Incubating Equity in a Local Child Welfare System: System Participants AND System Professionals as Co-Researchers in Participatory Action Research to Address Racial Disparities.

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With funding from the Florida Institute for Child Welfare, Broward County, FL, child welfare partners co-implemented an innovative participatory action research study that engaged both youth and parents with system involvement AND system professionals as co-researchers to address racism in the system. The year-long study was transformative for the co-researchers and generated actions and outcomes for equity in the system. The study was framed with a critical participatory action research lens (Fine & Torre, 2019) that addressed racism and inequitable power dynamics while growing humanizing and healing relationships and partnerships. This article will describe the theoretical underpinnings of the study design, research questions, data collection and analysis methods, findings and implications for practice and policy.

The design of the PAR project in Broward was enhanced by (1) using a critical lens and (2) including system professionals from the child welfare system as co-researchers with the youth and parents. Critical Participatory Action Research is "research rooted in politics, power, participation, and a deep appreciation of knowledge, created in conditions of oppression and mobilized for social action." (Fine & Torre, p. 433, 2019). Sustained structural and policy change in child welfare system necessitates the navigation of political and power dynamics and the use of a critical lens was intended to both unearth the power dynamics and build capacity to navigate them.

Youth and parent engagement in participatory action research (PAR) leads to the growth of agency, skills, interpersonal competencies and leadership development in youth and parental benefits (Anyon, et. al., 2018; Cook, A. L, & Krueger-Henney, P., 2017; Ponciano, 2013; Ruff & Harrison, 2020; Loizou, 2013). However, PAR with youth only does not always result in effective and/or sustained action (Burke, et. al, 2017). "Whereas youth in PAR projects embody agency in their actions, they hold less institutional power than adults in positions of authority" (Bertrand et al, p. 392, 2020). Zeanah, et. al. (2018), found community based participatory research with organizational representatives (ie., system professionals) adds value to the process and the outcomes. The potential for greater success is heightened with the inclusion of equitable youth-adult partnerships that foster a sense of shared responsibility (Bertrand, et al 2020) and in this study, with youth and parents involved with system and adult system professionals. Additionally, all co-researchers completed training on racism including the local history of racism in Broward and implicit racial bias in the child welfare system.

Faculty from the Public Science Project (PSP) from CUNY facilitated an initial three-day workshop to build trust, research skills, and knowledge of the local child welfare system (ie., hotline calls, investigation, courts, services, placement and/or reunification). By sharing lived experiences and knowledge, co-researchers (i.e., five youth, two parents, and five system professionals) developed two research questions and corresponding data collection strategies and tools. The first research question was how will youth and leaders improve program quality and system accountability together? Two focus groups with other youth transitioning out of care, one

focus group with life coaches who support the youth, and seven system leader interviews were completed. The second question was how can parents receive support to prevent them from entering the child welfare system? Nine interviews were conducted with parents who had a closed case with the local child welfare agency. The data collection occurred over six months with the youth and parents facilitating the focus groups and interviewing or co-interviewing the leaders and parents.

After the data was completed, PSP faculty facilitated a two-day workshop for data analysis using thematic analysis and research product design. Challenges to data collection and analysis including addressing the trauma of co-researchers related to child welfare system involvement (Waechter, 2019), structural precarity of co-researchers, and the defensiveness of system professionals. These challenges were addressed with highly skilled facilitation and additional support for the youth and parents (ie., transportation, referrals to additional services).

Key findings from the research included youth not being listened to by professionals, lack of system accountability, parents feeling dehumanized throughout their child welfare system experience and parents being afraid to ask for help because they are afraid their children will be removed. As a result of the PAR study, all the youth and parents were selected to serve on advisory boards for the system and will be co-leading a youth and system professional organizing process in Broward to improve program quality and system accountability.

Implications of this study include the value of building non-service relationships, research as a capacity building process and co-creating equity structures within child welfare such as youth/system organizing.

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