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Re-examining participatory research in dropout prevention planning in urban communities

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This paper explores the concept of what a community-based participatory dropout prevention planning process might entail. Specifically, it looks at a year-long research project that brought together formerly incarcerated school non-completers, researchers, and local policy-makers (stakeholders) to address low high-school completion rates in the community. Using our own project as a case study, we reflect on the challenges and promises that emerged when the knowledge of adults in urban communities, who themselves often did not complete school, become central to dropout prevention idea generation, strategy development, and decision-making processes. We re-examine the ‘participatory’ process using participatory action research principles as an analytical lens focusing on three central concepts: control, collaboration, and commitment.

Keywords: dropout prevention; community-based projects; participatory action research; formerly incarcerated persons; school non-completers

Introduction

In recent years, the implications of urban non-completer¹ rates for individuals, the economy, and society have garnered much attention from researchers, policy-makers, and the public. Few would contest the assertion that failure to graduate is among the most recalcitrant and complex problems facing urban communities. In large urban districts, as many as one-half of each ninth-grade student cohort fails to complete high school within six years. On a national average, these dismal school completion rates have remained unabated for nearly two decades (Christenson and Thurlow 2004).

School completion becomes increasingly critical for economic success and self-sufficiency. Attaining basic and advanced education credentials paves a path for full participation in today’s global economy. It is not that urban schools are necessarily faring any worse today than in years past. But, residents in urban centers face a different set of realities and challenges today. Employment opportunities in today’s global economy rely increasingly on high levels of education and credentialing or on a propensity for menial low-wage work (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). In the United States, individuals without a post-secondary degree, let alone those without

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a high-school degree, find that their employment and earning opportunities are much lower than those of their more educated counterparts (Levin et al. 2007a, 2007b). Such individuals, in terms of lost tax and spending revenues, social programs, and criminal justice expenditures, pose substantial financial costs to society as they are unable to compete for jobs and are more likely to engage in criminal behavior and substance abuse (Levin et al. 2007a, 2007b; Nealy 2008).

The dropout issue remains a concern for many school districts, nationally and internationally. Monticel, Cortez, and Cortez (2004) argue that even though research suggests dropout prevention should be a major school reform issue, practitioners continue to focus change efforts on addressing the school performance and student behavioral issues. This tendency to look to schools for solutions to problems that are systemic is a general approach in educational research and reform (Noguera 2003; Fruchter 2007). For example, most dropout prevention and intervention efforts are largely carried out by public schools and related educational entities. The prevention efforts are primarily designed to identify and mitigate behavioral dropout risk factors (Battin-Pearson et al. 2000; Lee and Burkam 2003; Bemak and Siroskey-Sobdo 2005; Rodriguez and Conchas 2009). These studies and their resultant programs are all well intended and provide definitive insight as to why students dropout. Yet the programmatic emphasis on behavioral indicators (Finn 1993) obscures the larger structural contexts that shape dropout processes. Consequently, little research explores what community-based approaches to dropout prevention look like. For our project, we decided to use community participation as the main framework to explore dropout prevention planning.

While youth are involved in participatory action research (PAR)-based prevention efforts (Rodríguez and Conchas 2009), adult members of marginalized urban communities, especially parents, are often not actively involved in dropout prevention efforts (Snell, Miguel, and East 2009). We contend that all adults, marginalized and otherwise, in urban communities must be considered key participants in such planning. This requires a commitment to empowering local communities to participate and eventually hold equal power in local decision-making (Park, Brydon-Miller, and Jackson 1993; Williams 2007). With this assertion, a research group was convened in fall 2009 to explore what a community-based participatory dropout prevention planning process might entail. The project brought together formerly incarcerated school non-completers, researchers, and local policy-makers (stakeholders) to address low high-school completion rates in the Philadelphia–New Jersey–Delaware metropolitan regions. The project attempted to raise awareness and gain insights about the dropout issue, to encourage the active participation and voices of a marginalized group of school non-completers, and to establish a forum for experts, practitioners, and former non-completers to reciprocate knowledge. The current research focuses on the unique challenges and possibilities that we faced in our attempt to maintain high levels of participation among the various individuals and groups involved in the collaborative research project.

Using our own project as a case study, we wrestle with what ‘participatory’ dropout prevention planning might look like. Using PAR as an analytical lens and three foundational concepts of control, collaboration, and commitment, we analyze the strengths and weaknesses of our research approach. While honoring the principles of insider control and genuine collaboration to meet the needs of the insider group, we illuminate the very complicated and unforeseen nature of participatory research. We

wrestle with the challenge of securing and sustaining participants' willingness to move the project forward, given its close relation to issues of control and collaboration. Specifically, we explore the challenges and promises that emerge when the knowledge of adults in urban communities, who themselves often did not complete school, becomes central to dropout prevention idea-generation, strategy-development, and decision-making processes.

