EDITED BY ELIZABETH R. DRAME & DECOTEAU J. IRBY

Black Participatory Research

POWER, IDENTITY, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE IN EDUCATION
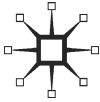
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Power, Identity, and the Struggle for Justice in Education

Edited by

Elizabeth R. Drame and Decoteau J. Irby

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We dedicate this book to Black researchers who sometimes get lost in the weeds, in the Ivory towers, in the trenches, and in the web of identities and complexities we bring to our work. We dedicate this book to Black researchers who use their lived experiences to disrupt and calm turbulent waters of injustice in the pursuit of liberation for, with, and on behalf of Black peoples in the Black Diaspora.

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<div align="right">Dominique Duval-Diop</div>

We want to thank the two project leaders for guiding us throughout the project and making us better leaders.

<div align="right">Fernie Diop, Ndeye Mama Diop, and Soukeyna Abbott</div>

I would like to thank Elise Frattura for being an integral collaborator on the journey. Thank you, Thor Stolen, for pushing us to even deeper levels of reflection. I would like to thank the Umbrella Group who opened their doors, hearts, and minds to the power of participatory research to engage community voice. I would like to thank Deirdre Johnson-Burel for the fearless leader she is. I am humbled by her honesty, integrity, and commitment to her home, New Orleans. It is a privilege to walk beside her as a friend and partner in justice for Black children. I would like to

Introduction. Black Bridges, Troubled Waters, and the Search for Solid Ground: The People, the Problems, and Educational Justice ❧

Decoteau J. Irby and Elizabeth R. Drame

Black professional researchers often serve as cultural brokers or "bridges" between White-dominated institutions and marginalized Black communities that are in dire need of educational justice. Identifying as *Black* and as part of Black communities is important for many people of the African Diaspora, including academically trained researchers, especially since community itself serves as an important unit of identity.[1] Black researcher racial self-identification and alignment with Black communities reflects a commitment to self-definition, determination, and liberation. One of the sites of struggle where these identities are leveraged to produce change is in the field of urban education.

Students in urban public schools in the United States are particularly vulnerable and at a disadvantage by virtue of their position in a grossly unequal public education system.[2] Jennifer L. Hoschild explains that youth's position in public schooling is nested in at least four ways—states, districts, schools, and classes—that each compound and result in gross inequalities in public education.[3] Nowhere are the inequities more apparent than in comparing urban schools with suburban schools, and White

students with non-White students in the United States. Because of persistent racial segregation, in the public school context, the term "urban" can, in a sense, be regarded as non-White, poor, and working class, while "suburban" serves as a proxy for White and middle class.

Even in racially desegregated schools, academic tracking of students maintains two separate and unequal educational systems: one efficient and high performing that serves East Asian American and White students, and the other failing and low performing that disserves Black, Latino,[4] and Southeast Asian students. The systematic and pervasive exclusion of Black students in educational settings is evident in a number of ways. Black students in the United States experience negative discipline consequences at much higher rates than their White peers. Black students experience disproportionate representation in special education.[5] For example, Blacks and students of two or more races were diagnosed with emotional-behavioral disabilities and intellectual disabilities at much higher rates than White and Asian students. An emotional-behavioral or intellectual disability diagnosis leads to students being placed in separate, more exclusionary educational settings.[6]

Urban schools with sizable Black populations have larger class sizes with fewer resources and lower per-pupil spending.[7] This is despite school size being a strong indicator of student sense of belongingness and attachment to school, which reduces school disorder.[8] School disorder is associated with acts such as bullying, disruption of classroom activities, and general unruliness, which impact student learning and behavior[9] and are predictors of crime and violence.[10] Reforms intended to address these conditions often exacerbate the problem. Reformers have changed school discipline systems such that they have widened and deepened over time, producing the likelihood that more students get into trouble at school, and that when they do, the consequences are more severe, making getting back on track all the more difficult.[11] Black males and special education students are most affected by overly punitive discipline and are more likely to receive disciplinary referrals, or be suspended, expelled, and placed in a school-to-prison track.[12]

In addition, urban schools suffer from a shortage of qualified teachers. Teachers in urban public schools often are not certified and teach in subject areas in which they have no academic training. Urban teachers are more likely to leave during the school year than suburban teachers,[13] leaving urban students without teachers or with permanent substitutes. Additional support, such as school nurses, counselors, and health-related services, are also not as readily available or of high quality in urban districts.[14] Urban students are more likely to attend school in poorly maintained facilities and to be provided low-quality technology, supplies, and books. Together,

these insufficiencies stifle urban youths' ability, especially Black students, to experience successful academic and socioemotional outcomes, leaving them on uncertain and shaky ground with respect to lifelong well-being. For far too many Black children, schooling is a site of struggle.[15] Black researchers and community members realize this.

Black professional researchers' identification with Black communities often translates into a desire to produce antiracist scholarship, agitate for educational change, and engage in actions to ensure that educational institutions contribute to the academic, socioemotional, and culturally affirming betterment of Black children, families, and communities. Producing antiracist scholarship, and, in particular, engaging in processes of coproducing anti-oppressive research, requires that Black researchers carry out the intellectual, emotional, and creative task of working the margins to produce distinctive processes and analysis steeped in freedom to be both different from and part of the solidarity of humanity.[16] Participatory research (PR)[17] approaches offer some guiding principles for honoring these commitments. Yet even in using participatory methods, partnerships that do not attend to positionalities, power differentials, personal biases, and the racial oppression inherent in academic research risk reproducing the very forms of oppression that participatory approaches seek to disrupt.

We, the editors, decided to write this book because in our conversation with one another, we discovered that we put an immense amount of pressure on ourselves to broker opportunities for our children, families, friends, and communities. In taking on the role of being *Black bridges* we, at times, find ourselves near the point of collapse. Our conversations helped us to realize we need to do more to care for ourselves and, in doing so, be better for our chosen scholarly fields and communities. Both work colleagues and our Black community-based colleagues depend upon our bridging capabilities to, at minimum, navigate and, at best, overcome the troubled waters of racism, oppression, and dispossession in research. The book is a result of our attempt to understand the dilemmas and contradictions that come with our positions, statuses, and identities in the conduct of Black-Black participatory research.

MULTILAYERED CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY IN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Participatory researchers agree that critical self-reflexivity should be a central part of any PR process.[18] Our belief in the need for critical reflexivity

was an impetus for us to develop the book. This book is about our commitment to making sense of Black people's roles, positions, and actions in PR projects around the world. The method that underscored the development of this book is one of critical reflexivity. Critical reflexivity is a sense-making process that seeks to describe, analyze, and ask questions about critical incidents or events in our lives. Critical reflexivity processes can be taken up individually or corporately and can be facilitated through thinking, dialoguing, and writing. Who is involved in the critical reflexive process depends upon the layer of involvement that requires understanding. Lai Fong Chiu[19] and Ruth Nicholls[20] identify three layers of reflexivity: self-reflexivity, interpersonal reflexivity, and collective reflexivity. Each is an important aspect of PR.

Transparent *self-reflexivity* asks research participants to identify the assumptions that underpin the research, which includes interrogating the research design, proposals, institutional and financial support, and other happenings that led to implementation of the research. Self-reflexivity also requires individuals involved in research to consider the multiple identities, power, privilege, and status they bring to the research project. Although this sort of transparent reflective work contributes to making researchers visible within written accounts of projects, researchers, who reflect only on the self, risk producing overly self-centered descriptions that focus primarily on identity as the unit of analysis.

Interpersonal reflexivity, the second layer of the critical reflexivity triad, moves beyond identity to consider positionality within the project. We worked to make sure this text was not a collection of reflections on identity. Rather, we aimed to illuminate researcher positionalities. By focusing on positionality, the authors explored their selves in relation to research partners and power brokers as well as their subjective positions within geopolitical contexts in ways that honor the inherently relational nature of PR. Engaging in interpersonal reflexivity requires attention to power relations and enables researchers to see their multiple positions, marginalization, and positions of privilege and power. The third level of reflexivity, *collective reflexivity*, is what we hope this book will compel researchers and community partners to consider as an essential aspect of PR. This layer begs the question of social change and project impact. It invites all partners to reflect on the research project with attention to questions such as who was in control when, what drove the collaboration and why, and to what ends. Collective reflexivity holds the potential to reveal unanticipated outcomes of a research partnership, and when done as a group may reveal that participants experienced the project as "transformative, affirming, cathartic,

or empowering."[21] It may also reveal the opposite. Although we did not engage fully in this final step of collective reflexivity within our respective projects, we now realize the very real need to do so. It may not be possible to reconvene our partners to engage in this process at this point; nevertheless, we do hope that if they read this book, they reengage for the purpose of making sense of our experiences in a more collective fashion.

Researchers, or anyone for that matter, can use critical reflexive sense-making for multiple purposes. It can be used to reflect on past experiences, present action, and future actions. In large measure, the authors presented reflections *on* past actions and experiences. A second use of critical reflexivity can be to engage in the more difficult process of reflecting *in* action, while projects are happening in real time. While each of us attempted to reflect in action, we found it quite challenging to do so. While reflecting in action is important and should not be dismissed, it is important to understand the limits of reflecting in action. For us, our senses of urgency for resolutions to the community problems we each confronted in our work constrained our abilities to step back and reflect in the moment. Doing so in the midst of our work may have seemed like time wasted, selfishness, and counterproductive to the research project goals. We viewed our bridging presence (rather than distance) as the most valuable resource in the moment.

Looking back, it is clear that not only did we need to reflect on how the work was evolving, but we also needed to give ourselves permission to explore our emotional, spiritual, and psychological connections to the work and understand how intertwined these connections were to our feelings of powerlessness, desires for control, commitments, and our socioemotional well-being. We realize now that building opportunities for multilayered[22] critical reflexivity is all the more necessary because of the urgency of the work. Several years removed from the initiation of our respective projects, we came to terms with our realities. Yet, the critical reflexivity processes we engaged in, in those forms and times, paled in comparison to our off-the-record conversations, our hidden transcripts (Scott 1990).[23] PR literature did not attend to the race-specific issues we experienced. We had no examples of the critical reflexivity required to heal ourselves from *researching while Black* (as researchers and Black folks) or to help Black communities process the harms of social science research. Although PR offers some novel insights into beginning this work of critical reflexivity, as a relatively new field of study, ways to attend to the challenges of specific principles of racial justice and anti-oppression remain underexplored.[24] As Black communities face persistent educational challenges, which spill over into our

daily lives, it is critical to unpack the unique possibilities of Black-Black research partnerships and the role they might play in advancing the cause of Black liberation.

BLACK PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

This book is our attempt to forge such a conversation about the limits of PR by attending to its assumptions about the usefulness of cross-racial research collaborations as a vehicle for advancing antiracist education research, policy, and practice. We explore being Black, partnering with Black communities in PR projects, and the struggles that reaching solid ground entails. We invited this book's contributors to turn within, reflect, and search for deeper understandings of their own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge.[25] By engaging in the critical reflexive methods of examining the self, the self in relation to others, and the collective,[26] we hoped to arrive at clearer understandings of how to proactively confront our individual and collective experiences with internalized and externalized forms of oppression.

By embracing our marginality, we focused on self-definition and self-valuation, which we believe, in turn, better positions us to (re)assert our rightful place as humans in a world where we, Black folks, are often not treated as such. Methodologically, we remain interested in the ways thatBlack Participatory Research (BPR) might advance humanistic approaches to social science research. We define BPR as a strand of participatory action research (PAR) where (a) the primary parties responsible for carrying out research in Black communities self-identify as Black, (b) Black perspectives are purposefully centered and White perspectives deliberately de-centered, (c) marginalized voices from within the African Diaspora are uplifted for Black empowerment, healing, and liberation, and (d) the normative underpinnings of PR are suspect and subject to cultural and political critique.

We intentionally and purposefully use the word "Black" throughout this introduction and in naming the research studies explored in this book. *Black* is a socially constructed racial identifier popularized by people of African descent in the United States of America during the 1960s and 1970s Civil Rights and Black Power Eras. It remains important as a social and political construct that signifies the unity of people of the African Diaspora. Blackness signifies a cultural and psychological connectedness to a common African ancestry while also recognizing that racial identity is wrought with conflict, and is political, complex, and multifaceted. Yet, we claim our Blackness with no apologies. We explore the complexities

and promises of advancing Black research partnerships and outcomes in a context of global White supremacy.

We make visible the intersectional power, privilege, and status differences between research partners who share common racial identity but who differ in terms of their professional priorities, socioeconomic status, class, cultures, gender, literacy and language abilities, and ethnic identities. Through engaging this kind of critical reflexivity, we expect that Black researchers will be better positioned to collaboratively challenge the marginalizing effects of research, intersectional power differentials, and ultimately the reproduction of inequalities that are the roots of many "Black problems."

PRESENTING OUR HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS

Three central questions are addressed throughout this text. First, how do Black researchers and Black community partners make sense of PR as a process for expanding access to and improving educational opportunities for Black people? Second, how do the intersectional identities of Black community researchers and Black professional researchers collide and coalesce as they collaborate to address institutional racism and marginalization in research? Third, what critical issues should Black professional researchers and Black community researchers anticipate as they initiate and implement PR projects?

We address these questions through three unique case studies. The first case examines an education reform project in New Orleans, Louisiana. The second case explores a collaborative project to address low high school completion rates in the Philadelphia-New Jersey-Delaware region. The final case focuses on a sustainable development youth leadership project in a bilingual middle school in Dakar, Senegal, West Africa. Each of the Black-led PR projects were carried out in sites marred with histories of colonialism, racism, and racial oppression. These sites are also home to Black folks who have not allowed racism and White supremacy to dampen their ambition to seek recognition, rights, and opportunities to live healthy and productive lives.

Although we believe participatory approaches have tremendous potential to disrupt the oppressive nature of social science research, we problematize the tacit assumption that multiracial research teams are best suited to advance research that disrupts White supremacy and the racist underpinnings of social science research in Black communities. Academic researcher identities are inextricably linked to White supremacist institutions. Their

scholarly cultivation occurs within institutional contexts and power structures that have historically pillaged people of color for their knowledge, labor, and resources.[27] Exploitative research practices continue in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. We would do Black communities (and the Black researchers who identify with them) a disservice by ignoring the possible ways that participatory approaches, too, despite the noble intentions of its proponents, might contribute to the reproduction of racial inequality. However social justice-oriented and anti-oppressive participatory action researchers wish their work to be, the mere fact that their researcher identities, social locations, and positionalities are influenced by their socialization toward Western social science research makes them suspect. So where does that leave Black researchers?

In our numerous conversations about our experiences as Black scholars, we constantly found ourselves coming back to concerns about how we ourselves experienced marginalization in the academy. We often felt this marginalization vis-à-vis that of our White research partners and peers. We found ourselves being critical of some of our colleagues and wrestling over our relationships with them as well as the nature of our "bridge" status. Whose bridge? To where? And over what waters? For the most part, we kept these reflections to ourselves. When we did share our feelings and thoughts, it was with people who we believed would "get it." As members of subordinated groups, we created what James C. Scott[28] referred to as "hidden transcripts" of our true thoughts and emotions. So as we shared our "hidden transcripts" with one another, we were troubled by what we considered some White colleagues' sense of entitlement and ownership over "our" research projects. We were more troubled by our own silence. In hiding our transcripts, we propped up racism within the academy.

We consider ourselves Black outsiders within the academy. Reflecting Patricia Hill Collins's[29] theorization of Black feminist positionality, we are professionally socialized to work within a patriarchal White normative knowledge paradigm. Yet, we consciously and unconsciously remain rooted within our own experiences as a Black man and a Black woman. In our efforts to master social science research paradigms, we have retained a critical posture toward them and therefore are positioned to bring a special perspective not only to the study of Black people but also to some of the fundamental issues facing participatory educational research itself. One of these issues is *our difference* as Black people. As Collins[30] noted:

> Outsider within status is bound to generate tension, for people who become outsiders within are forever changed by their new status. Learning the subject

matter of sociology stimulates a reexamination of one's own personal and cultural experiences; and yet these same experiences paradoxically help to illuminate sociology's anomalies. Outsiders within occupy a special place—they become different people and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see.

As Black researchers who embrace PR approaches, we possess an acute awareness of how racism and other forms of marginalization are experienced by both ourselves and our community partners. We realize that, if we are able to balance our professional training and what we can offer in terms of personal and cultural experience, our status is itself a position of power. This awareness alone puts us in a powerful position. Knowledge brokers or "bridges" "have differential access to community knowledge, resources, and sources of power, and therefore, in a twist to the [racial and cultural power] dynamics may have both less (in terms of decision-making) and more (in terms of access to information) power than their outsider researcher counterparts."[31]

Our awareness of power, positionality, and identity shifts and fluctuates across time and space. What happens in the moments where Black researchers' racial consciousness, solidarity, and reasons for project involvement are at odds with the research team's priorities and commitments? What happens when Black researchers decide that they do not want to be a "bridge" for advancing a research project? What if Black researchers decide that their project is appropriating rather than co-constructing knowledge? What happens when Black researchers confront the reality that they are positioned to be instruments of oppression rather than liberation? This book contains hidden transcripts.

RACE AND RACISM IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH: A CRITICAL RACE THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was first articulated by Derrick Bell as a way to explain the persistent racism that grips the US legal system.[32] CRT is an activist-oriented theory that critiques "incrementalism and step-by-step progress, liberal order, equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law."[33] CRT aims to demystify supposed race neutrality and recognizes racial oppression as socially constructed and relationally maintained.[34] Further its proponents call for purposeful and concise uses of language in legal scholarship and recognize that although race is socially constructed, its social effects

manifest to shape our material reality. In other words, racism makes race real. CRT scholars have applied the theory and its six tenets to understand historical events and to conceive of ways to improve a wide range of policy-related disciplines, including education.[35]

Critical race theorists are perhaps most renowned for their bold claim that racism in the United States is endemic, stubbornly persistent, and permanent. Race, according to CRT, thrives in a culture where race neutrality and color blindness mask its very real presence and effects. Racism manifests in the social organization of societies, as well as in the form of micro-aggressions that create oppressive life conditions and experiences for Black people while propping up White superiority and privilege. Racial categories exist because human beings categorized "other" human beings on the basis of observable physical attributes. Racial ideology developed in tandem with European imperialism as a means of achieving global economic exploitation to enrich European nobles by dehumanizing non-Europeans. The detriment of European imperialist conquests and the racist ideology that drove colonial expansion is expansive: dehumanization, use of physical and psychological violence, cultural annihilation, enslavement, and genocide of numerous populations of "others" encountered during imperialist expositions. Racial ideology and White supremacy explain White racial solidarity and White racial identity formation[36] and underpin the ongoing racialization and social oppression of people of color throughout the world.[37]

Racial construction cannot be relegated to historicism and our use of the term *racialization* underscores the social fact that racial formation is an ongoing and continual process, whereby race is given power and salience in contexts of time, space, material reality, and power.[38] Critical race theorists' commitment to unmasking the intricacies of racial formation is reflected in their adopted approach of viewing racial identity as fluid, ever changing, and differently experienced by each person classified as part of a racial group. Antiessentialist research approaches recognize that although individuals who fall under the same racial category share a collective experience of oppression, "the forms of that oppression can vary considerably"[39] dependent upon the ways their racial identity intersects with other aspects of their identities. The identities included cultural, ethnic, linguistic, gender, sexual orientation, and national identities and can be empowering or disempowering factors that marginalize some and center others within the same racial group.[40]

Critical race theorists seek to understand the variability that stems from intersectional racial experiences. Thus the perspectives of the oppressed

and marginalized are best captured through individual counter-narrative accounts. It is also important to account for the contexts, times, and the spaces from which voices of color emerge. The CRT counter-narrative approach compels researchers to rethink historical accounts by critiquing the credibility, integrity, and biases from which historical accounts and dominant narratives emerge. In particular, interest convergence theory calls into question the so-called racial advancement in the United States by recognizing that what counts as "progress" is questionable based on the fact that progress for people of color is tenuous within a context of global White supremacy. Interest convergence critically regards historical social and racial progress as viable primarily insofar as it stands to benefit White people.

Concepts such as endemic racism, race as a social construction, racialization and differentiation, antiessentialism/intersectionality, voice and counter-narratives, and interest convergence are not unique to CRT. Indeed, scholars who operate within other race and cultural frameworks utilize these concepts. Some also critique them and pose direct challenges to CRT's emphasis on race.[41] These include Afrocentrists' theoretical commitment to centering culture and its insistence on identifying an essential African way of being in the world,[42] Marxists' (and neo-Marxists') emphasis on classism and material determinism,[43] and Black feminists' centering of the interlocking nature of gender-race oppression.[44] CRT's usefulness lies in its synthesis of theories of oppression as well as its broad commitment to articulating an explanatory metatheory that "treats race as a defining principle rather than a variable within research . . . lending it credibility on questions of origin and causality."[45] CRT is a useful theoretical lens for making sense of our hidden transcripts. For example, we came to understand our research collaborations as moments of interest convergence. We viewed many of our interactions with colleagues as micro-aggressions. In thinking about different experiences, we understood intersectionality. But racism was a common denominator across our experiences. It provided useful ways for us to make sense of our collective experiences. But what is notably missing from CRT, beyond the field of law where it was initially formulated, is a specific research orientation. Its action is to present a different set of facts based on counter-narratives. While CRT works well for the purposes of education policy critique, understanding historical and current events, it does less to illuminate the challenges of engaging in action for the purposes of compelling change. For these purposes, we turn to PR methodologies, which, in our estimation, provide a complementary framework to disrupt the racism that CRT so eloquently critiques.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AS A RESPONSE TO RACISM IN EDUCATION RESEARCH

Researchers who engage in PR, PAR, and community-based participatory research (CBPR) projects often do so seeking to address complex community-based problems that, if solved, would improve the quality of life of people in local communities.[46] PR's criticality is located in its epistemic stance that co-constructed knowledge, which is produced through the encounter between an indigenous (insider) knower who is tacitly familiar with a phenomenon and a person for whom a phenomenon is unfamiliar (outsider), is more complete than either of these ways of knowing alone.

Individuals who conduct PR projects do so within a web of mutually constituted social relations. First, *individuals are subjects of communities*. Individuals are situated within constantly evolving webs of human relationships that center them in some communities while marginalizing them in other communities. Individuals are able to move between and within these communities.[47] Second, *individuals are racialized subjects in a White supremacist social world*. As discussed in the section on CRT, individuals and groups are assigned to racial categories. These categories are historically situated and culturally maintained, imbued with assumptions of White superiority and Black inferiority, which institutions and societal structures perpetuate or challenge.[48] Third, *individuals are subjects of time, space and place*. Time, space, and place profoundly shape individuals' and groups' social experiences and realities, yet individuals, through their actions, actively shape time, space, and place.

We make no claim to understand Black researchers' different motivations for engaging in research. But for those who adopt participatory, community-based, and related research approaches, we assume that the approach, as would be the case with researchers of all races, align with their values and commitments to co-construction as a preferred method of inquiry.

Because of participatory researchers' critical stance on the production of knowledge, the framework is useful for Black researchers to push back on dominant social science assumptions that dispossessed and marginalized people have little to contribute in terms of solving the world's most pressing problems or indeed the problems they encounter in their daily lives. Such a framework, in fact, recognizes marginalized populations may have more acute understandings of the structures and processes that (re)produce inequality.[49] Moreover, by understanding that part of the dehumanization of people of color includes the devaluation of the ways

of knowing of people of color, then the question of "whose knowledge is valuable" is apropos. A hallmark of PR is its priority, if not insistence, on engaging marginalized populations in conducting research and contributing their knowledge and skills to exercises of academic research. Within the PR paradigm, insider knowledge, active engagement, and expertise are considered essential to *knowing* about community problems. Action research goes further to suggest that insiders must be a part of using the knowledge generated to effect change. But this insistence on voice and inclusion is itself a point of contention that is shaped by who insists, who resists, and how racialized subjects make sense of both participation and nonparticipation. Exercising nonparticipation may be beneficial and instrumental given one's positionality in a project. Epistemologically, scholars who engage participatory approaches frame the validity of research knowledge claims in terms of (a) cogeneration of knowledge and (b) insiders' increased capacities to solve their own problems. The quintessential questions in this emerging field relate to "how participatory is the project?," "how empowering is the project for the marginalized groups?," and "when is nonparticipation an exercise of power?" PR scholars evaluate projects first based on the extent to which the knowledge development processes (i.e., research) are genuinely cogenerative and attentive to active and equal engagement of indigenous research partners and traditional researchers. Traditional social science paradigms separate researchers from researched participants. In participatory paradigms all participants are considered researchers. The primary distinction is based upon the type of knowledge the researcher is assumed to possess at the onset of the project. While the knowledge possessed is deemed to be different, it is regarded as equally important. Each partner has knowledge to impart and to gain. The research process then is based upon mutual benefit that is maximized throughout the cogenerative knowledge development process. Participants are theorized to exist along a horizontal spectrum (not vertical, as the process is intended to challenge knowledge hierarchies) based on their respective levels of cultural embeddedness in the indigenous community's culture, which has come to be known as an insider-outsider continuum.[50]

The insider-outsider framework inherent in PAR can be viewed along two dimensions—*the participants* and *the participation process.* At one end of the spectrum are indigenous insiders, participants who bring to bear indigenous knowledge and whose priorities and concerns should ideally direct the participatory collaboration. At the other end are outsiders who bring skills, access to resources, and cultural-political capital that can be

leveraged with indigenous insiders' capacity to act on their knowledge of problems and solutions. Outsiders also bring a fresh set of eyes to problems that insiders may be, by virtue of their deep cultural embeddedness, unable to recognize without the assistance of an outsider. The contributors to the book fall on neither end of the spectrum. We (the book's contributors) are mutually implicated in one another's lives.[51] We possess within us, at once the oppressive consciousness of the White supremacist, the patriarch, and the colonizer and the consciousness that can be a springboard for liberation.

ORGANIZATION AND OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book is organized into three cases that offer reflections from professionally trained researchers and community-based researcher partners. In part one's case, "Dark Waters: Navigating the Ripple Effects of Education Reform *on* Black Children in Post-Katrina New Orleans," Deirdre Johnson-Burel and Elizabeth Drame reflect on experiences, challenges, and lessons learned from their participation in an education reform project in post-Katrina New Orleans, Louisiana. In part two, "All-Out War: Fighting against the White Appropriation of Jailed Wisdom," Decoteau Irby, Gerald Bolling, and Lynnette Mawhinney provide insights into the racial and cultural-politics of their study, which brought together formerly incarcerated school non-completers, researchers, and local policy makers to address low high school completion rates in the Philadelphia-New Jersey-Delaware metropolitan region. The third part, "Eradicating the Waste: Challenging Western Education Dominance in Post-colonial West Africa," focuses on the experiences of students and teachers who developed a youth leadership environmental sustainability project in a bilingual middle school in Dakar, Senegal.

Each part contains an opening case description where the authors provide an overview of a research project. After each case introduction, contributing authors reflect on their perspectives, experiences, anxieties, hopes, and disappointments regarding their involvement in the projects. Whereas many PAR projects result in coauthored chapters that present "co-constructed" knowledge, we regard community members as *expert research partners* who have their own unique analytical lenses and insights about the projects. As such, we invited both formally trained researchers and community partners to contribute chapters to the book. Inviting community members to submit their own chapters reflects our genuine

attempt and commitment to not merely center but also elevate community members' voices in what is often the most contentious and difficult stage in PR—the knowledge distribution stage (specifically, the peer-reviewed publishing enterprise in which Black people are hyper-marginalized). In the conclusion, we reflect on the recurring themes and unique aspects of the cases in the book.

OVER TROUBLED WATER

We conceived this book with both professionally trained researchers and community-based research partners in mind. We named this introduction "Black Bridges, Troubled Waters, and the Search for Solid Ground" to reflect the precarious position of community-based and professional Black researchers as "bridges" and the anxieties that bearing the weight of being a bridge or connector entails. The water symbolizes the troubles of White supremacy, oppression, marginalization, and dispossession in education that we seek to overcome by embracing the relationships and co-construction of knowledge that are part of PAR. In this quest, we seek to find or, more accurately, construct solid ground that is educational justice. An identifiable solid ground, a site of nurturance and belonging, and the solace and comfort it brings seem ever elusive for far too many Black people and communities. The solid ground is inextricably linked to one's identity and might be found in a profession, a community of people with whom one strongly identifies, or a combination of the two. We hope this book lends theory substance through conveying stories and presenting multiple voices from which readers might find resonance. We hope that community members and professionals of all races will read this book before, during, and after engaging in research projects and use it as an example, with all its shortcomings, of what critical reflexivity in PR might entail.

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Part I

Dark Waters: Navigating the Ripple Effects of Education Reform on Black Children in New Orleans ✐

1. Striving toward Collective Solutions in Race-Conscious New Orleans ❧

Elizabeth R. Drame

SETTING THE STAGE

The City of New Orleans is located in the Orleans Parish (similar to a county) in the southern part of the State of Louisiana, the United States. The city straddles the end of the Mississippi River just before its confluence with the Gulf of Mexico. Owing to its geographic proximity to the ocean and the Mississippi River, which provides access to the center of the United States, it has been a major port town since the French founded it in 1718. Since then, its unique architecture, history, and celebrations, such as Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest, have made it a tourist destination. Also bringing notoriety to New Orleans was the catastrophic class 2 tropical typhoon named Hurricane Katrina that ravaged the city on August 25, 2005. This natural disaster raised many questions about the government's involvement in the construction and maintenance of the safety precautions/systems that could have helped save the city and how it was/is involved in the reconstruction of the city. Racial and socioeconomic situations have been at the heart of many of these questions.

New Orleans' proximity to the Mississippi River's estuary has made it particularly vulnerable to natural disasters, such as hurricanes, flooding, and storm surges. According to Kates et al.: "In its 288 year history New Orleans has had 27 major river or Hurricane-induced disasters at a rate of one about every 11 years." The authors describe that after every disaster the

city has been reconstructed and actually made a "safe development paradox," which they describe as: "increasing safety, [which] induces increased development, leading to increased losses."[1] After a natural disaster occurs, levee walls are built higher, higher capacity pumps are installed, and higher break walls are erected. When these safer systems have been constructed, then population grows in these areas, which in turn creates a larger population that is affected when the next disaster strikes. Throughout history, the more well-off citizens have lived in the more elevated areas.

The levees being breached, pumps failing, and high-density poverty, coupled with the disaster Hurricane Katrina itself caused, led to the aftermath and destruction of parts of New Orleans. The average elevation of New Orleans is below sea level, which led to much of the flooding. According to Wang et al., 80 percent of the Orleans Parish was flooded and the city suffered a loss of almost a one-third of the population. They estimate 130,000 people left the city. The news media placed the blame of 1,570 mostly Black deaths and the others who were trapped on the victims themselves for not leaving,[2] but according to Kates et al. many of the trapped or dead were residents without vehicles to escape, or who were homebound, or in hospitals and in-care facilities. They estimate that there was a 40–50 billion dollar loss when property loss, ongoing economic losses, and the cost of emergency assistance are factored in.[3]

With all the destruction, reconstruction was inevitable. With reconstruction came economic opportunities. One of the many controversies was the stages in which reconstruction occurred. Wang et al. describe it as a gradual uneven recovery or a U-shaped trend. The Commercial Business District (CBD) was given high importance in the recovery, and as the distance from the CBD increased, recovery decreased until the distance grew closer to the more affluent suburbs where recovery increased again.[4] They describe post-Katrina development as a positive growth or a small loss in the CBD and in the outer wealthy suburbs, but the rates declined toward the middle of the two areas that "suffered from the worst loss."[5] Wang et al. also state that the socioeconomic disadvantage factor was the most significant variable and had the strongest effect on population change. The predominantly African American communities in the east had low socioeconomic status and were more vulnerable to natural disasters. These communities experienced greater flooding, suffered from more severe housing damage, and had lower motivation to return.[6] Surprisingly though, the Hispanic community grew significantly. They credit this to the number of new Latino incomers working in the recovery and other sectors of the economy and then putting roots down in the city.[7]

With the already impoverished areas being hit the hardest by the multiple factors of depopulation and under-reconstruction, education also changed dramatically post Katrina, particularly with the passage of Act 35. Act 35 reframed what was considered a failing school such that the majority of Orleans Parish schools were judged as failing and placed under the purview of the state-run Recovery School District (RSD). This also led to a massive firing of public school teachers and a significant influx of newly hired, inexperienced teachers from programs such as Teach for America, The New Teacher Project, and New Leaders for New Schools. Oftentimes these teachers were from outside the area, White, and paid less than the veteran Black teachers of New Orleans.

Racial issues have been a big topic of discussion especially in the area of education. Buras states that "with support from state policy makers and venture philanthropists, White entrepreneurs in New Orleans have seized control of public schools in Black communities and attempted to create a racial geography that furthers their economic interests all while ignoring the claims of color to educational resources and urban space."[8]

OVERVIEW OF RECOVERY SCHOOL DISTRICT

In May 2003, the then governor Blanco signed into law Act 9, which gave the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) the authority to take over failing schools. The RSD was created as the state entity that would run failing schools under the authority of the state superintendent. By May 2005, five schools had been taken over by the RSD and converted to charter schools whose operations were managed by an independent charter school operator. Approximately three months after Hurricane Katrina hit on August 25, 2005, Governor Blanco signed Act 35 into law during an extraordinary session of the Louisiana State Legislature. Act 35 lowered the threshold for what was considered a failing school, effectively allowing the state takeover of more than a hundred additional Orleans Parish public schools for an initial period of five years.[9] This extraordinary and, many contend, subversive move set the tone for the work of the Umbrella Group. Act 35 allowed for the "sale" of New Orleans schools to education entrepreneurs, venture philanthropists, and for-profit interests at the expense of primarily Black veteran educators, families, and children.[10] The Umbrella Group's mission evolved to circumvent this sea tide change by connecting marginalized and discounted community members with the policy and reconstruction work from which they were left out.

Residents and families of New Orleans public schools experienced many challenges before the advent of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The Center for Action Research on New Orleans School Reform and other groups reported numerous challenges facing the district, including inconsistent leadership, corruption, financial instability, poor graduation rates, decreasing enrollment, unskilled graduates unable to compete in the job market, and a high percentage of academically unacceptable schools.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, state legislators took over many of New Orleans' failing public schools and placed them under the administration of the RSD. The takeover resulted in the creation of a decentralized network of schools, many of them public charter schools, overseen by a number of local and state entities, such as the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), the RSD, and the State BESE. In the 2009–2010 post-Katrina school year, there were 88 schools and approximately 38,000 students.[11] The majority of schools were run by the RSD, with the OPSB responsible for overseeing fewer than 20 schools. In 2009, over 61 percent of the students enrolled in public schools in New Orleans attended a charter school. Compared to OPSB-run schools, schools overseen by the RSD, whether charter or traditional public schools, enrolled over 88 percent of children who qualified for free or reduced lunch, an indicator of poverty level. RSD-operated traditional public schools enrolled the highest percentage of children with disabilities, 12.9 percent overall. The OPSB kept control of the higher achieving schools, enrolling lower percentages of academically challenged students.

Rather than working transparently and collaboratively with families under great strain due to the destruction of their homes, schools, and communities to identify the best approach to continuing their children's education, the "education reform" spurred by Act 35 was pushed forward without broad consensus and against the will of the Black New Orleans community. The fact that 61 percent of New Orleans students were enrolled in 51 charter schools in the 2009–2010 school year[12] created the real sense that the train had left the station and that Black students and their families were not on it.

In 2007, some preliminary evidence suggested that certain public charter schools posted higher gains in academic achievement than traditional public schools.[13] These initial findings were touted as evidence of the success of the public school takeover and "charterization" of Orleans public schools engineered by Act 35. The accuracy and validity of the comparisons made were questioned by many, given the differences in the demographic profiles of the schools compared.[14] Community members and parents were concerned that selective admission policies and other enrollment practices were leading to inequitable access to certain "higher quality" charter schools.[15]

Even before Hurricane Katrina, poor Black children did not have access to high-quality educational environments. This was evident in the high levels of enrollment of wealthier, educated Blacks and Whites in magnet and private schools, compared to the majority of poor and Black children making up the largest demographic group in the New Orleans public school population.[16] Access to the higher performing, integrated magnet schools were governed by selective admission policies and criteria regarding residency. Before Katrina, the majority of poor, Black families enrolled their children in the over hundred of 120 New Orleans schools deemed low performing. These schools were subsequently taken over by the state. Post Katrina, families hoped they would have a choice in where they sent their children to be educated since geography was no longer a determining factor.[17] These families hoped to have a say in how schools were redesigned and reconfigured, with quality education for their Black children in mind. This hope did not become reality.

Opening new schools is a huge undertaking in itself. The challenge of opening new schools is compounded when enrolled students are traumatized, as well as academically behind. Throughout the process of securing the needed resources and students to run a school, many poor Black families and their children were excluded from certain schools through complicated, inaccessible admission procedures. The rates of mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety, disruptive behavior, and post-traumatic stress disorder, increased without a concomitant increase in the availability of coordinated mental health services for children and adolescents.[18] Students perceived as too difficult to "handle" experienced systematic exclusion from quality school environments. At the heart of the design of new schools should be the interests, needs, and aspirations of the families and children they purport to serve. In the view of community members, education advocates, and families based in New Orleans, the evolution of the system(s) of schools led to systematic exclusion, opportunism, and marginalization for poor, underserved Black children.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN ACTION: THE UMBRELLA GROUP EFFECT

It was in this context that several New Orleans-based organizations came together in late 2007 to discuss what could be done to establish an advocacy agenda that would lead to community-driven, sustainable, and equitable public education reform. The Umbrella Group[19] network emerged

from what began as an organic, genesis conversation among members of educational advocacy and grassroots organizations and civically engaged community members concerned with and implicated in public education in New Orleans. Umbrella Group members realized sustainable reform required the engagement of a broad and diverse citizenry (see Table 1.1 for a description of the organizations). This ongoing dialogue presented a real opportunity to implement deep, sustainable reform and to address the long-standing disengagement and disempowerment of the majority of families whose children attended and attend New Orleans public schools.

