to this spoken desire for community space to connect and feel less isolated, we are planning the launch of a "Black Dads, Black Moms and Black Families Brunch Series." It will target millennial and xennial Black parents in King County.

In addition to the need for community connection, several ideas emerged during the January event for potential next steps to be taken by KCELC. It is our intention that through these efforts we will continue to strengthen relationships with families and engage them in future advocacy efforts and other opportunities.



Community suggestions for next steps:

- Support getting more properly trained professionals, more teachers and staff of color in early learning and K-12 systems.
- Use the film as an advocacy vehicle for parents, early learning providers and supporters of a better P-12 experience.
- Putting advocacy into action: organizing, meeting with legislators and decision-makers, and make them accountable. “Too many of the negative experiences that happened to us are still happening to our children a generation later.”
- Learn more about the causes of the high cost of child care, and the intention of quality initiatives that have reduced availability of care in our community.

We are also sharing the film with stakeholder groups including advocacy alliances, King County staff, Child Care Center Directors, school district leaders, and of course the King County Early Learning Coalition. Every time we show the film and discuss the Project’s findings, we are encouraged to bring it to more audiences.

Before we decide upon next steps we will form a parent advisory group who will lead and activate this work; our role will be to support their efforts. The work will be shared with the broader community through presentations and social media. We hope that the in doing this it will spread by word of mouth and encourage other families to join in advocating for the concerns that came out of the listening sessions and viewing of the video.

How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) part of your community engagement work?

Given the Project’s focus on early childhood development it was important to ask two questions regarding developmental screenings and access to early intervention. Based on the request from our partners at King County Developmental Disability Department, we asked “When did you hear about developmental screenings? Or have you not?” and “Are you or have you allowed your child/ren to be developmentally screened and if so, what did it look like?” Our goal was to understand how Black families understand developmental assessments and what their experience was when confronted with various outreach methods and tools. The responses were mixed, some parents felt they understood the need for developmental screenings but a fair portion questioned the need and value of their child being assessed. They had questions about who the developmental stages in the tool were based on, a Black child or a White child. They wondered if the screenings and possible interventions were worth the risk of their children being negatively labeled.

The conversations were frank about how the current systematic and structural issues in early learning and K-12 school systems, and a racist society in general, have impacted the mental health of the children and families as a whole. Multi-generational trauma was acknowledged as a stressor for family members of all ages. Families discussed how their children arrived at preschool or kindergarten feeling at first



excited to attend school, then experiencing a continual down-spiral of feeling sad, expressing negative feelings about themselves, having anxiety about school, and losing their excitement about learning. As mentioned earlier, families spoke about their level of isolation and feeling disconnected.

Another concern was parents worrying about their children's welfare while they are at child care because they have chosen a provider who does not meet their cultural need, but does meet what they can afford. The fear they have is that their child will be harmed in unseen ways that will impact their social and emotional as well as cognitive development.

What about your organization's way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships? Include examples of how your staff and your board (if relevant) contributed to the culture and values that enabled your success.

The CBPR process gives the power to the community by acknowledging that wisdom and the most effective solutions come from within the community. A primary goal of this Project is to keep the power and control within the community. Beginning with outreach and continuing through the conversations sessions, we pledged as the support organization to hold the stories sacred, to ensure the stories of families would not be misused or construed. This commitment built trust and allowed families to be more open and transparent with their stories.

A second key factor is that the Project lead is a member of the Black community in King County. She has the ability to authentically connect with the families and community partners, and was willing to devote considerable personal social capital to this body of work.

Since its inception in 2003, SOAR has been a convening entity. Our mission, revised in 2015, is to elevate community voice to influence policy and practices that impact children, youth and families. We are committed to, and experienced in using strength-based, inclusive approaches to engage with stakeholders, and have been a member of the WA State Community Café Collaborative for 10 years. We approach engagement of any community in the spirit of partnership and with a belief that community members have unique strengths and knowledge that, when brought to bear on an issue or need, can catalyze successful solutions. We see ourselves, and support engaged stakeholders in mobilizing as change agents promoting community transformation.

What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, and missteps? We know that we can learn as much from setbacks as we can from successes.

During our outreach phase, not every organization or alliance responded to our request to meet and discuss this Project. This meant we missed many voices that could have contributed to the dialogue.

It takes time, effort and energy to be present in a space where a person is being asked to be vulnerable to share their story. It is no secret that Black people have endured plenty of prodding, abuse and disrespect in the name of research. We had to overcome reluctance based on historic negative experiences in order to carry out the Project.



One of the challenging obstacles after confirming community partners and family participants was finding staff to support the note-taking and filming of each session. The pool to choose from in Washington State is very small. Black staff was necessary in order to ensure full transparent participation from the families.

Another obstacle we currently face is assuming that what we have heard from Black families in King County will have the impact that they want to see. The structures that maintain institutional racism are deeply imbedded and highly resistant to change.

We are learning that we must be realistic about the capacity and desire of Black families in King County to move the work forward by stepping into advocacy. One of our goals is to move into action on the priorities identified by the community. We are struggling to reconvene families whose time is limited and priorities are on work and family life. It is not yet clear that we will reach the outcome we desire: bringing families into opportunities for advocacy and elevating their voice to help facilitate change. This is a harsh reality but we remain hopeful.

What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?

We are just getting started. What has been hopeful is being able to do this Project and share the families' stories.

The responses from the Black community throughout the Project have fostered our hope. Their desire to come together to break bread, share stories, and build community is something we can actively support, and may serve as a springboard for advocacy and an increased sense of agency.

We are in the early stages of sharing the film and Project findings with stakeholders. Recently we did so at an Early Learning Coalition meeting, and in addition to invitations to present elsewhere we received suggestions for next steps and offers of help, including:

- Review developmental screening tools and early intervention practices for cultural competence.
- Challenge the "evidence" in evidence-based practices that are being funded; highlight and advocate for promising practices where evidence has been gathered from communities of color.
- An individual serving on the state's Workforce Development Taskforce suggested convening a Black Family Coalition to review the taskforce's upcoming recommendations related to child care, preschool and K-12 teachers.
- This Black Family Coalition could continue to convene in King County around issues related to culturally relevant child care, including issues of affordability.
- A bold idea was presented about supporting cohorts of Black children through various transitions in educational systems to support their growth and achievements, and mark their milestones. Partnering with movements such as Men on the Move and My Brothers/Sisters Keeper may help us move forward.
- Bring the film and findings to those initial reluctant partners to develop new and deeper relationships within the Black community.



- Advocate for Black teacher recruitment in early learning and K-12 systems. Advocate for policy and practice changes to ensure these spaces are welcoming of Black teachers.
- Advocate for increased teacher training around implicit bias and racial equity
- There are good ideas and programs that fail due to lack of sustained funding. Example: a project in which certified teachers of color were paired with students of color becoming teachers in a mentoring program. This program existed for a mere 18 months before losing funding; we could advocate for reinstatement and scaling.

A final takeaway is that much of what the Black families said can be construed as “common sense.” A Coalition member commented that half of what was said could be said by any parent, as it’s what all children need: security, love, nurturing, safety, family. And half of what was said could only be voiced by Black families: enduring disproportionate discipline, children being seen as a burden rather than a gift, lack of teachers and administrators that look like their children, Black college students not seeing education as a professional option, and the heavy burden of institutional racism. We find hope in the authenticity and honesty of these voices, and in our opportunity to elevate their stories to make changes in our educational systems.