Participatory action research as an analytical lens

PAR eschews 'the conventional model of pure research [and] elitist model of research relationships' in favor of actively engaging members of the organization who 'quest for information and ideas to guide their future actions' (Whyte 1991, 20). Specifically, Williams and Brydon-Miller articulate how PAR has the goal to:

[combine] aspects of popular education, community-based research, and action for social change. Emphasizing collaboration within marginalized or oppressed communities, participatory action research works to address the underlying causes of inequality while at the same time focusing on finding solutions to specific community concerns. (2004, 245)

Ultimately, PAR has the core value of believing that participants can provide social change through their shared knowledge and experiences (Brydon-Miller and Maguire 2009). PAR objectives include developing new scientific knowledge to address identified problems and empowering marginalized groups to arrive at new understandings that can serve to ultimately change their social reality (Whyte 1991; Freedman 1998; Brydon-Miller and Maguire 2009).

In any participatory model, insider and outsider participants provide insights into the project. Insiders, in this case, were school non-completers that partnered with the dropout prevention planning. The outsider participants were the university researchers and powerbrokers in the project. The specific insights that insider and outsider participants discover in the process of creating better explanations about their social reality benefit all parties, but must primarily benefit 'insider' participants. PAR projects are typically characterized by equal partnerships in terms of insider participant control over all aspects of the research project, including identifying the research problem, selecting researchers, contributing to research questions and design, data collection and analysis, and eventual 'full ownership' of the research process. While these characteristics may be ideal, power differentials, time constraints, and other factors often stifle collaborative efforts.

This project was not intentionally designed as a PAR project. We were focused on the active role of participation with insiders and outsiders contributing knowledge. The project was intended to empower the voices of and draw from the collective knowledge, insights, and life-experiences of marginalized people who live daily with the consequences of not completing school. The process, grounded in the situated knowledge of the participants (Genat 2009), was designed to be collaborative and to provide outsiders with an understanding of how to address the dropout issue while also preparing inside members to share, develop, and advocate their ideas for how to best address the problem of low school completion. It was not until after the completion of the project that we realized the PAR principles were the driving force behind the dropout prevention

planning, and we continued to use it as an analytical lens to evaluate the relative success of the project.

Unpacking participation

Steeped in a deep tradition of engaging marginalized populations, several strands of PAR exist, defined primarily by levels and the nature of participant involvement and outcome objectives (Suarez et al. 2002). While some consider insider participants' involvement in even a cursory advisory capacity as constituting participation, others frame PAR as 'authentic' only if it reflects a deep involvement on the part of insider participants. For our purposes, we understand participation along a spectrum of practices that emerge from a set of guiding principles (Suarez et al. 2002). Ideally, participation is collectively determined with consideration given to the research context, assessment of insider and outsider participants' strengths and resources, and project goals. With an understanding that context and power-differentials shape possibilities in terms of level of participant involvement and the purpose of research projects (Krumer-Nevo 2009), we understand the dimensions of participation in university–community partnerships in terms of degrees of control, collaboration, and commitment (Suarez et al. 2002).

Control refers to the degree that a partner is in the position of power to move the project toward its intended goal at any given time. In high-level PAR, insiders and outsiders equally share control over key responsibilities, such as selecting researchers, identifying and contacting stakeholders, and setting the research agenda. In medium-level PAR, insiders have representation and oversee these processes with the ability to make key decisions. With low degrees of control, insider participants act as advisors to university-based researchers. Maintaining a sense of the degree and locus of control is critically important because the failure of insider participants to actively set the agenda of inquiry, data collection, and analysis procedures risks the likelihood of co-option by outsider researchers. Yet the specific means by which a project's goals can be realized and by whom depends on context (Krumer-Nevo 2009), including the presence or development of specific skills, access to resources, legitimacy, and authority. Each of these is related to the abilities of particular individuals and groups to move a project forward.

Degree of collaboration falls along a similar high-to-low spectrum, with an emphasis on the willingness to share resources and information with others that may lack them. In highly collaborative projects, insiders comprise the active researchers and leaders who initiate and collaborate with university-based researchers primarily for consultation, training, and advising, as needed. Outsiders willingly participate. In medium-level PAR, the reverse occurs. Outsiders, university researchers, lead the project and collaborate with community-based researchers for consultation, advisement, feedback and reviews of the research process. Insiders willingly participate. In low-level collaborations, there is little collective action and collaboration is primarily advisory in nature. Finally, commitment refers to a willingness to participate and engage in the collaborative process. What exactly commitment entails depends on the locus of, the level of, and the nature of control and collaboration, respectively. In strong collaborations, commitment should grow over the duration of the project.