The Umbrella Group wanted to implement a participatory community engagement process. Since they did not possess the organizational expertise at the time to implement such a project, they sought out researchers with expertise in conducting participatory research. Over several years, I developed a university-community research partnership between myself, one of my colleagues,[20] the Umbrella Group board of directors, and

Table 1.1   **Umbrella Group—nonprofit network of organizations focused on public school reform**

Organization	Organization description
Bethel Center	Community-based advocacy organization
Labor Group	Civil rights, legal advocacy organization
MBA*	Racially diverse community-based organization focused on public education
Uptown	Nonprofit youth and community development organization
White Wolf*	Community-based youth group
Colden Center*	University-based education policy think tank
Crystal College	Local public university
Lakeland*	Community-based private foundation
LTL	State-based organization
Nearland	Quality chartering and school management organization
Pandora Group*	National policy think tank
RTI	State-level educational group
Band Collaborative	Association of independent charter schools
Star Corp*	Community-based marketing company
Sumner*	Public district group
Grand Corp*	Philanthropic community-based foundation

Note: Pseudonyms are used for all organizations above.
*Organizations involved in the Pre-Pilot Phase.

Umbrella Group's executive director, Deirdre Johnson-Burel. The group launched a pilot participatory research study in 2009, which evolved into a long-term, broad-based community engagement program beginning in 2010 and continuing to the present. This purpose of this program was not only to seek out key stakeholders' opinions about quality public education, but also to stimulate the engagement of these stakeholders in dialogue and policy action to create substantial changes to public education for Black children in New Orleans.

We employed participatory action research (PAR) to directly address the disempowerment of many New Orleans community members and produce impactful interactions that delved deep into participants' lived experiences with public education and their hopes and dreams for the future. We framed core issues of educational inequity and identified strategies for bringing best practices to bear to realize the Black community's vision for a quality public education. We viewed our action research "as locally-sponsored systemic reform sustained over time."[21] The participatory program was divided into four phases, which are described below.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Pre-Pilot Phase

The Pre-Pilot Phase began when I was introduced to the leaders of the Umbrella Group through a family member who was involved in education policy work with the group. Many local New Orleans-based education advocacy organizations were leery of conducting collaborative research with outsiders. This was because of the perception that, since Katrina, many outside researchers and organizations came in for the "kill" and profited off the aftermath of the hurricane through publishing books and articles, setting up organizations, starting for-profit schools, and so on. This insider connection was critical to establishing the trust needed for me to begin work with the Umbrella Group given the high expectation of being used and then left behind with unresolved challenges.

The coalition of organizations that formed the Umbrella Group had been having conversations about the need for community engagement for over a year since their formation. In June 2008, I introduced the concept of participatory research to the organization's board members as a potential means of addressing the desire for real engagement and

community empowerment. After conducting individual interviews with representatives of board member organizations, I proposed a process by which Umbrella Group members could build their skill and capacity to lead a community engagement process, which would be spearheaded by a participatory research project. During this phase, the Umbrella Group wanted to build their understanding of the nature of participatory research and their capacity and skill to conduct community-based research.

The members of Umbrella Group's board simultaneously acted as board members and representatives of their organizations. While they actively supported the group's mission, board members' interests were often more aligned with the agendas of the organizations they represented. Oftentimes, their loyalties to their organizations clashed with Umbrella Group's goals and priorities, which impacted the level of engagement and participation. For example, alignment with charter advocacy groups influenced some members' willingness to entertain perspectives that critiqued the growth in charters as elitist. A key aspect of my initial role included helping the board to coalesce around a strategy for moving beyond talk and conflict to consensus and action.

Pilot Phase

The Pilot Phase began when the Umbrella Group reached consensus to use participatory research as a strategy for initiating community engagement. The community coalition spearheading this participatory research project identified key stakeholders in public education whose perspectives needed to be engaged. In order to recruit participants from these stakeholder groups, Umbrella Group board members recruited directly from their core constituents (e.g., a coalition member who was affiliated with the OPSB encouraged participation from principals and administrators of these schools). The pilot PAR project respondents included OPSB and RSD representatives, charter school advocates, parents, parent advocates, students, community members representing various New Orleans community organizations interested in public education, and teachers in RSD public schools. I spearheaded the pilot PAR project, in order to demonstrate the efficacy of PAR and to model specific research methods. As part of this pilot study, I conducted interviews and focus groups with approximately a hundred key stakeholders. At this time, the Umbrella Group was still unsure and uncomfortable with getting intimately involved in the research process, so I was asked to execute all the pilot phases, including

collecting, transcribing, and thematically analyzing all interview and focus group data.

I designed and carried out the bulk of the research activities with the explicit understanding that I was modeling research skills to build local community members' research knowledge base and skill sets. In other words, I used the pilot study to help the Umbrella Group board plan and initiate a broad-based, post-pilot community engagement process using PAR principles.

We recruited a cross-section of racially, ethnically, and economically diverse individuals to participate in the pilot study and trained these participants to execute the research as community-based facilitators. These facilitators included Black church leaders, White charter school advocates, Black youth from community centers, and White nonprofit leaders, to name a few groups. Building on the Umbrella Group's increased confidence in participatory research as a vehicle for change, their executive staff, including Deirdre, recruited community-based facilitators from different groups who attended a retreat to continue the community engagement work of engaging residents and community members in active dialogue about quality public education for Black New Orleans public school children.

Community Engagement Phase

The retreat marked the beginning of the Community Engagement Phase. The facilitators recruited from the retreat were invited to become trained community-based facilitators who interviewed approximately 600 students, teachers, school leaders, school advocates, and other community members during this phase. While our community partners conducted interviews and focus groups around kitchen tables, in churches, and in board rooms, I developed a survey in an effort to reach community members who could not or would not engage in face-to-face discussions but who still wanted and needed to have a voice in the citywide dialogue. The survey solicited perceptions of what counted as quality public education based on themes that emerged during the pilot phase.

In addition, I analyzed state-level student demographic and academic data, which were presented at trainings with the community-based facilitators. The demographic analyses indicated that in the 2007–2008 school year, RSD traditional public and public charter schools educated a higher percentage of minority, low-income children and children with disabilities, than their OPSB traditional public and public charter counterparts.

Children in RSD traditional public and public charter schools exhibited lower academic achievement than children in OPSB schools. The total population of fourth-grade students in RSD charters performed significantly lower in the both the English/Language Arts and Math subtests of the state test called LEAP than fourth-grade students in OPSB charters. Children receiving free/reduced lunch, children in general education, and children with disabilities in RSD charters all performed more poorly than their peers in OPSB charter schools in the English/Language Arts and Math LEAP tests. These same fourth-grade subgroups showed significant underachievement in English/Language Arts and Math LEAP tests in RSD traditional schools (13 in total) versus OPSB traditional schools (2 in total). Consistent with the findings for fourth-grade students, eighth graders in RSD charters and RSD traditional schools demonstrated significantly poorer performance in English/Language Arts and Math compared to OPSB charter and traditional schools. The general perspective represented by the most respondents and the achievement data analyses indicated that there were significant problems with the quality of education in RSD traditional public and public charter schools. Those schools with "good" students found it easy to succeed under the system of judging school quality in place at that time. With these findings and with the broad-based coalition in place, the Umbrella Group moved into the Action Phase.

Action Phase

The Action Phase reflected the expansion and solidification of the Umbrella Group's organizational infrastructure. The efforts in prior phases led to the procurement of additional funds, hiring of administrative, logistical, and research staff, and the development of a plan to broaden the level of community engagement. Specific actions at this stage included expert panels held in the community highlighting best practices in public education, ongoing community-level discussions, and board expansion and development. By this stage of the PAR project, local community members representing key stakeholder groups (e.g., church leaders, charter school leaders, youth groups, and parent advocacy groups), many of whom were Black, comprised a majority of the project leadership, controlled the decision-making processes, and provided oversight and guidance on most aspects of the research activities. As intended in PAR, as the community members' capacity to lead grew (along with a stronger organizational infrastructure), my involvement evolved to writing, reporting, and summarizing research findings for dissemination.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

In the following chapters, Deirdre and I reflect on our experiences developing and implementing the PAR project. In chapter 2, Deirdre describes her professional identity redevelopment that came about in the process of developing the Umbrella Group's organizational infrastructure and organizational identity. She describes balancing and wrestling with her personal goals of Black empowerment with the expectation that she would develop an organization that could foster multiracial partnerships and collaborations that advance educational opportunities for historically underserved poor, Black students. She grapples with the definition of "progress" in the context of inequitable policy decisions with detrimental impacts on public schools for Black children.

In chapter 3, I reflect on my experience with building a relationship with Deirdre and the Umbrella Group to support their capacity for conducting PAR. I juxtapose my concerns about my home institution's pressures to conduct traditional research with my commitment to participatory approaches and "working in concert" with Black community members to address educational inequity experienced by Black children in New Orleans. I reflect on my relationships, multiple project roles, and ever-evolving interactions with project stakeholders. My reflection demonstrates how my identities as woman, professional, and "objective" researcher intersected with my Black racial identity, to give me access to information, places, and people, allowing me to move the project forward in unique ways.

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2. Nothing about Us, without Us (Nihil de Nobis, Sine Nobis) ⟨∽⟩

Deirdre Johnson-Burel

INTRODUCTION

I remember the weekend that changed my life, my family, my city forever. It started simply, joyously. I was traveling from Atlanta, where I lived, to Boston to visit my best friend—Kim—as a surprise guest at her baby shower. This was the weekend of August 25–29, 2005. As I prepared to leave the Atlanta International Airport, the brewing storm off the Gulf of Mexico was no more than a passing thought in my mind. I remember chuckling to myself as I listened to a local Atlanta radio personality discuss the possible implications of the storm on the upcoming MTV music awards scheduled in Miami. I chuckled to myself, thinking, "It's a Category One, these folks are such hurricane novices." I made a mental note to be sure to check on possible flight cancellations or delays for my return to Atlanta. Hartsfield was notorious for weather delays. A hard rain could delay flights.

That is how I entered the weekend that would change everything. Over the course of that weekend, I enjoyed a special time catching up with Kim. We laughed as we reflected on the past ten years of our friendship. We had not looked at a television or talked to anyone on the phone. In fact, it was not until after I retired to bed on Saturday night and was awakened by a call from my boyfriend back in Atlanta that I realized the state of emergency facing our families in Louisiana—that little storm that had been off the coast of the Miami was now a category 4 storm and seemed

on a direct path to New Orleans. At 3 a.m. EST, I called my mom first and then started calling our family members in New Orleans working out evacuation plans. This was not a storm that could be waited out. In the end, most evacuated but a combination of stubbornness, and, in the last minute, confusion about who would leave with whom—my two grannies (Granny and Mary Jane) and Uncle Ray were not evacuated. On Monday morning, as Katrina bore down on the Gulf Coast, I boarded my plane to Atlanta—praying.

Upon my arrival in Atlanta, my mom and sisters, who also lived in Atlanta, had already gathered at my house and were watching news reports on the storm. We were still waiting for family members who had success-fully evacuated to arrive. One by one they began to trickle into town: my aunt, uncles, cousins, and their families along with my boyfriend's sister and mother. With their arrival was the joy of their safety, mixed with apprehension and uncertainty about what was happening in New Orleans. We gathered around the television trying to get the most accurate and up-to-date information on what was happening with the storm. By the end of day one, August 29, it seemed the city had dodged a bullet. For the most part, the impact of the storm seemed concentrated in New Orleans East and downtown in the Ninth Ward where there was significant flood-ing and damage. We were still trying to get in touch with Mary Jane, Granny, and Uncle Ray. We also had not been able to reach my boyfriend's family who had stayed behind—his aunt—Ms. Cora and two cousins, Tabatha and Malcolm. We were not able to get through on the phones. By the evening, nearly 20 of us were staying in my house. We finally turned off televisions and had everyone settle in their rooms around 11 p.m. Around midnight a call came in, saying Granny, Mary Jane, and Uncle Ray were together, alive, and well. You could feel the collective sigh of relief breathed in our little house on Sable Bay. We planned to talk in greater detail on Tuesday as plans for the rest of the family's return were solidified. But the worst was over.

On August 30, 2005, I headed back to the office to resume my work routine. Upon arriving, my boss came in after a finishing a call with a New Orleans, Louisiana, hotel, where he was scheduled to attend a con-ference the following week. The hotel attendant had rushed him off the phone, saying they had just received word the levees had broken. Phone calls to New Orleans confirmed everyone was being told to head for higher ground as soon as possible. The day the levees broke, everything changed.

THE JOURNEY HOME

My name is Deirdre Johnson-Burel and I am a native New Orleanian. I grew up in various parts of Uptown, most notably, the Seventeenth and Third Wards. I still joke that I have never lived on the other side of Canal Street (the dividing line between Uptown and Downtown). I am a third-generation New Orleanian and a fifth-generation Louisianan. Most notably, I am a proud graduate of Eleanor McMain Magnet Secondary School, a New Orleans public school. I was reared in a Black, working-class (translation: poor, with a strong work ethic) family that placed high value on education as an essential ingredient for personal and professional liberation. Education was seen not only as a tool on the road *up*, but also as a tool in reaching *back* in support of community. I left New Orleans in 1989 for my undergraduate studies at the University of California, Berkeley. I chose Berkeley because of its history of activism and felt it would be a ripe training ground for a career focused on social change. I returned to New Orleans in 1994 and worked in support of public education, teaching and running a summer bridge program. Working in a local nonprofit and raising money for the organization opened the doors for me into the inner workings of the Black middle class, the Black elite, and the White upper class. During this time I felt like an insider-outsider. I had garnered some access to these privileged spaces in New Orleans, but I was a native. I was a newly invited guest. I was deeply committed to doing transformative work in my city, but as a Black woman from the city's poor and working class, I could not escape this insider-outsider feeling and the real recognition that people like me were more statistics in grant applications or the basis of problem statements guiding an organization's theory of change than they were full stories, narratives, and lived experiences that made the city work. People like me and my family were most directly impacted by the failings of public schools and broken systems. But, too often, the realities of living under the stressors of poverty was the noise preventing their voices from influencing policies and systems that systematically excluded them. I have to be honest. I enjoyed my new insight and entrée to meetings in the board rooms of corporate buildings I had never set foot in and the access to elected leaders. But I did not feel comfortable. I felt like an outsider.

I left the city again in 1998 to pursue a Masters of Public Administration in Policy and Nonprofit Management at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service. After graduate school, I opted to move to Atlanta, Georgia, where my mother had moved in the late eighties. She had reared

my sisters there, so I chose to make Atlanta my home as I began doing state-level education policy work. Even then, I knew I would return to New Orleans at some point. I did not know when or what would be the catalyst for my return, but I felt a quiet certainty that the day would come when I would be in New Orleans doing my best work.

In the year of Katrina, I was working as director of policy and research for a Georgia-based nonprofit that focused on state-level education policy advocacy. As I navigated the personal journey of my family over the next 12–18 months, it became clear that Katrina, and its aftermath, would become the catalyst for my return to New Orleans. In the years following my return in 2007 and beyond, I collaborated with others to establish what would become the Umbrella Group. And in the most unlikely turn of events, after first supporting the role out of the participatory research project (PRP), I would eventually assume the leadership of the Umbrella Group. This proved to be a deeply personal journey—providing a mirror for viewing and navigating my insider-outsider challenge to confronting my own assumptions about how change *should* happen and the role of those most directly impacted in the process of creating change. Certainly, I had become more sophisticated in my analysis of race and class but I still had much to learn and reconcile.

THE AX FORGETS WHAT THE TREE REMEMBERS

In the ensuing days, weeks, and months after the levees broke we began the slow and surreal journey of navigating the new normal. We made "look and leave" trips to New Orleans to assess the damage to homes and property. We enrolled children in Atlanta area schools. My displaced family members began the process of securing housing in Atlanta as it was unclear when New Orleans would be fully operational. In fact, the Ninth Ward was still not open to its residents. We were still picking up the pieces and figuring it out in November 2005. I dare say this was true for many New Orleanians and yet, during this hour, the rug was violently and suddenly swept from beneath the feet of Black New Orleanians. The most significant piece of public policy impacting public education was passed, changing the face of public education in New Orleans (for the foreseeable future) forever.

In the early days following Hurricane Katrina, two important decisions would leave an indelible imprint on the delivery of public education in New Orleans. The first was the decision by the Orleans Parish School

Board to fire all its employees in September 2005. The second was the passage of Act 35 in November 2005, transferring 90 of the city's schools into state receivership under the auspices of the Recovery School District (RSD), for a minimum of five years.

In September 2005, the Orleans Parish School Board, on the brink of fiscal collapse, and without necessary aid from the state, was forced to terminate all its employees. This decision led to a complete overhaul of the educator workforce, radically shifting the demography of the school district from largely an African American, older workforce to a young, increasingly White and less experienced workforce. This move effectively decimated the stable, Black middle class in one fell swoop. As schools began to reopen in the winter of 2005 and into 2006, there would be no centralized workforce from which to draw teachers. The mass firing had the effect of summarily toppling the power wielded by the United Teachers of New Orleans, the local teachers' union.

The second, and perhaps most significant, shift would come as a result of the passage of Act 35 in November 2005. The landmark legislation changed the definition of a "failing school" in order to legitimize the transfer of the majority of the city's public schools into state receivership. The new definition of failing raised the bar from a school performance score of 65 to the state average of 80, a change that was essentially only applicable to Orleans Parish. Moreover, the new definition not only scooped up the city's lowest performing schools but also swept up with it several schools previously dubbed as *meeting* the federal criteria for Annual Yearly Progress.

Unsurprisingly, these changes and the lens through which diverse New Orleanians viewed such changes would continue to color the perspective of various stakeholders. Some viewed these decisions as pragmatic and courageous—a necessary step to begin opening schools and concurrently to provide an opportunity to address the languishing academic programs that had, for too long, failed too many. For others, it would be viewed as a political coup, a disaster capitalism type of conspiracy, as many of New Orleans' Black families and children were still in severe psychological, emotional, medical, and financial distress dealing with the recent aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. These two decisions, along with increased aid from the federal government to provide support for charter schools, would together create the conditions for the development and growth of what is now the nation's largest district of charter schools.

I will not debate the issue of the quality of pre-Katrina schools in New Orleans. Real challenges faced public education in the city. However, from

my vantage point, the ends did not justify the means. The coup of school takeover exploited the fact that most Black New Orleanians were still piecing their lives together. The timing, scope, and scale of the state takeover of public education—and specifically *how* and *when* it was done—while fully legal, was unethical at best, and immoral. In essence, while the teachers who staffed, and the families and children who attended, public schools in Orleans Parish were still piecing their lives back together, Act 35 engineered a takeover targeting only Orleans Parish and included schools not considered failing based on Louisiana's pre-Katrina definition of failing schools. While accomplished by an elected body, it was arguably the most undemocratic public policy passed in recent history. In November 2005, the city's Ninth Ward was still under a "look and leave" order and no one from the Ninth Ward was allowed to return to that part of the city.

Katrina was the catalyst for the sweeping changes made to public education in New Orleans, but from its genesis this was something done "to" the New Orleans Community, not "with." This is the spirit in which post-Katrina education reform in New Orleans was born. Given this context, it is easier to understand the distrust and skepticism of the post-Katrina education reform movement. Some say that we should move on—charter schools are to stay. I find these sentiments to be dismissive and inconsiderate of the real pain and loss suffered by New Orleanians. What was done is akin to kicking a man when he is down. It is as true as the old adage—the ax forgets, the tree remembers. This is neither to say that public education in New Orleans pre-Katrina was not in need of repair, nor is it to say that there is no good in any of the post-Katrina reforms. However, building a new path forward inclusive of the full community must give consideration to how it all began and the real pain that members of this community experienced in the disregard and dismantling of their lives during their most vulnerable hour.

WE WILL LIVE AND NOT DIE: CREATING AN OPENING FOR COMMUNITY WISDOM AND VOICE

As the national attention and support for New Orleans grew after Katrina, along with the criticism of the failing of the federal government, civic engagement across the Katrina Diaspora took shape. New Orleanians determined they would return and rebuild. Even as some members of Congress questioned whether New Orleans should be rebuilt at all, New Orleanians asserted their collective voices. We had two choices—to live

or simply not to die—and the people of New Orleans were determined to live. In fact, for me it was the spirit of resolve, a determination to have *my* city rebuilt in the face of insurmountable odds that had been at the heart of my own decision to return home and begin the work. Black people were under attack—our choices, our intelligence, our way of life. We also were presented with an incredible opportunity to do things differently, to right previous wrongs. For me, this meant that the *new* New Orleans could provide greater opportunities to those who had worked to build it and keep it going but often did not benefit.

It was in this energy that the genesis of what would become the Umbrella Group[1] would be born. The opportunity to build differently certainly, for me, centered on what could be done in public education. At this time, it was not a forgone conclusion that New Orleans would be a city of charter schools. Instead, this looked like a time when we could really have public education realize its potential. If public education would be rebuilt differently and in a more sustainable manner, then it must be done *with* the people, the majority of public education consumers, namely, Black New Orleanians. This value was the thread of commonality that brought the founding members of the Umbrella Group together. The conversations about forming a new organization focused on a place for the people's voices as central to building and sustaining excellence. Could we create an authentic space inside an audacious organization to honor and amplify the Black voices?

The informal education coalition group, which eventually evolved into the Umbrella Group, began to meet in coffeehouses, having exploratory conversations on what the group was working to birth—what would this organization be—what problems were we working to solve and what would be its impact in the landscape? Our group was diverse in its composition and its assumptions about the growing new education reform movement and the role of race and class within it. Collectively, however, we knew and agreed that building transformative and sustainable change in public education required the ownership and buy-in of those most directly affected by it, historically marginalized Black people. Moreover, we knew that building a base of engaged citizens would be critical to bringing balance and democratic engagement to the conversation on the return of schools that was expected in 2010. Those were the issues the group knew for sure—governance and engagement. We would spend the next 18 months expanding the people around the table, framing the work of this new collaborative/organization and somewhat unexpectedly doing the arduous work of confronting our own assumptions and values about the

role of race and class in our city. This was a necessary, albeit difficult and contentious work, in building a collaborative/organization strong enough to foster a space of trust in a city steeped in divisions on race and class.

THE MOST IMPORTANT CONVERSATION
IN THE ROOM

By early fall of 2007, the informal coffeehouse conversations had given way to a more intentional assembly of partners, who would eventually become Umbrella Group's founders, with a regular meeting schedule. Our group made a commitment to being diverse by design. If the intention was to create a transformative space engaging a divided New Orleans community, then members with divergent, often diametrically opposing, perspectives needed to be included. For me, this meant bringing "my kind of people" in the room with members of the Black middle class and the White elite to have a conversation in a space where all voices were on equal footing. I knew this alone was a major shift because it is simply not how we did things in New Orleans. The White and Black elites made decisions that others lived with—or, at a minimum, there was a meeting before the meeting. Honestly, the very concept of what we were proposing was transformative. I was excited about that!

   The founding group included youth leaders, community organizers, foundations, community agencies, parent advocacy groups, and universities. We had Black and White people at the table, though this did not represent a reified racial binary. The Blacks and Whites around the table had a spectrum of ideas on the state of public education that often converged and diverged in very interesting ways. For example, members of our group were unequivocal about the decimation of the Black middle class as a result of Act 35 and thus frowned on the explosive growth of young White teachers through alternative preparation programs. Others were actively involved in the proliferation of these programs. Additionally, the group drew on the expertise and experiences of several national advisers who brought specific context and insight to help our founding group think about the appropriate organizational design and how and where the group might decide to best leverage its capacity. One national adviser helped us consider specific tensions arising in a community that had faced an education takeover by the state. Another adviser raised the importance of paying attention to the forces of institutional racism that were invariably at play in New Orleans, while also not allowing race to become a paralyzing force.

During our semimonthly meetings, we framed rules of engagement (a few of which are listed below) to guide our work and discussions of this loose coalition of organizations. Our rules of engagement were critical because they allowed for contradictory perspectives to be voiced in the context of the group's deliberations, without having any single perspective drive the agenda or undermine the work of the collaborative. These principles of engagement included participation and voting guidelines, as well as attending to the political nature of our work.

- The purpose of the Umbrella Group coalition is to develop a community-wide process to create a vision and strategy for the future of public education in New Orleans. Coalition members will not seek to inject their own philosophical and policy preferences into this work. It is understood that during the process, individuals affiliated with Umbrella Group may participate in public meetings and express their opinions in that context; but no attempt will be made to influence the process or outcomes from within.
- Disagreement among coalition members is expected and welcomed. However, disagreement and debate will always be accompanied by respect, courtesy, professionalism, and a desire to find the common ground where possible.
- Disagreements within the Umbrella Group coalition will not be repeated or reported outside the coalition unless so voted upon by the membership. All communications prepared for public or media consumption and all contact with the public and particularly the media should be a collaborative effort of the coalition. Messaging must be consistent from all Umbrella Group members, and media relations must be part of an overall, coherent media strategy designed and approved by the Umbrella Group members.
- Umbrella Group is a coalition that requires intense participation by its members. Therefore, organizations are expected to designate a primary representative to the coalition, and also to have additional representatives who can participate and replace the primary representative if s/he is unable to attend a meeting.

An ongoing discussion focused on "who is the community?" This discussion tackled the twin elephants in the room, race and class. We had contentious discussions about the historic role of the business community in public education, the political coup of Act 35 and its decimation of the

Black middle class in New Orleans, the fast-changing demographics of the city's educator workforce, and the cultural disconnects that occurred between Black families and their children and young, inexperienced, transient White teachers. We could no longer ignore the competing interests our members brought into the room and the inherent tensions that resulted from those interests. For me there was always an even more nuanced perspective. It was an oversimplification to draw a hard Black and White line on the public education analysis. From where I sat, the Black middle class was also culpable. The city's public schools had largely been abandoned by most of the middle class—Black and White. The district's challenges, financially and otherwise, was certainly due in part to the fact that too few were vested in its outcomes.

There was anger, pain, hurt, revelation, empathy, and apology in those discussions. People were honest even when explosive. I struggled in these sessions, wondering if we could get beyond these strong and visceral emotions. But the group kept plowing forward. In retrospect, the space we created was the place for honesty, authenticity, and acknowledgment—we took the time to not simply brush over the pain of generations of racial and economic disempowerment but to work through it. Perhaps it was because we kept the end in mind. We knew we wanted to build something that had not existed before. There was a strong belief and commitment in creating a new reality and the promise of change, the promise of righting historic wrongs. This new reality would create a place for community voice to support the advancement of public education. We would shift from an elite driven approach to reform, to a shift in policy that was aligned with the voices and realities of those most directly affected by it. The community would hold and steward the public education agenda. We were committed to creating something where the whole was truly greater than the sum of its parts. What emerged was bigger than one program, one grant, but a space, an organization, that could fundamentally shift how we have done business in education and ultimately shift civic engagement to ensure democracy in our city around public education.

At the end of nearly three months of discussion, the group was actually stronger and more cohesive. The work on race had cemented the group. There was an air of honesty and authenticity. I think we had collectively come to value the community we had formed together. There was a sense that as a group we could talk about or navigate anything. The members not only began to enjoy the sense of community and space for robust discussion, but also actually looked forward to it. Having done our internal

work as a unit, it was now time for the group to turn its attention back to the mission at hand, broad community and civic engagement for quality public education.

After listening to advisers offer possible community engagement models and approaches, the group stalled in determining the appropriate "project" to launch its work. How could we launch a conversation on quality education, when the community seemed to be having disparate experiences of public education? There was no clear data to reflect the multiple narratives that were being heard only anecdotally in the city. We received a recommendation from one of our advisers to consider participatory research as the ideal instrument for gauging and engaging community sentiment. This advisor suggested that by pulling in the community to participate in the research, to frame the questions, and to shape the research methodology, we would gain a better sense of the direction our community engagement efforts should take. The adviser introduced us to two researchers based at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; Liz[2] Drame was one of them. We invited Liz and her colleague to New Orleans to make a full presentation on the role of participatory action research (PAR) and how it might be a useful model for the group.

After listening to the presentation on PAR, we were convinced that this was the approach to community engagement we wanted to take. However, we did not feel confident to lead PAR efforts, so we enlisted Liz and her colleague to lead a pilot PAR project so that we could learn how to do it. While we bought in to PAR, the group was challenged in how to move things forward. Specifically, the group had hit a wall in its ability to move things forward. At each meeting assignments would be delegated and members would return to the table with very little accomplished. There was a growing tension in the meetings about the lack of progress. To get us moving past this roadblock, Liz and her colleague met with each founding member and reflected back our individual fears and sentiments to the whole group. Some of the findings from these discussions are listed below.

- We were individually and collectively committed to doing public education differently, but were overcommitted in our own individual venues.
- We were frustrated owing to the slow pace of action and unmet promises.
- We were strongly committed to a community-based participatory engagement process, but needed to know more about what it would look like, how long it would take, how many, and who to engage.

- We had an intense sense of urgency because we felt the train had left the station but we were still waiting on the platform (change was fast-paced and outstripping our work).
- We lacked a clear organizational structure with a leader who could spearhead our participatory community engagement.
- We needed to have more faith that action would happen because more talk and no action breeds more distrust.
- We needed to be concrete with our commitment by committing organization resources to fund and support the work.
- We needed to believe that the founding members understood that the community must be in the driver's seat of defining indicators of quality public education in New Orleans, not outsiders or powerbrokers.

Liz and her colleague were instrumental in guiding us through a reflection process, allowing us to come to these understandings and we enlisted their expertise to lead the pilot PAR project. In addition, the Umbrella Group founding members committed the resources needed to fund the organizational infrastructure necessary to move the effort forward.

Each Umbrella board member leveraged their constituency base to participate in focus groups as part of the pilot project. Participants considered the broad question of "what is quality education in New Orleans?". The participants represented a wide spectrum of people. They spanned charter school advocates and charter school opponents, current and retired teachers, school leaders, parents, students, and community members. Nearly a hundred individuals participated. We captured diverse and divergent perspectives on what was happening in the New Orleans public education landscape.

It became clear that the experience of education reform in post-Katrina New Orleans was significantly informed by personal experience. For example, if you were a parent with a bird's-eye view in navigating the city's hybrid system of schools, your perspective of choice and autonomy was different. While parents may have valued having a choice, they were the first to recognize that the confusing system of schools felt more like a burden than an opportunity. Moreover, they were often the first to see the "chinks in the armor" of the city's educational system. They raised early concerns about the lack of continuity in school schedules (block schedules in some schools in contrast to a traditional seven-period day) and curriculum and potential harm it would to do students as they moved from school to school. This was particularly significant in a city that already had high student mobility rates (largely the result of poverty) and now this

mobility was exacerbated as the city was still very much in recovery and even middle-class families found themselves in temporary housing as they worked to get their homes repaired and rebuilt post Katrina.

The pilot achieved its expected aim. We tapped the pulse of the city's diverse experiences with public education and with what was billed as "transformative" education reform, contesting the dominant narrative of who was benefiting from the transformation. Parents specifically were identifying the chinks in the reform movement armor—the challenges with schedules, the nightmare enrollment process, and the lack of insights gleaned from the pilot. The full participatory research was "leading" versus lagging data. It captured trends and problems that were not even being framed, let alone discussed within the public sphere among the larger educational institutions (RSD). Participatory research allowed us to legitimize the people's voices. The engagement of Black parents, in particular, allowed us to counter the celebration of autonomy as the cornerstone of innovative education reform with the necessity for a democratic, centralized system for holding public schools accountable to the majority of their "clients," poor, Black children in New Orleans. The pilot PAR project collected more than a single anecdote. The community truths that rose to the surface during the pilot became a road map into the challenges of this new landscape. We now knew more than just what the community was thinking and experiencing, but also why. As a result of the success of the pilot, we moved into a full PRP. By the beginning of 2009, the Umbrella Group had defined its theory of change as building and broadening civic capacity for quality public education. As such, we decided to share the pilot findings at our first public convening—at a retreat center in a state park, just outside the racially, economically, and politically contested space of New Orleans.

CALLING NEW ORLEANIANS TO BE OPEN!

We were ready to openly leverage our learnings and insight built over the past year and a half to *open* an expanded conversation on the future of public education with the public. It was hot! As is every late spring in New Orleans and here we were, headed to Bayou Segnette for a day-and-a-half-long getaway retreat on public education. Admittedly, I was uncertain about the whole retreat getaway idea. Would the diversity of folks invested in public education actually pull away for a weekend? They were also skeptical. The idea of being "open" and the importance of community

engagement as a cornerstone in rebuilding public education in New Orleans were a little cushy. For many, the years of a languishing system had already demonstrated there was no public. Now with charter schools on the rise and the promise of a different future, what role would the public play? Would rebuilding the *public* only serve to slow down the fast pace of reforms? Would it serve simply as a platform for the disgruntled? Could it possibly be transformative? Would there be room in this new space to talk about the inequities that were already emerging in education reform? Would we be honest about the fact that education reform was largely happening *to* the Black community, not *with* them? On this hot spring Friday, we were all headed to Bayou Segnette to find out.

Perhaps we were all there for the same reason—curious, skeptical, and, yet, internally hopeful that a different outcome was possible. Was transformation possible in New Orleans, even with its historic race and class entrenchments? Perhaps we could build something greater than the sum of its parts. The arrival looked promising. There were a little over 120 diverse individuals who made the journey across the river. We were grass tops, mid-grass, and grassroots. We were traditionalist, union reps, Teach for America, parents, concerned citizens, reformers, and decision makers. We all came into the room, even if we came carrying our own thin veils of cynicism.

Something happened as the program got underway. As we negotiated ground rules and began to articulate our hopes for this weekend, a sense of optimism emerged. The sense of hope was almost palpable. Suddenly, you could see through the veils, something authentic and honest in our communication with each other. The evening gave way to shared stories and new introductions, and we began to see each other differently. Maybe this retreat could open the door to a different possibility.

On Friday, our hopes were bigger than our fears. The possibility and promise were bigger than our problems. But then came Saturday. Saturday morning began with the premiere screening of "The History of Public Education in New Orleans," and with it race entered the room. As we provided space for key decision makers to discuss the landscape—the RSD superintendent, the state superintendent, Orleans Parish School Board members—politics entered the space. With each new element, the complexity of our problems and the diversity of our viewpoints shifted the tenor of the room. The final straw, for me, was the RSD superintendent's presentation. He had been allotted ten minutes to discuss the progress of the RSD. We were now nearing an hour and ten minutes and he was still presenting—dictating the direction and tone of the discussion, stifling the

community voice in the process I believed. As I slid out to the front porch to regroup and check-in with a few other Umbrella Group founding members, someone encouraged me to trust the process and to take a look at what was actually happening in the room. I glanced through the window and saw people *staying* in the room. They were in the conversation, on the field, sometimes like the offense and defense of opposing teams playing different roles but still completely in the game. They were honoring the ground rules and playing for their collective hopes for the weekend. And that is how it all began in 2009. One weekend, in late spring, we chose to build on the promise of possibility. It was crystal clear that this community (New Orleans) wanted something better and bigger than any one of us in our organizations or community-based work could build, but would we have the courage to do it? Was everyone on board? No! But we would move forward with a coalition of the willing.

The pilot project's data that was shared at the 2009 retreat engaged over a hundred New Orleanians and quickly gave way to an extended full PRP in 2010. The PRP engaged over 600 New Orleanians, and informed the first major policy issues we tackled and won—advocating with partners for the establishment of a centralized school enrollment process to redress the chaos about enrolling students in school. However, the PRP's greatest contribution would be solidifying the approach of "Meeting the Village in the Village." Through the PRP, we realized civic engagement and voice had to extend beyond community "all-call" events. Attendance at public meetings in a community as diverse as New Orleans was a poor proxy for community interest and investment. While those events were necessary, they alone would not be sufficient to engage diverse and oft-considered "sidelined" citizens, particularly, poor, Black families. Meeting people where they were and directly confronting the active distrust that many Black New Orleanians had about an educational system that historically and systematically disempowered them and their children was where we stood. We recruited members from different stakeholder groups to facilitate kitchen-table conversations—grandmother to grandmother, teacher to teacher, pastor to pastor.

The barriers of distrust did not just come crumbling down—but brick by brick, the methodology of Umbrella Group's work, the consistency of the organization's practices, if not creating converts, created openings and belief in possibility. A contributor to this belief was our village in the village methodology, which built from our learnings during the PRP. We privileged unique spaces for civic participation. The Black church, the Black barbershops, and beauty salons have been catalytic institutions and

safe spaces for navigating the day-to-day realities of Black life. These places gave Black people the freedom to create a civic infrastructure for translating their voices into the public domain. In these spaces, more often than not, there is no question of "voice." These culturally aligned and village-based approaches honored the voices of all citizens, created learning spaces, and, most importantly, exemplified the value of community wisdom—that the solutions to a community problem must come from those most affected by the problem. Still, amplifying community voice did not always translate into that voice being heard, as the following story describes.