Table 1. PAR dropout prevention planning participants.

Actor	Race	Gender	Position	Power status
<i>Transitional corrections partners</i>				
Belinda	Black	Female	Insider	
Ryan	Black	Male	Insider–outsider	Powerbroker
Alicia	Black	Female	Insider	
Edgar	Black	Male	Insider	
Derrick	Black	Male	Insider	
Aaron	Black	Male	Insider	
Manny	Black	Male	Insider	
Keisha	Black	Female	Insider	
Larkin	Black	Female	Insider	
Corey	Black	Male	Insider	
Orion	Black	Male	Insider	
Gilbert	Black	Male	Insider	
Katie	Black	Female	Insider	
Barry	Black	Male	Insider	
Courtney	Black	Female	Insider	
Alfonzo	Black	Male	Insider–outsider	Powerbroker
Richard	White	Male	Outsider	Powerbroker
Brian	White	Male	Outsider	Powerbroker
<i>University partners</i>				
Amber	White	Female	Outsider	
Donnell	Black	Male	Outsider–insider	Powerbroker
Shakown	Black	Male	Outsider	
Lisa	Bi-racial	Female	Outsider–insider	
<i>Additional community partners</i>				
Pryor	Latino	Male	Outsider	Stakeholder
Daniel	White	Male	Outsider	Stakeholder
Selena	White	Female	Outsider	Stakeholder
Sherry	Black	Female	Outsider	Stakeholder
Harold	White	Male	Outsider	Powerbroker
Jackie	White	Female	Outsider	Powerbroker
Nora	White	Female	Outsider	Powerbroker

Note: Participants cited in no particular order.

Participants

There were various parties that were members of the dropout prevention planning project. This project consisted of insider participants, insider–outsider participants, outsider participants, and outsider–insider participants (Table 1).

For insider participants, we decided to rely on the expertise of adult non-completers. As stated previously, youth are often involved in PAR dropout prevention efforts (Rodríguez and Conchas 2009), but marginalized adult members in urban communities are often left out of the PAR process (Snell, Miguel, and East 2009). We collaborated with 16 formerly incarcerated adults who were school non-completers. We worked with nine men and seven women whose ages ranged from late 20s to early 60s. All participants self-identified as African American or Black. Unique to our population was that they were formerly incarcerated in a Transitional

Corrections Center (TCC).² TCC is a large offender in-prison treatment provider that operates in multiple US states with a combined capacity of approximately 30,000 male and female residents. It houses offenders who are primarily incarcerated for drug-related offenses (distribution and addiction) and who show promise for successful re-entry.

Unique to TCC is its active volunteer-based alumni support group. The TCC alumni group is open to any person paroled or released from a TCC facility. The alumni organization functions as a support and volunteer group of motivational speakers who encourage current inmates to prepare for successful re-entry with a goal of reducing recidivism. It has a general membership of over 10,000 and approximately 200 active members. We considered the active alumni members as a suitable group with whom to collaborate because of their collective educational and life experiences, critical self-help perspectives, and willingness to contribute and give back to what they often referred to as ‘the communities they once destroyed.’

There were some participants that had insider and outsider status simultaneously, which we refer to as insider–outsiders (Griffiths 1998). Griffith explains that ‘being an insider or outsider might simply mean being black or white, female or male, middle class or working class, disabled or not’ (1998, 138). In this case, the distinction rested primarily on status within the TCC organization. For example, the alumni director and coordinators were insider–outsider participants since they too were previously incarcerated for long periods in traditional prisons, as well as in TCC facilities.

The outsider participants comprised several groups who collaborated in the research project. Some were researchers who operated from within and outside the university context. Three of the four people in the research team are African-American, and they could be considered insiders to the community since they shared a common race with the target participants. According to Griffiths (1998), in the context of this research project, they were insiders put as outsiders. In Table 1, we identify two of these individuals as outside–insiders because, although they are primarily outsiders (in relation to the alumni status), they moved back and forth between both the alumni group and the other outsider participants.

We refer to another distinct sub-group as powerbrokers. Powerbrokers were individuals who held positions of authority and power that gave them influence over a number of key decisions. Powerbrokers were identified within outsider and insider groups.

Study procedures

Research project design

The research project occurred in three stages over an approximately nine-month period and was guided by the following research question: How can participatory research principles and concepts foster collaborative decision-making in dropout prevention planning in urban communities? As illustrated in Table 2, the first stage – project planning – involved preparing to undertake the research project. We (researchers) regularly visited TCC facilities to establish rapport with alumni group members. We did not actively recruit but focused on developing relationships while simultaneously securing funding, designing protocol, and formalizing the research to meet Institutional Review Board (IRB)³ requirements of the host university. In the next stage – project implementation – we conducted individual

Table 2. Project stages and participation points.

Project stages	Research activities	Participation points
Planning (S1)	Problem identification	S1-Prob
	Participant identification	S1-PartID
	Fundraising	S1-Fund
	Advising	S1-Advise
	Management	S1-Manage
	Strategizing	S1-Strategy
	Research design	S1-StudyDes
Implementation (S2)	Advising	S2-Advise
	Management	S2-Manage
	Strategizing	S2-Strategy
	Recruitment	S2-Recruit
	Informal recruitment	S2-RecruitInf
	Interviews	S2-Interview
	Discussion Group 1	S2-Group1
	Discussion Group 2	S2-Group2
	Discussion Group 3	S2-Group3
	Analysis	S2-Analyze
Analysis and Reporting (S3)	Advising	S3-Advise
	Management	S3-Manage
	Strategizing	S3-Strategy
	Analysis	S3-Analyze
	Reporting	S3-Report
Ongoing Reporting (S4)	Reporting	S4-Report

educational life-histories and group discussion sessions. We interviewed 15 alumni members to retrospectively explore the participants' educational backgrounds and life-experiences. We used the process to better understand what factors the participants believed contributed to their non-completion. We encouraged participants to consider what they would have done differently in their younger school-aged years to complete school and what resources and supports would have facilitated completion. Our hope was that the interviews would encourage participants to scaffold their experiences to think imaginatively about solutions.

Findings and themes from in-depth interviews were folded into three semi-structured discussion sessions. The groups were intended as a space to co-generate knowledge about dropout prevention strategies and were guided by group learning and research goals. The first session focused on understanding the school dropout problem. Insider participants were provided with basic information about the dropout issue as understood by traditional researchers in the field. The discussion focused on their responses, reactions, and critiques of the dropout issue as framed by traditional researchers. Alumni offered their own critiques, perspectives, and insights to the problem definition. In session two, alumni members debated and discussed strategies to increase school completion rates in urban communities. The session resulted in a set of loosely defined strategies. The final session brought together the insider participants and stakeholders for a dialogue.

Data collection

We analyzed the research process by studying transcriptions, primary field notes, study protocols, internal email correspondence, monthly management and planning

memos, meeting notes, information forms, sign-in and sign-out sheets, fliers, and other documents associated with project management. We focused heavily on discussion group transcriptions, as this was where most of the whole-group collaborations occurred. One-on-one interviews and group working sessions produced over 40 hours of audio data. We probed these sources of data to understand where and to what extent PAR principles were used, with an emphasis on understanding degrees of control, collaboration, and commitment.

Findings

Participation patterns

Across the span of the project, the participation levels of insiders, outsiders, and powerbrokers varied greatly. Figure 1 illustrates participation trends across the duration of the project. High levels of insider participation were confined to the second stage. Some participants engaged in informal recruitment. In the planning stage, very few insiders participated in decision-making processes. Proportionally, powerbrokers dominated these efforts as revealed in the disproportionate representation of powerbrokers in the advising and strategizing (across all three stages). Insiders are under-represented across all stages with the exception of the interviews and group meetings. The participation trends also reveal the ongoing involvement of outsider powerbrokers across all but the most intense implementation activities. Although we intended for insider participants to play a more active role in the process of knowledge generation, a number of issues related to control, collaboration, and commitment undermined the collaborative nature of the project.

The trends illustrate that despite drawing from some aspects of participatory research, the project was rather traditional, exhibiting only small portions of PAR principles, especially in the planning and reporting stages. An exemplary PAR would reveal a more balanced trend over time, where insider representation proportionally increased over time. High-level PAR projects are characterized by equal partnerships in terms of insider participants' control over all aspects of the research project. The control of process includes identifying the research problem,

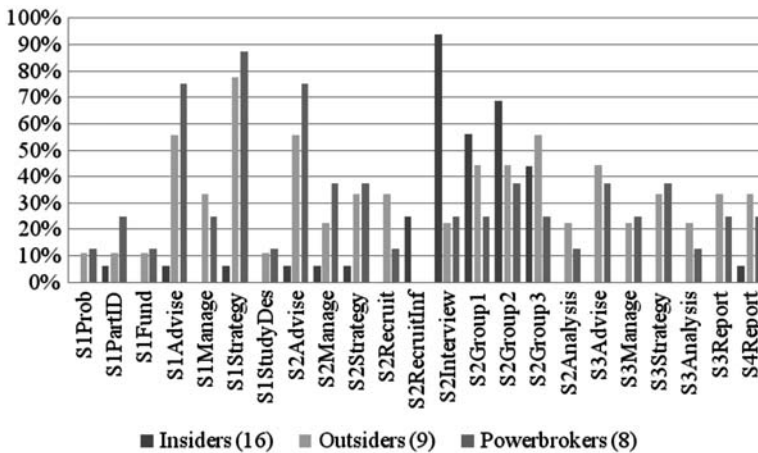


Figure 1. Participation patterns.