In December 2011, the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), summarily denied more than 12 charter applications from local New Orleans community groups (mostly Black). For several of these groups, this was the second application. Some applied at the behest of RSD leadership. The Umbrella Group received the call to get involved to challenge the racial inequity in the charter school application process that favored for-profit outside charter organizations over local community groups. We convened many meetings to frame the experiences of these local Black public education advocates into a common narrative. In less than a month, the group had garnered support from a newly elected BESE member, presented its four-point plan, and held a press conference to a group of sympathizers. In less than six weeks, the RSD was calling to convene a task force to review and address the issues raised by the coalition. When it was all said, the charter application was completely overhauled, the Charter School Association worked the National Association of Charter School Authorizers to host the first-ever public workshop and training on how to apply for a charter school, and a new provision allowed organizations to pursue an appeal process if denied. Our group's efforts appeared to have been effective. However, after a year of advocacy, only two community groups were successful with their charter applications and neither group received funds to support the operational development of their charter school.

Responsibility is associated with stewarding the hopes and expectations of an emerging public voice. The steward's legitimacy and credibility requires ensuring the terms of the game are adequately and sufficiently defined. From 2010 to 2011, we ran the ONE Step Campaign, and the Governance 2010 Series, engaging over 1,900 New Orleanians. Our work resulted in the publication of the *People's Agenda—the only community-based agenda outlining key recommendations for a direction of public education to ensure quality for all children*. In 2012, we worked with a diverse coalition to support pioneering changes to the state's charter application,

and another citywide governance planning process with total engagement approaching 3,000 community members.

AND SO WE CONTINUE…

I can point to a few solid policy wins—changes in the charter school application process and the establishment of the centralized enrollment system—ONE App. However, there is still significant ground to cover. As the Umbrella Group's leader, I was incredibly excited about the energy, optimism, and movement we were able to accomplish at the outstart. I also, however, bore the burden and challenges that we encountered in places where the system seemed impenetrable. Yes, there was change. But it also did not feel like enough when I looked at the lives of children. The life outcomes of the city's young people were not changing quickly enough. The most persistent inequities remain as our city struggles to serve vulnerable populations—homeless, special education, adjudicated, the majority of whom are Black. Decentralization still allows too many gaps, permitting children to be pushed out and forgotten. There is no single entity in New Orleans that is responsible for all children. This equity issue is at the center of our commitment to governance and local control. These are solvable problems but addressing them in a holistic manner must be done in partnership with the community. Schools cannot do it alone.

One thing was clear about the continued growth of New Orleans' charter school movement. While it waved the banner of equity, closing the achievement gap, it was increasingly clear that there was little room for voices of the New Orleans community, particularly, of the majority poor, Black population served by public schools. Many asked, how can this movement be about us, without us? Umbrella Group's arrival on the New Orleans scene brought with it a quiet set of expectations about stewarding public trust. We committed to the creation of spaces where honest truths could be shared. As citizens with diverse views shared their truths, their expectations that the Umbrella Group could be a bridge-builder in the divisive terrain of public education, grew. We were hearing things that were not being said or articulated in public spaces—reformers who had doubts about the quality and sustainability of the reforms, parents who wanted even greater accountability of other parents. Prior to Umbrella Group's establishment, no organization had created private and public spaces bringing opposing points of view together. Our emergence ushered in, for some, the promise and expectation of a true voice for the people. And with such expectations comes responsibility.

I recently read a statement from Mary Laurie, esteemed New Orleans principal of Landry-Walker. She is an education legend. It is a statement she made in talking to the author of a book on education reform in New Orleans, *Hope against Hope.* The essence of her statement was that she thought all the stories would be good stories after Katrina. I share her sentiment. I thought we would be further along in the change that community created. But it has not been all good stories. I measure our efficacy in the changes in the life trajectory of our city's young people. And there is still too much collateral damage resulting from education reform's short-comings; the inability to amplify loudly enough to change the policies that affect their lives is evidenced in the hundreds of young Black boys and men who have died violently on this city's streets because there was not enough—enough seeing them to affirm who they are, enough love to know that they matter, enough educational opportunity that leads to the path to somewhere—an economic ladder of this city.

I have personally seen the loss of two beautiful young Black men. I think of Joshua Short. His smile, his droopy eyes, and thus his nick-name—EYEZ. I knew him from my time at the Urban League. He was a member of FYRE Youth squad, one of the founding youth members of the Umbrella Group. We lost Joshua to gun violence three years ago on the Night Out Against Violence. This past year, we lost Rethinker, George Carter. When I think of them there is a deep tension in my chest; I know their lives were snuffed out because of what is still missing in our city and our schools. My work is not yet done.

The Umbrella Group has been the only space for the range of disparate voices on public education to discuss the most salient issues in the land-scape. It has been a space where individuals of all backgrounds can learn about and have a voice on the key issues, serving as a "steward of the *next*" conversation. Moreover, I've learned that we have to support and enable change in the "village" as much as we support changes in policy. How do we connect community members more directly to young people to ensure we build the types of support in the village young people need? There has been progress. We work arduously to be a conduit for the people's voices, *not* to speak on the people's behalf. But even then, I have learned the need for balance. As a steward, I have a role to play in ensuring the people's voices are heard in the small backroom meetings. So, I carry what I learn into every space. This was a significant shift for me as I was so concerned with making sure the people's voices were in fact theirs that I did not always speak for them in the spaces where they were absent. I learned that this, too, is part of my role as a researcher-practitioner-activist. We are building

structures that ensure the public has the tools it needs to engage civically not just on the details of a particular education policy issue, but also in understanding how to make change happen. However, there is *much more work to be done*. New Orleans needs a true teacher pipeline and a path for experienced and indigenous New Orleans teachers. We need greater safety nets to serve our young people, especially our young Black boys. We need a holistic approach to education. Schools cannot do this alone.

And while the people have created chinks in the armor that have led to change, we are far from victory. We are constantly discovering. Democracy is slow and the change we desire does not happen on a dime. I have realized that to *do the work*, *you must do your work*. Individuals and communities must be willing to carry out a personal examination and then a collective examination confronting the role of race, class, and privilege in every aspect of society and self. It is both naïve and destructive to believe that we can do work on behalf of our Black children without intentionally considering the insidious nature of race, class, and privilege in our institutions and our practices. We say we want to eliminate the achievement gap even as we exacerbate the opportunity gap through our inequitable ways of being and doing.

Ten years post Katrina we are most looking for a pivot point. The lives of our Black children cannot wait and success in education reform cannot be solely measured by changes in a test score. With charter schools as the new status quo, there must always be a place for collecting the voice of the *next*. There is too much work still to be done. The open space we struggle to keep *open* is very necessary because it ensures a place for those who will not be satisfied with anything short of excellence and equity. We know our Black children deserve it.

NOTES

1. Pseudonym used.
2. Liz refers to Elizabeth R. Drame.

3. Crisscross Applesauce: Reflections on Intertwined Identities ◆

Elizabeth R. Drame

INTRODUCTION

As other researchers have also acknowledged, participatory action research (PAR) poses many challenges for "expert" researchers and community-based researchers alike.[1] The literature reflects a near universal acknowl-edgment that large-scale collaborative research projects are bound to be subjected and influenced by politics and power differentials. This is especially so in cross-racial collaborations. Situated in a US region with an entrenched history of racial conflict, the Umbrella Group's work was rife with distrust, skepticism, and tensions that have come to characterize post-Katrina New Orleans.[2] Many education scholars, community activ-ists, and members New Orleans' African American community viewed choice-based school reform efforts as an extension of neoliberal policies designed to "reclaim" and "rebuild" the city to serve corporate and White middle-class interests and sensibilities, respectively.[3]

I am a Black woman who happens to be a researcher, a mother, and a special educator. I am a child of Haitian immigrant parents who left a county decimated by the killing and torture perpetuated by a brutal dicta-tor. They never returned. I was born and raised in Chicago as a "child of immigrant parents" without a Haitian cultural identity, since my father, in particular, refused to claim and transmit his cultural and linguistic

heritage to his children, given the pain and trauma he and his family experienced at the hands of his countrymen and the Duvalier regime. Though everyone I interacted with growing up saw me as Black, I was not allowed to claim my Blackness either, since Black was equated with everything bad in one of the most segregated cities in the United States. It was not until my early twenties that I arrived at a sense of self, which acknowledged my identity as a Black Haitian raised in America as a Haitian American.

Education was very important to my parents. They worked extra-long hours to be able to afford private Catholic school tuition for their three daughters. I enjoyed and benefited tremendously from my educational experiences, but always felt isolated from the majority of my Black peers. Always seeking to return home to what I viewed to be my community, I sought out majority Black schools and educational environments to teach in and conduct research in both Chicago and Milwaukee. By the time Hurricane Katrina hit, I had just begun working as a tenure-track assistant professor at a Milwaukee university. In my first month there, I connected with a professor in the sociology department to apply for a National Science Foundation grant to study the impacts of poor, displaced New Orleans residents in poor host communities in Milwaukee. Obviously, I felt strongly compelled to do something to help since I spent my first month as an assistant professor working on a Katrina-related federal grant proposal when the hurricane hit. I was unsuccessful, but undeterred and spent the next two and a half years trying to find a way into New Orleans. Simultaneously, I was on the tenure-track rat race, trying to publish or perish.

A door cracked open when I attended a regional equity summit in March 2008 in New Orleans and was introduced to a founding board member of the Umbrella Group by a family member who worked with the organization hosting the summit. We had dinner and coffee and talked long into the evening about educational equity and the burgeoning charter school movement in New Orleans. I saw a way I could contribute as I was in the midst of conducting PAR on access to charter schools for students with special needs in Milwaukee. I stayed in touch with this board member over several months until the time came when I was invited to speak with the entire board about the value and potential of PAR to foster community engagement and voice in November 2008.

As an outsider joining the Umbrella Group's efforts, I was naïve as to how deep-seated the racial divisions were. I found myself brokering conflicts and attempting to foster consensus without a true understanding of the historical race-based legacies that played out over the duration of the project. The fact that I acted, inadvertently at times, in an "altruistic"

expert outsider role, wanting to come in and help "fix" the problem of public education, fed into this racial narrative. During and after the PAR project, I wrestled with issues of power, commitment, and control, as well as the extent to which I influenced, in positive and negative ways, the level and quality of the engagement of the Black community. Even after distancing myself from the project, I remained concerned about whether I indeed helped the community achieve the goal of creating and accessing high-quality public education for historically (and contemporarily) marginalized Black students. Did I inadvertently encourage exclusion from participation through my interactions with community partners? Did I privilege the narratives and histories of certain organizations over others in my data collection and interpretation efforts? Did I use my expert status to achieve personal goals rather than supporting the priorities of the group? Did I silence certain histories in order to advance the stories of the marginalized members that I was more concerned about (Black children with disabilities)? I engaged in a critical reflection of my role in facilitating (or impeding) the Umbrella Group's emancipatory objectives. I hoped to develop, through my reflection, a deeper understanding of shifts in control, commitment, and collaboration, and how these shifts shaped both my experiences as a Black researcher and the experiences of my Black community collaborators.

NAVIGATING COMPETING AGENDAS

The Umbrella Group included representatives of organizations who brought to the project their own personal priorities and agendas, including myself. For example, I engaged in the project because of my commitment to achieving educational equity for marginalized Black children and their families. I also wanted to be one of those people who had a book on New Orleans. This might seem selfish, but in my mind, I knew I was working toward getting tenure and promotion. What better way to do that than by doing research in a community I cared about and whose children were suffering rather than succeeding in their public schools? Who better to do this work than me, a Black researcher with a family connection to the city of New Orleans? Surely, I was more legitimate than the White drive-by researchers who studied the city under their glass bowl and left with a book in hand. This is the mantra I repeated to myself, little realizing that my university's priorities and pressures would bleed into my work as much as I tried to avoid it.

Competing organizational agendas influenced many project dynamics as well. In my case, my university expected me to secure large grants and publish research articles to increase its profile. This goal would become increasingly distant and unachievable given the relationship-driven nature of PAR. My commitment to this goal became more tenuous as I began to care more about the people around the table and the communities they loved than my university's aims. I was not the only one at the Umbrella Group table who had to navigate conflicting organizational priorities with the Umbrella Group's priorities. Although everyone at the table had the common objective of engaging the community in substantive dialogue regarding their perceptions of quality public education in New Orleans, the priorities of the organizations these individuals represented often conflicted with or superseded the objectives of the PAR project.

Personally, I assumed two identities within the project. I self-identified as an insider because of having a family member who invited me to the table, my Black racial identity, and my commitment to marginalized Black people. Members of both the local Black insider community and the White outsider organizations (policy groups and local university research centers) were comfortable with my Black identity, but also saw it as a positive that I was not a Black woman from New Orleans. The Umbrella Group was invested in my professional outsider identity because of the objectivity they felt it brought to the collaboration. They also rightfully believed that my racial identity would allow me to foster relationships with local community members. But as I reflected, I realized that my racial identity and professional outsider status were only two factors that shaped my participation. My organization's racial ambiguity—its spatial and psychological distance from the racially charged New Orleans context—proved as important as both these factors.

SOMEONE FOR EVERYONE

I came to understand that a central aspect of making a cross-racial collaboration like the PAR project work is that a central person exists who all stakeholders can identify with and feel free to express their concerns to—a *someone for everyone*. I became that central person for the PAR project. Initially, I was very naïve about the racial dynamics of New Orleans' public education. As I began my work on the project, I learned quickly that, even though I was a Black woman, my interactions and the way I was treated would be different depending on who I engaged. First, my individual Black

identity made it easier for Black partners to trust me and my motives. Second, my professional status as an "expert researcher" allowed me to foster relationships with White partners. Third, I was a faculty member at an outside university. Although other local universities were engaged, my university was geographically and psychologically distant from the racial politics of New Orleans. Thus, my organization was viewed to be independent of the historical and racial politics that the New Orleans organizations were steeped in. It was clear that my connection with an "objective" outsider organization paved the way for me to initiate the Pre-Pilot and Pilot phases.

In contrast to my status as a representative of a "racially ambiguous" organization, the other organizations had localized historical and racial legacies. For example, behind closed doors, some Black community members perceived one White university as supportive of the White takeover of schools given the latter organization's strong support of the "*charter*ization" of New Orleans' public schools. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans public school district was plagued by a number of problems. Educators, supported by the predominantly Black teachers' union, advocated for adequate funding, effective financial management, and stable leadership. Opponents countered that the union protected incompetent teachers and administrators who were unwilling to innovate their administrative management and instructional pedagogy to improve teaching and learning. The creation of the Recovery School District (RSD) in 2003 allowed educational management organizations (EMOs) to take over failing schools. Prior to the creation of the RSD, only five schools were under the management of EMOs. With the passage of legislative Act 35, the state took over the entire New Orleans school district. Conservative state legislators, many of whom supported the charter school movement, were viewed to create situations where schools would be taken over and run by independent for-profit charter management organizations or EMOs. Given the racial composition and interests of the legislature, charter organizations, and EMOs, the move was interpreted by many as a "White takeover" of public schools.

I learned these perspectives in individual, informal interviews with 13 board members. I realized that these board members spoke candidly and shared their perspectives on issues of race because of my unique positioning in the project. Some talked to me as an expert researcher. Others spoke with me as a Black woman. The racial ambiguity of my organization allowed the different partners to construct and interact with the aspect of my identity that they felt most comfortable with. As a result,

representatives of both insider and outsider organizations engaged me in honest, confidential dialogue that they were unable, unwilling, or too fearful to engage in with each other.

DISTRUST AND CONFLICT

I learned from these initial conversations the distrust that representatives from various organizations held of one another was steeped in how the organizations interacted with the local Black community. This distrust held back Umbrella Group's attempts to move the PAR project from discussion to action. The first time the lack of trust became evident was when the group began to develop and clarify their purpose and vision. During the discussion, several members expressed a sense of urgency to act since the Master Planning process for rebuilding schools was going forward at a fast pace without community input into what schools would be rebuilt and where. Some wondered if certain members around the table wanted to stifle progress with more talk. I was able to facilitate discussions through disagreements about the need to go deeper with a community engagement process rather than trying to match the pace of changes occurring in the school system, such as the Master Planning process. The reality was that these large systems and institutions do not move as quickly as they would hope so there was time to do engagement right.

Another instance where distrust became evident was when the group began working to identify and secure resources. One board member believed that several White partner organizations had the financial wherewithal to fund the Umbrella Group's work, but refused to commit it. Another board member, who represented one of these White organizations with resources, supported the idea of the PAR project, but refused to commit to funding it. His rationale was that the Umbrella Group, still relatively new, had not reached a consensus on the purpose, goals, and desired outcomes for the PAR project.

Given that people were willing to talk openly with me about these long-standing taboo topics, I was in a unique position to learn and share. To move the project forward, I compiled summaries of the individual interviews and presented them to the board. Some of the themes from these interviews are listed in Deirdre's chapter 2. Among the themes were three important takeaways. First, the distrust between organizations was grounded in the racial inequities that have long existed in New Orleans. Second, across the board, the stakeholders believed that the project was

stymied because no one was willing to commit financial resources. The third theme pointed to the fact that the group was divided about the Umbrella Group's ultimate organizational identity. Would the group be an advocacy organization closely connected to the local Black community? Would the group be an organization that advocated a particular school governance model? Would the organization be focused on quality public education for all New Orleans' children? I presented these perspectives in as fair and balanced a manner as possible to the board. The summary of findings and the discussion that resulted challenged the Umbrella Group's commitment to moving the PAR project forward.

This case is an example of how my position of power within a racially ambiguous outsider organization privileged my voice in the initiation of the community-based participatory research. Because my institution was not intimately engaged in this history and past actions—and therefore viewed more objectively than local racialized organizations—my perspective was considered trustworthy. As a result, partners listened to my thoughts about how to best accomplish the community engagement process. The organizations with the power to push forward the project decided to commit significant financial resources once their representatives felt that there was consensus on the Umbrella Group's direction. Throughout this process, I served as a facilitator and mediator, and as a voice who reminded the group of their mission when their conversations strayed into a political and racially charged arena.

SHIFTING ROLES, SHIFTING PRIORITIES

The Umbrella Group leveraged these initial resources to hire executive staff who could do the "boots on the ground" work in collaboration with me given my distance (while working on the PAR project, I made monthly trips to New Orleans). The first executive director hired had a difficult time marshalling the interests and perspectives of the diverse board members, since she was not viewed to be racially neutral. Locally, her racial identity could not be disentangled from the Black-dominated pre-Katrina public school district that many Whites viewed as suspect at best and corrupt at worst. The Umbrella Group wanted a strong, racially neutral leader who could simultaneously serve as an effective liaison to the marginalized, poor, Black insider community who would access the public schools and the more privileged board members. I became this temporary substitute, racialized in a manner that—because of my organization's

racial ambiguity—was nonthreatening to the White organizational inter-
ests on the Umbrella Group, as it sought a new director. I was viewed as
an asset and entrusted to take on a more prominent role in the Umbrella
Group's work.

I completed the pilot study with the Umbrella Group in August 2009
and began working toward implementing the large-scale community
engagement phase that the group originally envisioned for the project. At
this point, the board understood the nature of PAR and felt prepared to
take more ownership and control of the research process. With this new
understanding and control, the board actively sought someone who could
lead the PAR project through connecting with local community members
and manage the project with effectiveness and efficiency. At the end of
2009, Umbrella Group board members moved Deirdre, who was already
engaged as a board member, into a leadership position as a replacement for
the previous executive director. Deirdre was a highly competent, racially
and politically neutral leader. She had credibility in the community given
her effective leadership of a youth-based advocacy organization, highly
regarded by both Black and White constituencies. She also was skilled
in organizational management, gaining these skills in graduate studies
outside of the state. By extension of her neutrality, the Umbrella Group
continued to cultivate its status as a racially ambiguous organization by
both its member organizations and the broader New Orleans community,
allowing it to successfully implement the community engagement phase
of the project.

While I was previously the central driving figure of the PAR project,
Deirdre's leadership allowed me to take a backseat in a lot of ways. The
community engagement phase represented a shift in my role from a quasi-
leader to a behind-the-scenes researcher and project supporter. Deirdre and
I developed a process to train approximately 30 community members to
facilitate the PAR Project research activities. The newly trained facilitators
were members of community-based organizations involved in the fight for
quality public education. Many of them were regarded as community lead-
ers before becoming involved with the PAR Project. We encouraged the
facilitators to draw on their existing capital within the local community to
engage its most marginalized members. We asked them to use their new
research skills to draw out and document the perspectives of groups we had
minimal access to. A mutually beneficial collaboration emerged. The com-
munity insiders were responsible for collecting data. I was asked to support
the work in different ways. I remember thinking that this is what PAR is
supposed to look like in practice. With Deirdre's and the newly trained

facilitators' project contributions, I was, for the first time, *not* in reactionary mode. My ability to play a proactive rather than reactive role changed my positionality and experiences in two ways. No longer was I the go-to person for the PAR Project. The Umbrella Group was coming into its own identity. I did not dictate who was engaged. I became a sounding board, a co-researcher rather than solo researcher. This freed me to more explicitly advocate for the Black community voices I felt were not fully present (e.g., poor Black family members themselves rather than leaders of organizations who worked on their behalf), without having to worry about undermining the Umbrella Group's efforts to be neutral on racial issues.

Whereas I had previously rationalized my continued commitment to the PAR project primarily as a matter of my commitment to ensuring that Black students were afforded access to high-quality public education, the newfound autonomy that resulted from my shifting role provided me space (i.e., literal, psychological, and emotional) to refocus on my scholarly agenda. I began to come to grips with the fact that I had spent close to three years working with the Umbrella Group on the project. I was an assistant professor. Although I had known that disseminating research related to the project was important, with my tenure clock ticking, the urgent need to show the fruits of my work grew more palpable. There was no way for me to account for the difficult work of building relationships with communities (especially a community miles away) in my tenure and promotion case.

What mattered, I knew for my professional well-being, was to publish scholarly articles and give conference presentations that reflected the PAR project. My renewed focus on my case for tenure and promotion and the shift to a more traditional researcher role raised ethical responsibilities that manifested in the form of new trust-related problems. I knew, though, that I could not publish anything from the project without the express participation and permission of my community colleagues and they were not there yet. The kitchen-table chronicles of Black people's experiences with public education in New Orleans was just at the beginning stages. The last thing anyone would be focused on was publishing journal articles. I realized that I had to turn my attention to the more traditional and "valued" (at least within university ivory towers) forms of scholarship, so I started to work on publishing findings from research I had conducted on inclusion of children with special needs in Milwaukee charter schools.

As I began to shift my work and time outward, a conflict emerged from a question about who had "ownership" over the rich focus group data being collected by community-based facilitators. Many facilitators had difficulty

understanding why they could not use data collected as part of the PAR project to further their individual organizational needs. The facilitators collected data through focus groups conducted in home settings from people they knew well and with whom they had trusting relationships. They audio-recorded the focus groups on digital recorders owned by the Umbrella Group, but were not allowed to maintain copies of the audio recordings. Then they turned over the original data to me for transcription, storing, and analysis.

It was clear that I held the data per the guidelines for the protection of human subjects through my university, but the fact that I had complete control over it raised suspicion in some facilitators' minds regarding how I might interpret and use it. On the other hand, facilitators representing groups who were leery of some motives of a few organizations that were considered racially biased toward one group or the other, were happy that no one group had access to the data. They did not trust what some member organizations of the Umbrella Group might do with the focus group or interview data. Because of my ongoing involvement and the multiple positions I occupied, I understood the concerns of all parties involved. I told myself that these community facilitators did not understand their responsibilities and obligations to protect human research subjects. On the surface, I held firm to my ethical responsibilities to maintain the integrity of the data. Internally, I felt a little sick about it. Why should the community members not be able to directly benefit from the work they were doing to better understand their constituents' perspectives, experiences, and ideas? No—the university Institutional Review Board protocol said that you must collect, protect, and *de-identify* the data. Of course, this process of wiping clean and making the data a homogeneous whole would take months. By the time the community members got the data back, their very individual voices would be wiped clean. My position as "keeper of the data" put me in control of the whole process of making meaning of the data, which should have been carried out by the community collaborators, and I was very conflicted by this. In a sense, I became an instrument of disenfranchisement.

I tried to atone for my role in this erasure by identifying the missing voices who had not yet been engaged in the participatory work. These included young Black children, children with disabilities, and poor Black residents of New Orleans. I drew attention to groups that were missing in the community engagement process in significant numbers. Their voices mattered and should have been accounted for in the research. The youth who were engaged were already connected to different youth leadership

programs. I advocated for the inclusion of greater numbers of marginalized community members during our collaborative debriefings with the Umbrella Group. My personal ambitions in this regard, while supported by the board of the Umbrella Group, proved to be a hurdle that was not surmounted during my active involvement in the project.

I argued to the Umbrella Group that the power of PAR is that the data is used to affect change. I pushed to have the community-based facilitators, under Umbrella Group executive leadership, analyze, interpret, and write the reports from the data they collected during focus groups, surveys, and interviews. This, too, in my mind, would resolve the conflict of "who controls the data" by engaging everyone in a shared data analysis and reporting process that required consensus. This proved a challenge, however, since most of the facilitators worked full-time and had already devoted numerous volunteer hours to collect data. Since they could not commit the time necessary to analyze the data, and given the time-intensive nature of qualitative data analysis, I had no other choice than to complete this analysis myself, in order to get a report written. To ensure some level of community input and at Deirdre's suggestion, I convened a working session with some community-based facilitators to share and seek feedback on preliminary findings from the qualitative data and survey and academic achievement analyses. I asked the facilitators to cross-check the findings with what they heard when conducting the interviews and focus groups. Since community-based facilitators did not have much time to participate in the data analytic process, working sessions turned out to be an effective way of facilitating community input. The major themes and subthemes of the PAR project were established through this process.

By December 2010, we were prepared to disseminate a full report on community perspectives on school reform. The report included evidence in the form of direct quotes from Black parents and Black teachers speaking about the historic discrimination and marginalization in the local community. In addition, many Black parent participants expressed their frustrations and beliefs that they were actively excluded from quality charter schools, as seen in the focus group quotes below.

> I think that there is a major problem with people just basically understanding how you maneuver in R.S.D. and New Orleans Public Schools and then the charter school system. I don't think we've done a good job and explained it to the public, the systems that exist here and how a parent can get their child into one of the schools in New Orleans public area. I think this hurts a lot of our lower income Black families.

> I'd say that there are a number of schools that are open admissions, but a lot are selective admissions. I think there are two ways schools get better. You either increase the capacity of the adults or you get better kids. I think what we have done in New Orleans in the past [*through parochial and private school admissions*] and what we're doing now in charter schools is we're figuring out ways to weed out the Black kids that aren't the strongest and to keep the kids that are stronger.

The unabashed perspectives on racism in New Orleans schools did not sit well with many Umbrella Group representatives who reviewed the first full draft. The report struck a racial nerve for the White member organizations, in particular. Representatives of White outsider organizations felt their organizations were portrayed in a negative light and that distributing a report rife with accusatory statements and race-specific perspectives was problematic. From my perspective, it seemed that the complex, historical (and current), racially charged divisions between Blacks and Whites resurfaced with the potential for the report being released serving as a tipping point.

During this conflict, Deirdre's importance as a race-neutral leader was reinforced, in my view. While she owned and validated the findings, she was concerned that releasing the report would alienate powerful policy, and legislative organizations that could be potential Umbrella Group allies moving forward. Given our analysis, I understand now how such a move might have threatened the racial ambiguity of the organization. But for me, the report reflected high-quality PAR that represented the voices of community insiders. I was opposed to watering down the racial aspects of the report. Since I had credibility and a positive relationship with the Umbrella Group and I knew they had grown to respect my opinions, I advocated for releasing the full report in its current form.

After much disagreement and debate, the Umbrella Group board released a project description and executive summary of findings. The abbreviated report did not include quotes thought to be scintillating and/or provocative. The Umbrella Group was still, in many ways, in its infancy. They were working to establish and maintain their standing as a racially neutral organization, which could convene groups with conflicting racial histories to engage in difficult dialogues about how to redress historical educational inequities for poor Black children in New Orleans. The leadership of the Umbrella Group believed the full report was racially charged and that withholding controversial elements was more important at that time to continue to strengthen their image as a voice of all perspectives on

educational equity. My disagreement stemmed from my continued out-sider status—after all this time, I still had only a superficial grasp of the impact of race on everything. In looking back, I realize now that it was too soon to release the report. The Umbrella Group needed more time to build their community engagement movement. Deirdre was sensitive to timing and rightly held off on sharing the full report with the broader commu-nity. This conflict highlighted the importance of considering the impact of time, space, status, and race on participatory research. Ultimately, I did not have to worry about lasting repercussions, since, as an outsider, I could leave. Real insiders have to deal with the long-term implications of their actions. Deirdre exerted her power as an insider leader to make the right decision about the report given the local community's racial dynamics. My role as an outsider was to accept Deirdre's decision.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I wanted to better understand how I defined myself, how others defined my role over time, and how these perceived roles influenced our col-lective action in the project. My reflections on my experiences forced me to confront the impact that my power as an "expert," Black, female researcher and outsider had on interactions and on all aspects of the PAR. I subconsciously operated from the assumption that race, class, and professional authority did not have an impact. However, commitment to participatory and emancipatory research within racially, socially, and economically marginalized Black communities requires an active ques-tioning by Black researchers if true equality and empowerment are to be achieved.

My individual power within interactions throughout the project was mediated by the racial identity of my outside university. Other project participants' organizational affiliations mediated their interactions, too. In a large-scale PAR project that brings together multiple organizations focused on promoting action for critical and sustained change in Black communities, it is critical to understand not only the individuals who are at the table, but also the perceived and real historical and racial relation-ships of the organizations and communities they represent. I entered into the project with no clue about the racial gulfs I would have to traverse. In retrospect, this naiveté and lack of knowledge could have backfired on me. Luckily, it created a more neutral space in which to develop relationships at the start of the work, which gradually became colored over time by my

Black interlocutors as I began to learn, judge, and make assumptions about the motives of the people around the table.

If research is to speak for and with a Black community it should involve meaningful interactions with community members. It is important for research across fields to understand these issues before they enter into participatory processes. It is critical to be mindful of balancing the needs of the researcher(s) and the needs of the community (publishing and so on). To be impactful, PAR scholarship requires mindfulness to the difficult and uncomfortable work of meeting multiple, often competing, demands for what the research should contribute to the Black communities in which it is situated and to the Black researchers themselves.

NOTES

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Part II

All-Out War: Fighting against
the White Appropriation of
Jailed Wisdom ❧

4. Working with Adult Non-Completers to Address the School Dropout Problem ❧

Decoteau J. Irby

The Philadelphia-Delaware-New Jersey metropolitan area is home to approximately six million people. Situated along the Delaware River are the region's central city, Philadelphia, the southwestern portion of New Jersey (Camden), and the northern part of Delaware (Wilmington). The urban metropolitan area is often referred to as the Delaware Valley. Because of its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean and the access the Delaware River provides, this has historically been an area of trade and development. At the inception of the United States, it was one of the nation's busiest ports. It was also a gathering place for the founding fathers and served as a temporary capital during the early formation of the republic. From the port grew the railroads, which led to Philadelphia becoming a railroad hub and industrial center. The region was and continues to be among the United States' most important centers for economic development, intellectual and social innovation, and politics. Located just north of the Mason Dixon line (that separated "Slave" states from "Free" states), the region served as a center of the US slavery abolition movement. Historically, these aspects made the Delaware Valley and its principal city of Philadelphia a major destination for African Americans seeking refuge from slavery and southern racism over a period spanning the pre–Civil War through the 1950s Great Migration.

From 1930 to 1960 the Black population of Philadelphia grew by 300,000 people, increasing from 11.4 to 26.4 percent.[1] After World War II at the onset of "White Flight" to the suburbs, Philadelphia's Black population began expanding out from the area historically known as "Black Bottom," which was defined by 32nd and 40th Streets and from University to Lancaster Streets in the city's West Philadelphia borough. According to the US Census Bureau, the City of Philadelphia had an estimated population of 2,992,206 people in 2013.[2] It is home to one of the United States' most concentrated Black populations, specifically in North Philadelphia borough. It is the fifth most populous city in the United States and has many symptoms of a deindustrialized North American City: a weak labor market plagued with the inability to provide good jobs to long-term city residents, a segregated housing market defined along lines of class and race and ethnicity, and an education system that ranks among the worst in the country.[3]

Life in the inner city of Philadelphia presents many challenges to its residents, especially the poor and dispossessed who are disproportionately people of color. Marginal schools and a struggling economy are two barriers to achieving success that Philadelphia's poor must overcome. Philadelphia is in the top ten largest school districts in the country. Most students in Philadelphia attend schools that are segregated along lines of class and race, a direct reflection of the city's and region's patterns of residential segregation. In traditional public schools in Philadelphia, Black students are the majority at 51 percent, followed by Whites and Hispanics who make up 14 percent and 19 percent of the population, respectively. Asians make up 8 percent, and 6 percent is multiracial.[4] Charter schools in Philadelphia enroll a majority of Black and Latino students at 79 percent.[5] In the past ten years, the school district has reformed its governance into a corporate model that does not rely on a traditionally elected board. The new governing body, the School Reform Commission, has engaged in a pattern of closing schools, reducing the teaching force, and expanding the district's networks of charter and privately managed schools. Low test scores, high dropout rates, violence, and segregated and unequal schooling remain common.

The poor performance of students in Philadelphia's schools has a detrimental effect on the city and the region because the students become underused local human capital. The state spends $11,000 a year to educate a student in Philadelphia but pays $34,000 a year to incarcerate a person.[6] Courts in Pennsylvania sentence "more youth under 18 to life without parole than any other state in the country."[7] The phenomenon of school

failure and incarceration are inextricably linked. The school systems' inability to educate its residents is most harmful for the students, communities, and families who are left unprepared to make a living, which often leads to a life of crime and delinquency born of alienation. The staggering number of students that have been failed by the education system is particularly disturbing given the fact that the economy no longer produces living wage jobs for low-skilled workers.

In today's post-Fordist economy, it is increasingly essential that workers are educated and skilled if the regional economy is to grow and if its residents are to benefit from opportunities. In 1930, Philadelphia began to experience a decline in the industrial economic base that had established it as a world-class city. Manufacturing provided living wage jobs to Philadelphia's working-class population. However, 75 percent of the manufacturing jobs in the city were lost between 1955 and 1975.[8] The majority of the city's population of 1.5 million is employed in trade transportation and utility services, educational and health services, professional and businesses services, government, and manufacturing-oriented industries in what was once a leading manufacturing and industrial center in the United States.

Although Philadelphia is the largest city in the Delaware Valley, its smaller neighboring urban fringe cities share many similar conditions. The region as a whole has grown as residents have relocated to the outer edges of the central city, following job opportunities and quality of life associated with suburban living. Yet, some edge cities, such as Camden, New Jersey, and Wilmington, Delaware, fare no better than Philadelphia in their abilities to afford their populations with high qualities of life. It has also had a continuous decline in population since the 1990s, which has led to vacant and abandoned buildings in the city. The city has also had three of its mayors jailed for corruption.

THE TCC RESEARCH PROJECT

In the fall of 2009, we initiated the university-community collaborative research project in the Philadelphia-New Jersey-Delaware tristate region that brought together formerly incarcerated school non-completers, academic researchers, and local policy makers to address low high school completion rates. The project explored the myriad of issues described above. The project's aim was to leverage research to develop the capacity of grassroots leaders who would be positioned to (a) raise awareness and gain

insights about the dropout issue; (b) encourage the active participation and voices of marginalized communities in dropout prevention planning; and (c) establish an ongoing forum for experts, practitioners, and former non-completers to reciprocate knowledge.

The project began when a colleague Nora, who was, at the time, a professor at a local university (which we refer to in these chapters as Major University), contacted me and asked if I would be interested in coordinating and coleading a research project that involved working with formerly incarcerated adults. About a week after Nora informed me about the project, I had breakfast with Nora and Paul, a local education advocate who conceived of the research project. Paul was a retired businessman who became interested in education reform in his later years. In his sixties, he returned to graduate school and earned a PhD. In the process, he became interested in how to foster the capacity of residents in poor communities to address deep-seated and generational social problems. At our meeting, we explored ideas on conducting a research study that asked dispossessed adults from marginalized communities to share with policy makers strategies on how to improve their communities. Prior to introducing the idea to Nora, Paul had done substantial groundwork in terms of conceiving of an area of inquiry and identifying a population he was interested in tapping as research subjects—members of the Transitional Corrections Centers (TCC) alumni organization.

ABOUT TRANSITIONAL CORRECTION CENTERS ALUMNI GROUP

TCC,[9] a large in-prison treatment provider, houses approximately 30,000 male and female residents throughout the United States. Its residents are primarily incarcerated for drug-related offenses (distribution and addiction) and showed promise for successful reentry. TCC maintained an active volunteer-based alumni support group, which served as a base for TCC parolees and release persons to provide support and motivation to inmates who were nearing their release date. It has a general membership of over 10,000 and an active membership of approximately 200. Its primary goal is to reduce recidivism.

Paul learned about the alumni association from his business contacts who were interested in investing in TCC as a part of their investment portfolio. Paul researched TCC and grew interested in its alumni association. TCC alumni association members traveled to facilities throughout

the Delaware Valley and North Jersey area to share their stories and provide words of encouragement to current inmates. Alumni members were most committed to regularly visiting the facilities in which they had been incarcerated. At the sites, they coached and encouraged their friends, former inmates, and strangers. Despite the fact that a majority of alumni members remained marginalized, especially with regard to employment and education, we learned over the course of the project that the alumni group fostered a "you can live as a productive member of society" ethos. Although the alumni members were committed to others and used the group to support others, they also used it for the therapeutic and supportive effect it had on their own lives.