selecting researchers, contributing to research questions and design, data collection and analysis, and eventual ‘full ownership’ of the research process. For PAR ‘purists,’ these characteristics are ideal. Our analysis reveals power differentials, tensions, practical constraints, and other factors that posed considerable challenges to fostering PAR principles. To examine these issues, we now present critical reflections about issues of control, collaboration, and commitment across the span of the project.

Control

The locus and degree of control shifted over the course of the project between outsider and insider participants. In the planning stage, representatives of TCC provided oversight and facilitated interactions and communications between insiders and outsiders. Interactions, activities, meetings, and informal encounters occurred within the contexts of the alumni association settings and TCC facilities. Outsiders needed ‘permission’ to enter into the TCC facilities, were subject to the established entry protocols to visit the prison facilities, and had little voice in the formal settings of the alumni meetings. In terms of control, Alfonzo, the alumni director, wore multiple hats as an insider–outsider participant. As a former resident of TCC facilities, he was an insider, but in his role as director, he was also a powerbroker (outsider) for the group. His willingness to support the project, although it was unclear whether this was in his official capacity as a TCC employee or as an insider who genuinely saw merit in the project, was central to gaining buy-in from the general alumni population. As trust and understanding developed among researchers and TCC powerbrokers, the research project became more formal.

During the planning stage, while Alfonzo was garnering insider support for the project, the research team developed a project timeline, designed research protocol, and identified and secured resources to carry out the project. Insiders had little control over these processes and procedures. For example, Harold, who initiated the project, was the powerbroker who alone identified and defined the study problem. He, with the assistance of a trusted colleague, searched for and compiled the team who planned and implemented the project. This same individual secured funding for the project and required that Major University participate to act as a research base and financial conduit. Once the project became formal as reflected in approval by the IRB, control over the project shifted to the outsiders. Although recruitment and visits to build rapport remained informal in tone, we increasingly used the IRB protocol to guide our actions.

After IRB approval, the institutional practices, norms, and expectations of the university took precedence over the institutional practices, norms, and expectations of TCC. Although both institutions played a central role in shaping interactions between insider and outsider participants, the locus on control shifted to reflect formal research protocols and priorities. In early meetings, we (outsider researchers) did not bring fliers or attempt to recruit participants despite the fact that the alumni members knew we were researchers interested in collaborating on a dropout study (the idea was promoted before we joined the research team). After IRB approval, we formally introduced ourselves (although we were already familiar faces), explained our roles as researchers, and distributed fliers with information about the research project.

The flier described the project as an opportunity to:

offer insights about your own experiences leaving school before graduation in a one-on-one interview, work with a small team of other alumni group members to learn about and develop strategies that may help at-risk students graduate from high school, and with community and school stakeholders to discuss the strategies you believe will help reduce the dropout rate. (Recruitment flier)

The flier also outlined eligibility requirements including membership in the TCC Inc. alumni organization, being a school non-completer, and maintaining a willingness to be interviewed on a Friday during the month of February at a prearranged TCC facility in Central, NJ, USA. Finally, the flier indicated that participants would be compensated for the costs associated with transportation.

Based on our early interactions, we assumed that alumni members would respond immediately to requests for participation. They did not. In the design of the project, we established a clear timeline, secured facilities for conducting interviews and focus groups, and defined with great specificity the goals of the dropout study. In hindsight, these measures were an exercise that gave us a tremendous degree of outsider control. Despite our detailed planning, the alumni members did have control over their willingness to participate. When we changed strategies, straying from the official research protocol, and began to focus the relationships with alumni members that existed in the planning stage, a more collaborative spirit took hold. Our access to participants expanded beyond the core alumni group and insiders engaged in informal recruitment efforts, which snowballed our sample (many eventual participants were not as *actively* involved in the alumni group). Yet there was shortsightedness of a pre-planned control-centered approach: 'We made an incorrect assumption that participants had access to transportation because they regularly attend alumni meetings ... [Most of the] interviews have been conducted at homes and other dedicated spaces that participants themselves chose' (Donnell, research memo, February 2010). The subtext speaks to the need to adopt a flexible collaborative approach that considers what works for the insider group.