The alumni group, although not free from conflict, represented a supportive and safe place where adults who lived daily with the possibility of relapsing into a life of addiction or crime could both receive and give support. TCC supported the groups' efforts through employing counselors to coordinate the group. The counselors were highly regarded by the members. They were well-respected individuals with immense street credibility in their communities for both their "old street days" and their personal transformations and willingness to work toward healing their communities. People often called on the TCC alumni coordinators when they faced challenging, oftentimes life-threatening, situations. The coordinators kept their cell phones beside them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They were, for many, especially the new parolees, a lifeline of emotional support and the central source that connected them to networks of support and opportunities.

Besides the Alumni coordinators, the alumni associations' primary mechanism of support was the community it provided. The core alumni group consisted of approximately 40 individuals who visited prison facilities throughout the tristate area two to three nights per week for approximately three hours per night. The members shared with current inmates personal stories of success and cautionary tales. Telling their stories and hearing others share their stories was therapeutic. It fostered ongoing healing and self-improvement that was free of obligation. Members attended, spoke, and participated of their own free will. After offering motivational words to inmates, alumni association members fellowshipped over food and conversation. Paul, who became interested in the inner workings of the alumni group, started attending their meetings, dinners, and gatherings and interacting with the alumni members as an observer. He contacted Nora because he wanted to conduct research about the group. Nora had the legitimacy of Major University and was highly regarded as a scholar-activist, with years of experience in service learning and collaborative

community-based research approaches. But this was neither her community, nor necessarily mine. However, I did share a strong sense of brotherhood and sisterhood with the alumni members, several of whom I remain in touch with to this day.

I was initially skeptical about working on the project. I am a heterosexual Black male who identifies with the Christian faith tradition. At the time of the study, I lived in the Brewerytown-Strawberry Mansion section of North Philadelphia where I had owned a home for several years. I am the son of a single mother of three. I grew up in a working class family in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Greenville, South Carolina. I attended private Christian schools in my primary years and public schools in my secondary years. I have never been arrested or taken to jail. But my life experiences and encounters with the police while growing up in the conservative South, attending college in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, living in San Francisco's Fillmore district, and coming into my adulthood in Philadelphia's Nicetown Tioga, 23rd and Snyder, and 28th and Cecil B. Moore areas cultivated within me a deep distrust of all and everything related to policing. In fact, a year before being invited to lead the project, I had written a nearly 300-page dissertation on the development of punitive school discipline policies, tracing the roots of punitive disciplining of Black and Brown children to the Raegan era war on drugs.

I was born in 1980. My first introductions to policing were by way of the DARE program at my private elementary school where I was one of a handful of Black students and Niggaz Wit Attitudes (NWA)[10] by way of home and hip-hop. By the time I was in my late twenties, NWA's analysis and assessment of the usefulness of policing had, by far, superseded the perspectives of the DARE officers who made a racist presentation to my second-grade class that has stuck with me as a defining racial moment in my life. Fast-forward to the research project invitation. I was reluctant to get involved with the project. Jails were bad. They were a central part of the problem facing Black Americans. I wanted to help *my people* however I could. I realized that my race, gender, masculinity, and even where I lived gave me the cultural capital and credibility to lead the project. I had lived in rough neighborhoods. I had friends who were tough people. I was well acquainted with people who were most often targeted by the police, many of whom had spent time in jail. Relatively calm and somewhat soft-spoken, I got along with people just fine. I had just completed my PhD. I did not have a place of employment and I was finding my way in the world. I presented research about education policies at academic conferences by day and returned home to sit on the stoop and talk with my neighbors in

my poor, all-Black North Philadelphia neighborhood by night. When I worked with youth, my address earned me respect right off the bat. I was the perfect Black bridge.

I reasoned that although the alumni group was an autonomous group, it was still supported by full-time coordinators who were employees of a for-profit prison company. This troubled me because for-profit prisons trouble me. I expressed my reservations to Paul and Nora and discussed the invitation with a few friends for counsel. All the while, I remained open to the possibilities of the project. Paul invited me to attend alumni meetings. After I attended two meetings and after chatting with numerous alumni members, my enthusiasm for the research project grew. I saw first-hand the potential of the alumni members to expand their service beyond the confines of the alumni association. Over the course of approximately two months, Nora, Paul, Alfonzo (an alumni coordinator who joined the conversation), and I continued the conversation that began at the initial breakfast meeting. Since Paul was interested in literacy development, urban school improvement, and abating the dropout crisis and Nora was interested in community-based collaborations, we settled on a general topic area that we eventually refined into a broad examination of "addressing the dropout crisis." At the time, increasing graduation rates was a major priority for Philadelphia city leaders. As such, addressing the issue made sense as it aligned the project with the current movement toward improving school completion rates.

FORMALIZING THE PROJECT

With a general topic at hand, I suggested to Paul, Nora, and Alfonzo a collaborative participatory approach that would engage alumni members in addressing issues in their communities. Over an approximately three-month period, we developed a research design and work plan. Because of the exploratory nature of the project, the team decided to implement a small-scale pilot study that would allow us to work out kinks before involving a larger number of participants and stakeholders. We designed a four-stage approach: (1) conducting life history interviews with participants, (2) holding a series of co-generative focus groups, (3) engaging stakeholders in a series of conversations, and (4) developing a plan to advocate policy and practice changes to improve schools.

Over the course of approximately one year, we worked with participants to develop understanding(s) and approaches to addressing the school

dropout problem in poor inner-city communities. Although we entered the project expecting a long-lasting engagement, we unofficially ended it after the planning and idea generation stage. We worked with nine men and seven women whose ages ranged from late twenties to mid-fifties. All participants self-identified as African American or Black (see Table 4.1).

A majority of the alumni members did not graduate from high school. Some who did, dropped out and returned to complete their education. Others earned General Educational Diplomas. Still others had not earned any educational credentials. For most alumni members, education, and especially high school completion, was a topic for which they shared a passion.

The core research team (outsiders/professionals) was comprised of one independent researcher (Paul), a university-based researcher (Lynnette), and me, a community-based researcher-activist. We managed the core functions of the research and project management. Additional team members played significant but less direct roles. Instrumental in bringing the research project to a university setting was Nora, a faculty member from Major University who advised the research team at the beginning of the project and assisted as needed by facilitating relations within the university to ensure the project's success. A graduate student (Amber) assisted with focus group preparation and logistics, as did experienced workshop facilitator and community activist, Aaron. Finally, Jackie, an education policy expert, attended and informed the planning process and served as an adviser throughout the research project. The research team conducted the project out of Major University, which provided key support and resources, including serving as a financial conduit, providing a review of Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol and oversight, office space, computer access and printing privileges, classrooms for focus groups, and intangibles such as legitimacy.

RESEARCH PROJECT DESIGN: A PARTICIPATORY AND CAPACITY-BUILDING APPROACH

We designed the pilot study so that data collection would occur *through* developing the capacity of alumni members to understand and advocate approaches and influence decision-makers on key issues related to the dropout problem. As such, we utilized a participatory and collaborative approach that considered the importance of developing and deepening our collective knowledge over time. The iterative process used the co-generated

Table 4.1 **Research study partners: name, race, sex, and position**

Community partners: insiders

Allison	Black	Female	TCC alumnus
Barry	Black	Male	TCC alumnus
Belinda	Black	Female	TCC alumnus
Darrell	Black	Male	TCC alumnus
Devonte	Black	Male	TCC alumnus
Gerald*	Black	Male	TCC alumnus
Jermaine	Black	Male	TCC alumnus
Keisha	Black	Female	TCC alumnus
Oliver	Black	Male	TCC alumnus
Patrice	Black	Female	TCC alumnus
Shontrel	Black	Female	TCC alumnus
Sylvester	Black	Male	TCC alumnus
Tyrone	Black	Male	TCC alumnus

Community-side cultural brokers: insider-outsiders

Alfonzo	Black	Male	TCC alumni group counselor
Brandon	Black	Male	TCC alumni group counselor

University-side cultural brokers: outsider-insiders

Aaron	Black	Male	Independent community activist and educator
Decoteau*	Black	Male	Independent community researcher and educator
Lynnette*	Black	Female	HBCU** faculty and researcher

Project powerbrokers: outsiders

Jackie	White	Female	Director of school policy organization
Joseph	White	Male	TCC executive
Nora	White	Female	Major University faculty and researcher (project principal investigator)
Paul	White	Male	Independent researcher and education advocate
Russell	White	Male	TCC director of research

Additional stakeholders: outsiders

Andrea	White	Female	Education policy advocate, nonprofit leader
Enrique	Latino	Male	School reform commissioner
Sharon	White	Female	Major University graduate student and researcher
Stanley	White	Male	Former school board member, education advocate
Susan	Black	Female	Education policy advocate, nonprofit leader

*Authors of chapters in this book.
**Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

knowledge construction to inform subsequent steps in the research process. The design started at a personal level and moved to a more global level. The life history interviews informed the content of the first focus group. Data collected in the first focus group informed focus group two. Focus group two informed focus group three and so on.

The end goal was to cultivate, among alumni members, an ability and willingness to engage in social problem solving beyond the confines of the alumni group. Because alumni members were already engaged in advocacy and public speaking (directed at inmates), we theorized that these skills and dispositions might translate into other arenas. Our arena of interest was public education, and the goal was to contribute to the current conversation about reducing the dropout rate in urban school districts. After Paul, Nora, Alfonzo, and I reached a consensus on a research approach, I prepared and submitted an IRB protocol, study protocols, and supporting documents. The university's IRB approved the project.

Using the study design document created during the IRB submission process and through relying on the esteem that came with housing the project at the university, Paul raised funds to support the pilot study. He secured $48,000. The funds were directed to a research center at the university where the funding stream was set up for Nora to have signatory authority. I was familiar with the research center because I worked there years ago as a graduate research assistant. I had good relationships with the center staff and they welcomed my return as a research project subcontractor. I was provided an office and phone line and immediately recruited a team to implement the research project, which included Lynnette and Paul's business colleague, Eric. Nora identified Sharon, a graduate student, to assist with the project. We, along with Paul, attended alumni meetings where Paul and Alfonzo introduced us as researchers who would lead the collaborative project. Eventually, we started attending the meetings on our own, without Paul.

While recruiting, we also organized ourselves to carry out the research. We collectively agreed to roles and responsibilities for each team member. Nora was to act as the project's executive director, overseeing the budget and guiding the overall research, and to write research reports and publications. The team expected me to manage the day-to-day nuts-and-bolts aspects of the project. Lynnette and I planned to work together to recruit participants, conduct interviews, refine and lead focus group sessions, organize data, and draft internal study reports that the larger research team could use to advance the work.

Nora, as the project executive and university faculty member, agreed to provide oversight and direction for the project, including engaging in the production of external reports and interfacing with stakeholders. Aaron's primary role was a focus group facilitator. Sharon assisted with planning, collecting, and summarizing research articles, and general project organization. Both Aaron's and Sharon's roles were mostly limited to assisting during the focus groups. Paul agreed to support the project through engaging stakeholders from the broader public policy community. He agreed to work with Nora and me over the course of the project to identify and correspond with potential supporters, including funders and members of policy think tanks and foundations in an effort to move the project beyond the pilot stage. With financial, infrastructural, and personnel support committed, our project was underway.

IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT

The interviews and focus group series served the purpose of working toward two interrelated goals. First, we wanted to learn from and with the alumni members about how to understand the dropout process. Second, we used the interviews and focus group series format as a capacity building and priming process. Because we envisioned a participatory action research process, we intended to facilitate a shift in the locus of control from us to the alumni members, making the research project less hierarchical and more collective. We wanted the alumni members to find their voices, know that their experiences matter, and develop the comfort level to advocate for their perspectives on how to solve problems in their own communities. Integral to the process was moving them into situations where they could advocate their positions. We facilitated this shift by starting with their own personal experiences and scaffolding what they knew of their own lives to those of others. Life history interviews and small focused conversation groups offered the means for accomplishing our goals.

Life History Interviews

We conducted 15 in-depth interviews, with the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the participants' educational and life experiences, specifically those that related to success and lack of success in K-12 school settings. The interviews probed to understand what caused the participants to drop out and sought to ascertain what they would have done differently

in their younger school-aged years if they knew what they know now, as adults. All of the interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, with each interview lasting approximately two hours. I interviewed the male participants. Lynnette interviewed all female participants and one male participant. We found that, owing to the sensitive topics that arose in the interviews, participants were more comfortable with same-gendered interviewers. Both interviewers used a common protocol to ensure reliability.

We did not directly involve participating alumni members in the preliminary analysis of educational interviews. Instead, we analyzed the initial interview data to inform the content of subsequent focus groups. We transcribed, coded, and generated memos to develop key themes. These themes were juxtaposed against information compiled from a review of the research literature. Together, the primary data collected from participants and the secondary data collected through a review of relevant literature were used to guide focus group discussions. The in-depth interview process was more than an opportunity to learn their stories. By starting with listening, we built one-on-one rapport with the participants. At the time of the one-on-one interviews, we invited participants to take part in a series of focus groups. Following the interviews participants engaged in a three-part interactive focus group series designed to enhance their understandings of their personal experiences and their knowledge of the dropout issue, and to discuss their reflections, insights, and knowledge with outside stakeholders.

Focus Group Series

Four of the researchers (Aaron, Lynnette, Sharon, and I) met at least once a week before each focus group. In these meetings, we generated essential questions for the participants to work on during the sessions. We designed discussion questions and group activities in order to have participants generate their ideas within small groups and then present to the larger group. As with the interviews, we audio-recorded the sessions with the participants' permission. We collected and photographed all documents and artifacts produced in the focus group sessions. In addition, we drew from 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.

The first focus group session focused on deepening our collective understanding of school dropout experiences. We lifted stories, anecdotes,

and key themes from individual interviews and presented them back to the group. We also asked the alumni members to use their own experiences to develop a "framework" to understand the school dropout issue that considered their unique perspectives. Essentially, the subjects engaged in a process of analyzing the data that they and people with similar backgrounds experienced that led to leaving school. The discussion focused on understanding and analyzing individual risk factors, school factors, and family and community factors that contributed to or mitigated the dropout problem from their own perspectives. We asked participants to come to the next group session prepared to engage in problem-solving activities.

The second focus group session focused on decision-making and problem solving. The session drew directly from participants' knowledge as generated from the life history interviews and the first focus group session. The session began with a presentation of the contributions that participants made during the previous sessions and presented the "framework" they developed during focus group one. After a presentation of key findings, we facilitated hypothetical problem-solving activities. We presented scenarios that were based on focus group one and asked them to discuss and solve the complex problems they identified in the previous session. Following the problem-solving activity, we asked participants to share their opinions, openly discuss possible solutions, and exchange dialogue about the merits and weaknesses of possible solutions and strategies generated by the group. Different perspectives emerged from the problem-solving activity, as did different group processes that allowed them to arrive at decisions.

The third focus group for the pilot study was designed to engage alumni members in a dialogue with influential policy stakeholders who we regarded as dropout "experts." Paul and I identified and invited the stakeholders to participate in a discussion with alumni members. The research team summarized findings for the expert stakeholders generated in prior sessions and opened the floor for a conversation about (1) the feasibility of implementing the identified solutions and (2) the will of stakeholders to deploy resources and services to address the problems. The guiding questions were developed by the alumni members and represented what they wished to know from the powerful decision-makers they would encounter. We were interested in alumni members' levels of engagement, the nature of the conversational exchanges, and the willingness of the expert stakeholders to respect, acknowledge, and consider both the merit and feasibility of various options alumni members contributed as strategies to address the school dropout issue. Our project culminated with formerly incarcerated community members (insider participants) communicating on behalf of

their communities with city and school leaders. The formal project never succeeded past the initial pilot and idea generation stage.

FIVE YEARS LATER: SOME REFLECTIONS

In this chapter, I attempted to present a "factual" account of the project. Of course, my subjective experiences and identity are present. The descriptive account represents my lens and my version of the story. I was admittedly a key player in the entire process and I do not want to diminish that. More of my story will emerge as my research partners reflect on their stories, especially since we have spent the past five years trying to make sense of what happened, what worked, and what did not work. We often refer back to "the project" or "the dropout study" in the course of our conversation, wrestling with the question: was the project a failure or a success? In hindsight, it was probably a bit of both.

In what follows, Gerald and Lynnette, two people I partnered with during the study, reflect on their lives and experiences participating in the project. Gerald Bolling, in his chapter "Commitment, Love, and Responsibility Are Key," pushes us to challenge our assumptions about "who" knows best, the ways ex-offenders are treated, and the similarities between research "opportunities" and other opportunities that are supposed to benefit ex-offenders but that often fail to deliver in meaningful ways. He describes how localized subcultural tensions born of racial containment and socioeconomic difference were all but ignored in the research process. He reveals that the way the insider-community alumni members interpreted and understood the project was different from the professional researchers. He concludes by suggesting ways the project could have better served insider-participants and calls for a different way of collaborating that honors insiders as experts of their own experience, while acknowledging the important roles professionals can play as *supporters* of community change efforts.

Lynnette Mawhinney's chapter, "Be Catty and Piss on Your Work: A Cautionary Tale of Researching while Black," argues that Black researchers must be fully aware, early in the research process, that conflicts over resource allocation, data access, publishing, "white involvement," and funding have potential corrupting effects on even the most well-meaning participatory research projects. In the chapter, which is framed as a cautionary tale (the character(s) know something bad could happen, sees and ignores the warning signs, and then inevitably falls victim to that which

they knew could occur), Lynnette (re)chronicles her (and, to a lesser extent, my) experiences of marginalization to demonstrate how we wielded what power we had to minimize what we considered exploitation of our Black community partners. The following chapters are an attempt to put structure to our experiences and reflections by telling our individual truths. From this, we hope our collective truth, in its full complexity and richness, will emerge.

NOTES

1. Matt Delmont, "Making Philadelphia Safe for 'WFIL-adelphia': Television, Housing, and Defensive Localism in Postwar Philadelphia," *Journal of Urban History* 38, no. 1 (2012): 92.
2. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table GCT0101, generated by Thor Stolen; using American FactFinder, http://factfinder2.census.gov, accessed April 30, 2015.
3. Judith Goode and Jo Anne Schneider, *Relations in Philadelphia: Immigrants in a Divided City* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994); Carolyn Adams et al., *Restructuring the Philadelphia Region: Metropolitan Divisions and Inequality* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008).
4. Philadelphia School District—December 2014, http://www.philasd.org/about/#schools.
5. Ibid.
6. Recco Ford et al., "Building a Youth-Led Movement to Keep Young People Out of the Adult Crimial Justice System," *Children and Youth Services Review* 35, no. 8 (2013).
7. Ibid.
8. Goode and Schneider, *Relations in Philadelphia*.
9. All names (except starred author names) and places are pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymity.
10. NWA refers to a Los Angeles–based group, Niggaz Wit Attitudes, that achieved popularity in the 1990s.

5. Commitment, Love, and Responsibility Are Key ⌇

Gerald Bolling

My initial impression of the dropout project study was that maybe it would be another bullshit study. That's no disrespect, but I remember thinking to myself that the researchers were not really going to be interested in hearing our opinions. If they did listen, I didn't think our opinions were really going to count. I thought that "they are going to mark it [the report] up and dress it up the way they want it to be and feel." That was just my perception off the top of my head. I almost missed a chance to be a part of a study that was run by a person who looked like me. I was thinking that these Black folks can't be the ones in charge. I thought having Black researchers run the project was a gimmick and that some White folks were going to walk in and take over at any minute. I didn't want to be a research monkey. Once I figured out it was about us and run by us, I went all in.

I was born in 1966 to Evangeline Hammond, my mother, and Gerald Leon Bolling, my father. My childhood was extraordinary. I was always surrounded by people who dealt with drugs, either using them or selling them. I grew up as a street youth. My mother was a heroin user. She got caught up in the streets. My father worked in the airspace division of a large company. He won awards for his contributions, but he was never around for the family. Before my mother became addicted to heroin, she was a supervisor at a hospital. She sustained a workplace injury. The medications she took for the injuries and other issues started her downward spiral with drug addiction.

By the time I was six years old, I was basically caring for myself and my mother. On a regular basis, she would pass out in bars. I would have to go get her. I would drag her up the steps to get her into our apartment. She was abusive to me. She passed when I was 14. When she died, I didn't really feel anything because of her abuse. I didn't come from a household of loving people. After my mother died, my remaining family members were too old to take care of me. I was stealing and robbing. I didn't have anybody to put dinner on the table. I would just pack up and go away. I guess that nowadays you would call it running away. I would hang out with my cousins.

Contrary to what some might believe about people who drop out of school, I never had a problem with school other than the fact that it was boring. I didn't go to class. I felt like I didn't need school. I needed clothes. I needed money. I always had to stand up for myself because of my mother and the kids who teased me. The best way to stop the teasing was to punch them in the mouth and bust them in the head with something. So a lot of people didn't want to be around me. As I fell deeper into the lifestyle, I actually became what you could call a serial robber. I would stick the same store up repeatedly. I was a fighter but it was primarily my mind-set. I was worthless in my own mind because I never finished school. One of the things I always wanted to do was go to prom. I returned home in 1993 and was still deep in the streets and in and out of jail.

Fast-forward to the time of the dropout project, I was just coming out of jail. I was involved with doing alumni work for Transitional Corrections Centers (TCC), which basically involved spreading a message of hope to current inmates. It was based on the education I received in the treatment program. In the program, I learned not to return to prison but to enhance my position in life. When I was invited to be a part of the project, I didn't have a job. I'm just going to be frank. I was in the streets dipping and dabbing and selling drugs to make my way and to feed my family. Then the project came up. Alfonzo told me about the project. The first person I met was Aaron. We introduced ourselves to one another and talked for a second. He introduced me to Decoteau, Lynnette, and Dr. Paul.

I became more interested in the study after Decoteau explained it to us in clear detail. I appreciated that the research team wanted to put the ball in our court and let us present our message as people who were part of the dropout demographics. We started off with the research team leading so we could learn. But we agreed that, over time, we would eventually shift the power and decision-making to the participants—us. The range of people who would be involved was impressive. It was good to get the

chance to meet the bigwigs—the people from the city and School Reform Commission—and tell them things from our side. It made me feel good to realize that somebody really cared. The experience of participating in the project showed me a lot. I understood research in a different way than I used to think about it. Researchers can use you. Researchers can exploit our knowledge, raise our hopes for change, and let us down just like any other opportunity can. But, over time, I started to use what I learned and the relationships I developed to advance my own work. Most importantly, throughout the process, I became more aware of myself and how I felt about my life, both past and present.

NOTHING HAS BEEN DONE THAT BENEFITS US

I thought about the study a lot, especially after I read the article documents.[1] I said to myself: "This work is brilliant." We came up with three broad ideas to address the dropout crisis: a Community Mobilization Model, a Family Wraparound—Lifelong Learning Model, and an Individual Assessment and Recruitment Model. Decoteau and Lynnette wrote papers that presented those ideas that were published in an academic journal.[2] Anyone interested can find that article, read those ideas that we developed *with* the researchers, and implement them or similar strategies in schools and communities. But we developed the ideas in 2009 and nothing has been implemented since. It makes me feel like the study was done for nothing. I know why we did it, but there's been no application. Since then, around 40 schools in Philadelphia have been closed down. Teachers have been laid off. There are almost no nurses in the schools. It is disheartening. I felt we had good ideas and good formulas.

Nothing's been done. Folks can read the documents and take our advice. But my question is why shouldn't we, ex-offenders, have the opportunities to implement our ideas? But we don't get chosen for jobs. If we had moved to the stage of implementation as planned and had been chosen to guide and facilitate the processes, that would be just. I may not have an advanced degree. But I'm an expert at being locked up, returning from being locked up, and learning how to be on parole. I have become an expert on how to stay out of trouble. Nobody can take that from me because I've done it. But I still face the struggle and drama. There are so many things that I go through as an ex-offender who is doing the right thing now. I've been out nearly eight years and my record is clean now. That's something I never had since I was aged 14. For a long time I could never say I was doing this

citizenship thing the right way. I'm doing it right now. It's so hard for me to articulate the things that go on in our lives living as ex-offenders.

As ex-offenders, we are selectively picked to give out information and to learn from, but we rarely reap the direct benefits of the research. For example, when it is time for us to get hired or be put in positions that matter for the community or make an impact in society, we are not given those opportunities. There's this stigma that sticks to us as people who have been incarcerated. Maybe it is our body language or our attitudes that rub people the wrong way and we are denied opportunities to get good jobs. I'm not talking about McDonalds or Burger King or anything of that nature. I'm talking about jobs that will help us get to the next stage in life.

But others, such as TCC representatives, did stand to benefit from the project. I believe they needed the recognition to further expand their work into halfway houses and homeless centers. They have bought properties and facilities all over the tristate area, including safe haven shelters and other organizations. They are a powerhouse for substance abuse recovery. Philadelphia is known as a city where substance abuse recovery is big business. TCC's involvement in research stood to boost their reputation and facilitate them getting into the recovery side of the business, not just in-house treatment. Many people who participated were handpicked. They asked me because they confused my passion for my people with my passion for TCC organization. They thought that because I was so passionate to work with the alumni that I wouldn't talk about the organization (in ways that didn't go with their script). Acknowledgment of somebody's success brings them (TCC) more success. What they do is partner with researchers from a major university to conduct a study of TCC alumni and how they managed to reach where they stand. Somebody may have done such a study before.

The research participant stipends aspect of the project was crazy. The researchers gave us $50 every time we engaged in the research activities. That money was powerful because it kept people dangling on that line. But even though the research stipends were good, the alumni participants expected a more substantive payoff in terms of longer-term opportunities. Every Wednesday, another alumnus, Jermaine, and I would go to the facility to meet with inmates. We got so many letters from the inmates. The inmates sent back letters detailing how we helped them when they got out. I think Jermaine eventually got a job with TCC but I don't know what happened.

They never hired me because I always spoke the truth about the people who controlled the organization. All of them would only reach out to

people who they liked. That included some of the researchers. They were selective. I've been out of TCC for eight years. Yet TCC has not offered me a job despite my involvement in the research project or my contributions to the alumni association. They gravitated toward people who spoke the things they wanted to hear. But I was not involved to tell them what they wanted to hear. I had to speak my truth. And because I spoke it, I was hurt by it—financially and personally through denied opportunities.

NOT MUCH HAS DIRECTLY BENEFITED ME

I remember that at one of the meetings, a few alumni members left upset about how things were operating. I can't remember the exact situation, but Sylvester was acting out of character. He and Jermaine got into a verbal confrontation to the point where they were about to fight. I wanted to calm the situation because it wasn't as serious as it seemed. It was a misunderstanding. The fact that Sylvester and Jermaine almost got into a fight made the professionals involved with the research project look at us again as a group of people who were unable to restrain ourselves when faced with a challenging situation or asked hot questions that we perhaps don't want to hear or deal with. That situation affected all of us negatively in terms of how people perceived our ability to contribute to the project in a professional manner.

My point in bringing up the incident is to show how it didn't matter how you behaved in the project or what you contributed. What mattered is whether or not you said what the TCC folks wanted you to say. It mattered that you represented them and not yourself. The fact that Sylvester was almost in a fight during the project didn't hurt the brother. I talked to him about how he acted that day and he responded: "I ain't gonna let nobody talk to me like that. I'm a grown man, and blah blah blah." It is ironic to me that after the study wrapped up and after his role in that major incident that embarrassed us all, he got a job. I did get an interview. But at the time I was honest with the interviewers. I told them how I felt about the organization and the way it could be better. After that interview, they never invited me back. And they banned me from participating with the alumni group. Now, they probably would not admit that. It may not have been official. But they just cut me off.

The TCC organization always needed people to spread the message of hope in the Philadelphia treatment facilities. But they would not connect with me. About a year ago, they started reaching out to me and answering

my phone calls. But before that, they invited me back about three years ago when I had a job working in clinical and nonclinical treatment settings through a drug rehabilitation program. So at that point, I was going back to the facilities giving inmates the positive message that they can change. I used myself as an example. I took my boss at the time along with me. Then my boss started getting high. I was basically running the program on my own. I was doing my job and still regularly going to TCC, but I was stressed. I felt like I was being used by numerous people. My expectations were not being met on a number of fronts. The research project did not pan out. TCC were not supportive. My new boss was using me to do the lion's share of the work. On many fronts, I felt disrespected. I didn't know where to turn. I didn't have benefits but I was making a little less than $15 per hour. I was working my ass off to help the clients get back on their feet, and by the grace of God many of them did get clean.

All the help I thought I would receive to get myself on my feet never came. I expected that we, folks who gave our time and expertise to the research project and alumni meetings, were top candidates. After all, we were doing most of the work in the TCC facilities. TCC officials promised us the opportunity to be employed with TCC in Philadelphia. When they didn't deliver, they gave my family coats and Christmas presents. It offended me. I didn't need a hand out. I needed a hand up. The White folks didn't like me. The likeable White folks didn't like me. They considered me a threat. Yet, they would come to Philly and ask me to do support work for them. When they asked, I did it. I didn't want to be selfish because I still wanted to help the folks who needed it by getting addicts placed in recovery houses. But the organizations wouldn't even pay me for that work. The support didn't come. Many of the promises that were made to me were never brought to fruition. As I sit back and think about all the work we did and the data that we gave to the professionals during the study, I believe we contributed some key tools to think about how to address the dropout problem. But the fact that I was used when it was convenient is the story of my post-incarceration life. For me, the research project represents another project built on false promises that I have encountered as I have worked to rebuild my life.

EX-OFFENDER STATUS AND FALSE PROMISES

Every time I came back from being locked up, I had no opportunities. I had no mentorship. I had no one to tell me: "Hey man, this is the way you

have to do it and to make it. Here's a job for you. Here's some training for you. Here's some housing." Many of the people who are in jail are homeless owing to circumstances beyond their control. It may be that people didn't have family. It could be related to what (crime) they did to get locked up. So when they are released, the first thing they have to do is find shelter. They try to find a place anywhere. And when we find a place, people act as though we need to find another place. That may be because of the trust factor (lack of trust) related to things we did in the past. The people who house you want you to get a job. There's a tremendous amount of pressure to get things in order and we don't want to be a burden on the people trying to help us. These are demands in addition to the responsibilities associated with being on parole. And finally, there's the challenge of just being free. When a person is incarcerated, he or she is closed off. When you get out, you feel like one of those wind-up toys. Inside, you're winding up and when you are released, you don't know in which direction you will go. That's why ex-offenders need a lot of help and support.

There are programs that can help. But all the programs are missing a vital point: Ex-offenders need to lead the talks about ex-offenders. Ex-offenders need to help ex-offenders. And not just on a surface level. A person doesn't need to go to jail to know that it' a demoralizing place. I don't want people to experience imprisonment. But a person who experienced that level of demoralization and overcame it is better positioned to help someone else who has experienced it. We have the ability and deserve jobs doing work in an area of life that we are experts in. For example, a professor is an expert in her or his field. No one can take that away from that person. So we have to appreciate that we are experts in our fields based on our experiences. There are two different societies in this society: *one inside* and the *general society*. We have the ability to help people coming from inside to integrate into society. That is what I liked about the idea of the research project. It trained us to think like researchers and was supposed to shift the power over to us to drive decision-making on a deeper level.

I'm not saying that all the jobs should be given to ex-offenders, but many more of the jobs and opportunities should go to ex-offenders, especially in areas where we matter. I, and many others, fight hard for ex-offenders to have better lives. This is happening not only in Philadelphia but also all over the country. I'm dedicated to this work of reintegrating ex-offenders into society. Yet I'm unable to pay my phone bill. The people I know who work in the programs and the heads of the programs that the city is launching don't even come out to the neighborhood. The program officers and officials do not live in the neighborhood and are not a part of

the community. They are not around ex-offenders who they know personally. The problem is that if they have no personal connections to people who are in need, then they can't help them because they are detached. Folks who are not part of the ex-offender community have an attitude that "I'm here ['successful'] and you need to figure out how to get here."

In Philadelphia, a lot of organizations say they want to help ex-offenders. And maybe they do. But when it comes down to it, they fail to speak the words of ex-offenders and to help the public understand the importance of this mission. Although these programs' stated missions are to help, the truth is that helping ex-offenders is actually the ex-offenders' mission. But we're on the sidelines helping professionals. It should be the other way around. I don't mean that others (who are not ex-offenders) can't help. But we ex-offenders need to know that we have a purpose in this world other than being locked up, or an ex-felon who can't get a job or being out there robbing somebody or doing something harmful because we're bigger than that. For example, consider an organization called Eliminate. Eliminate is a coalition of organizations and individuals seeking an end to mass incarceration and the harms it brings our communities. The organization's website states that "they seek mechanisms to build whole, healthy communities and believes that imprisonment exacerbates the problems we face." Some of their demands include an immediate and lasting moratorium on all new prisons, county or city jails, prison expansions, new beds in county jails, and immigrant detention facilities. They also seek changes in policing, sentencing, and legislation to reduce the prison population. The organization believes that public dollars should be spent on quality public schools, jobs and job training, community-based reentry services, health care and food access, drug and alcohol treatment programs, and so on. They also advocate for restorative forms of justice and nonpunitive programs that address the root cause of violence in communities. This is all good. I'm a friend of the organization. I like the organization's stance. I like what the organization fights for. I especially like the aspect about investment in communities and education.

I appreciate the solidarity and allies, but I get concerned when "we" statements are used to drive the movement. Folks who do ex-offender activism have to know that this is not a "we" thing. It is not primarily their fight. This is our fight. I don't want to be harsh, but I have to say that and draw that line. Because sometimes, some people think they need to take over and do all of the activism for us. But in time, outsiders' agenda will become front and center. And that's what has happened. They marched up to Harrisburg and protested against mass incarceration. That's okay. But

it goes back to understanding the two different societies that I mentioned earlier—the inside and the general society: the outside.

PROBLEM FRAMING: YOU'RE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

There is a way to understand the issues that the incarcerated or ex-offenders experience if you are on the outside. But it is not a complete understanding if you are not inside or have not lived inside. Many activists have not lived inside. So when they reference mass incarceration, their minds automatically think "going to jail." Too many activists try to compel the government to stop building jails and to stop spending on upgrading facilities. Now, if you live in a house that is 200 years old or more, you have to do some repairs. If you do not, the house is going to be unfit and unlivable. Middleberg Prison, Gratterford Prison, and a lot of jails in Pennsylvania were designed for one person per cell. There are two people living in each cell. The conditions are horrid. The plumbing system has not been updated since the 1950s. If the activists lived in a place where plumbing backs up when it rains, and rats come up when it rains, they would think twice about not allocating funds to upgrade the facilities to basic living standards.

When activists talk about the prison abolition movement, they frame the problem as the jails when the problem is actually in the streets. That goes back to the investment in communities and education. The activism has to start in and be centered on what's happening in the streets. The problem is with one guy busting another guy in the head to try to feed his family—which is an economics problem—or to feed his drug habit—which is often a mental health or emotional problem. That's where the cycle starts. Nothing is set up to really help build our communities for our own benefit. I saw it coming a long time ago. I was born down in the Black Bottom. That was the neighborhood. And regardless of what outsiders thought about it, Blacks owned the neighborhood. They owned their businesses. They owned their houses. And they were successful. Those stores are gone. When the businesses were there, it showed we were our own people and demonstrated that we were capable of taking care of our own. Now we have none of that. In Philadelphia, we have neighborhoods where 95 percent of the residents are Black but they own 1 percent of it. That's insane. People who profit off of the neighborhood don't even live there. They come in to do their business, get the money, and leave. And that's why Black communities are dilapidated and dysfunctional.

I remember when they started sending the White folks in to take over the neighborhood—to "transform" it and make it "better." Now the Chinese and Arabs own our neighborhoods. They feed us. We have very little, almost nothing in terms of ownership. So now, when activists are telling us "let's go fight mass incarceration and let's discuss ex-offenders" they are missing the point that the problem is ownership of the neighborhoods and control of our own destiny. Here in the city, the police recently murdered two brothers. But we couldn't do anything about it in terms of litigation. I recently watched a video about White supremacy and the Klu Klux Klan (KKK). It detailed how the KKK bombed up churches. They killed people. But when they went to court, they were acquitted. They were literally allowed to walk free. Other KKK murderers were 80 years old and they were retried and given life. But what justice does that serve us? It doesn't improve our day-to-day lives.

Mass incarceration is rooted in school and neighborhood quality. Mass incarceration is the same as miseducation, no education, and destructive education. And many activists mean well but make a mistake of how they understand and address the problem. The dropout project was appealing because it allowed us who have lived inside to identify the problems as we saw them. That is powerful. When you don't focus on those root issues and instead focus on their version of mass incarceration as the problem, it's laughable. Program officials and policy makers fail ex-offenders by not providing us with ample avenues to improve our financial well-being and our lives. It's insulting because organizations that are operating have no track record of success and no success stories. People who work for programs used to ask me to refer people for jobs that were earmarked for ex-offenders through the city's office of community service. They would call me to find people to fill their jobs so they would be in compliance with the city's program. And they never gave me a dime for that.

At the end of the day, service providers, researchers, elected officials, and so on are going to go home. They will put in their eight hours' work and go home. They don't live in our communities. Folks want to define our problems. But they can't tell us what our problem is. How am I supposed to keep my good face on? Why am I not supposed to be angry about how people keep manipulating us into thinking that the problems are over there or somewhere that is difficult to address? No psychologist can do better than me in helping heroin addicts through recovery. I can really help people. Many people with education credentials who I encounter think they are above me and above us. They believe that ex-offenders deserve to be where they are in life. Too many so-called educated folks have that "I'm

here and you need to get here" mentality. Service providers also assume they will be respected and people will follow them based on position. I go to the places where nobody has "position" so you can't count on that. Folks in the streets don't care.

Ex-offenders need a lot of help. And they need it from people who understand them, with the support of professionals. The people who operate and head the ex-offender programs don't recognize, for example, that many of the people who are coming out of jail were making millions of dollars in cash before they were incarcerated. The program heads expect them to start working for $7.25. Several people who I know coming out were bosses in the streets, so to speak. They were selling drugs and then they are supposed to come home and make $7.25. It's hard in terms of the economics. But more importantly, that's a difficult psychological, social, and emotional transition. Ex-offenders are willing to struggle through those difficulties to have opportunities for a better life. Last year, the city made a press announcement: "We want to hire ex-offenders." They had so many ex-offenders come to the municipal building across from the city hall, it was a shame. They had to close the process. They reorganized and called a second meeting. This time, they held it at the convention center to accommodate the large number of people who showed up. It was more of the same.

NO ONE WANTS TO WORK "FOR" BLACK FOLKS

Organizations that are in our communities say they want to help, including TCC. But they only want to do it on their terms. I've been around folks from recovery organizations and when I requested help on my terms, they declined. We are not of their kind. It doesn't baffle me anymore. There's no natural animosity on the part of White people. But because of White supremacy, it is beyond many White folks' worldview to believe that we are human. They don't believe we can be up to their standard. So there's a pecking order in terms of who is allowed to lead. It's unfair to us. Almost no one, including Black folks, wants to work *for* Black folks. We are always underneath someone. Everyone wants to advance White people's objectives and goals. That's White supremacy. That's why they destroyed the research project. I don't know all the details of what happened, but I believe that the project never moved forward because no one wants to work *for* Decoteau. No one wants the school system to work *for* Black people, which is what it needs to do and where research needs to direct people to go.

We can never underestimate the importance of who is in charge. I give it to the research team staff because they asked us to deal with a lot of tough questions about things in our lives that affect us. I tried to answer them to the best of my ability. It was hard. They pushed us. I don't know that it would have worked if it was White folks asking us to deal with those questions. I don't even think White folks would view us in a way that allowed them to believe we could contribute as we did. We were all drop-outs and ex-offenders. For the day-to-day aspects of the project, especially when we started to discuss the dynamics of why people drop out, it was very good that we had facilitators who were like us. I felt that they could feel what we felt because they were closer to us and probably have family members or know people like us. I didn't think Dr. Paul could ever fully understand. I don't think that White folks could ever fully understand or facilitate a process like that. The research project is a reminder that for us to be our best we need Black professionals working with us.

We have so many intelligent Black minds that could help. So many Black professionals say they are for Black enterprise and Black power, but today Black enterprise and Black power are nothing. Too many Black people have no sense of where we come from or have allegiance to people like me. We have to say *this* is where we come from and these are *my people.* Until you know where you are from, you have nowhere to go. I'm a staunch believer of that. In our communities, we believe that our culture is criminal. We are taught to believe that we are poverty stricken, our history starts with us being slaves, and so on. That's not our culture. Our culture is God-given. We are intended to use our minds and be of high dignity. Once we have the type of dignity we are supposed to have, then we can respect others.

We, as a people, will never be anything unless we stand together and clearly say the way we are treated and conditions that are allowed to persist in our communities are wrong. It's not about civil rights. It's about human rights. We need human rights before civil rights. Civil rights are too easy to amend. We were not written into the constitution right from the door. We were written in as amendments. What happens if White folks say: "You know what, fuck that 13th, 14th, and 15th amendment. Who cares about the Voting Rights Act? We tired of y'all. Y'all always on our backs. All y'all do is rob and murder." We were not founders of this society and therefore it is not designed to operate smoothly for us. We were property and cast as unable to be of worth for ourselves. We need to deal with that. Those thoughts are still in people's beliefs today. That's why they can still call us nigger. It's all the same to me.

They turned their backs on integration. They kick us out of their schools. And they say "everybody get their own." Where are we going to go? What are we going to do? Where are we going to eat? It's deep. We don't own farms—not on a scale to feed ourselves. We do not have enough businesses. How much money do we have, as a people? Can we ever really control our own destinies, do our own research projects, give out our own surveys and collect our own statistics, and use that for our own benefit?

USING THE PROJECT FOR MY OWN BENEFIT: BUILDING BRIDGES4CHANGE

The ex-offender population—I don't want to sound harsh saying this—in general, are uneducated. During the dropout study, I made an announcement and tried to recruit everyone I know—everybody. But I didn't get any responses—none. But if I put a naked woman's ass on Facebook, everybody is going to give me a "like." It goes back to the lack of formal education and training that we explored in the research project. Half the ex-offenders don't know how to use computers. Half of them don't know how to be citizens because we never learned it. We acted the way that we were acted toward. We react to things that happened or are happening to us. In my case, when I was younger, those things were having no food at home, a mother on drugs, and so on. These experiences and conditions contribute to the recidivism and the high crime rate, and mold us to behave in certain ways.

One of the things I did to keep myself motivated was to start volunteering with elected officials. I worked on their campaigns and tried to get them reelected. Then it happened again and again, what I call "the ex-offender dilemma": the help of an ex-offender is needed only until there is a payoff. I was needed only for that particular time when they were running for office. When the election season was over, they literally said: "Thank you for your help. We'll see you later." That repeated experience of being used for someone else's benefit is what made me want to start my own organization called Bridges4Change.

Bridges4Change assists ex-offenders in their transition back to society and those who are struggling with substance abuse problems and cannot seem to get on the right track. I thought that it was important to have an organization founded and led by someone like myself, because as mentioned before, as a person who has experienced dropping out of school, incarceration, addiction, and so on, I have a unique perspective

to offer. I spent a whole year trying to figure out how to start the program. I didn't know how to do anything. I didn't even know the process for doing taxes, or even that there was a process. I had never done my taxes. I started to realize that what I didn't know and needed to know, others didn't know and needed to know. So I started pushing my own program.

I used a lot of what I learned during the research project as motivation to start the program. When I read the study-related documents after it came out, I was so astounded by it and so in awe that I sent it to many of my friends. I've used the articles and experience to drive conversations in my activist work and with my organization Bridges4Change. So I have to say that my exposure to research was important. My involvement was the catalyst to starting to think like a researcher. Now, I have a habit of researching. I record stuff by phone, audio-recorder, and pen and pad to document the conditions of the neighborhood. How many stores are there? Are the people friendly as they come and go? I never used to ask those sorts of questions as a way of understanding the conditions in our community. The organization I founded is concerned with the conditions of the community. There is a bigger picture and research can play a role in painting that picture and helping to advance change. People in our communities can learn to do this work.

VISIONING A NEW REALITY

Decoteau and I kept in touch. Decoteau and I would meet up whenever he came back to visit Philly and we would talk through the ideas I was developing. We talk over the phone and communicate over email. I did and still do have a lot of admiration for Decoteau. It is good to have a person like Decoteau to share my opinions and ideas with because he can circulate those ideas to channels that might make a difference. The connection itself is a valuable resource. On a personal level, I appreciate Decoteau because he's continued to keep in touch with me. He could have just written me off and kept on with his professional career. But whenever I needed to talk, he would be there for me and offer words of encouragement. That encouragement helped me keep up the fight that goes on in my head to not turn back to where I came from.

I am a good person. But at this stage in my life I am unable to show it. I have a lot of anger and so it's difficult. I never want a child from an impoverished situation to not believe they can't overcome it. I used to

be that way. At the time I'm writing this chapter for a research book, I am unemployed. I can't buy my children Christmas presents. How can I be happy? It's difficult. But I have a vision for myself. Going back to when we were doing the study in 2009, I was systematically unemployed and it continues today. But I'm using what I learned. I'm more aware of resources, even if it is difficult for me to access them. I'm pushing to achieve my dream of building an organization that can help ex-offenders from all over the country, but especially here in Philadelphia. I'm still working on it every day. What matters to me is to be able to have a livable life, which means not having to worry about a meal, a coat, or education for my kids. The challenge is to remove, in some way, the people in our neighborhoods who are not adding anything of value to it while exploiting us. It's similar to the way that some people involved in the research project weren't adding any value to it. But they were benefitting.

I have a vision for our communities. I want to establish a cooperative supermarket in the community that is Black owned and that other communities would want to come to for their food needs. A friend of mine was instrumental in bringing one of the first nonprofit supermarkets to Chester (an urban fringe city south of Philadelphia). When I learned about it, I became interested in that model. That way, we can accept donations to offset the cost of the shopping. The problem is the stores close because the purchasing power (or more specifically, the high profits) is not there. Other organizations such the Center for Returning Citizens provide entrepreneurship opportunities and support start-up businesses. These are good programs.

My goal is to use Bridges4Change to expand these sorts of opportunities to make them more commonplace in our communities. More importantly, Bridges4Change can connect people like me, with the real-life experiences, to the powerbrokers in a similar way the research project intended to connect us to bigwigs that have resources and decision-making power. We are going with youth to talk with a councilman about opening an arts and performance center—music, video, interviewing celebrities, and so on for a youth-led television station. We want to start a science and math after-school program using an online academy. We continue to need support from researchers to accomplish what we need to. We need to understand the effects of our approaches and to document needs to seek funding for our efforts. We need the connections that research can bring. Researchers are resources and they can teach us how to move forward in an outstanding manner.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Overall, I think that looking back over the project, my life, and all that is happening today, I feel change is needed. I never made a change in my life until nine years ago. I wanted to be more of the person who I was born to be, rather than the person I let circumstances and situations shape into being. My past life was filled with circumstances that led me to crime, drugs, and incarceration. In jail, I went through the Camp Hill Riots. Thinking back on these things and how I tried to reshape my life, I was always unable to get on my feet. In 2006, I was trying to figure out a way to help folks who have been in trouble like me. I personally know how to do things other than dishwashing. I can go into a boardroom and strategize. I know how to think. In fact, I did a lot of strategizing and thinking when I was in the streets. And now I want to use my thinking to do better by my community. But my status and the ways people treat ex-offenders make it very difficult.

My friend went to a restaurant recently. When he received the check, someone had written "drug dealer" on it. He was devastated. That one incident says a lot. And it has an impact. The pen is mightier than anything we have. They write down our pasts to destroy us. Researchers ask questions and write reports that can destroy our futures. So folks who understand the inside perspective have to conduct our own research with support from, and in collaboration with, people who have the power to circulate these ideas. We need them to follow, not lead. More than ever, I am now committed to myself. I've gone through hell with a lot of so-called service agencies that were supposed to help me. Life is hard based on the things that I've done. I'm looking for the blessings now. I've learned from my experience that patience is key and that things will change.

The research project helped me think about creating Bridges4Change. It also made me understand that I need others to help me bring those visions to fruition. Bridges4Change is based on the idea that if we get together as a people, regardless of our positions in life, we'll be fine. People might consider me lower class. People might consider Decoteau higher class. But think about the fact that we sit together and talk and work together. These are the results of unselfish behavior. These behaviors—communicating across our differences—always take human beings to the next level. I'm talking about a new structure for thinking about how we work together. Once we learn to be in solidarity as a people we're going to be fine. This is not Gerald or Decoteau, this is Yahweh. He made us as a people to stand up to do what we need to do. You get rewarded for things that you do

right. And in the end, commitment, love, and responsibility are key. Those three things are probably the most important result of any work that we do together as a people.

NOTES

1. Decoteau J. Irby and Lynnette Mawhinney, "Strategy Development for Urban Dropout Prevention: Partnering with Formerly Incarcerated Adult Noncompleters, Preventing School Failure," *Alternative Education for Children and Youth* 58, no. 2 (2013); Decoteau J. Irby, Lynnette Mawhinney, and Kristopher Thomas, "Re-examining Participatory Research in Dropout Prevention Planning in Urban Communities," *Educational Action Research* 21, no. 2 (2014).
2. Irby et al., "Re-examining Participatory Research."

6. Be Catty and Piss on Your Work: A Cautionary Tale of Researching while Black ❧

Lynnette Mawhinney

INTRODUCTION

I start off this story feeling fortunate to have found a colleague with whom I share similar views related to the importance of conducting research in partnership with communities in order to bring about meaningful change. I found this like-minded colleague, Decoteau, when we were both masters students at the young ages of 22 and 23 years. A couple of years later with masters degrees behind us, Decoteau and I worked together spearheading a nonprofit program for high school students in North Philadelphia. The program's purpose was to provide rigorous academic enrichment and support to low-income, primarily Black and Puerto Rican students as they worked to be the first in their families to attend a four-year college.

Decoteau directed the program and worked directly with the youth. I worked with the parents and served as a liaison to the schools. It was during this time that we recognized our similarities in how we worked with the community. We were both PhD students at the time. We were engaged in theorizing what it means to be scholar-activists while we were also practitioners. We both believed that students and parents have an important voice that needs to be listened to, in serving the communities we lived in, and in providing programming to empower students—especially students who looked like us.

Years later, after we both graduated from our PhD programs, Decoteau was establishing a business called Action, Advocacy, Knowledge and Training Concepts that focused on engaging Black folks in learning and conducting research and evaluation to improve educational opportunities in communities of color. I was working at a Historically Black University as a faculty member in their Teacher Education department. Decoteau and I would meet about once a week for writing sessions in order to provide some accountability for getting our research done. One day, Decoteau walked into our writing session and said: "I've been approached by some folks at a university who asked me to lead a project" (as described in chapter 4 of this book). At that meeting he asked me to join his effort as someone he could trust to help him navigate the politics of the project. In hindsight, the fact that Decoteau wanted to work with me, someone he felt a sense of deep trust for, was telling.

In this chapter, I chronicle our experiences of how we, as relatively disempowered Black researchers, exercised what power we had, on behalf of our participants and ourselves, to challenge one of our White collaborator's attempt to control us and the project. I loosely frame this reflection chapter as a cautionary tale. In a traditional cautionary tale, a taboo or prohibition is stated—some personality trait, act, location, or thing is said to be dangerous or undesirable. Following the issuance of a prohibition, the main characters in the story disregard the prohibition. The story then unfolds with the defiant characters, who had warnings, meeting an unpleasant fate owing to their disregard of the stated prohibition, sometimes resulting in a death or a near-death experience.[1]

I use this chapter to caution Black researchers about the perils of engaging in research when early red flags or intuition suggests that the project might not be right. My purpose is not to suggest not engaging but rather to anticipate the perils and possibilities of doing so. While the following story does not end in the death or near-death experience of a person, it does end in the death of our project. This is my story of the project's demise and my experiences and reflections as a partner in the research process.

OUR IDENTITIES AND OUR VOICES

Decoteau spearheaded this project, and I was a lead researcher. Decoteau and I both identify as Black. We also regarded ourselves as professional researchers. Decoteau considered himself an independent community-based researcher and did not have the stability that a workplace offers.

I was a faculty member at a university. Part of the reason that Decoteau invited me to join was because he was skeptical about the potential for his own exploitation and that of the potential participants. We were, after all, two young Black scholars unsure of how we might be treated or what the folks who invited us to lead the project intended for themselves and for us. Complicating the decision to participate was the fact that we were invited to do so by two White people who wanted to engage in a research project with a relatively vulnerable group of people—adult non-completers, formerly incarcerated, mostly low-income, many unemployed, several low literate, and all Black.

We were both aware of why we were even asked to be on the project. We could better connect with Black folks. The project revolved around marginalized populations and our place and race within the world would allow a connection to the participants that Paul and Nora could not offer. Although we were being utilized for our racial identity and melanin, we were willing to participate because we inherently believed that this research would bring real progress to the dropout issue in the schools and communities in which we lived. Plus, we believed in ourselves. We were smart. We were ambitious. We could carry out the work with integrity. As it turns out, we were also naïve.

Within a year's time, we found ourselves at serious odds with one of our project collaborators. From the beginning, even in our initial conversation about whether or not to take on the project, we anticipated that the project might lend itself to some conflict and politics. What we did not anticipate was that our participatory approach would create such a strong sense of solidarity with our participants. We also did not imagine that we would find ourselves working to tactically shut down the project in order to diminish the exploitative treatment of the participants and ourselves.

Our participatory action research project revolved around the importance of voice. The point was to value all that the adult non-completers had to offer the educational realm in order to support current students at risk of dropping out. Yet, in this chapter, we[2] use this writing as a platform to share our voices. Throughout, I center my own experience, but there are elements where Decoteau's story also interconnects. Through conversations and reflective practices (e.g., looking back at emails, documents from the project, and so on), Decoteau and I have discussed our perspectives from this project or reminded the other of occurrences we may have forgotten in a moment. I will divulge our story, with Decoteau's permission, as one collective voice around my personal experiences and perspective. For me, my story begins at the moment of solidarity with the participants.

ESTABLISHING THE ROLE OF PROTECTORS

After I stepped away from giving Belinda a hug and saying good-bye, I rushed to my car. In my rush, I slipped on black ice in front of the house's stairs, but I caught myself. I was determined to get into the car. I could not get there fast enough. By the time I neared my car, I was almost at a full sprint. I ran up the block to my car parked on the street outside an abandoned home. I got in the car, slammed the door, and gripped the steering wheel. My knuckles turned white. I started to sob uncontrollably. I kept thinking: "This could have been me."

I knew the life histories of the participants were going to be hard. Research shows time and again how incarcerated females have histories of extreme physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Yet nothing could prepare me for the horrors that some of our women participants shared with me. These beautiful, kind, courageous, and strong Black women I worked with had experiences that I do not think I could have survived. There was Shantel, who survived continual sexual assault by her brother. Katie relayed the story of how her mother repeatedly brought men into the home for money and drugs, many of whom took advantage of her ten-year-old body and mind. The stories were raw and gut wrenching. I was often struck by the women's honesty. I was humbled that they shared such personal parts of themselves with me.

The day I ran to my car, I was running away from me. I interviewed Belinda, and listening to her story, it was my story. Belinda, like myself, loved school, although it was always a struggle to learn, and it took more effort to study compared to her peers. Belinda, like myself, had a great teacher who was a mentor to help her through the academic struggles that arose in school. And Belinda and I grew up in towns near each other. As Belinda was talking, I felt like she was telling my story, and I had similar experiences and could relate to her in so many ways. Unlike many other participants, Belinda did not have a horrible story of abuse. The one thing that made her path different from mine was a choice to find an escape with drugs. Belinda and I both struggle(d) with issues of confidence and self-love due to abandonment issues—as both of us were abandoned by our fathers at a young age. Yet, where I tried to find myself by escaping through athletics, Belinda escaped by numbing the pain. That day, I was interviewing myself if I chose to take the different path of drug use.

It was in this moment of seeing myself in Belinda that the moment of solidarity manifested for me. As a researcher, I often take great pains to protect

my participants. My role was to honor and respect the participants' words in order to, as we all had a collective goal, help current at-risk students. But this—this was different. The participants' stories were so honest and raw that I felt the need to protect and guard them (the stories and the participants) at all costs. I shared this concern with Decoteau. We recognized they did agree to tell their stories. And their telling was for a reason. But we were concerned about the stories getting into the hands of people who were so distant from the women's experiences that they would be told without integrity. There were some interview transcripts we predetermined we would not share with our collaborators. Were we being over-protective? Where was this sense of concern coming from? After all, the stories made for "good research."

BEING BLACK IS NOT ALWAYS THE PERFECT FIT

Although the time we spent getting to know participants one-on-one and despite my feeling of connectedness as solidarity described above, I quickly discovered that just because the participants were all Black, it did not mean that I was the perfect fit to be a researcher for the project. There was so much that we did not know about how the individual identities contradicted the group's identity. Of course, we know people were their own selves. But our enthusiastic belief in racial identity as an important glue for the project caused us to ignore the potential for within-group fractures and fissures. It blinded us to what happened when we started to bring the members of the alumni group together in a collective decision-making process.

It was the first full-day focus group working session. I was excited for a number of reasons. First, I was eager to see those participants I interviewed previously from the life histories stage of the project. I wanted to give hugs and catch up. Second, this was the day that we were finally going to start "making miracles" by co-generating knowledge that would lead to action plans for supporting the current students at risk of dropping out. We were prepared to co-generate knowledge. We used the best of the action research facilitation literature and used our own experiences to formulate our process. The plans and support would come from marginalized adults in their communities. Lunch was preordered. Breaks were planned. It was all good. The session was going to be supertight—or so we thought. The following is the exact wording of our protocol that we read aloud at the beginning of the session:

> The Focus Group Session One focuses on deepening the understanding of school dropout amongst researchers and participants. The sessions will begin

with a presentation of key findings from the secondary data collected from a review of the literature. Additionally, anecdotes and key themes will be lifted from individual interviews and presented to the group. Participants will be asked to analyze and develop a "framework" for understanding the school drop-out issue that considers their unique perspectives in the context of the existing body of work on the school drop-out issue.

At this point, participants have explored and thought deeply about their own personal stories and experiences that led to leaving school before graduation. The focus group is designed to shift the conversation from individual experiences to a larger discussion of the drop-out phenomenon. The session will focus on understanding and analyzing individual risk factors, in-school factors (curriculum, teachers, discipline, etc.), and out-of school factors (family, community, etc.) that contribute to or mitigate the dropout problem from their own perspectives. Participants will be asked to come to the next focus group prepared to engage in problem solving activities.

In conducting the focus group, it is important that we meet two sets of inter-related objectives. Teaching objectives focus on knowledge the researchers need to impart to you so that they have a solid foundation for moving into the subsequent focus groups, action planning, and implementation. Research objectives are designed to answer the research questions of the study—what insights do participants offer that help us achieve a stronger or more nuanced understanding of why students leave school before graduation? The workshop objectives are as follows:

Teaching objectives:

1. Participants will understand national trends in school drop-out (race, class, etc.)
2. Participants will understand the major domains that are studied to understand the drop-out issue
3. Participants will understand most frequently used measures to combat dropping out

Research objectives:

1. Researchers will understand *how* out-of-school factors contribute to the drop-out problem
2. Researchers will understand *how* in-school factors contribute to the drop-out problem
3. Researchers will understand *how* individual level factors contribute to the drop-out problem
4. Researchers will understand what factors the participants feel are the most important contributing factors to address

(Protocol for focus group 1—Understanding as submitted for Institutional Review Board approval).

Fourteen participants attended the session, including Alfonzo, one of the group leaders at Transitional Correction Centers (TCC), who was required to provide transportation to alumni meetings and related events. Aaron (another researcher on the project), Decoteau, and I shared facilitation duties. We presented our session agenda and objectives as presented above. Aaron started the morning with a presentation on framing the dropout issue in the United States, with an emphasis on the research literature and studies about "what we know" about the dropout crisis. We sat in attention. Aaron posted some statistics on a PowerPoint about the dropout issue. We read everything aloud to accommodate low-literate partners. We were moving. Our research partners took notes. They thought. They spoke back to the content of the videos and assertions experts made. The dialogue we hoped for was emerging. Everyone was excited.

I was up next. I led an activity that was designed to further engage the participants in discussion and dialogue but that used their personal experiences and opinions as a starting point—this was our attempt to represent all voices. I started conversing with participants about responding to "what rings true" from the morning's "review of research." While I was talking, Aaron placed predesigned white poster boards around the room. The posters were labeled "Out-of-School," "In-school," and "Individual and/or Personal." Decoteau and Aaron handed out color coded slips of paper (participants were given colored paper that matched their name tag colors, which allowed us to identify who placed what response items on the poster board). I asked participants to place on the white poster boards their responses (example of words/phrases: this is a great concern, this is not a great concern, and so on) to indicate the areas that they felt were the most important to understanding the dropout issue in their lives and in the lives of urban students. We also asked the group to modify current and/or create additional domains. They created one called "Family and Home Life."

I started the discussion with the poster "Family and Home Life," which contained participants' ideas about contextual factors in the home that might contribute to a student being at risk of dropping out. During the conversation, Aaron wrote out responses on sheets of paper and placed the dimensions that participants identified under the domains. Based on their responses, I started to engage the group in a discussion about why they made the choices they did. As a facilitator, I stressed that we were exploring and that there was no need to try to reach a consensus about importance in this stage. Now the knowledge co-generation was really

happening! The topic turned to the subject of child abuse. One of the participants, Jermaine (who I interviewed previously), became upset at a comment by another participant, Sylvester, who expressed that we cannot know if some students deserved what they got because some kids are "bad."

I honestly do not even remember the specifics of how things escalated in the next few moments. Everything just moved really fast. Several participants were talking loudly back and forth at each other. Several participants were challenging Sylvester's thinking and daring that he made such a question a part of the process. As the conversation calmed, our partners seemed hesitant to speak. I reminded folks that this was an opportunity to share and judgment or consensus was not a part of the process. Eventually the conversation picked up again. Without saying a word, Jermaine got up from his chair. Jermaine took out his wallet. He removed an old picture of himself as a child from it. He walked to where Sylvester was seated and slammed the picture onto the table directly in front of Sylvester: "Does he look like he wanted something like THAT [abuse] in his life!?" And I knew the place where Jermaine was coming from with this comment, as in tears during our private interview, he talked extensively of the abuse his mother put him through. She would hit him over the head with an iron or leave him home alone for days on end to fend for himself. Sylvester rose from his seat. The two men faced each other, fists clinched. Alumni members pleaded for them to calm down. This all happened in a matter of about 30 seconds. And me?

All of my difference to the group came to the fore. I was stuck. I did not know what to do. I was stuck in my tracks. When the yelling started, I found myself joining in by screaming: "Y'all need to calm down." I was not helping the situation at all. At the onset, no one realized what Jermaine's intentions were or what he planned to do when he got up from his seat. At least, we facilitators did not. Decoteau later confessed to me that he thought Jermaine was getting up to leave the room to cool off from the heated, but important, discussion. Alfonzo, whom members of the alumni group have a great deal of respect for, stepped in and calmed the situation. We took a break before reconvening. It was intense for everyone. Aaron and Alfonzo took Jermaine and Sylvester into a different room to mediate and process through the experience with them. At our end, we did the same with the remaining participants. Jermaine and Sylvester returned to the session and apologized for the disruption. But by that time, everyone, including me, was understandably turned off for the session.

WHO AM I?

I was thankful that the situation did not escalate into physical violence. But it was close. My conflict resolution training did not prepare me for the experience. One participant told Decoteau that what happened was "typical jail culture," which he explained as the inability to accept critique and disagreement because it was a sign of weakness. He told Decoteau that "there are a lot of dynamics y'all just don't understand." After that, we were open to learning. We had to be.

I remember being utterly embarrassed for myself and feeling like it was my fault that I could not control the situation. I kept thinking to myself, in the moment, that I was not the right person for facilitating the focus group. Honestly, who really knows who would be best for the research, but for me, these thoughts came as my identity was challenged in this moment during the focus group—the identity of Blackness. I am a biracial woman (half Black/half White) who mainly identifies as a Black woman in this world. I grew up with a White family in a White community, so living in a predominantly Black city for 15 years, I am often told how "White" I am considered in this Black community. For some reason, this moment felt like a challenge, once again, to my identity. When my identity is challenged, it is because I am seen as an outsider. In this moment, I felt like an outsider in not understanding the underlying issues to this situation. Thus, I connected my "outsiderness" to racial identity.

The reality is that this thought of "not being right for the research" is my own baggage in terms of racial identity. No one brought up or challenged my racial identity as a Black woman in the moment. Our blind spots were indeed more complex than racial identities. We included participants from the TCC groups in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. In mixing the groups in the name of "collaboration and inclusivity," we were also mixing people with past prison and jail-related affiliations. Regional differences also emerged from place-based identities. We could not "see," among our Black participants, tensions about New Jersey people thinking that the Pennsylvania people were weaker.

There were differences in rank about power within the group related to drug addiction. Drug dealers were ranked higher than users. All of these distinctions flew in the face of Black solidarity that we, as researchers, imagined was the strength of the project. Within the group, differences more than similarities shaped whose voices mattered. But the idea that it was a racial issue, that I was somehow less Black, was shaped more by my own racialization than on any evidence on the part of the alumni members.

The alumni members could just have easily connected my outsider status to lack of cultural understanding for "inside" or prison culture. I was still Black. We were still Black. Looking back, we do not have to question that. But in the moment when I lacked other resources to ensure the project's success, I attributed my lack of cultural resources to my racial identity.

I was also embarrassed for two other reasons. First, I yelled, which is completely against my personality. I am one to usually talk through a situation and defuse it, but by yelling, I showed my desperation to stop the situation by throwing out all my practiced techniques on conflict resolution and mediating issues. Second, yelling made me feel incompetent, like I was not the seasoned teacher I was at that point, but an inexperienced teacher who did not know how to handle a learning environment. The conglomeration of the trifecta of my "outsiderness," stepping outside my personality, and lack of "management" all came to an emotional head for me. It was from this moment I had to step back and really reflect on my fit with the project.

Decoteau and I were ignorant to the underlying and complex identities of the group members that created difference and insider-outsider status within the alumni group itself. Although our racial identity may have connected us to our participants in various ways, there are many layers we did not understand as outsiders. It was in this process that we realized that just because we are Black does not mean we were a perfect fit for this research situation. We had much to learn. But in other instances, we had much to give, and in the instances and areas where we could give, our Blackness and racial identities made us more perfect for the work than not, especially when it came to dealing with the way our White research collaborators made sense of the focus group fallout and the unfolding of the overall project.

BACK TO BLACK

We were very concerned about how the participants would be viewed in light of the focus group incident. But our concern about the specific incident was compounded by a larger concern. First, our collaborator Nora was disengaged from the project. Throughout the project, Nora would not respond to any of Decoteau's emails concerning the project and took a very hands-off approach. We were left to troubleshoot and address substantial problems on our own. But as the project picked up and stakeholders became aware of the work, she became interested. Whenever she

corresponded, it related to funding issues and raising money to advance the research. Although not active in the research, Nora used the grant funds to finance a trip to Jamaica for her husband, daughter, and herself. Decoteau was left to explain the line items at research meetings. For our community partners, it raised questions but we did not have any voice. Nora was listed as the principal investigator (PI) of the project. But the glaring red flag that followed was when Nora finally became communicative and reached out to Decoteau for the transcription data from the life histories and focus groups.

One day, as I walked into Decoteau's office, he was intently looking at his computer with a very disturbed expression on his face. He turned to me and immediately said: "Guess what, Nora wants all the data!" My jaw dropped and I immediately exclaimed: "She can't do that!" Decoteau really took an active role to protect me from some of the crazy experiences that were going on with Nora, but this was the first time I heard how deep the crazy went. We both knew, although it was not directly said, that Nora would take all this data and use it to publish papers for her own benefit. She already stood to benefit financially. We were both upset. After all of our work and efforts to implement the project with integrity, Nora was demanding involvement. Participants openly shared their stories. They worked collaboratively with us to make a change in the educational system. She did not know one person's name. It did not feel right to us.

We were determined that Nora was not going to exploit the participants' and our efforts. What could we do? We were *just the Black researchers.* She was the woman with the power. She was the PI. She was White. Many stakeholders saw her as the project leader. Decoteau and I were the hired help. But we stood in solidarity with the participants, and we both knew that we could not let her exploit the participants' voices or ours. As all this went unsaid, Decoteau immediately replied: "But I got a plan." I am not sure how he came about formulating this plan, but it was clear he was thinking about this for a while. It was my first time learning of the behind-the-scenes politics.

We were powerless to what Nora asked, as she held the purse strings, but we had power with our relationship with the participants and knowledge of the day-to-day management of the research project. Standing in solidarity with the participants, Decoteau shared the transcripts, but he purposefully gave Nora the original transcripts that were unclean (except for changed names), unedited, and honestly would not make sense without the audio files—which she did not request and honestly would not put the work and time in to listen and fix the transcripts. It was a move that set

into motion a plan to sabotage the research project. We ignored the origi-
nal red flags, but we decided to take action in a very calculated way to end
the project, protect the participants, and save face for ourselves early in our
careers as scholars.

GEARING UP FOR THE GOLDEN SHOWER

As the research was starting to wrap up and Decoteau was working on the
final reports for the funders, Nora started becoming more active in trying
to benefit from the participants' stories. This predicament started to bring
up important questions that we really needed to think through. How do
we dismantle this "system" without destroying our reputations as research-
ers, and ultimately ourselves? As Black researchers, is it okay to ultimately
not give the institution what it wants? In short, are we willing to make
White people mad at us? Are we willing to burn bridges? Are we willing to
be insubordinate? Should we act up and show out? We decided the answer
was "of course" we should. The question was "how badly?"

It was at this point that we really started to devise strategic plans in
order to continue in the solidarity of our participants—and all of our tac-
tics had an end result, which would be the end of the project. We knew
that shutting down the project would mean that only a very minimal
amount of the work we did with the participants would be shared with the
world, and we would not move our planning to implementation. All of our
plans were larger in trying to make a bigger impact on the K-12 schooling
system, and by shutting down the project, it would bring much of that to a
halt. On the other hand, we saw the shutdown as the only way to guarantee
the protection of the participants—and that was our first, and ultimate,
responsibility. We also reasoned that if we were treated poorly by Nora,
certainly she would not treat our partners with dignity.

Tactic 1: Speaking Out

We initially felt tremendous guilt about purposefully sabotaging the proj-
ect. We also felt we were sabotaging ourselves. By the time we started meet-
ing with community stakeholders, people associated us with the project.
Would people attribute the lack of implementation to our inability to lead?
Funders were also interested in the project pilot and scaling it to additional
community members. We learned that Nora was having meetings and
amplifying her role in the work. We saw this as her attempting to capital-
ize on the voices of the participants. Interestingly, no one on the research

team, including Decoteau, Lynnette, or Paul, were aware that Nora was having meetings to explore expanding the project. We learned late that this is why she made a request for data.

Through a series of emails and one particular chance conversation with a research community member, Decoteau learned about conversations and planned meetings to which he was not privy. In fact, a person from the organization who thought Decoteau was aware of the email exchanges and conversations asked him if he was going to be at the upcoming meeting to discuss a grant proposal for the project. He replied: "I'm not sure. I wasn't invited." The person whom he talked with worked for an organization that conducts research in order to bridge the gap between educational policy and schools and communities.

These experiences confirmed our initial fears. As we started to feel more that what we were doing was right—shutting down the project to avoid the participants' exploitation and our own—we become more vocal about our participation and our indispensability in the process. Up until this point, Decoteau and I were quietly and softly manipulating the situation to protect the participants. We were not in full shutdown mode. Additionally, we were afraid. We did not want to actively voice our concern, as we felt vulnerable in our lack of power in the hierarchy. But an email exchange marked an important turn of events that presented a window of opportunity where we decided to finally "act out." It started with a brief email exchange between Nora and Decoteau. Nora's initial email (below) was in response to a monthly research update email that Decoteau sent to everyone involved in the project. Decoteau's response follows:

Great to hear from you Decoteau and am looking forward to reading your reports, which will be essential to our continuing this work with [a research organization who was interested in further funding the project scale up and implementation].

All the best,

[Nora] (1/12/2011)

We'll have to discuss further. I've personally not been in conversation with the organization's leadership or staff, have no sense of their level of commitment. Honestly am not sure that I will continue with the project should they become involved. Since I have been the leader in the effort in almost all regards, I'd need to think more about what your proposal means for me and the others who have been committed to seeing the project through. Let's arrange a time to chat sometime in the coming weeks. Perhaps we should also involve [Paul], Lynnette...and others who have a better understanding of the project since

they have been more involved in making it all happen. Let me know your thoughts.

Trusting you're well,

Decoteau (1/12/2011)

Nora did not respond to Decoteau. Instead, she contacted me. This was the first time it was voiced that the project would not move forward, and by contacting me, I believe Nora was hopeful that maybe I would do the "heavy lifting" of continuing the project. Nora, who was my masters adviser, had not been in communication with me for six years. This was the first time I heard from her:

Hi Lynnette [sic],

Hope all's well with you and you've had a good New Year and break, and are ready to start of the next term. I've been in touch with Decoteau and [Paul] about the (pleasant) fact that I was told that there's some $2500 left in the grant budget, which can be spent to complete the work (or perhaps get help in writing a follow-up grant?). How could it best be helpful to you to get this work done and move on to the next phase? I would be thrilled if this work were to continue with Decoteau and yourself, if interested, as PIs on any subsequent project.

Take good care,

[Nora] (1/18/2011)

My reply to Nora was as follows:

[Nora],

A question of this nature should be directly to Decoteau Irby.

Regards,

Lynnette :) (1/18/2011)

My response, which was cc'd to other members of the research team as well as to Decoteau was not viewed favorably by our collaborators. By this time, Paul, with whom I had developed a pleasant relationship (mainly through email), was particularly not pleased with my response. Since Decoteau had brought me into the project as a collaborator, Paul contacted Decoteau to express his concern about my tone and response. But we viewed the exchange as a tactic to shift the locus of power to ourselves. Without our knowledge and relationships, and our relative insider

statuses (compared to our colleagues), the project could not possibly move forward.

Tactic 2: Missing Meetings

Nora called us to a meeting with an organization to potentially have the project continue forward. The meeting was with two executives from an outside nonprofit research group, two big-name researchers from well-established universities, Paul, Nora, Decoteau, and me. Decoteau and I were the two people at the meeting who could provide details about the project and the collective work done with the participants. Decoteau and I figured, although it was not explicitly stated, that this meeting would provide some more funding to extend the project.