Despite our belief that we had control over the project, our analysis reveals that the insiders held more control than we thought – they controlled their involvement. Their access, or lack thereof, to resources, such as transportation, also shaped their involvement. To move the project forward required us to shift our alignments away from the university control-based framework. Likewise, alumni members moved away from the corrections framework that dominated the planning stage interactions, controlled disproportionately by powerbrokers within each group. For both the researchers and the alumni members, the project had been negotiated *for* rather than *with* them. Buy-in for the project was established between powerbrokers within the respective insider and outsider groups rather than within the rank and file of the groups. Upon reflection, we realized that most decisions, including the identification of the dropout problem as an area of study, the participant pool, and the researchers were identified by powerbrokers.

We realized after 'looking into the problem of recruitment' that we needed to gain acceptance within the alumni population. Our initial approach relied on the privileges endowed by the powerbrokers within the alumni group and researchers through their formal positions with TCC and Major University, respectively. We stopped attending alumni meetings and worked more closely with alumni members

who showed a commitment to the project. Many alumni members began to informally recruit their close acquaintances and friends. As a result, many key participants were former TCC residents and school non-completers, but were not actively involved in attending the weekly alumni meetings. Once we understood these issues, we understood the need to shift the nature of the project from a control-based model to a more inclusive and flexible collaboration-based model.

Collaboration

Effective collaboration should reflect a shared understanding of power and control, social locations of various groups and actors, identity politics, and access to resources. The distinction between degree of control and collaboration is illustrated in the selection and recruitment of stakeholders (outsider participants). In our project, the research team relied heavily on powerbrokers to secure commitments from a group of relatively exclusive city and policy leaders. Their participation, at the time and even upon reflection, marks a great success in the overall research process. Insider and outsider participants did not take the achievement lightly. Despite this, stakeholder participation would probably have looked different if guided by PAR principles.

Attempts to select and/or solicit the participation of the stakeholders may have proved unsuccessful if insider participants had attempted to identify and especially to recruit the stakeholders for participation. The research team possessed more cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Lareau and Weininger 2003) and networks to secure the four stakeholders. In this instance, collaboration trumped control. Alfonzo, the alumni director, became a central advocate for where the group sessions would occur. At his advice and our acknowledgement of his ability to see multiple perspectives (insider–outsider participant), we made a concerted effort to attract highly regarded participants. Alfonzo advised us to select important stakeholders so that the alumni group would understand the importance of the study. Likewise, Alfonzo advised us to host the focus groups at Major University instead of at a TCC facility as originally planned. His concerns were grounded in an analysis of what he thought were the needs of the alumni members.

Our rationale for planning to meet at TCC facilities was based on our belief that having stakeholders meet at TCC would be a powerful gesture. The intent was to show that stakeholders were willing to literally and figuratively ‘meet them where they are.’ Alternatively, Alfonzo reasoned that insider participants should be exposed to people and places that they, in their everyday lives, may not have exposure to. Had the alumni members controlled the site selection process, they may have opted to convene group meetings at TCC, perhaps because it is closer to most of their homes or because it might have been considered a more comfortable space. In this example, we realized that one powerful insider–outsider made an important decision that shaped the rest of the project. Ironically, we thought that our advice of seeking and ‘listening’ represented sincere collaboration. Framed this way, the exercise of collaboration over control worked well. But how might it have undermined the process in terms of PAR?

Upon reflection and further analysis, our process potentially undermined the ability of participants to see themselves as change agents in the process. We collaborated with Alfonzo, who was a powerbroker, working in what he considered the best interest of the alumni group. Neither Alfonzo nor members of the research

team included insiders in the decision-making process. Before looking at the project through a PAR lens, we considered Alfonzo as a legitimate insider whose alliances and experiences reflected those of the alumni group. It was after our analysis that we came to understand him as an authority figure, insider–outsider, and powerbroker who is distinctly different from the regular alumni members. Because of our shortsightedness, the alumni members were perhaps denied critical opportunities to develop essential skills and ‘tools’ that would have enabled them to continue their networking efforts irrespective of the current project.

Jackson and Kassam (1998) argue that, in well-designed PAR projects, outsiders are mindful to move insiders from the place of mere participation to meaningful stakeholder interactions. Meaningful interactions are found, not in formal settings, but in authentic interactions that hold the potential to move beyond the specific research problem and deepen political connections and networks at the benefit of the insider participants and their communities. Using research projects to develop deeper connections between insider participants and stakeholders can deepen engagement and expand networks; however, these same processes also run the risk of leading to disengagement (if insiders do not achieve desired goals). Such processes hold the potential to allow outsiders and powerbrokers to experience what it means to give up power and to allow insider communities to experience gaining power. There are learning opportunities inherent in these collaborations that insiders or outsiders missed out on. Such revelations were not clear during the process but are nonetheless informative.