We knew that without either one of us present, Nora would not be able to discuss the project, as she was not active in any of its planning and execution. Decoteau had already planned on not attending, and I ended up cancelling my attendance from the meeting two hours before it started. This decision happened after Decoteau and I had a conversation on the phone and strategically made this plan. We knew that if I called out late, it would leave Nora to have to fend for herself in this meeting and outsiders would see that she could not speak to the project. Paul was a very generous person, and we felt bad to have him involved. But we did not share our intent or reason with him. Decoteau had shared his concerns with Paul on several occasions, but Paul continued to give Nora a benefit of the doubt in regard to her covert actions. In most cases, I would have regarded my calling out right before the meeting as rude and unprofessional. But in this instance, I considered it as a necessary step I was willing to make in order to shut down the project. It was a tactic to set up a situation where we could start to pull out of the project, as without us (and Decoteau in particular), nothing would move forward.

Tactic 3: Project Shutdown

At this point, the message was loud and clear to all parties that this project was not going to go any further. Decoteau and I had a lunch meeting with Paul, at which time we finally expressed that we were not looking to move the project forward at either of our institutions (by this time, Decoteau had announced he was moving to Milwaukee where he had accepted a university job as an assistant professor). Paul respected our wishes and said that he understood. By this time, his eyes were opened to Nora's approach,

although he withheld judgment about why she behaved as she did. As I write the chapter, Decoteau or I have never heard from or spoke with Nora again. Decoteau completed the reports and that was the end to this study—the "Project Shutdown" ended up being successful. It was successful in the fact that we did what was needed to continue to stand in solidarity with our participants.

As we suspected, only a small portion of the research was shared with the world. We presented with a participant (not included in this book) at a conference and published three articles on the work. We know that adding research to the literature has some impact, but the larger impact on schools was never achieved because of what we did. I know that we may have disappointed some of the participants that the project did not move forward as we (Decoteau, Lynnette, and the participants) expected. But I feel that Decoteau and I made the right decision to minimize the participants' exploitation. Nora did not get another grant, and she was unable to move the project forward. Yes, she did get a paid vacation to Jamaica. And that is much more than what the participants who were intimately involved with the project received. For us, that is unjust.

LESSONS LEARNED: RESEARCHING WHILE BEING BLACK (RWBB)

In this experience, I was definitely "catty." I called out of meetings in an unprofessional manner and wrote curt emails to a colleague. I worked with Decoteau to strategically set up a plan to "piss" on our work in order to protect our participants and ourselves. Yet, by not informing the participants about what was going on, what we were doing, and why we shut down the research project, we also made them voiceless in the process. This was participatory research, but Decoteau and I made this decision in a very hierarchical manner and negated the "partnership" part of the research altogether even as it ended.

Years later as I write this chapter, I realized how keeping our partners out of the process of shutting down the project and even making a decision to do so without their input is problematic and patronizing. As we thought we were protecting the participants, we just perpetuated the cycle of failed research tactics because we did not tell them what was going on. Looking back now, if given the opportunity to go back in time, I would collectively discuss with the participants what would be the best tactic to handle the research project and the red flags that were occurring.

As I reflected by writing this chapter, I am shocked at our "chutzpah" to empower ourselves in order to disempower Nora. I find that I need that same courage now with publishing this piece, as there are two dueling thoughts: (1) it is about darn time we kept it real in research and tell it like it is and (2) how will this make me look as a Black researcher? It is the second point that makes me really nervous. Through my experiences in this project (and other life experiences), I am certainly aware of my marginalization and place within the academy as a Black woman. Also, this research project demonstrated our participants' marginalization and the quickness of their exploitation that could have happened without our strategic responses. Yet discussing my "unprofessional" strategies in this chapter could further marginalize me in the academy. In essence, by airing out my dirty laundry, I could be making problems for myself. The same is true for my colleague and friend Decoteau.

On the other hand, my hope goes toward my first thought that maybe this chapter, and my (our) experiences, will help others to be more open and present their authentic experiences as Black researchers. In retrospect, this experience has shaped my understanding of how I now approach research as a Black researcher and with Black folks. Since this project, I have not worked with anyone whose work I do not know intimately or their view of how the research will benefit the community. This narrow criterion has compelled me say no to research projects that may have been professionally lucrative, but still questionable if the participants would have been exploited. It will always be about the participants and community first and the research second. In short, although the project was created to share the voices of the participants, I ended up finding my own voice and stance in the process. And that in and of itself is actually an outcome of strong participatory research.

NOTES

1. Margaret Drabble, "Cautionary Tales for Children Designed for the Admonition of Children between the Ages of Eight and Fourteen Years," *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), *Oxford Reference Online*; Vanessa Joosen, "Cautionary Tales," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Jack Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
2. The use of "we" refers to the collective voice of Decoteau and me in this research experience. Decoteau made contributions to the chapter but insisted that my voice and experiences be at the center and that he trusts me to write on our behalf.

Part III

Eradicating the Waste: Challenging Western Education Dominance in Postcolonial West Africa ❧

7. Navigating Age, Gender, and Cultural Crashes and Clashes in a Youth-Led PAR Project in West Africa ❧

Dominique Duval-Diop

INTRODUCTION

The impacts of climate change are being increasingly felt around the world, and especially in Africa. Individuals and leaders at all levels have the power to directly influence human actions that induce climate change and that contribute directly to environmental degradation. Youth, in particular, are simultaneously the most oppressed and the most powerful potential agents of change capable of reversing the downward spiral of environmental destruction. To address the pressing issues of sustainable development and simultaneously facilitate innovative educational approaches, I conducted the Green Leaders of Africa's Future (GLAF) project with my colleague, Yvette Triscot,[1] a participatory action research (PAR) project from 2010 to 2012 with a small group of middle-school-aged students in Senegal, West Africa. In this chapter, I describe the genesis of the GLAF project, initially teacher-driven, which eventually evolved into a participatory project. I describe the environmental, geographic, postcolonial, and cultural contexts in which the project was situated. I introduce some of the experiences, challenges, and triumphs of this group of young leaders as they wrestled with age and gender conflicts and cultural rifts in their attempts

to advance sustainable development in their school and communities. I foreshadow the role I unintentionally played in these conflicts as a result of my subconscious negation of my power, cultural privilege, and personal biases.

HARMING THE ENVIRONMENT IS HARMING OURSELVES: THE CASE OF DAKAR, SENEGAL

Human beings' behaviors and habits are often harmful to the environment. The environment cannot sustain continual pollution and degradation. This is clear in the Earth's intense responses to the effects of climate change that manifest as encroaching deserts, eroded coastlines, and diminishing rainfall. The negative effects of climate change are especially severe in the continent of Africa. According to the International Panel on Climate Change, the average annual temperature of this continent is likely to rise by 1.5–4 degrees Celsius by 2099.[2] Not only are the people in Sub-Saharan Africa suffering from extreme weather changes that cause dry areas to become drier and wet areas wetter, but they are also the victims of their own destructive actions as they pollute their environment with poor waste disposal practices, cutting trees, and overexploiting other natural resources. For a continent whose population is largely dependent on the exploitation of natural resources, this acceleration has led to an increase in poverty and the spread of diseases among the most vulnerable.

According to the Population Reference Bureau, in 2013, Africa's population crested at 1.033 billion people.[3] Senegal has a relatively young population, with about 41 percent in 2013 below 15 years of age. Kwabena Gyimah-Brempong and Mwangi Kimenyi stress the importance of African youth for the economic development of the continent.[4] The youth are better equipped to adapt to and absorb new technologies and ideas. This aptitude, coupled with a willingness to take risks, makes engaging young people essential to Africa's ability to fundamentally shift environmental degradation toward sustainable development. However, Westerners view efforts to harness the potential of African youth as directly confronting the system of age hierarchy embedded in many African cultures that they believe prevent youth from fully expressing themselves and participating in society in meaningful and significant ways. Others who value the "wealth" of knowledge African elders possess find ways to build collaborative relationships for environmental change in the continent. The GLAF PAR project, at its core, intended to leverage and empower youth to confront

unsustainable behaviors in their school in Senegal. These youth experienced enormous obstacles within the school because we (Yvette and myself as project coordinators) framed the project as a critique of Senegalese cultural norms. On the other hand, the youth experienced tremendous success when they developed the capacity to lead and shape the direction of the project. Under their leadership, the youth engaged in culturally sensitive discourse actions *with* (not onto) elder community members outside the school around sustainable development.

THE SETTING—THE CITY AND SCHOOL CONTEXT

Dakar is the capital and largest city of Senegal, located in the western part of Sub-Saharan Africa. It is the westernmost African city located on the Cap-Vert Peninsula in the Atlantic Ocean. Its location, and inclusion of Gorée Island, has historically made it a port town and a strategic stop on the North Atlantic slave trade route.

The metropolitan area of Dakar has a population of 2.5 million people that makes up roughly 25 percent of the country's total population. It has a population density of 4,000 people/km^2 and has had continuous population growth, with a population increase of 4 percent in the 1980s and 2 percent in the last decade. If the current growth rate continues, the population will double in 25 years.[5] One of the major colonial legacies left behind by the French colonizers is the French language. French is the national language and dominates political and educational discourses, despite the prevalence of West African languages, such as Wolof and Pulaar.

Dakar proper was primarily made up of single-story homes. As the population increased, homes continued to be built around the city (horizontal growth) until space became an issue. People then proceeded to build additions to homes and second stories (vertical growth) so that they could rent rooms to keep up with the housing demand. This has led to increasing cohabitation and housing occupancy rates.[6]

The Intercultural Middle School (IMS)[7] was established in 2007 as an outgrowth of a primary bilingual school located in a different part of Dakar. The school was constructed in new development area. Solar panels were installed in the school since the new development did not have consistent access to an electrical grid in the area. The solar panel installation was primarily viewed as only a source of electricity rather than an act of sustainable energy. The IMS is a small private school with about 80–100 students from grades 6 through 8. Though the feeder primary

school was very diverse in that students came from Europe, the United States, and various African countries, the majority of students enrolled in the IMS were from African countries. The White European students from the primary school tended to matriculate into a popular French school or the international American school for middle school, depending on if they wanted a French or American education. Parents had to pay significant sums toward tuition costs, resulting in a more affluent population of students. Students enrolled in the IMS were either English-dominant (Anglophone) or French-dominant (Francophone). At its inception, the previous director conducted global recruitment strategies to locate qualified teaching staff, primarily from France and the United States. At the time of the project, the teaching staff was predominantly Senegalese, and primarily *vacataire*, or nonpermanent part-time teachers. This reliance on part-time Senegalese instructors who taught at other schools was a culture shift that took place with the change in director in 2010.

When I arrived at the school in 2010, I observed what I viewed to be many unsustainable behaviors, such as routinely leaving classrooms in disarray, neglecting to turn off classroom lights and fans during break periods, and a lack of attention to personal hygiene prior to meals. School administrators and teachers believed that their primary responsibility was to deliver the French curriculum and ensure that students performed to at least average standards. The term *sustainable development* was an abstract concept for all members of the school community.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2010, I, Dominique Duval-Diop, along with my colleague Yvette Triscot, initiated the GLAF project in a middle school located in the city of Dakar, Senegal, that aimed to prepare youth to become responsible stewards of the environment. Though initially teacher-driven, the project evolved into a youth-led PAR collaborative. Our primary objective was to train a cadre of 12 students aged 11–14 years old in the sixth to eighth grades on PAR methods that lead to the promotion of eco-responsible behavior among the participants and among members of their communities. During the 2010–2011 and 2011–2012 school years, we incorporated sustainable development concepts within the school curriculum and conducted separate youth leadership training and PAR activities with a select group of students outside the school environment. We wanted to reframe the focus of traditional science and language arts curriculum goals

on concepts of sustainability. We also wanted to provide experiences where students directed their learning experiences and developed leadership and critical thinking skills to address societal problems.

Specific project objectives included the following:

- To educate students and teachers throughout the school on the concepts of sustainable development and environmental protection, and ultimately promote the concept of a sustainable lifestyle in the broader community.
- To strengthen the capacity of students to act as leaders and advocates able to effectively communicate information to their families and their communities.

We grounded our work with the youth in several core principles:

- *The central notion of respect*: On the surface, throughout the duration of the project, we emphasized respect for others, including present and future generations, respect for languages, difference, and cultural diversity, and respect for the environment and the resources of the planet we inhabit.
- *Adoption of the values of sustainable development by all school stakeholders*: Education for sustainable development is holistic and should involve all disciplines including the arts, mathematics, science, language, and so on. We believed in the importance of engaging all stakeholders of the school community, including administrators, teachers, staff workers, cooks, and janitors.
- *Adoption of a multidisciplinary approach*: We adopted a multidisciplinary approach that acknowledged the complexity of sustainable development and used that complexity as an opportunity to foster cross-disciplinary learning in the areas of physical and human geography, science and math, and French and English. Through this approach, many students gained a full range of skills and knowledge, including communication and leadership skills that were applied at home and in the community. We conducted all project activities in a bilingual French and English environment. A subtle undertone embedded within many academic activities aligned with the project was a critique of the form and structure of the Senegalese French curriculum.
- *Action-oriented and participatory*: Students were not accustomed to being active decision-makers in the learning process. Initially, Yvette and I developed and directed all project activities. Over time, we gradually

emphasized student-directed actions tied to the sustainability theme to build students' capacity to lead project goals. In the second year of the project, GLAF students lead the choice, development, and execution of all project activities. My and Yvette's roles shifted to supporting them with making connections to community organizations, hosting and facilitating weekly meetings, and teaching them key skills necessary to the successful implementation of the project.

We promoted youth empowerment using a PAR approach to effect environmental change through combating different forms of supremacy (race, culture, age, language, and so on). Throughout the project, the youth negotiated cultural clashes at multiple levels—between the Senegalese/French cultures of the school environment and the Western cultures of the expatriate GLAF students, and between us, the project coordinators, who were American and Malagasy and the predominantly Senegalese school staff. In subsequent chapters, we reflect on conflicts (a) between Western versus African perspectives on education, (b) involving age and gender differences, and (c) driven by unacknowledged cultural biases.

Youth are the leaders and the citizens of tomorrow and thus must be the drivers of environmental change. Yet the French curriculum delivered in Senegal did not incorporate education for sustainable development or a focus on student leadership development. As we implemented the project with the youth leaders, we butted up against an educational environment influenced by the French colonial legacy emphasizing education through repetition and the transmission of knowledge through rote memorization. We wanted to teach our students to be critical questioners of authority. We brought Western cultural norms, which centered youth resistance *inside* institutions, in contrast with youth resistance in Senegal, typically in the form of protests relegated to the outskirts, *outside* of institutional settings. Most of the students involved in the project, particularly those who participated over the two years, came from non-Senegalese cultural ethnic backgrounds and so were more open to the manner in which we challenged the existing power structure. Our use of a somewhat subversive approach, as opposed to a direct confrontation that fully exposed our critique of the inadequacy of the educational environment, backfired within the school environment in ways that negatively impacted the GLAF students.

The way we taught, in general, put us in direct conflict with the values of the educational philosophy of the school culture. I taught students, in my history, geography, and English classes, to constantly question what they were learning. For example, the French history text devoted one

paragraph to the impact of the North Atlantic slave trade compared to several chapters on the contribution of African and Arab slave traders to slavery. I challenged this deliberate expurgation of the role of the French colonizers in the slave trade and the effort to teach African children that their ancestors were primarily responsible for slavery. Through presenting other perspectives and resources, I showed them how the North Atlantic slave trade fueled the colonial structures of three continents. In contrast, many of the Senegalese teachers strictly followed the curriculum and did not challenge the negative assumptions embedded therein. Many viewed my revisions to the curriculum and my pedagogical decisions as a direct attack on how they themselves structured teaching and learning.

The participatory action approach demonstrated the important role that young African people can play in advancing their own knowledge base and in applying that knowledge to solving real problems. We grounded the project in the idea that the students themselves could be powerful actors capable of advancing their own personal and intellectual change and growth. The importance of schools as laboratories that teach critical thinking and the use of multidisciplinary and applied approaches to learning were hallmarks of this project. Through the tools and skills gained in the project, the students acted as agents of their own change and thus models for change in the society in which they live (school, home, and neighborhood), helping to influence attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles in the area of sustainable development. What was missing was the ongoing critical interrogation of the ways in which subconscious judgments and stereotypic assumptions on our part (as project leaders) prompted power plays and encouraged active resistance against project goals.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Several students participated in the project. Table 7.1 provides an overview of the cultural, national, and linguistic backgrounds of the active GLAF participants at the time of the project. Several other non-GLAF students and teachers (not listed in the table) participated on a short-term basis, focusing on specific projects aligned with their particular interests, such as filmmaking, art, and journalism.

The multiracial and multiethnic composition of the group and the diversity of culture, language, age, and gender contributed to rich exchanges and brainstorming sessions throughout our weekly meetings outside the IMS. Differences in personalities, talents, and interests also contributed to moving the work of the group along, as well as some disagreements among the students. For example, one boy was always filming with his

Table 7.1 **GLAF project participants**

Name	Age	Gender	Cultural background	Language(s)	Nationality
Fernie Diop (author 1)	12 years	Female	Mauritanian and Haitian American	English and some French	American
Ndeye Mama Diop (author 2)	17 years	Female	Mauritanian	French, Wolof, Pulaar, and some English	Senegal
Soukeyna Abbott (author 3)	13 years	Female	Mixed White and American/ Senegalese	Bilingual French and English	American
Youth #4	14 years	Female	White American and African	Bilingual French and English	American
Youth #5	14 years	Female	Congolese	French	Democratic Republic of Congo
Youth #6	14 years	Female	Congolese	French	Democratic Republic of Congo
Youth #7	11 years	Female	Beninois	French	Benin
Youth #8	14 years	Male	Belgian-African mixed	Trilingual French and English, Flemish	Belgian
Youth #9	13 years	Male	Senegalese	Bilingual Wolof and French	Senegal
Youth #10	12 years	Female	Gambian	English and some French	Gambia

personal camera and he used this interest and skill to develop a film from the images he captured of the group doing its work. This film ended up being one of the artifacts we presented to the school community and parents at the end-of-the-year celebration.

At the same time there was a challenge related to language. The Francophone students wanted to speak and write in French, while the

Anglophone students preferred to speak and write in English. To address this challenge we initially paired the students by language for specific activities. These pairings inadvertently created more difficulties, resulting in miscommunication when passing on "messages across language borders." Sometimes the Francophone kids would blank out and not provide feedback when the Anglophone students were presenting information because it took too much mental energy to understand. We eventually bridged this language gap by pairing students in English/French dyads. These pairings facilitated cross-language learning, which was important given the bilingual focus of the school. The Francophone students had a chance to practice their English, which allowed them to more actively engage in outside activities such as the Global Young Greens (GYG) conference. The Anglophone students also benefited since they had to interact in French with representatives from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Canacla organization. Embracing the language differences led us to better equip the students to communicate effectively in many different advocacy environments.

PUTTING THE PROJECT INTO ACTION

We implemented the GLAF project in four phases, summarized in Table 7.2. I describe each of the project phases in more detail below.

Phase 1: Pre-Project Phase (Fall and Winter 2010–2011)

The pre-project phase involved identifying, educating, and consolidating the youth leadership cohort. This was done through a selection process based on subjective criteria Yvette and I defined. While there was no limit to the number of students who could participate, our use of selection criteria resulted in the recruitment of a select group of academically strong and compliant students, to the exclusion of many others who could have benefited from the leadership development experiences. Many conflicts we experienced centered on the perception of elitism resulting from how we selected the students. The selection criteria included

> demonstration of a positive work ethic evidenced by performance in the classroom setting; willingness to work outside of school on project activities; desire to voluntarily participate in the project and develop leadership skills; desire to learn more about sustainable development; and parent approval for the students to participate in after-school meetings and activities.

Table 7.2 Project phases and stakeholder engagement

Project phases	Geographic location	Leader roles	Level of stakeholder engagement	What was the work
Phase 1: Pre-project phase Fall and winter 2010–2011	Intercultural Middle School	Project coordinators— recruited students; integrated sustainability themes into curriculum; project development; skills instruction (problem analysis, communication, language, technology, interpersonal skills)	Total student population; two teachers teaching English language arts; English science; English history and geography	Baseline student understanding and environmental scan through school-wide survey conducted by the English language arts students and school environmental assessment; focus on learning about sustainable development
Phase 2: Communicating knowledge phase Spring 2011	Intercultural Middle School	Project coordinators— research skills instruction; logistical coordination Students—self-instruction on sustainability; dissemination and awareness building activities	School-wide participation in awareness activities; engagement of the arts, Spanish, and technology teachers; journalism club, history and geography teacher	Student school-level awareness building on themes of sustainable development through student-led research and presentations, awareness campaign on sustainable behaviors; learning about Human Development Index

Project phases	Geographic location	Leader roles	Level of stakeholder engagement	What was the work
Phase 3: Community outreach phase Spring and Fall 2011	Community—village of Sébikotane in Thies (1 hour outside of Dakar)	Students with coordinators as support to identify community site and make initial contacts; students as community researchers and reporters	Engagement of key community actors in village of Sébikotane focused on theme related to water; some level of school community engagement	Conversations with community leaders and local community members after conducting prior research to learn about water challenges; neighborhood tour; analysis and solution development, developed report with recommendations for addressing water and erosion problems
Phase 4: Global engagement phase Spring 2012	Dakar	Students—preparation for presentation at GYG and participation in Living Library exercise Coordinators— identification of opportunity and advocated for participation; supported students during participation	Full engagement of GYG stakeholders; no engagement of school population or administrators	Third Congress targeted at youth and held in Senegal, opportunity for them to connect with global community of youth engaged in sustainable development

During the pre-project phase, the parts of the project that remained under our direction as project coordinators included the identification of opportunities and partnerships, and the negotiation of those partnerships to facilitate student engagement. Students gradually became responsible for taking leadership during the implementation of the eco-diagnosis and developing recommendations for the school community related to increasing sustainable behaviors.

We led weekly meetings outside of school with this group of young leaders. These meetings were established after school on a day agreed upon by everyone in the group. During this time, GLAF students discussed their progress on assigned tasks, received assistance and guidance on problems they experienced with their research, and engaged in dialogues among themselves on issues faced, such as gender differences, challenges dealing with shyness and difficulties presenting before audiences, or problems encountered with teachers and other students. These meetings also presented opportunities for the students to use dialogue to deal with difficult issues arising from the need to work together. The weekly dialogues and pairings of Anglophone versus Francophone students for the completion of certain assignments also helped mitigate differences and foster solidarity. These meetings provided an important space for group identity formation, serving to create and strengthen ties of friendship and support through trust and relationship building.

During this phase, the group's first task was to conduct an eco-diagnosis to better understand the school context at a baseline level. The task allowed the students to examine the strengths and weaknesses of their school according to the principles of sustainable development. The eco-diagnosis enabled the students to reflect upon themselves and their peers, as well as on their behaviors, lifestyles, mentality, and the existing school culture in general. They used actual observations, documentary research, and the collection and analysis of survey data to discover assets and gaps. Our role as project coordinators was to impart to the students the research, analysis, and critical thinking skills needed to successfully complete whatever they decided was necessary for furthering their sustainable development mission.

Additionally, the GLAF students, who were in my seventh-grade advanced English class, developed a survey including questions, such as (a) how sustainable is your lifestyle? (b) do you spend money sustainably? (c) what are your perceptions of pollution? and (d) how sustainable is the technology in your home? They surveyed the entire school and then coded and analyzed the survey data using Microsoft Excel. To present their results, they developed charts and graphs of the data and compiled these results in a poster format. The students used their data to inform their action plan, to discuss concepts with fellow students and adults, and to establish a baseline to assess the relevance of

the actions they planned to implement. This eco-diagnosis prepared them for the second phase, which involved communicating the knowledge that they gained through school-based awareness building activities.

Phase 2: Communicating Knowledge Phase (Spring 2011)

During the first year of the project, GLAF students gave a series of brief PowerPoint presentations on various themes before individual classes, followed by short question-and-answer sessions. In contrast to structured events we planned as adult coordinators early on, toward the end of the school year the GLAF student leaders independently organized and planned an entire day devoted to dialoguing and guiding the student body to reflect on the role of sustainable development in their daily lives. As the first step to this school-level awareness campaign, students divided themselves into smaller groups that conducted research to learn more about specific sustainable development themes. Students illustrated their results using Microsoft PowerPoint and were also taught oral presentation skills to deliver effective presentations. Students took responsibility for choosing their topic of interest, for developing their research approach, and for the information finally incorporated into their presentations. Selected themes included the definition and history of sustainable development, water and water pollution, global warming and climate change, renewable energy, air pollution and greenhouse gases, waste management, and Agenda 21 for schools.

Not only did the GLAF youth leaders raise awareness by giving presentations to the student body and the school's administrative staff, but I also used my connections to garner meetings and presentation opportunities with external stakeholders, such as members of the Japanese Embassy and the National Commission of UNESCO in Dakar. From a curriculum perspective, all teachers of the sixth and seventh grade English classes, French classes at all levels, physical science classes, and history and geography classes introduced sustainable development concepts and incorporated these ideas into lessons and class exercises. For example, geography teachers introduced students to the Human Development Index. Students in these classes were assigned specific developing countries and created sustainable development profiles on each of these countries, which included an analysis of the socioeconomic and environmental conditions of youth, women, and the general population. They compared these profiles with those of developed countries during class reflections and discussions.

Additionally, students created artistic flyers to encourage the school members to conserve electricity and water and to recycle. They placed these flyers throughout the school: under fans, on garbage cans, and above light

switches. They also used flyers to encourage the use of the Canacla device that was placed outside the cafeteria. The Canacla is a receptacle, which is filled with water for hand washing. To release the water, you push a lever, letting out a very small amount of water. The water flow stops when there is no pressure applied to the lever. This is a water-saving device, minimizing water wasted from letting faucets run. These are handmade and provide employment for local people. These awareness building efforts were accompanied by school-wide competitions regarding the best definition of sustainable development and the best artistic representation of sustainable development led by one of the project coordinators in partnership with the arts teacher. All of the in-class, school-wide, and extracurricular activities fostered a more concrete understanding of the concept of sustainable development as a personal and societal choice, with the actions emanating from these choices having personal and far-reaching consequences.

Phase 3: Community Outreach Phase
(Spring and Fall/Winter 2011)

The combination of the increased capacity and empowerment of the GLAF leaders and the decreased opportunity to exercise this new power and act upon their increased capacity in their school set the stage for the third phase. The third phase of the project involved reaching out to the wider community of experts acting in the area of sustainable development. The decision to expand project activities to include work outside the school was made when the youth participants showed both the potential and desire to go beyond what they were able to accomplish and learn within the school environment. GLAF leaders were eager to experience sustainable living in a very practical sense. However, the impetus to shift activities outside the school was also influenced by the diminished support that the project was receiving from the administration, which limited the possibilities for more substantive action on the part of the youth leaders within the school context. The youth leaders had outgrown the school environment, and we were pleased to witness this transformation. The move into the broader community was also accompanied by a shift in how we, as project coordinators, perceived our roles—from teachers and guides to facilitators of the students' visions and priorities. As facilitators, it was our role to identify learning opportunities and to facilitate interactions with actors outside the school environment in response to the priorities and desires manifested by the GLAF students. We organized field trips to enable students to learn about the reality of sustainable development in the field and to provide an opportunity to meet

with environmentalists such as Dr. Jacques Vanhercke, the inventor of the Canacla—"an art that saves lives." This phase culminated in a field action research project where students worked on water resource issues in the region of Thies in the rural village of Sébikotane.

GLAF students conducted field visits to flood and remediation sites in the village, interviewed villagers and water restoration experts, and collected various data such as GPS points, photos, and films. Through these and other experiences, the GLAF students developed a more holistic understanding of the problems encountered in the region, which informed the development of their proposed solutions.

Phase 4: Global Engagement Phase (Spring 2012)

The final phase of the project involved the opportunity to present the results of the research and advocacy efforts to other young leaders from across the world at the GYG Congress held in Dakar in March 2012. I learned of this event from the school's UNESCO partner. I contacted the organizers to explore the possibility of the youth leaders' participation and got approval for the GLAF students to take part in the first two days of the meeting, specifically on the Global Dialogue and Global Knowledge days. Some of the activities they were able to participate in included the opening plenary session, group dialogue sessions, the "Living Library" exercise, and cultural exchanges. Certain students also presented on their Sébikotane project in one of the workshops. This was an especially important phase because it exposed the students who reside in a developing country to an event where they could exchange ideas with and be inspired by like-minded youth leaders for sustainable development from many other countries across Europe, Asia, and Africa. The fact that they were, by far, the youngest participants (aged 11–14 years, while the other leaders were in their twenties or older) was especially affirming. It was an excellent opportunity for them to engage in a collective dialogue that opened their young minds to new ideas about how to affect real change in Senegal and in the world. It also taught them that they had information of value to communicate to other GYG Congress participants regarding their firsthand experience about the types of environmental problems encountered in Senegal.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

Three of the youth leaders explored issues of power and oppression in chapter 8. The chapter highlights how the GLAF youth experienced social

and academic pressures and worked to overcome perceived powerlessness brought on by age, language, knowledge, and skills differences within their own communities. They reflect on how their work was seen as a threat or even subverted by adults who attempted to use empowered youth as a tool to reassert cultural norms that restricted them to a position of powerlessness. The youth authors reflect on cultural differences between the GLAF students and the majority of the school population. These challenges as well as those related to the perceived elitism, potential bias in the participant selection process, and sense of marginalization felt by the students who did not participate in the project are explored in both chapters 8 and 9.

In chapter 9, I describe how I worked with my colleague, Yvette Triscot, to foster cross-disciplinary learning in the areas of physical and human geography, science and math, and French and English. I describe challenges with supporting the leadership development of our students within an unsupportive academic environment. My reflection reveals that, in many ways, my actions and interpretations of key incidents were heavily influenced by deep-seated biases that I was unaware of and did not confront until after the project ended. In reality, the way we conceived of the project, introduced the school community to the project, and executed the project resulted in systematic exclusion. This was in part due to the fact that the project did not begin as a participatory one.

My chapter emphasizes the importance of addressing the disempowerment that Blacks who have different cultural and ethnic identities and assets and who live within the context of postcolonial cultural oppression, can inflict upon one another, shattering the unidimensionality of the concept of Black in the African continent.

NOTES

1. Pseudonym used.
2. Kwabena Gyimah-Brempong and Mwangi Kimenyi, "Youth Policy and the Future of African Development," *African Growth Initiative Working Papers*, Brookings Institute, no. 9, April 2013.
3. "World Population Data Sheet," *Population Reference Bureau*, 2013, http://www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2013/2013-world-population-data-sheet.aspx.
4. Ibid.
5. David Lessault et al., "International Migration and Housing Conditions of Households in Dakar," *Population* 66, no. 1 (January-March 2011): 197.
6. Ibid., 196.
7. Pseudonyms used for all names except the author's name.

8. Littering, Planting, and Harvesting: Imagining Going Green in the Sands of Senegal ❧

Fernie Diop, Ndeye Mama Diop, and Soukeyna Abbott

WHO WE ARE

My name is Fernie Diop. I am 16 years old and I am now a sophomore in high school. When I was doing this sustainable development project, I was in the sixth and seventh grades. It was my first year at the Intercultural Middle School (IMS) when I started the project. I was an American living in Senegal. I dance, play the violin, and I am trying to play the kora. I care about the environment and have been doing work on the environment since I was in the fifth grade in America when I did a science fair project on the water quality of the lakes in Baton Rouge. I speak French and English. I am part Mauritanian and part Haitian and I have three sisters (I am the eldest). I have been in Senegal for four years. It's been cool to compare the differences between first world and third world countries. I have had to learn how to live differently and be more aware of how we use our resources. I have to be aware of electrical outages and water shortages and to not overuse water. It makes one more conscious of how scarce things are and how we have to take care of what we have on this planet. When I was doing the sustainable development project, I was in the sixth grade and my mother, Dominique Duval-Diop, was my English and geography

teacher. It was so weird because I kept calling her "mom" in class and she insisted that I call her Madame Duval. My classmates kept thinking that I knew things ahead of time. They kept asking me what's going to be on the next test and so on. I kept telling them that I didn't know. My mom treated me like every other student. The fact is that she was one of the program coordinators didn't really cause any problems with my friends in the sustainability development club, but this fact did cause problems with other people. Some of the other students who weren't involved, and even some of the teachers, thought that my mom was playing favorites by letting me participate in the project because she was my mother. Also, Yvette's husband was my math tutor and my family and their family were really close, so that gave them more reason to think that there was favoritism going on. I think that made things even more difficult for me as I tried to do project activities in the school.

My name is Ndeye Mama Diop and at the time of the sustainability project, I was 17 years old. I am a Senegalese girl of Mauritanian origin living in the suburbs of Dakar, Senegal. I was a student of the Seydina Limamou Laye Senegalese High School of Excellence in Guédiawaye. I speak French, Wolof, and Pulaar and learned how to speak English during the two years of the project. During the project, I had great difficulty going to each meeting, because my school was located far away from the middle school and I had to wait for school to be over to attend it. I was also excited to be a part of the group because we were supposed to do activities in my own school. However, during several months of my participation in the project, this didn't happen because my school was on strike. At one point, I wanted to leave the group because it was too hard to manage my participation, but then I told myself that if you have the opportunity to acquire knowledge you shouldn't let it pass you by. So I stayed and learned and experienced so much. My aunt, Dominique Duval-Diop, helped me a lot by having me live with her family during the months my school was on strike. I was able to get really close to my cousin, Fernie during this time and get much better at speaking and understanding English.

My name is Soukeyna Abbott and I am 17 years old. I was in the seventh and eighth grades (12 and 13 years old) during the sustainable development project. I am American and have lived in Dakar, Senegal, for the past 11 years. I am biracial—my mom is Senegalese American and my dad is white American. I am fluent in French and English. I have three younger brothers. My multicultural background and experience have made me who I am and helped me to understand a lot more about the world. I also understand others who are different from me because

when you have different backgrounds you know that there is more than one way of being and doing things. You know that the world is much bigger than the place where you are.

I am a person who always tries to do the best that I can and I care about my family. My interests include dance and sports and my academic interests include economics, history, and geography. Participating in the sustainable development project allowed me to learn more about how resources are used and about how to live more sustainably. I also learned a lot about what it means to be a leader in front of our peers and to take control of difficult situations.

This chapter combines the voices of three of us young leaders who participated in the project along with several other students. As young Black leaders who coauthored this chapter, we mostly attended the private IMS, with the exception of one student who was from a public school in Senegal. We all exhibited the characteristics of trustworthiness, being able to cooperate, creativity, inspiration, perseverance, and hard-working nature. Therefore, we were selected to participate not only because we had these characteristics, but also because of our work in school and our good grades.

It wasn't an elite group. We just had an opportunity and the reason we were chosen was because the teachers could see that we were reliable because we had good grades. They didn't want to get people who wouldn't work because that would be a waste of their time. We never thought that we were better than the others. If it is an important part of your life, if you care about school, then you are willing to work hard at it. Everybody could have had the chance to participate if they wanted to make the effort. Some people just decided to choose the wrong path and others didn't. The other students thought that the teachers who chose us thought that we were better than them. They knew that we were the students who worked the most. We didn't choose socializing over doing a project. It caused conflict because a lot of people wanted to step up their game, but by the time they were a little more mature, we had already started the work so it was too late for them to join. Our skills in learning and in working together as a group also distinguished us from other students. We were ready for the challenge and the commitment to work in fulfilling our role to make our environment a better place.

We didn't feel pressured by our leaders (project coordinators) to join. We all thought it was a great opportunity. We did feel pressure from other students in the school as we worked, because, to them, the participatory project was just an excuse for us to get out of class. It was hard because we

had to prove to them that we were actually making a difference. We also felt pressure because we knew that when we went out into the community, we were reflecting the school so we never wanted to do a bad job or not accomplish what we set out to do. This is our story of how we struggled, had fun doing participatory action research, changed, and hopefully made a difference.

THE WRITING PROCESS

When we were told that we had an opportunity to write a chapter in a book, the students who wanted to help write gathered at a friend of our project coordinator's house to brainstorm how we would go about it. We met during the summer and knew that we had to organize ourselves because everyone was going on vacation. Fernie's mother, one of the project leaders, facilitated our brainstorming session where we established rules and expectations, listed out potential topics to write about, and assigned each other roles and responsibilities (such as who would edit, who would help with the translation of the sections that would be written in French, and who would referee if we had arguments during our meetings). Each of us picked from the different topics we brainstormed and wrote about what interested us. We also had other common topics that we all wrote about. There was no restriction on language so the students who wanted to write in French could do so to fully express themselves. The project coordinators gave us feedback on our initial drafts, which we used to comment on each other's sections and to figure out how to improve them.

In this chapter we talk about our experiences using several themes dealing with the project itself and the PAR activities that we carried out; our relationship with other students, teachers, and administrators; our growth as leaders; how the project became a point of conflict and cooperation; the difficulties we were forced to deal with; being oppressed and the balance of power between us and the adults and how we coped with that; how we worked together as a group; and two major activities and experiences we had that really influenced our evolution and transformation as leaders. We also talk about the results of our actions and what could have been done differently.

Through our work in the Green Leaders of Africa's Future (GLAF) sustainable development project, we came to understand that sustainable development is a concept that prepares future generations and about preserving our planet, our ecology, and our environment, and the need to work toward a better future.

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The GLAF sustainable development group consists of talented young people who fight for the prosperous future of the planet, and for the protection of our environment for our and future generations.