Commitment

Using the principles of PAR, deepening the insider participant degree of control and expanding networks through collaboration should enhance the sense of commitment that all participants have to address the identified problem. Our process reflected a relatively deep level of commitment to the process and addressed the dropout issue. In the final discussion group session, George, an alumni member (insider participant), expressed what the project meant for him:

What I'm leaving here with is I know our problem and I know New Jersey isn't unique. It's more of an American problem. It's Philly's problem. It's everybody's problem. It was my problem back in the 70's and it's 2010. So, you know, I'm leaving here with a new found passion ... and I feel like I found something new, you know, with the school and things, this whole session that we've been going through it's like a new found maybe career. If I could drop it [the dropout rate] 1%, 2% in my community, I feel as though I did my part. (Discussion Group 3 transcription, 24 April 2010)

Alumni members' commitment to address the dropout problem increased over the duration of the project. First, participants felt empowered through telling their stories and having someone listen and having the opportunity to reflect on their past educational experiences and relate them to their current life ambitions. Comments such as the following were common throughout the duration of the project:

I just wanted to say thanks for the opportunity because you made me reflect on some things I haven't thought about in awhile, that's going to keep me in this process that

I'm in now [successful re-entry], even just talking about it just now. I thank you for it.
(Barry, interview transcript)

Second, the process shifted their understanding of the dropout problem from that of a personal shortcoming to that of a deep-seated social problem. The experience of collectively analyzing and discussing a shared societal problem that impacts their personal lives and communities enhanced their commitment to addressing the issue. In the first discussion group, the research team shared basic statistics on the magnitude of the dropout problem. In the following exchange for discussion group 1, an outsider and researcher, Shakown, facilitated the discussion session, and summarized three central pieces of information to prepare the alumni to explain and advocate on the dropout issue:

Shakown (researcher): So, just real quick, recapping the statistics, if there's three major numbers, that we want people be able to say in a quick conversation about dropouts? First, number: nearly one-third of high school students will drop out before graduation. The other number: How many students drop out per year? About 1.2 million. And during the course of each day, 7000 students dropout of school. One-third, 1.2 million, 7000 a day. What do you all think about this?

Kathy (alumni): Staggering.

Aaron (alumni): It makes you fearful for the future of our country.

Edgar (alumni): I was one of them. I didn't know I had 6999 with me.

Shakown (researcher): You didn't know you had that much company, huh?

[Group laughs] Yeah, it's a major issue.

Many of these moments and opportunities for reflection were met with silence followed by deliberation on the part of alumni members. Here, it is evident that the insider participants first grappled with the magnitude of the number of students who do not complete school. Their willingness to see school non-completion as a societal, rather than personal, problem marked a turning point in their commitment to address the problem. Edgar recognized that when an individual drops out, so too do 6999 peers. This acknowledgement exemplifies a moment of clarity that many of the participants experienced over the course of the project.

Finally, talking with stakeholders increased the alumni's sense of importance and connected them to a larger community of people concerned about the dropout problem. After the discussion group with stakeholders to share the strategies we developed over the course of the project, Harriet expressed her newfound awareness of how many people are committed to addressing the issue:

I'm aware of how many allies are out there and that they need to – and that we need to work together in a way where people can equally share their expertise. You know, people are experts in their own lives. (Discussion Group 3 transcription, 24 April 2010)

Her statement captures two accomplishments of the project. First, she corrects her assertion that 'they' need to work to 'we' need to work. She explicitly shows the

willingness to share in the responsibility of addressing the dropout issue. Finally, she acknowledges her own expertise and ability to contribute to addressing the issue. In these ways, she expresses commitment to working in her own community to address the dropout issue. But she also acknowledges the importance of allies.

A sense of commitment was fostered throughout, especially once the project moved into the discussion group setting where insider participants were able to develop knowledge as a collective group. Beyond the life of the initial project, many alumni members continue to remain in touch and express their commitment to moving into subsequent direct action stages. However, tensions over issues of control and collaboration remain. The majority of ongoing collaborations occurred outside the bounds of the formal project and institutions.

Discussion and conclusion

Helping the children [is] very important. It's just not one sided here. Everybody has to take a stand if this thing is going to work ... I have come to appreciate it [the dropout problem] because I now have children, I have grandchildren, and I want to be able to have the tools to pass onto my grandchildren. Like I've always said, I don't want my past to become my grandchildren's future, and I'm really stuck on that. (Larkin [alumni member], Discussion Group 3 transcription, 24 April 2010)

The strength of the participatory approach to addressing the dropout issue was the commitment developed from the insider participants, as indicated in Larkin's quote above. We learned that adult non-completers are eager to address dropout issues. We found this to be a positive outcome of the project. But it makes us wonder whether deeper and more meaningful transformations and solutions would have resulted if we had utilized the PAR framework as a methodology prior to using it as an analytical lens.