We tried to build awareness and to change the mentality of people in our school so that our community could become more sustainable and a better place to learn. Part of building awareness was making people at the IMS and in the community at large realize the impact of their negative actions on the environment (e.g., throwing papers, buying new clothes that they do not need, throwing away clothes instead of giving them to people, and so on). In the beginning, we didn't really know what PAR was. It wasn't until we starting doing the planning, research, and action that we really started to learn what it was. It meant that we don't just do research online, but go out in the community and talk to real people about real problems. The action is part of the research too, like when we did our surveys to find out what our school community knew about sustainable development or when we did the Canacla project.

The PAR activities, like what we did in the sustainable development project, gave young people like us the opportunity to explore where we fit in the world and in society. Not only did the GLAF group help us to realize the impact of what we did but it also helped us become closer, like a second family, where we felt comfortable and had friends we could count on. In the next section, Fernie tells a story that is a metaphor for our collective experience doing the PAR project. This story has two antagonists—breakers and believers.

OUR STORY AS TOLD BY FERNIE DIOP

We have lived our lives like ordinary people. We all breathe the same air. We all eat the food that is given to us. We all drink whether the water is dirty or clean. We are so wrapped up in our own worlds that we don't realize what our world is becoming. The skies are gray and the rain is pouring acid, not water. When we walk outside, we walk on trash, muddy sand, dirty puddles of "water," sheep poop, and rotting food. We smell the car fumes and everything else mixed in. The only way to escape this is to leave the city and pay to go to a clean place like a resort in Sali, for those of us who can pay. What were we seeking? One little ray of light, the one that comes from above, our only source of hope for a better future: sustainable development.

We tried to tell everyone that this ray of light was good and needed to be grasped at all costs, but they were all blinded by their lifestyle (eating candy and dropping the wrappers, smoking cigarettes and polluting the air). Every message was water under the bridge of selfishness, but the time came when ten believers stood up to capture that ray. The ray was knowledge and the ray was a powerful light shining on who we are and the power that is in all of us. But it is a process; you have to capture it piece by piece. We looked around us and saw other people crying out for that light, wanting to change. But they couldn't, wouldn't, and didn't move an inch, and stayed in their darkness.

Once the believers started to capture the ray, the breakers were envious in a heinous way. They did not respect the believers because they thought that they were superior to them—they were able to capture the ray of light, after all. This hurt the believers because they were toiling and using all their sweat and mental strength in every way to try to bring the light to everyone. In the end, the believers started to believe that they were superior to the breakers. The believers felt confident and felt that they had some recognition for trying to bring the light. The believers were in their own zone. Slowly, over time, people started to realize the importance of living a sustainable lifestyle and the believers slowly managed to start influencing some of the breakers. Then the breakers started to change when they started to feel more included and part of the change. They wanted to help. The believers had accomplished many great tasks that only highly ranked officers would achieve: they had achieved the impossible—they opened the eyes of the breakers who had not realized that being sustainable was a good thing—and they were not afraid.

RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER STUDENTS WHO DIDN'T PARTICIPATE IN THE PROJECT

We tried to build awareness among the students and teachers of our school, but only a minority cooperated and understood our message. We had to admit people don't like changing their lifestyles or admitting that there's something wrong with it. It was really hard, especially with the students. They didn't try to understand what sustainable development meant. For them it was just about turning off lights, saving water and energy, and learning about the environment. Sure, that was all in sustainable development, but that wasn't everything. You also had to learn to be respectful and cooperative with others.

To be in the group was especially hard for us because other students thought that a sustainable development club meant that it was only the

club's participants who had to make a difference. We were expected to pick up all the papers everyone else threw on the floor and to clean up the classrooms.

It bothered us because we wanted to make a change, but it was hard because people didn't fully understand our role in helping the school evolve into a more sustainable place. They didn't feel that litter was their problem because they weren't part of the group, so, in their eyes, all the responsibility fell on our shoulders. At the end of a class, the teacher told us not to leave the classroom until we picked up all the trash on the floor. We told him it wasn't fair and the teacher retorted that it was our responsibility to tell the other students to clean up. Since we didn't do that, he forced us to clean up the classroom. It took about ten minutes to clean, and there were a lot of papers, food wrappers, and some gum on the floor. It made us feel really bad because our work was being belittled and taken in the wrong way. It was discouraging because it was an excuse for people to be lazy instead of honestly thinking twice about their actions and their consequences.

First, we tried to educate people on sustainable development because knowledge has the power to change the world. But they would not cooperate and learn from us; instead they would sometimes laugh. We would tell ourselves that this was because they did not understand; if they all knew the consequences of destroying the environment they would be more conscious, but unfortunately they were not.

We tried to ignore the mean comments, such as "your presentations are boring", or "you think you're special, but you're not." According to some students, we showed too many presentations but didn't explain clearly what the goal of the project was and what sustainable development was. We still continued our work, even though it was useless because the majority of people in our school didn't care about our message.

The sustainable development group became a source of conflict between the group and the rest of the school community, instead of a space of cooperation and positive changes. People's jealousy evoked a negative reaction toward everybody who was in the group. The other students often teased us and were resentful of us because they thought we had certain privileges. These privileges, however, did not come free. They thought that the reason we were in the group was to have fun and to go on field trips to get out of class. They didn't see the amount of work we did and the responsibilities that we had apart from school work and the home.

This made it harder for us to achieve our goals, and the students were not encouraging or supportive. Their actions antagonized us and blocked

our work because they were jealous. They would take down our awareness flyers that reminded students to turn off school lights and fans. Sometimes they deliberately put the wrong items in the wrong recycling bin. Certain students didn't use the Canacla properly and even went so far as to pee in the water receptacle.

On one hand, we could understand their jealousy because in the second semester (phase 2), students who were new to the school were selected to replace participants who had left the group. The other students had a right to be angry and annoyed when this happened because they had been trying for a while to integrate into the group. But the criticism, prejudice, and jealousy that they often forced on us were hard to bear and were really hurtful. We also knew that the students who tried to enter the group wanted to because they saw that sometimes we were taken out of class for special activities and they wanted to be part of something special. But others also just wanted to get out of class. It was the project coordinators who decided who could be in the group and they didn't feel that these students would come with the right positive attitude and willingness to work. The student leaders did not have a say in this decision. We could see why the students may have thought that their inability to integrate the group was unfair because they had good grades and behavior. But we felt that our leaders had taken the right approach and would not have done things differently. We were able to achieve our goal, even if we couldn't plant trees in Sébikotane with the rest of the school, as originally planned, and we still did a good job and the support of our project coordinators was what led us to that success.

POWER RELATIONS WITH TEACHERS

In Senegalese/African culture we have to respect our elders. So they were really able to bully us because we couldn't do anything; we were in this vulnerable state. The teachers were practically enslaving us because they used the excuse that a sustainable development group should be responsible for cleaning up after others against our will. We were held responsible for the unsustainable behavior of the other students. The teachers and the principal should have been more supportive of the group and those who were part of it. They liked to do the opposite of the new behaviors we were trying to instill like cleaning up their trash, not wasting water by using the Canacla, and turning off the electricity when they were not using it. Some of the difficult issues we experienced had to do with how the principal felt about our project coordinators, too.

The teachers were way too harsh. They were jealous of the coordinators and so when they saw a mess or something similar they would blame the mess on us. Once the teachers started to see how much we were able to accomplish, they wanted to be a part of the accomplishment. The jealousy negatively affected not only the GLAF students, but also the students of the entire school when the principal refused to get a bus to allow the whole school to go to the village of Sébikotane and plant more than a thousand trees. The principal waited until the last minute to tell the coordinators that he wasn't going to get a bus and the whole school was extremely disappointed. It was really embarrassing for the coordinators because they had mobilized the whole village of Sébikotane that had purchased trees and water and other equipment so that the students could carry out the task. Therefore, our coordinators and us youth leaders were equally mistreated when we should have been valued, because we were helping to benefit the society, the school, and our environment.

Throughout our experience, we had to deal with people of different ages. Sometimes it was easy, but most of the time it was difficult because the group consisted of people of mixed ages but mostly those in the younger classes. We not only had to deal our feelings of insecurity since we were all in our early teens, but we also had problems with our confidence because oftentimes we were not taken seriously. It was a really hard process and we took time to overcome this and achieve self-confidence. Age was not an issue in how we interacted with our coordinators. They had every confidence in our ability and were always pushing us to our full potential instead of trying to control everything. This is one of the main reasons we accomplished so much in terms of our personal development and as a group.

Trying to lead change is difficult, especially if you are young, but it can also be rewarding and exciting. We enjoyed being in the project and doing all the extra activities to raise awareness. One example, however, where we were successful because we supported each other and had our project coordinators' support was when we organized our Sustainable Development Awareness Day at school. We had different stations and were assigned different classes that attended our stations to learn about different topics. We worked in groups of three students and had to come up with a plan on how we were going to execute our workshops. This included games, facilitating discussions with the students, and short presentations. It was really interactive. The Sustainable Development Day was a good opportunity to see how we could collaborate well in groups and all contribute to our designated workshop. We organized this all by ourselves. We were responsible

for all the logistics and planning. Most of our fellow students responded positively to what we had to say because it was interesting and they were being engaged and had a chance to participate. Since we were students, too, we knew what interested them and how to engage them and that knowledge helped us to figure out the best way to present our material and make sure that people had fun. It really helped to know that we had each other there so that if we got nervous, we would be reassured.

REALIZING OUR PERSONAL AND GROUP POWER

The GLAF group not only helped us to become better people, but also helped us to become better leaders. Dealing with conflicts helped to bring us closer together as a group. Fighting oppressive behavior forced us to continually encourage each other to talk out our experiences, which helped us put things in perspective. It helped us to keep striving for success and be the best that we could be. When we succeeded, it made us proud of ourselves as a group. All the activities that we participated in helped increase our knowledge of being more ecological. When we learned about the environmental problems happening around us, it made us more aware of our actions and our own negative impact on the environment. In the beginning, we were shy and reserved, but as we continued, we gained confidence and the ability to communicate with our words and our actions. We discovered a new way of presenting information and data, and how to talk in front of an audience without being stressed or scared of making a mistake.

One of the first things that we did was to gain a basic understanding of what sustainable development was and the consequences of not being ecological. To gain this knowledge, we used secondary information such as books and the Internet as sources for our research. To deepen our understanding, we went out in the field to experience an example of a problem to which sustainable solutions could be applied. Being able to use primary and secondary information resources helped us to directly experience the circumstances in which people actually live. Then we were able to use critical thinking to help come up with solutions to real environmental problems.

For example, to deepen our research on water, the project coordinators had the idea to send us to Sébikotane. Sébikotane was a village that had chronic problems with their water and suffered constant floods, erosion, and deforestation. We interviewed experts and villagers, collected GPS points, and took videos and photos of the water problems and their solutions. Through our conversations with villagers we found that access to clean water was

a problem because many villagers didn't have faucets and their wells were dry because the water table was low and the water did not have a chance to replenish the underground aquifer.

Simple and cheap solutions had been put in place to slow down fast-flowing water during floods, to increase water infiltration into the underground aquifer, and to increase the regeneration of vegetation. Some of the solutions that had already been implemented were the construction of rock walls and ditches. We came up with additional solutions, including building awareness, raising money to finance the construction of more ditches, and implementing other constructions, such as solar fences, to protect new plant growth. The villagers could also monitor change in water infiltration by looking at the amount of vegetation growing again and the number of termite hills, which is a sign of moisture in the soil. One GLAF member said: "This problem is important for the capital city of Dakar because Sébikotane is Dakar's water source. So we thought about ways to improve the water quality, how to reduce water losses and minimize the effect of flooding, runoff and drought. It was about three weeks of intensive reflection." It was easier to communicate with the villagers than our fellow students because they were willing to hear us out and listen to us. This was because they had serious environmental problems in their village. We actually helped them with their problems and they appreciated this help and listened to us.

It was really an amazing experience to be able to use primary resources for our research. Even though our solutions were not implemented, we still felt that we made a difference. Our solutions were not applied owing to the fact that we had hoped to involve the school to support the community in some of the activities, but the administrators refused to support us in engaging the whole school. This was an opportunity for the school to take part in the work hands-on. Despite not being able to work long-term in the community of Sébikotane, the whole process gave us the opportunity to go to the field and discuss with people who were living with these problems. This experience let us connect physically and emotionally with the people because we knew that even though we did not actually have an environmental impact, we felt the villagers understood that we wanted to help them. Our personal development and realization of our potential and how to fight against resistance to change made us feel like we could do anything. Even when we were doing secondary research, sometimes we were able to connect that research to events that were happening. For example, one of us worked on the theme of natural disasters, something that she had never heard of. The fact that the tsunami in Japan had just

happened before she started the research made it even more meaningful because we understood better how terrible it was: all the people who lost their lives, their family members, and their houses. We even presented before the ambassador from Japan and the other students of the school. This encouraged some IMS students to do art showing our solidarity and raise money to help with the disaster response.

In addition, we learned various tools to support our research such as Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint and how to do good research. Soukeyna said: "We were asked to do something that freaked me out. They asked us to do power points on our theme and that we would have to present them to the whole school and all the teachers. It was really nerve-wracking for me because, first of all, I'm a very shy person." Not only did we learn about the environment, but we also learned about important life lessons that allowed us to develop as leaders who think critically and who can express ourselves confidently in front of other people.

To summarize in the words of Ndeye Mama Diop: "I was shy before participating in this kind of project. I thought I was not capable, but I just decided to throw myself in after realizing that I just had to believe in me. One thing I would change is that our teachers should have also given us more room to see if we could succeed without them. Those around me have changed their behavior, they finally understood what I wanted to tell them in English. I am delighted and proud of myself, proud of my teachers and the other youth leaders. Thanks to GLAF, our teachers have taught me how to be a leader. They put in our heads that anything an adult can do we can also do."

Another thing that we tried but failed to do was visit Ndeye Mama Diop's public high school. We couldn't go to the school because there was a teacher strike there and so students were not in session. This upset Ndeye Mama because the other young leaders missed out on an opportunity to meet Mama's friends and students at her school and to understand the challenges that she and her fellow students faced.

THE CULMINATION OF OUR LEADERSHIP EVOLUTION—GLOBAL YOUNG GREENS CONGRESS

One of the things that really had a big impact on us while we were in the GLAF group was being able to participate in the Global Young Greens (GYG) Congress. GYG is a united community of young leaders that connects through web-based and face-to-face contact. These are leaders who want to help fix problems such as peace, social justice, being sustainable,

and many other issues. The third GYG Congress was held in March 2012 in Dakar, Senegal. About a hundred people from different countries came to attend this congress and to develop their green politics.

One thing that amazed us the most was that our teachers told us that we would probably be the youngest people there. It sounded really cool and was a really interesting experience. We all waited impatiently for the congress before it arrived. After our long wait, the congress finally arrived. We were all nervous, excited, and scared. When we walked into the conference room, we were amazed because there were so many people from all over the world. It felt like we were completely out of place because all the other people there were between 20 and 40 years old. In our group we were between 11 and 15 years old. That's a big age difference, and luckily we had our project teachers with us. The congress was a perfect example of the fact that no matter where you're from or how old you are, we can always come together to work toward one same goal. "The GYG, a convention for Young Greens that was held in Dakar, also was a good opportunity for us students to learn experiences of other Young Greens, and it also allowed French speakers like me to practice English. It had very interesting workshops, and I met wonderful people who had a lot of knowledge, and I learned things I did not know, such as the fact that oil is an integral part of global warming. So it was a wonderful and memorable experience," said one GLAF member. We saw that people who tried to make the world a better place weren't always in the best situations, but learned that we should never give up, and always keep trying to achieve our goal. We learned that we should believe in ourselves and in what we set out to do. Our determination and belief are the only things that can help us to succeed. It was one of the best experiences of our lives. Some of us really liked the beginning, but there was too much pressure. The congress was too hard for some of us because of the language barrier for those of us who were not good in speaking English and because we had to wake up extremely early in the morning. Eventually we all adapted even though the discussions were sometimes boring. Sometimes we did not understand what some of the participants were saying. In the end, we didn't want to leave because we were getting to know people who faced difficulties and success like us in our work on sustainable development.

OUR GROUP DEVELOPMENT

During the first year, our leaders divided us into pairs or small groups of three people and assigned each group a theme about sustainable

development to study and present on. For example, we did research on global warming and natural risks, the meaning of sustainable development, renewable energy, pollution and waste management, and water. When the work was done, we participated in a competition for the greenest school in Africa, which we won and were recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Since the school became the greenest school in Africa, we had to continue our job and work harder because now that we were at the top we needed to keep that position. Our success and the recognition we got motivated us to stay engaged in the project.

Before working in the sustainable development project, we were so wrapped up in our own worlds that we didn't realize that our world was becoming more polluted. Working together and having the same belief made us a team. We knew that if we could work together, every person could bring his or her knowledge, skills, and talents to achieve our goal. Some people in the GLAF group were good at organizing our work, others were good in working on specific tasks, others were good in helping people who were struggling with their work, and others were good in cheering up the team and encouraging the team members so that they could achieve their goals. In order to work together, we had to all first know our goals and understand what we were trying to achieve. We had to see how we could take the ideas of other people and of ourselves and put them together to try things out. We learned not to be afraid if we couldn't accomplish something on the first try. We had to have the back of other people and help them when they needed it. However, some of our differences did cause some conflict in the group. The most important differences were the gender gap and language. There were fewer boys in the group, and it seemed that this discouraged them from taking the initiative and being more engaged. They sometimes acted superior to the girls because they were a minority in the group and so were trying to stand out in some way. Some people in the group were native French speakers and others were native English speakers. This sometimes led to misunderstandings, but we learned to understand and work with each other. At the end of the project, we all learned to speak our second language much better and with more confidence.

WHY WE STAYED INVOLVED

One GLAF member said: "When I was asked to join, I did not know anything about the issues, I said yes because for me it was just a way to make presentations, to know new things and to have fun. We discovered a

lot about our environment for our age. But the reason I really stayed committed is that sustainable development is an action that serves to improve our environment to make it more healthy and clean. It will also result in the creation of the next generation that lives better and makes the world a better place. It represents also a change in behavior." For many of us, we wanted to help the environment because we hated the destructive pollution surrounding us every day. This group gave us the opportunity to really do something about that and make a difference.

This pretty much sums up all our feelings. We wanted to experience what it was like to be in the sustainable development group and learn new things. We enjoyed discovering new things like how to do research, PowerPoint, enter the data, how to make good reports and presentations, and so on. Another reason for many of us to stay involved and engaged was the freedom we had to pursue our interests and projects like learning how to make movies and how to use Prezi or the GPS. We always tried to see how we far we could push ourselves. It was pretty easy to balance all the different responsibilities because the group complemented what we were doing in our classes, which was not so demanding to begin with. Most of the parents pitched in and helped, in any way that they could, not only their kids but also the other kids in the group. Those responsible for coordinating the project have really contributed to our growth as researchers. It was also fun because of the friendships that we developed or deepened. We also felt that the coordinators and some of our fellow youth leaders needed each of us for different reasons. One of us was good at organizing tasks and projects and others were good with doing presentations or helping with the English language writing and presenting. Some of us were really good with technology and computers. All of us were hard working, and knowing that everyone was doing their best and giving a lot of effort also helped us stay engaged.

One of us attended a public school in the suburbs and had to travel really far to make the meetings. She had a lot of difficulty getting to each meeting, because her school was located far away from IMS. At one point, she wanted to leave the group but then realized the enormity of the opportunity to acquire knowledge that she would be missing out on. The other young leaders also went out of their way to make her feel welcome.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Our bilingual school operates in an energy-saving way. It has solar panels that operate much more subtly than can be imagined. It works not

only from the sun but also with batteries that take over once the sun goes down. The school also has Canaclas (a device to prevent water waste). The GLAF group has put up posters around the school near the light and fan switches. All these things just mentioned were primarily intended to influence the behavior of each student and teacher, and to push everyone to be aware of the impact of their actions. This is mainly why we had undertaken all these campaigns to change people's mentality.

Fernie Diop believes: "Students were excluded from participating because of their lack of maturity and their lack of responsibility and their actions toward us. These students had the opportunity to be a part of the group, but when they showed that they were unreliable and wouldn't do the work, they had to be replaced. Also it depends on the students, behavior, work ethic, commitment to the group…I also understand them because they thought the group was probably based on favoritism, but they also needed to realize why they were not chosen. Based on the decision of who was in the group I also believe that the people who weren't in the group should have also participated in more activities. We could have done this if we organized more field trips for classrooms or the school community. But most importantly we shouldn't have imposed on them our strategies or our work because later on they thought that they were forced to like what we were doing or that it was an obligation to support us when it seemed we were the only ones to benefit. This wasn't a really good strategy. We were doing participatory action research, but we were too young to realize what it actually meant and how our activities could have been more explicitly participatory."

For us, we couldn't help change peoples' lifestyles because they never wanted to take responsibility for their actions. This put a lot of pressure on us. We worked as hard as we could, during two years, trying everything we could to build awareness. In the end, the workshops we organized for the Sustainable Development Awareness Day were probably the most effective. Since we actually talked to the students in groups and asked them what they could do, instead of telling them what to do, they were more positively engaged.

The research and presentations we did before the Japan Embassy and the UNESCO delegation on the themes of sustainable development had the impact of creating more visibility and awareness of the activities we were doing in our school. This helped us to win the competition for UNESCO's Green School Award. It gave the adults who visited the school a belief and hope in the next generation to take care of the environment. They seemed

really impressed by our work and our commitment. The GYG delegates also had this reaction.

Winning the Green School competition, being recognized by UNESCO, attending the GYG Congress, meeting people from all around the world, and learning new things had a big impact on us. We had amazing experiences that helped us understand how sustainable development is very important in life. This makes many of us wish that in the future, we all keep on working and trying to make a positive difference. An important result for us GLAF leaders was the evolution that we made in becoming Young Green leaders. We also learned how to work as a group, as a team. This is something that we will take with us throughout our whole lives.

9. Unveiling the Bias Within: The Power of a Single Narrative to Oppress the P in Participatory ❧

Dominique Duval-Diop

INTRODUCTION

I am a multicultural Haitian American who identifies as Black. I don't see myself as just American or just African or just Haitian. My worldview is a conglomeration of the experiences I have lived and the many places in the world I have traveled (Australia, France, Turkey, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Belgium, Italy, Madagascar, Cape Verde, Senegal, South Africa, the Congo, and Mauritania, to name a few). I am a mother of four daughters. My children and youth in general are my future. I will do anything I can do to help them grow and care for more than themselves. I like to have fun, explore, have adventures, try different things, and challenge myself. I love traveling and learning about different cultures. I have learned that I need to learn how to better connect with people who are different from myself. It wasn't until engaging in the critical self-analysis necessary to write this chapter that I realized how my perceptions guided how I judged the cultures I encountered on my travels. I am more aware that when I experience a new culture and society, I need to go in without preconceived notions and opinions.

I am a geographer who conducts applied policy research in various roles and organizations to influence policy change. I am motivated by the understanding that without the engagement and empowerment of local

communities, investment in the sustainable development of vulnerable areas will not benefit the most vulnerable. I wanted to contribute to solving the entrenched problems of poverty, environmental degradation, and sustainability around the world. Moving to West Africa allowed me to apply my skills, experience, and enthusiasm in a context that could greatly benefit. Or so I thought. How arrogant! And this is the core reflection that I embark on in this chapter—the danger of the arrogance of uninformed actions and assumptions of no "cultural bias" as a Black woman in implementing a participatory action research (PAR) project in a West African country.

When I first arrived in Senegal, I became a teacher in a Senegalese bilingual middle school based in Dakar. I taught history and geography in English. While my teaching was fulfilling in itself, I felt somewhat stifled and so I was very open to new initiatives that would stimulate my intellect and allow me to feel that I was having a positive impact on the environment and society in Senegal. When my fellow teacher, Yvette Triscot,[1] approached me to volunteer my time in a sustainable development awareness building project, which I call the "Green Leaders of Africa's Future" (GLAF) project, involving a small group of selected students, I jumped at the chance. When I think about it, it wasn't altruism that drove me to participate initially—I was bored. Yvette was from Madagascar and had participated in the UNESCO Sustainable Development capacity building program and thus was very passionate about sustainable development. She had created the initial idea for the project and I was excited to partner with her to develop and implement the program. Not only was I a teacher, but I was also a parent of one of the youth we engaged in the project. When I arrived in Senegal and enrolled my Anglophone daughter in this Senegalese bilingual school, I was in full protective mode to ensure that my child received the best educational opportunities possible. My participation was also, in large part, motivated by the desire to create educational experiences for my daughter that would mirror what she could experience in the United States.

While the sustainable development project had clear pedagogical goals and was structured in such a way that resembled PAR, it was not initially conceived of as a PAR project since it was teacher-driven and teacher-directed at the onset. It evolved into a PAR effort during phase 2. During the first phase of the project, I actively worked to incorporate sustainable development topics in my history, geography, and English classes. Furthermore, throughout the project I acted as a facilitator of the GLAF students' leadership development and devised innovative opportunities

for them to learn and exercise their new skills. I consciously tried to find opportunities based on experiences I had in the American educational system that spoke to the students' interests. I was motivated by the need to apply the experiences I gained firsthand in empowering others to conduct research to analyze, explain, and change their own realities in the post-Katrina Gulf Coast.

We didn't know or understand what PAR was until we learned more about it and how we needed to shift power from us to the students. I gradually understood that PAR is collaborative in nature, combining education and action in order to gather information and gain insights leading toward change on social or environmental issues. It empowers the people who are concerned about or affected by a particular issue to lead the production and application of knowledge to effect change. PAR is discussion-oriented, participant-driven, democratic in its production and use of knowledge, and able to harness the unique talents and skills of involved researchers. We gradually let go of control as the students gained capacity to act as leaders in the project. As our control shifted to the students, we began to focus more on skill development. In fact, it was less of a shift to a PAR approach but rather more a recognition of the inherently PAR nature of the work that we were engaged in. In this chapter, I reflected on the impact of not beginning with PAR at the center through several stories, where I critically confronted my contribution to the sense of powerlessness and marginalization we (myself, Yvette, and the GLAF youth) experienced and how I attempted to salvage the experience for the GLAF students. I also reflected on how we inadvertently excluded the broader school community, while, at the same time, successfully engaging community members outside the school.

CLASH OF THE TITANS: CULTURAL CONFLICT AT THE NEXUS OF ENGAGEMENT

I started teaching at the Intercultural Middle School (IMS) and doing this project when I first arrived in Senegal. I really had no knowledge or deep understanding of what it meant to be Senegalese, what Senegalese culture was, specific gender or age roles, and what was and wasn't appropriate. I had no understanding of how to interact and communicate appropriately and respectfully with Senegalese people. I didn't know that you don't ask for things directly, that you more suggest and let the person come to the conclusion that you are hoping to achieve. It's a less direct and subtle way

of asking and receiving permission to act. I had no knowledge of that and was culturally insensitive making a lot of faux pas as a result. My cultural miscues even as a teacher were based on language, based on how I treated girls versus boys, based on how I communicated praise and criticism. I was a language teacher and a lot of work I was doing was situated within the English language and the American culture; I viewed the world around me through the cultural paradigms or the lens of the American English culture, which is socially very different from Wolof and even French language and culture. English is more direct, confrontational, simplistic, less nuanced, and less poetic as opposed to French and Wolof, which is much more steeped in imagery and prose. The cultural divide came from a core ignorance of the Senegalese culture. It was inevitable that there would be clashes on both sides. Exacerbating the clash was the lack of knowledge that Senegalese people in the school had of what it really meant to be an American, beyond the pop culture widely portrayed on television. They also didn't know how my culture influenced my perceptions and interactions, or how my frames of reference bled into how I spoke, thought, and interpreted actions.

Yvette was from Madagascar and had training from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). I was from the United States and had a doctorate in geography and a wide range of international professional experiences. We came to the IMS with a set of perspectives, experiences, and education different from the experiences of the majority of the Senegalese teachers at the school who were born, raised, educated, and worked their entire careers in a Senegalese system. In contrast, the people who did not give us resistance were non-Senegalese—the Spanish teacher from Spain, all the *intervenants* (people who came in from outside agencies), the Canacla creator who was a Frenchman, the UNESCO representatives, and Global Young Greens (GYG) attendees who came from all over the world. I assumed at the time that my Senegalese colleagues were intimidated by our differences in experiences. Now, I realize that I had no real understanding of why we got so much resistance. Maybe they just didn't like me and thought I was just another arrogant foreigner who thought I knew everything. I didn't understand that it was incumbent upon us to bridge the gap in experiences. This power dynamic was especially difficult for the principal, who seemed to have insecurity about his ability to lead the school, a job that he had just assumed full time during the first year of the project.

Just by virtue of doing the project, we were inherently critiquing and negatively judging the cultural norms of the predominantly Senegalese

environment. In tandem, I actively and consciously critiqued two things both in my teaching and in my work with the PAR project. I critiqued the French curriculum, which I felt did not have a sufficient amount of applied knowledge, and that it did not embed experiences for students, which fostered critical thinking, problem solving, and the construction of your own knowledge and frames of reference based on tools you are given. The French curriculum and the way it was delivered in the Senegalese school was memorization based, where you regurgitate what you are taught. Creative thinking was not encouraged by the teachers. I don't think that was intentional, but it was a condition of people replicating how they were taught. I felt that this was a travesty.

One of the things I used to say all the time was: "We do this in the United States. Kids in 2nd grade, 7 and 8 years old already know how to do powerpoint and people in universities in Senegal don't know how to do Powerpoint!? What?!?! I am going to teach these kids how to do Powerpoint and I'm going to teach these kids how to use Excel because that's what kids in the United States do." I made these explicit statements quite often, in front of the students in the context of our weekly GLAF meetings, in school, and with other colleagues. I never really felt that I had a good connection with the other teachers, except my history and geography co-teacher who wanted to "improve" himself, and maybe regarded me as a means to expand his horizons, so we had a very good working relationship and we coordinated well together. But I was just so different that people didn't know how to deal with me.

My verbal critiques were rarely challenged. Instead, they were justified and legitimized in my mind when my co-teacher, who taught history and geography in French, started teaching his students to use Powerpoint in the second year of the project. Without an explicit, clear, negative backlash to my deficit discourse, I continued to maintain and find evidence to support my biased attitude that bled into the work of the GLAF project.

We didn't engage in PAR with the intention of becoming an instrument of imperialist, or postcolonial, oppression. Our very ways of *being* were representative of the Western critique that poor Africans in developing countries aren't developed enough and we have to teach them how to do things right, like in the West. Though the core of my *being* was invested in the African continent, personally, professionally, culturally, and linguistically, I acknowledge that I was not immune to becoming a tool of oppression. Lack of awareness, lack of knowledge, and lack of a PAR theoretical framework prevented me from having that critical self-consciousness and awareness of my actions, reactions, perceptions, and judgments.

THE FALSEHOOD OF THE VICTIM NARRATIVE

I worked with a truly great group of kids. I had a positive relationship with them that was atypical from traditional relationships between adults and children in Senegalese culture. I had a proprietary feeling of ownership over the students and the project. Of course, I was going to protect my own. I would keep them close, privileging who was in the group, and vetting who could join the group. Isn't that contrary to the tenets of PAR? PAR means it wasn't just for a select few. It should have been for everybody. But it never started out for everyone ... it started out for me and for Yvette and then we widened our net a little to include just some kids, among whom was my daughter. I operated under the unconscious premise that it was my project, and these were my kids and that was it. This implicit narrative was in direct conflict with my explicit narrative, which was: "This project was for the school and the community."

Our selection criteria resulted in the inclusion of an elite group of students. We wanted to make sure that we selected students who were engaged in school, had a work ethic, commitment to sustainable development, and not have the work negatively affect their school. We developed the criteria so we could have a successful project, rather than thinking of the project as an opportunity for students to develop capacity and experience success on their terms. Subconsciously, we stacked the deck to ensure success, understanding that the students' success would be a direct reflection on us. In retrospect, our selection criteria resulted in creaming the good students for the project, leaving out students we observed to be unengaged, and academically struggling students. It was only open to a group of students who were already doing well in school. My daughter, Fernie, fit the criteria and I didn't worry about being viewed as playing favorites. Since I was one of her teachers, people already thought that I favored her and gave her information or tests before everyone else. This was already an existing dynamic. Though I treated her the same as the other students, I know I did have higher expectations for her because she was shy and I was always trying to push her more than the others because she was my daughter.

We made judgments about the "viability" of students based on our experiences with them in our classrooms. We basically said that if they couldn't perform for something that was required, for an education that their parents were paying for, then how could we expect them to perform for something that was totally voluntary? Our criteria systematically excluded whole segments of the school community from participation. Students who were "too Senegalese" were also subconsciously excluded.

Then we tried to engage and encourage participation from students who were already rejected once. Had this truly been participatory from the beginning, there would have been no selection criteria in the first place because it would have been a project for all, by all, with all students. Had the school community decided that they wanted and needed to implement a PAR project and decided what the focus of the PAR project would be, based on what they viewed to be the most important challenges or issues facing the school, we would have seen a very different level of engagement of all actors.

I often felt powerless, marginalized, and put upon on behalf of myself, Yvette, and the students because of the way we were perceived and our efforts to increase awareness of sustainable development were received. I felt like we were victims and were treated unfairly because we were doing so much to "help" the school community. I felt that the school community didn't appreciate the work that we all were doing for free and for no credit. When teachers critiqued the exclusivity they perceived, I rewrote their words to fit my victim narrative.

I now see that many adults in the school read past our "we are doing this to help the school and Senegalese society" narrative and deciphered our hidden narrative. They saw us for what we were doing and that PAR wasn't for everyone. They challenged the reality that we had recruited an exclusive and elite group and excluded many others. I can see how the victim narrative we perpetuated, that we were lacking in the power balance, was false. It makes me feel now that, duh, of course they weren't going to get on the sustainable development band wagon. And the teachers and administrators resisted through their interactions with the kids.

Of course, the students bought into our victim narrative. They trusted us. We made them special and set them apart and protected and privileged them. On the surface we were all Black, but we—Yvette and I—were different from the Black Africans. We came from Western cultures and a few others from English-dominant cultures that had a level of value and prestige in a bilingual educational environment, whereas the majority of the educators had a French educational experience, language, and culture. We perpetuated the victim narrative because we thought we came in as innovators, creative thinkers, who knew better. We viewed many of the Senegalese educators as stuck in a French educational system that we saw as limited, limiting, culturally bound in a colonial history, and fraught with non-engaging teaching strategies such as rote memorization and lecture. I didn't understand that, subsumed in my critique of their system and their approach, I was a tool of postcolonial oppression

as well. I fed into the dominant Western narrative told about the African continent for hundreds of years—that they are uneducated, undeveloped, unenlightened, and without valuable cultural and linguistic traditions in their own right. We opened up opportunities for our GLAF students and they greatly benefited from their experiences in the project. At the same time, they were very hurt by the project and they were put in situations that would be very difficult for anybody to deal with, let alone children. That's something that really was difficult for me and Yvette to deal with, too.

AN OPPORTUNITY LOST

The premise of the project was to raise awareness about sustainable development and to embed it into the curriculum. We thought that the teachers had bought into the construct and that they would be amenable to incorporating the theme into their curriculum. Yvette and I tried to model this with the survey as an example of how to embed the sustainable development concept into a language class. I used the survey to directly counter how students acquire knowledge in the French educational system. Rather than sitting passively and listening to a teacher lecture and accept what they say as the truth, I used the survey to push them to devise their own way of gaining knowledge and communicating about what they learned with others. I did not want them to be passive receptors of knowledge. That was what I was trying to do with the survey. I honestly didn't expect the kind of reaction we received from the teachers and believe that their negative reaction was more a reflection of the teachers' perception of me as an arrogant Westerner telling them what I think they were doing wrong.

At the beginning of the project during the fall of 2010, we encouraged the youth leaders to collect both primary and secondary data on various topics related to sustainable development. The curriculum text I was working with was just focused on grammar. I felt that the students needed to practice communicating in writing and speaking beyond acquired grammatical fluency by doing projects, reading and interpreting literature, developing their vocabulary, and learning different literary forms. A survey project was associated with one of the grammar units, so I took this as an opportunity to use the sustainable development theme and to go way beyond the expectations by having them conduct the survey, as well as do data analysis with Excel, develop posters, and learn how to make presentations with PowerPoint. Students who were in the advanced

English seventh-grade class—representing both GLAF leaders and non-GLAF students—completed a survey assignment gathering information on student and teacher impressions of sustainable development and whether they led "sustainable" lives. The non-GLAF students were excited to participate in this survey project because they learned many of the problem analysis and communication skills that the GLAF students learned and were able to present before external stakeholders alongside the youth leaders. After forming groups, they came up with their research topics, and formulated short questionnaires in English that they then administered to the teachers and students. They approached teachers during break times. To make it as easy as possible for the Francophone teachers who did not speak English, the students verbally translated and asked the survey questions in French and filled out their responses. Not only did the survey contribute to the GLAF project, but it was also a part of their graded work for the English class.

The reaction of the administration and many of the Senegalese teachers when the students tried to conduct the survey was influenced by age dynamics and symptomatic of the way I communicated about the PAR project and the emphasis on sustainable development. Some teachers used the interactions with the students to convey their position of authority. When approached by the students with a description of the purpose of the survey (to obtain an understanding of the role that sustainable development plays in their daily lives), a few teachers aggressively questioned the necessity of answering the questions. Some made the students uncomfortable by forcing them to justify the assignment repeatedly before finally filling out the questionnaire.