Reimagining our process

Cooke and Kothari (2001) discuss how participatory research can often be manipulative and disempowering, which is counter to PAR's actual claims. In this case study, participants (insiders and outsiders) strengthened their commitment through the process, but the foundations of control and collaboration were weak and possibly subject to what Cooke and Kothari (2001) define as the 'tyranny of participation'. This is evidenced in three ways:

The tyranny of decision-making and control: Do participatory facilitators override existing legitimate decision-making processes? The tyranny of the group: Do group dynamics lead to participatory decisions that reinforce the interests of the already powerful? The tyranny of method: Have participatory methods driven out others, which have advantages participants cannot provide? (2001, 7–8)

Although we did not approach this research with a PAR methodology, we feel there are some parallels to the tyranny of participation that were suffered in this study. For control, we overrode the process from the beginning. The insider participants were not part of the initial process, which tended to negate their voice. If insiders had been part of the process from the beginning, issues of control about the location of the research meetings may or may not have shifted, but at least the spirit of

the project would have been more collaborative. The collaborations that did occur involved primarily powerbrokers, not insiders. The tyranny of the group played a role, as the alumni and researchers participated in bringing stakeholders to the last discussion group. The powerbrokers were able to use their power to access people of interest to them, but not necessarily of interest to the whole group. Using PAR principles as an analytical lens enabled us to see such weaknesses in our approach.

We problematized the notion of authentic PAR and highlighted the importance of context. The project, initially, was more focused on the outcomes and was less concerned about the actual process. Most importantly, we came to understand that the focus of participatory research must be centered in the needs of the people rather than the needs of the project. For example, our planning process focused too heavily on research procedures and management and not enough on developing and preparing the alumni members to play an active role in leading the project. We learned that the outcomes, strategies, and solutions devised to address complex educational issues, such as dropout prevention, are shaped by who is in control at the decision-making table. So, too, is how participant groups representing different social locations contribute to the decision-making processes.

More specifically, our review of participation in the research project helps us understand where particular groups were most heavily involved and the proportion of involvement across possible participation points. Based on ideal PAR principles, participation should have been different. In particular, insider participants should have a greater degree of control. Our analysis and reflections force us to ponder what the research project might have looked like if the degree of control had not shifted. Instead of asking the participants to contribute as subjects in the study, how would the process have looked if insiders had been asked to study the dropout problem? The marked distinction exposes a lost opportunity to learn equally *with* rather than *from* the participants. Learning *with* the insider participants reframes the research process into an exercise in power-sharing, trust development, and co-generative knowledge development where collaboration usurps control.

Dropout prevention efforts would benefit greatly from giving more attention to the people and processes involved in planning and strategizing. Including marginalized stakeholders is an important step toward empowering local communities to engage in dropout prevention efforts. Doing so holds the potential to reframe the dropout issue from a series of individual failures to a societal problem in urban communities, to deepen the level of engagement in promoting high-school completion, and to provide local communities with the tools and networks to collaboratively address problems in ways that include their unique insights and strategies. Such processes hold the potential to allow stakeholders to experience what it means to give up power and allow members of marginalized communities to experience gaining power. In the most basic sense, this equates to addressing the dropout problem through community empowerment rather than prescriptive programming and social services. Such revelations were not clear during the process but are nonetheless informative. But simply sharing power does not ensure that insider participants, social service providers, schools, and other institutions in their respective communities would be receptive to change.

Our experiences and analysis left us asking numerous questions: How might re-thinking our research project using a PAR lens inform similar efforts in the future? How would the project and the knowledge it fostered be enhanced through achieving a more ideal balance of control, collaboration, and commit-

ment? Given the project's numerous constraints, what is a realistic balance of control, collaboration, and commitment that can collectively sustain community-based engagement to address complex educational problems? Because PAR is challenging on numerous levels as well as time intensive (Smith et al. 2010), policy-makers are often unwilling to collaborate in a genuinely participatory way. Moreover, many policy-makers are uninformed about PAR theory and practice since it is usually applied within the context of community and educational research, as opposed to policy decision-making. Advocates for reducing dropout rates would benefit from giving more attention to the people and processes involved in planning and strategizing prevention efforts. We hope this article, its methods and reflections, encourages decision-makers to think thoughtfully about including community members as partners to address deep-seated and complex educational problems.

Notes

1. We use the term 'dropout' as a verb indicating the action of leaving school early. We refer to students that leave school before completing graduation as 'non-completers.' We feel this term carries less negative social connotations than referring to people as the noun, 'dropout.'
2. All names and places are pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity.
3. The IRB approves research projects to ensure that participants will not be harmed, abused, or unethically mistreated.

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