The primary goal of the survey was for the students to generate their own understandings from data they collected from the survey, but the way I introduced the project to the school community didn't honor cultural norms around how knowledge is transferred. I should have prefaced students' completion of the survey with an explanation that there was intrinsic value in the knowledge and experiences that elders in the school community (the teachers) had to offer related to their perspectives on nature, people's interaction with nature, and conservation. As it happened, teachers were put on the defensive because they felt judged and interrogated. Even the types of questions asked (created by the students but influenced by my framing of the project) facilitated this sense of judgment—"Do you buy new shoes every 6 months?" "Do you turn off the TV when you are not using it?" "Do you leave the water on when you brush your teeth?" The interactions between the students and their

teachers became a contested space of resistance for the Senegalese teachers and a site of marginalization for the students. If I had emphasized that students were in a position to respect and learn from the community's knowledge base on sustainable development, teachers may have reacted very differently to the students.

If I was more sensitive to the cultural context in which I was working, I would have created an assignment that was more culturally appropriate. I was operating from a Socrates-driven construct of education, which gives students the right to question their elders. I was insensitive to the Senegalese culture, which is respectful of elders and privileges their knowledge. I didn't understand that the goal was student learning, not proving to the adults in the school that the students were equal to them. I should have worked within and respected the cultural context of the school rather than resisting, challenging, and disrespecting it. As a result, many GLAF students experienced very negative interactions with their teachers rather than interactions characterized by positive cross-generational and cross-cultural exchanges. In the context of a youth participatory research project, it was particularly difficult to deal with these power plays, because instead of acting as a buffer and protecting the students, we felt compelled to let them experience these difficulties themselves. It was during the weekly meetings and individual discussions that we helped them to process and analyze these experiences. This was sometimes painful to witness and we felt guilty for not having anticipated such negative reactions.

In contrast to what they experienced in their school, the GLAF youth experienced real intergenerational learning when *they* themselves led the effort to understand the environmental realities of the villagers in Sébikotane. In the school, the way that the students interacted with their teachers to get their perspectives on sustainability was a student survey with questions that could put their teachers on the defense, given the implied critique. In the village, the GLAF students just walked around house to house to talk to whomever was willing. They had one open-ended question: What types of problems did the villagers have with water? The discussions with villagers went where the villagers wanted to take them. I observed this respectful intergenerational dialogue happening when the students visited the village and sat on mats around an elder lady who sat under a tree with her children and her bucket of water washing her peas while she talked and dropped her pearls of wisdom to the GLAF youth, who soaked it up. This effort was driven by the students and the outcome, as a result, was much more positive.

THE GENDER MASH-UP

Not only did we experience differences and conflicts around culture and age, but we also experienced conflicts around gender both with adults in the school and among the GLAF youth. In the American culture, you have equality between men and women. Whenever I thought we were receiving resistance from males in the school community, subconsciously I interpreted it as a backlash against women empowerment since I negatively viewed the Senegalese culture as a patriarchal one that minimized women's voices. I had a visceral reaction to it. We were often immersed in gender conflicts, particularly Yvette, because one of the ways the principal acted out his power as a male over her was by ordering her to get coffee and carry out menial tasks, such as type a letter, when she wasn't a secretary—she was a teacher. I actively resisted this kind of treatment. In conversations where we were brought into the principal's office to discuss the project and he tried to challenge us or confront us on how we were doing things, I made a deliberate point to speak as a strong Black woman and *forcefully* communicate my point of view. I didn't understand or acknowledge that I needed to say things and present our work, my perspective, and opinion in a different way, acknowledging the cultural context I was in. Instead, I was in a fighting stance because I knew I was in a gender conflict and I had been socialized in my Western, African American, and Haitian American cultures to come out ahead. I refused to let myself be stomped on...I'm a strong Black woman. I was unaware of the indirect nature of communication in Senegalese culture, and among men and women in Senegal in particular. I was culturally incapable of conceding a direct point in favor of a more subtle way of doing things. My lack of cultural understanding of communication norms and my active resistance against what I saw as patriarchal domination backfired. An example of how this backfired is evident in an incident between myself, Yvette, and the principal of the school.

One afternoon, Yvette and I were meeting with three of the GLAF youth in a classroom after school. The principal barged into the classroom, interrupting the discussion. He had just received a call regarding the arrangements we were making for an upcoming field visit to the village of Sébikotane where the students would be conducting a field assessment of problems related to water. Prior to receiving the call from the village organizer, he had no knowledge about the fact that the GLAF group would be traveling to the village to conduct research. Since the start of the project during the previous year, the principal showed disengagement and

disinterest in the planned activities that were mostly conducted within the school environment. This was evident even as the project was gaining recognition and notoriety outside the school after winning the UNESCO competition for the Green School of Dakar in 2011 and the subsequent production of a short film documenting the successes of the GLAF group in 2012.

During the second year, many of the activities involved organizations and people in the broader community. We had attempted unsuccessfully to schedule meetings with the principal to discuss the upcoming field visit prior to him receiving the call. The principal rightly felt that he should have been kept abreast of the planned activities and when he received the call, he felt stupid for not knowing what was going on. However, the manner in which he chose to express his concerns went far beyond the limits of etiquette, respect, and professionalism. He came into the classroom and proceeded to berate Yvette in front of me and the three students. His manner made us and the children extremely uncomfortable. We were shocked at his combative tone of voice and verbal criticism.

In retrospect, his reaction was a function of our inability to engage the administration in the project. It was inevitable that the information wouldn't flow well. Even though we would meet and correspond with him, we never really got positive responses and by then we were pretty much operating independently and autonomously and made the mistake of not fully informing him of the field trip. While we kept him informed with updates on what we were doing with the PAR project, he didn't prioritize the information because he felt disconnected from the beginning. The responsibility was on us to fully engage the school community, but the responsibility should be equally shared with the people who accepted to participate in the project in all its imperfections. The principal accepted the sustainability project and all its activities in theory, but his lack of engagement and valorization of the information and regular updates put him in a powerless position of lacking knowledge when that phone call came. On the flip side, we were in a position of power because we were in the know. Since the principal couldn't assert his authority in this and other situations, he exercised his power in other ways, especially through demonstrating a lack of support to the school community and not supporting activities involving students working on sustainability outside the school community. Instead of trying to understand the role I played in these types of interchanges, I was unwilling to learn how to communicate and be different because I had assumptions about my own lack of power.

Another area where we encountered gender conflict was within the GLAF group. We tried to have an equal number of boys and girls in the group. At the onset, we had five boys in the project but three boys left the school midstream. We replaced these boys with girls because at the time we didn't see any "viable" male candidates to replace the three who had left. In their written reflections leading up to the writing of the youth reflection chapter, the two boys who remained in the group throughout the duration of the project said they felt they couldn't express themselves because they were a minority. They also said that I often didn't listen to them. I remember that in some of our weekly meetings, I often said things like "girl power." I would actively favor and praise the girls for the work that they were doing. In some ways, I thought I was joking, but the boys took it seriously. One of the boys knew a lot about technology. He liked to teach himself new things and he did a lot for the project. Subconsciously, I saw him as having a superior attitude and questioned his commitment to sustainable development as a societal need, which often colored my interactions with him. The two boys left in the group would sometimes criticize the girls and put them down and of course we would jump all over them when they did that. We should have been a lot more aware of our role in facilitating negative interactions among the boys and girls in the group, so that we could model how they could better collaborate with each other so that everyone felt valued and able to fully contribute to all aspects of the project. This conflict, though, wasn't as serious as some of the gender-driven altercations that Yvette and I had with some of the adults in the school building.

EMERGENCE OF FUTURE LEADERS

The sustainability project wasn't just a PAR project, it was a youth leadership development project. In order to be successful with our school-based efforts, we needed leadership buy-in. In reality, we created outside opportunities to accomplish our leadership development goals when we experienced roadblocks in the school. At the time, I thought that a measure of successful leadership development was the extent to which the students were empowered enough to view themselves as "equal" to adults. Now I understand that I set the GLAF kids up to experience many clashes and conflicts within the school environment because I didn't consider the cultural norms they were embedded in. They could have successfully developed as leaders in the school had we been mindful of the need for

cultural sensitivity and understanding of the morals of Senegalese culture and relationships between youth and adults. I set them up to compete for equal standing and position as knowledge brokers with adults in the school. Expecting the youth to operate as if they were "equal" to adults set up reactive resistance from their teachers who sensed the subtle, subconscious, and inherent disrespect and rejection of the ways in which these youth could benefit from their teachers' experiences, values, and knowledge. They had a right to express their voice, but we didn't coach them in their responsibility with how to use and exercise their voice with respect as well.

I wanted the youth to experience the ability to speak with confidence and to participate in discourse from a position of power because they experienced so much disempowerment in the school setting. The third international GYG Congress held in March 2012 was that opportunity. At GYG, the GLAF youth interacted with environmental leaders throughout the world aged in their twenties and older. They knew at their core that their experience was equally valuable and informative as everyone else's despite the fact that they were children. They had something to say and an audience who would listen at GYG.

> Thanks to sustainable development, our teachers taught me how to be a leader. We were growing up and were shown that anything an adult can do we can also. Ndeye Mama Diop, GLAF youth leader

Ndeye Mama's quote represents the culmination of the leadership development process that each GLAF student underwent—despite the constant pressure and resistance. This leadership process allowed them to fully participate in research fieldwork conducted in the village of Sébikotane and to effectively take part and share their experiences as youth leaders attending GYG. Their successful participation in both events represented the culmination of their evolution into young leaders, confident in their abilities yet cognizant of their continuing need to learn and share. Mutual experiences and challenges created a culture of solidarity around the shared identities of being students in Senegal and of living in a developing country where they confronted the consequences of unsustainable choices on a daily basis.

Within the school setting, we did not achieve these leadership outcomes. The reason we were successful with achieving this outcome outside the school setting is because the cultural setting outside was different and more aligned with Yvette's and my own cultural assumptions and

narratives. The dynamic of youth being "equal" to adults was accepted at the GYG because the attendees were youth in their twenties and up who had a history of acting as young people going up against adults and power structures in their communities for a cause. It was a given that these young adults would automatically value the perspectives of our middle-school students. We didn't change our approach—we just changed the setting. We did not have sensitivity to the cultural setting of the school and did not work within that cultural setting to foster acceptance. We actively resisted doing this, and the last act of resistance was to take the project out of the school. We, in essence, "punished" the school for not accepting us by removing the prestige and power ascribed to the project by others in the international community (e.g., UNESCO).

One place where the students did achieve success within the school was the Sustainability Awareness Day held during the second year of the project. During the previous year, we received constant criticism about the fact that the project did not involve all the students of the school. In response, the youth organized a whole day devoted to a series of student-led workshops, to engage the entire student body in math, art, language, and science activities, and games centered on sustainable development. That was the first time they really engaged their peers in an interactive way to co-construct an understanding of what sustainable development was and that had a lasting positive impact.

Simultaneously, Yvette and I were charged with having teachers integrate sustainable development as a theme in their lessons in conjunction with the student-led workshops. By that time, the administration wasn't behind the project so they weren't going to do anything to support what we were doing. We presented the project at the staff meeting to discuss and plan the day where teachers would integrate the theme into their lessons, but we were put at the end of the agenda. By the time we were ready to discuss the project, everyone was ready to leave and no one followed up. It was too late and we knew it. We tried to engage teachers and the administrators at that point, but we didn't try very hard because we were already checked out and committed to supporting and "protecting" *our* students. It was just a stopgap measure to basically say that we were working on the project inside the school despite the fact that we knew our efforts were focused outside. Our lack of engagement was juxtaposed against the GLAF youths' high level of successful engagement of their peers in activities they led to help the latter explore different concepts of sustainable development.

THE DANGERS OF EMBARKING UPON A PAR JOURNEY
WITH AND WITHOUT A RUDDER

One major issue that emerged from this reflection on our PAR work is that the project didn't start out as a participatory one. This reality dictated our singular focus on sustainable development to the exclusion of other viable community problems, influenced the way we framed our discourse about the project, informed who we selected, and shaped how we went about attempting to engender buy-in after the fact. We weren't experts in participatory research and we weren't fully aware of what it really meant. So we didn't seek out assistance and training to get a better handle on it so we could collectively implement PAR within the central tenets of what is considered participatory. We were like the blind leading the blind. A lot of times, I felt that I was out of control. I felt like I was facing challenges that I had no ability to fully grasp, let alone try to solve. It never occurred to me to ask myself: "Do I have to control everything? Do I have to be the one to solve every problem?" Our lack of understanding that we needed to cocreate this project with the administration of the school and the students was at the root of many of our struggles.

We needed to have a broader conception of the "community" to be engaged beyond the selected youth we wanted to "transform." We privileged sustainable development as the focus of the project and selected youth who were interested in that focus as well. If the project was really participatory from the very beginning, the school community would have been engaged in discussions about what issues were of concern to the whole. Would the focus on sustainable development have emerged as *the* issue the whole school community wanted to address? I don't know. From the reaction to our efforts, probably not. We spent our whole time in the first year trying to convince the school community why they should buy in to the sustainable development focus. Looking back, I realize that by not having PAR at the heart of our work from the very beginning, we created a project that excluded whole segments of the school community. In the midst of the project, I absolved myself and our group from any responsibility for the self-marginalization we created by chanting the narrative that we tried and tried to engage the administration, teachers, and students, but we were repeatedly shot down. And it wasn't our fault.

I think a lot of resistance was due to the fact they didn't understand what we were trying to do. As soon as you don't understand something, you are made to feel inadequate and there is that dynamic of power based on knowledge or lack thereof. So here we (Yvette and myself) were, two

outsiders with advanced degrees, challenging traditional educational customs and mores. The teachers and administrators did not understand what we were trying to do, in part, because we didn't understand it in the beginning. If I could do things differently, I would have learned more about PAR and then oriented the administration and teachers to its tenets, including showing them examples of different types of PAR activities to demystify it. As we attempted to involve the rest of the school community later on, the fact that they were not in the know kept surfacing as a barrier and a site of conflict, only exacerbated by the fact that others outside the school community understood our work enough to give us prizes and accolades for our efforts.

I often felt powerless in my interactions with my colleagues because we frequently faced active resistance and barriers to achieving our goals. The power of reflection is that I now acknowledge that I did, in fact, exercise tremendous power over the administrators and teachers. The information about research and technology skills set me apart, as did my connections and networks with international organizations, which I leveraged to open doors for my students to exciting experiences. As I was in the midst of the work with the youth, I developed a narrative and taught that narrative to the students that we were the unfortunate victims of ignorance. Now, in hindsight, I realize that I had tremendous power that I exercised to create a privileged space for the GLAF students, who included my daughter.

As I think back throughout the life of the project, Yvette and I strategically used different types of dialogue to foster the evolution of our young leaders. We actively facilitated their learning and development of a shared identity through structured written and oral discussions. Through our weekly discussions, students confronted the emotional crises, challenges, and opportunities that arose during the life of the project. Furthermore, dialogue helped mitigate misunderstandings that sometimes arose from the gender, culture, and language differences (i.e., American/Anglophone versus African/Francophone) in the group.

I describe one example of the results of a structured written dialogic session that we facilitated at the end of the two-year project to help the GLAF participants reflect on the entire experience and the changes they underwent during this time. During the reflection exercises conducted at a one-day retreat, students had a chance to select photos that represented personal responses to specific reflection questions. This exercise and dialogue demonstrated the young leaders' ability to engage in critical thinking about what could have been done better and what worked. The fact that they came up with these conclusions themselves means

that we succeeded in fostering this skill, which is essential to all leaders. I strongly believe that if the youth leaders had not participated in this project, they would not have had such an increased level of insight. The quotes below from two of the students expressed their feelings regarding some of their experiences during their participation in the PAR project, as well as their perceptions of how these experiences affected their personal development.

> In the group, I learned patience, how to listen to others; self-control, responsibility, confidence, team work, and public speaking. GLAF youth leader

> At the Congress, I learned so many things; I saw that people who tried to make the world a better place weren't always in the best situations. But that you should never give up, always keep trying to get to your goal. It was one of the best experiences of my life. Soukeyna Abbott

Below is a summary of some of the group members' reflections in their own words.

What about the project worked well?

- We learned to express ourselves better to the public and to be more responsible leaders.
- We didn't only work in the school, but also outside of the school in the village of Sébikotane. That gave us much more possibilities to do different things in other places and learn more.
- We learned how to work together and how to cooperate to get to a common goal, and we supported each other when one of us had a problem.
- We changed some people's ways of thinking but especially our own minds.
- People saw us as role models because we were doing stuff that most youth do not do nowadays.
- We acquired new skills and were able to analyze situations and find solutions.

What about the project didn't work and could have been done better?

- We weren't able to raise awareness in the whole school, but at least we affected a minority.
- We could have been more convincing towards the teachers and the students and explained that great opportunities come with great responsibilities.

- We should have included students in some activities we did for them to realize the importance of the sustainable development project. Instead of always telling them what to do we should have given them tasks to do to make them responsible and give prizes after the task has been completed.
- We should have done a "clean the school day", taking the jobs of Ibou and Demba (the janitors) and make the rest of the students clean the school so they will know that it is hard to clean classes and they'll stop dirtying the school.
- We should have tried to find another way, better way, to build awareness in the school.
- More boys could've been in the group. There used to be more.
- Get a contract with a recycling company and then they could recycle the plastics and cans we use in the school to encourage people to recycle more.

The GLAF youth experienced powerful lessons through their ongoing reflections that we, as coordinators, didn't experience at the time. Yvette and I did not build in the time to reflect together and individually on our involvement and personal experiences. We didn't realize the necessity of periodically stepping back throughout the implementation of the project to analyze what was happening and how we were either negatively or positively contributing. We built in those reflective moments for our students during their weekly meetings, as you read in the excerpts above. We did facilitate their discussions and their processing of events and incidents from our interpretive lens. These reflective discussions helped them to evolve in their understanding of their privileged place in the school, what is community, and the role of elders as important actors in a community. These reflections resulted in students seeking out opportunities to learn from their elders outside school by necessity. Unfortunately, Yvette and I would reflect regularly but it was always in relation to what was happening with students rather than on ourselves and how we were hindering and obstructing progress and how we unintentionally fostered discord and clashes.

OUR MESSAGE TO BLACK RESEARCHERS

In the planning and execution of our project, we achieved success while, at the same time, discounting Senegal as a developing country, non-educated,

stuck in the past, mired in colonial mentality, an unenlightened and patri-archal society. What is so ironic is that the purported focus of our project was on the very communities we inadvertently excluded from the change process—the Senegalese community. Almost every last kid in that project was from a non-Senegalese background, with the exception of a couple of youth. All the youth participants were Black but they were not from Senegal. Hindsight is truly 20–70. You can benefit greatly from our mistakes and our lessons learned. You need to know what you are getting into. You need to know what PAR is at the onset. You need to acknowledge that being Black doesn't make you immune or shield you from acting in such an oppressive way or similar to the way that the powers that be—White people, whatever—would act. You need to acknowledge that you are socialized to have very deep-seated biases and stereotypes that will rear their ugly heads despite your best intentions. You need to foster and build awareness of the acute need to regularly and critically self-reflect, knowing that, if you are honest with yourself, it can be painful and very uncomfortable. This look inward is extremely necessary if you want to have the impact that you are hoping to achieve—that fundamental change is for *everyone*, not just for that select group of people or the people for which change is easiest—the low-hanging fruit. Your active self-critique is a necessity for the fundamental change that should engage people who would automatically be excluded because of whatever they are not.

NOTE

1. Pseudonym used.

Conclusion ❧

Decoteau J. Irby and
Elizabeth R. Drame

This book explores the promises and perils of Black professional researchers working alongside Black community researchers in collaborative participatory research (PR) projects. Throughout, the authors addressed three questions. First, how do Black researchers and Black community partners make sense of PR as a process for expanding access to and improving educational opportunities for Black people? Second, how do the intersectional identities of Black community researchers and Black professional researchers collide and coalesce as they collaborate to address institutional racism and marginalization in research? Third, what critical issues should Black professional researchers and Black community researchers anticipate as they initiate and implement PR projects?

In the prior pages of this book, we revealed our hidden transcripts. We reflected on the past. We worked closely with each author to unpack her or his individual experience with her or his PR processes. We also encouraged each contributor to consider her or his self in relation to other project partners. The authors reflected on challenges and opportunities they encountered as collaborators in PR projects. Turning inward, the authors shared their perspectives, experiences, anxieties, hopes, and disappointments regarding their involvement in the research projects. Finally, they explored how the research projects and partnerships could have been strengthened to better serve the insider-members of the affected communities and their own roles in undermining the potential of the projects. In keeping with the

centering and uplifting of marginalized voices, we recognized the sometimes marginalizing effects of our own voices.

For the community partner authors, the chapters in this book may be their first, of what we hope will be many more publications, presentations, or applications of the work. We did not coauthor chapters, instead presenting community member reflections independently from, yet alongside that of, their professional collaborators. The contributing authors offered candid reflections of how global White supremacy, neocolonialism, racial and ethnic identities, life experiences, and cultural differences among people who shared a racial identity influenced how they worked together and the conflicts they encountered in their research in Black communities.

As editors, we benefitted from having the opportunity to read and think deeply about each author's reflections. Our challenge in writing the conclusion of this book is to reflect in the moment. Not only did we develop a deeper sense of ourselves through our readings, but we also clearly saw commonalities and differences within and across cases. We used our conversations with the participants and with one another to co-reflect and develop a set of recognitions of our collective experiences as Black researcher partners. In this conclusion, we use the book's cases to highlight examples of the personal and collective benefits of multilayered critical reflexivity.[1] Critical reflexivity served as a tool to help us rethink PR approaches and its liberatory possibilities. Critical reflexivity forced us to unapologetically confront the contradictions that emerge in Black Participatory Research (BPR). We use the remainder of this concluding chapter to reflect on these understandings and actions for the future.

BRIDGING FROM PR TO BPR: LESSONS LEARNED

In the introduction, we defined BPR as a strand of participatory action research where (a) the primary parties responsible for carrying out research in Black communities self-identify as Black; (b) Black perspectives are purposefully centered and white perspectives deliberately decentered; (c) marginalized voices from within the African Diaspora are uplifted for Black empowerment, healing, and liberation; and (d) the normative underpinnings of PR are suspect and subject to cultural and political critique particularly as it relates to who is centered in the research. Here we consider some lessons learned from our critical reflections on our conduct of BPR.

PROMISES AND PERILS OF STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM

By chance or by orchestration, Black communities often end up collaborating with researchers who self-identify as Black. Such collaborations are assumed to be a good match. However, sharing the same racial identity does not preclude conflict in the quest to conduct community-based, social justice-driven research in Black communities. We prioritized shedding light on a problematic assumption that Black professional researchers and Black community members are a *perfect fit*. At the same time, we sought to recognize the power of drawing on racial solidarity as a form of strategic essentialism.[2]

An apparently essentialist and homogeneous ideology such as Blackness, like its counterpart Pan-Africanism, can be interpreted in very different ways. Black racial identity is at once unifying and divisive.[3] It is fragile and prone to fractures. It is an asset that binds people with great differences to one another. No matter how imagined some might argue *being Black* is, the self-identifier and the cultural, political, and Pan-Africanist ideals that underpin it have inspired some of the most important social, political, and cultural movements in recent history.[4] Even if our Blackness is imaginary, so what? Our imaginations have proven invaluable in our ongoing quest for freedom from oppression. Our shared racial self-identity represents a self-conscious form of essentialism that holds the potential to create political solidarities among groups of individuals and must not be neglected despite the risk of lending credence to regressive beliefs about ontological essence. However imagined Black is, it has been a consistent epistemic resource from which we have found political power.

On the literal question of strategic essentialism, the books' authors make clear that there is an incredible diversity of identities, positionalities, and experiences that intersect with racial identity. Dominique's reflection in chapter 9 provides one example of the risks of strategic essentialism when assuming shared racial identity equates to shared cultural understandings, experiences, and values. Dominique acted in ways that were culturally insensitive based on her assumptions of racial sameness while remaining ignorant of the cultural understandings of the school community. She entered the school environment with preconceived notions of Africans in general and Senegalese culture specifically. She viewed the practices, values, and behaviors of her Senegalese colleagues as patriarchal and backward. At the time, she was blind to how her attitudes and actions were filtered through a deficit-oriented Western view of the African continent. She found it difficult to take ownership of her repressive and oppressive

actions. Her critical self-reflexivity required a level of vulnerability that was difficult, courageous, yet important given her desire to grow as a participatory researcher.

Despite the potential benefits of being a Black bridge, shared racial identities and affinities do not preclude intra-racial conflict born of power and privilege differentials. Decoteau's shielding of Lynnette from the political fallout of strategic disengagement in the project could be viewed as patronizing and patriarchal. Lynnette's attempts to prevent exploitation of Black community partners without fully informing and involving them in the decision to withdraw participation from the project raises questions about her professional status and lack of reflexivity in the moment. In chapter 7, Lynnette raises questions about her reason to not share particularly personal stories from focus group participants despite their consent and desire to do so. She was concerned about the women's stories being misused and misunderstood. Instead of working with her Black community partners to decide which stories to share and which to keep private, Lynnette acted in a more patronizing manner and decided on her own to withhold specific stories. This was an exercise of her power over rather than power with her Black community partners.

Other stories demonstrate that Black-Black collaborations can be a *good fit*. Gerald Bolling, for example, claimed that the Transitional Corrections Centers project could not have been successfully facilitated by any people other than Black folks. This belief is important. Gerald's and Decoteau's commitment to Black people and to each other presents a contrast to the perils of strategic essentialism. It demonstrates a possibility. Their self-identities as Black men—brothers—served as a bridge that reached across differences, such as educational level, ex-offender status, and employment status. Decoteau and Gerald used their Blackness and their commitment to Black communities and Black people as catalysts for ongoing engagement and connection. They superseded issues of social and class differences by strategically drawing on their racial identities. Their relationship continues today.

If Black researchers choose to embrace the margins, evidence that there are inherent possibilities in strategic essentialism for disrupting systemic oppression is likely to emerge. Blackness can and has served as an instrument of power as it can be strategically employed as a political unifier that acknowledges the sociopolitical construction of race and challenges biological notions of racial categorization. Politically, Black self-identification reflects a commitment to self-definition, determination, and liberation. The Black Nationalist Flag, for example, with its red, black, and green

stripes, has emerged as a unifying symbol that crosses national and cultural boundaries.

But the book also contains a warning for readers that these collaborations, like many others, are messy, complicated, and wrought with contradictions and conflict as they should be, given our diversity of experiences. The chapters demonstrate that challenging the racist assumption of "Black fit" and being aware of intra-racial differences can foster Black racial solidarity, selflessness, and commitment to community uplift. These ideals and their political underpinnings (including Blackness), rather than any particular Black person or group of Black people, are the critical resources that must be cultivated if BPR is to be used as a tool for Black liberation and advancement in the face of global White supremacy. Solidarity in research practice entails being conscious of our individual and collective power and using the power at our disposal to advocate and effect change. It also involves working against wielding our power in ways that reproduce inequalities between Black people.

ACTIVE NONPARTICIPATION AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE

Throughout this book, we purposefully centered and uplifted Black perspectives. Although White folks were involved in various degrees in each of the projects, our previous efforts to make sense of our (two Black university-based researchers') experiences working with White colleagues[5] in Black communities helped us come to terms with the importance of creating a safe space for critical reflexivity in processing our own experiences and sharing our stories independent from that of our "non-Black" colleagues and partners. There was a therapeutic, cathartic nature to this reflective process. We created a space to explore our experiences. And we did not have to explain ourselves. This process helped us arrive at a different reading of PR. One of the major aspects that we discovered in the stories is the importance of what we call *active non-participation*.

Critiques of participation discourses and practices are not new in research. Participation has its limits.[6] Yet, these limits have not been fully explored in the field of PR. An expectation for full and active participation prevails as a fundamental aspect of PR and is most apparent as researchers wrestle with issues of control, collaboration, and commitment. *Control* refers to the degree that a given partner is in a position of power to move the project toward its intended goal at any given time. 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, 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 spectrum with an emphasis on the willingness to share resources and information, including cultural knowledge. 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 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, even across differences. But we continually wrestled with the question: commitment to what? And commitment to whom?

In our analysis, we not only viewed assumptions about participation and empowerment as suspect, but also came to understand that nonparticipation holds the potential to be empowering. We describe active nonparticipation as conscious, specific, and deliberate (dis)engagement that is intended to redirect or limit research for the sake of preserving personal or collective identities, cultural integrity, or other forms of well-being. Within PAR, there is an assumption that participation is associated with empowerment. But we found that participation could also be disempowering and that active nonparticipation was a means of challenging oppressive conditions brought on by engagement in research.

We do not suggest we have fully worked out what active nonparticipation means as it relates to the broader goals and processes of PR, but it was a recurring theme across the projects. Lynnette and Decoteau engaged in strategic and active nonparticipation by bowing out of meetings. They planned this nonparticipation when they realized that a White outsider researcher was poised to use the data collected from the project for personal rather than community advancement. Traditional PR researchers would consider this lack of participation a poor reflection on the conduct of the research. Lynnette and Decoteau were conscious enough to act against their colleague's effort to insert herself into the research project at an inopportune time from which she stood to directly benefit. They saw

their acts of nonparticipation as liberatory attempts to minimize exploitation of their Black community partners. Nonparticipation became their form of active resistance.

Another example is found in chapter 8, where youth authors, Fernie, Ndeye Mama, and Soukeyna, described active resistance to participation in sustainability activities by school community members. Fernie attempted to process the resistance of her peers to participation through telling an allegory. In this allegory, GLAF student leaders anointed themselves as "believers" and the rest of the students in the school as "breakers." Fernie's allegory reflected the dominant perspective of their project coordinators: the GLAF students (and the project coordinators) were more enlightened leaders, while everyone else was in the dark. While the believers criticized the breakers for their nonparticipation, a different, more critical reading might suggest that the Senegalese students and teachers, the breakers, were engaging in defiant opposition for a reason. In other words, we can understand their nonparticipation as a conscious act of resistance against perceived cultural imperialism and exclusionary elitism.

By writing the chapter and assuming a critically reflexive stance, Fernie, Ndeye Mama, and Soukeyna came to understand their roles in facilitating an *us* versus *them* dynamic, as reflected at the chapter's end. They acknowledged that they systematically disengaged their peers because they did not involve them in all activities from the beginning of the project. Their inability and unwillingness to engage them was, in part, due to how the project coordinators selectively recruited the believers based on their statuses and performance in the school. From the onset of the PR project, the coordinators made choices that marginalized a majority of the school community. In doing so, they marginalized themselves and the students who would eventually follow them.

Despite participation's limits as a discourse and practice, in terms of producing mutually beneficial outcomes, it continues to be an underpinning for what constitutes valid knowledge claims in PR. Participation is not always the end goal. Willingness to engage in active disengagement or participation when and if a research project has the potential to cause harm is an act of courage. All participation is not good participation. Lack of participation and disengagement challenges the assumption in traditional PR that something is wrong with the Black people who choose to not participate. In fact, something can indeed be wrong. But the problem is not always a poor reflection of individuals and groups who choose to not participate. We are rethinking the power of refusal to participate, but also withdrawal, and active nonparticipation. Lack of participation requires a

focus on what is underlying the nonparticipation. It also represents a redistribution of power because the work cannot continue without the agreement of insider participants.

Without understanding active nonparticipation as a strategy, it can easily be cast in a negative light. PR is important in that it recognizes that collaboration among disparate groups has the potential to be empowering. But this, in large part, depends on people with a shared commitment to the research goals. Thus, we suggest that research assumes nonparticipation is an active nonparticipatory process and a suitable site of inquiry in BPR. It is likely a site to which primarily cultural bridges and insiders have access. In the research projects presented in this book, outsiders held a disproportionate amount of control and the mutual benefits of the project remained underexamined by all partners. The outsiders within and insider participants used their cultural knowledge and ways of being to counterbalance the disproportionate amount of control that powerbrokers held. In the end, we recognized active nonparticipation as forms of resistance and solidarity.

RELATIONSHIPS AS BOTH METHOD AND GOAL

BPR acknowledges the risk that engaging in cross-racial critical reflection will result in the active re-centering of White people and the challenges of engaging in critical reflexive practices with White folks in the room. Part of our humanizing work has to occur when the people who are intentionally or nonintentionally dehumanizing us are not in the room. There is always the potential for White people's voice to take up too much space even if they do not speak. Their very presence takes up space, which can prevent Black people from engaging in the transformative dialogue and relationship development necessary for impactful PR to occur.

Relationships became the means by which we conducted BPR and the foundation of the successes we did achieve in all of the cases. For example, Deirdre and Liz reflect in chapters 2 and 3 on how the trust they developed over time through a personal relationship became the solid ground that allowed Liz to release control of the Umbrella Group project to Deirdre and the New Orleans community. A clear goal of BPR is to Reserve relationships in the face of disagreement. This was manifest when Liz let go and trusted that Deirdre's decision to not release the PAR project report was in the best interest of the community. Deirdre, because of her positionality, understood better than Liz that with the

Umbrella Group in its nascent community engagement phase, an ill-timed release of a report held the potential to fracture the fragile cohesiveness of the group.

The core questions underlying PR projects shift when research partners center relationships as a method and an outcome. The question becomes: "Can the community and the professionals rely on one another beyond the life of the project, even if and when it was deemed a 'success?'" In other words, did the project generate, in addition to change and knowledge, authentic lasting relationships that can be called upon if and when the community or the professional faces new challenges? And where should these commitments end? We understand that relationships are the means by which we conduct our PR as well as a desired outcome of the research. In such instances, developing and maintaining relationships become framed as methodology.

OUR COMMITMENT TO
BLACK PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

This book is an artifact of critical reflexivity. We presented counter-narratives from the perspectives of Black folks, who represented a range of societal positions—professionally trained researchers, community leaders, students, and community activists. Through the lenses of both professional researchers and community researchers who collaborated in participatory projects, we learned about different ways that participants worked through or attempted to work through intra-racial divisions such as professional priorities, socioeconomic status, social class, cultural differences, literacy and language differences, and ethnic identities while attempting to both honor the integrity of their research projects and their sense of responsibility to Black advancement.

The research stories are counter-narratives that demonstrated a deep commitment to making sense of our roles in the projects, how we shaped the projects (for better or worse), and how involvement in the projects shaped us. We committed to centering ourselves, our needs, as a means of challenging the White supremacist structures that, absent critical reflexivity, relegate our research stories and experiences to the margins. More importantly, we learned about ourselves, we healed a bit from our past experiences (although we have not done the collective work to make peace with some of our partners), and we have a clearer sense of the importance of our relationships in our work as we move forward.

We recognized, as a result of developing this book, that for Black folks, the critical reflexivity processes that are a cornerstone of participatory approaches fail to challenge many assumptions of PR, which brings us to the final aspect of BPR—the importance of positioning PR as suspect. PR emerged in response to traditional social science research that studied "subjects." PR attempts to transfer power and build capacity of insider groups. It seeks improvements in insiders' lives and for folks to be able to solve their own problems. These are noble principles. Yet, as Black researchers, the central problem is that advancement and struggle do not have an end point in the context of global White supremacy. The potential of participatory approaches is its ability to directly challenge racial marginalization of professionals and community members alike. We consider racism, its incompatibility with human dignity, and its pernicious effect on our lives as the root problems that warrant more pointed critiques, even in PR theory and practice. We came to this realization as a result of exploring our hidden transcripts.

BPR entails developing a consciousness of our individual and collective power and using that power to advocate and effect change, including our self-care and self-transformation. It also involves not exercising power over our sisters and brothers. To achieve this balance requires engaging in difficult intra-racial conversations, being courageous enough to speak truths to ourselves, and to heal and care for one another. It entails subversively wielding power, in whatever form we possess it, to protect Black people from exploitation in the research process. It entails confronting and negotiating with powerbrokers in institutions and communities, respectively. It entails developing a critical lens of if, when, and to what extent organizations and individuals can and should support our causes. It entails elevating and extending research beyond the traditionally valued outcomes of publishing and conferencing.

This book contributes to the knowledge bases in PAR, community-based research, Black studies, and urban education by attending to the complex dynamics that occur when Black professionally trained researchers work with, for, and alongside Black folks in Black communities toward an end of knowledge production, strengthened communities, and liberation. The book offers a glimpse of Black racial solidarity as a critical resource for challenging the marginalization and the imposed essentialization of Black experiences in research and scholarship. Our hope is that Black professional researchers and community members might follow suit in using critical reflexive methods to make sense of their identities, positionalities, and power in PR.

NOTES

1. Ruth Nicholls, "Research and Indigenous Participation: Critical Reflexive Methods," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 12, no. 2 (April 2009): 117–126.
2. Katharina Schramm, "Pan Africanism as a Resource: The W.E.B. DuBois Memorial Centre for Pan-African Culture in Ghana, *African Identities* 2, no. 2 (2004): 151–171; John J. Su, "Ghosts of Essentialism: Racial Memory as an Epistemological Claim," *American Literature* 81, no. 2 (June 2009).
3. Schramm, "Pan Africanism as a Resource," 151–171.
4. S. Lemelle and R. D. G. Kelley, *Imagining Home: Class, Culture, and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (London: Verso, 1994).
5. B. B. Swadener and K. Mutua, "Decolonizing Performances: Deconstructing the Global Postcolonial," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, and L. T. Smith (pp. 31–43) (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).
6. Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, *Participation: The New Tyranny* (London: Zed Books, 2001); Samuel Hickey and Giles Mohan, *Participation—from Tyranny to Transformation—Exploring New Approaches to Participation in Development* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

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