



Figure 2. Balance between home life, schoolwork, and after-school activities was identified as one of the most stressful aspects of the middle school to high school transition.

The impact of change reached to other levels of the school. I facilitated three workshops on transitional stress that students encounter at the ISB for both middle school and high school staff and presented our findings and recommendations to the school leadership team. Recommendations included the hiring an additional social-emotional counselor in the high school, offering a social and emotional course in ninth grade, educating parents on the transition from middle school to high school, advocating for a universal grading system between the two schools, allowing for collaboration time between teachers in middle high schools, reducing the academic jump between eighth and ninth grade, creating an assessment calendar, providing additional activity counseling, vertically aligning the curriculum better, creating a bump-up day for students to experience ninth grade while still in eighth grade, and eliminating semester-long science courses in ninth grade.

The PAR left me with a critical understanding: *The voice of the student has been underserved with policy changes in the past when student voice should be at the forefront of decision-making in a school.* The research helped to bring the student perspective forward at ISB. More time has been devoted in Advisory to discussing academic and social-emotional stress, and students have been given a voice in advisory planning sessions to outline the pressure they are feeling as a group and the ways we can better serve them as educators. I remain a teacher-leader at the school and, with many of my colleagues, have been somewhat surprised at the multiple ways the PAR could affect local school changes and choices.

Lihi

The explicit social justice focus of ECU's EdD was key in my decision to enroll in the program. I pursued the degree with twin goals of sustaining my work as an educator for equity and advancing activism within my organization. It did not take long for these goals to

begin to materialize. From the start, when instructed to eschew the traditional *problem* of practice and instead investigate a *focus* of practice, the program steered me toward an asset-based approach to addressing complex educational issues. This stood in contrast to the common problematizing approach of locating deficits to be remediated, which invariably contributes to the educationalization of entrenched, cross-sector social problems (Labaree, 2008).

Through the use of design thinking strategies – including empathy-building, early probing, and prototyping – I could ensure my focus of practice stemmed directly from the voices of parent and staff activists, who quickly became my co-practitioner-researchers. Working as the regional executive director for a large community-based organization afforded me access to a wide swath of educational, mental health, and child welfare professionals within my agency, as well as to their school-based partners – the students, parents, faculty, staff, and leaders within the public schools in which my organization did its work. I gravitated toward the most vocal among parent and staff voices within one of these public schools, an elementary charter school serving racially diverse students in an under-resourced, urban setting. I was inspired by the collective quest among the school's constituents to envision a school community organized to support unconditional belongingness, rather than exclusionary discipline practices and other methods of sorting and segregation. The goal dovetailed with my organization's work and our existing partnership with the school, and was rooted in the activist tradition of radical inclusion, drawing from Dr. King's concept of the Beloved Community (<https://thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy/>). Choosing an equity-centered goal was only the beginning; ahead were the important steps of organizing for activist participation, doing the collectivist work required, and making meaning of this venture within the wider context of the school and community.



Setting the Table

To actualize the laudable goals of increasing belongingness and eliminating exclusionary discipline, the research group of parents, transdisciplinary school staff, and school leaders defined a theory of practice. Guided by our beliefs in the wisdom of the community and the power of collaboration, we defined our theory as follows: *if we provide meaningful structures for collective learning embedded in real-time data about the school's current culture and climate health, then we can continue the school's goal of eliminating the use of exclusionary discipline practices while simultaneously maintaining an organized and orderly learning environment in which all students belong.* Understanding the complexity inherent in our inquiry, we committed to interrogating root causes deeply, creating a fishbone diagram that incorporated both assets and challenges, and considering the intersecting conditions impacting the school at the macro, meso and micro systems levels. The approach is rooted in systems theory: the belief that meaningful change requires a high level of systemic overhaul, and that such systemic overhaul is best negotiated by constituents most closely affected by the current system (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

To activate the principles of educational activism further, we determined the need to center not only those with day-to-day interactions with the school but indeed those most disenfranchised by its status quo, believing they were best capable of uncovering blind spots and setting priorities (Freire, 1997). To this end, we explicitly sought participation from constituents whose voices were least likely to be present, reaching out to families experiencing the impact of exclusionary discipline practices and engaging classified staff and community representatives. To provide access, I leveraged my role as a formal leader within the organization to ensure we had childcare and transportation available, provided meals for meetings, and identified co-facilitators who were credible messengers within the existing community (Baumbusch et al., 2008). How did these experiences and decisions to exchange with various stakeholders match up or align with course work? What background knowledge did the student need to prepare or gain before they could make decisions about the circumstances described above?

Doing the Work

We put in place the conditions for authentic, community-driven change. Yet, all too often promises of inclusion and access draw marginalized community members in, only to further their mistrust when these promises are not reflected in consistent practice. To actualize the goal of activating activism, I relied on the coursework in data collection and research design. Having first experienced the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) model with my EdD cohort, I was privileged to host two dissertation committee members as co-facilitators for our inaugural, multi-day CLE at the focal school site.

Several days before the CLE, all invitees were provided with pre-readings, including a summary of the CLE axioms presented earlier in this chapter (Guajardo et al., 2016) and the concept of gracious space, defined by the University of Washington's Center for Ethical Leadership as, "A spirit and a setting where we invite the stranger and learn in public" (Hughes & Grace, 2010, p. 21). Together, the CLE axioms and corresponding concept of gracious space helped frame the intention of the CLE: to create a space where hierarchy had been intentionally flattened and leadership thoughtfully distributed in order to facilitate the transfer of the community's own wisdom and strengths. By empowering the

people closest to the issues, encouraging appropriate boundary crossings, facilitating both critical conversation and other socially dynamic learning processes, and organizing around assets, hopes and dreams, the CLE sought to activate change from within. These axioms were supported by the attention given to embody gracious space, which set in place the conditions necessary - safety, trust, and space for strangeness - for powerful activist action aimed at large-scale change.

As the CLE itself began, we translated these concepts into embodied experiences. The room was purposefully designed to encourage collaboration and creativity, with table-top bins consisting of colored pencils, fidgets, sensory items, snacks, pens, and other learning supplies and white paper as tablecloths and on most walls to encourage written or artistic expression of key concepts. The first activity consisted of a welcoming circle and a mindfulness exercise, and three 30-minute breaks and a free, provided lunch sent the message that self- and community-care were being prioritized. Throughout the CLE, the axioms and gracious space were both explicitly modeled and contextualized by the participants given their preferences and needs. As individuals shared stories, participated in performative modalities (such as theater exercises and the creation of metaphors through visual and performance art), and co-constructed a definition of the values they brought collectively to the work, they did so within their natural, transdisciplinary teams. In this way, the CLE not only served as the vessel for interdependent learning and decision-making but as practice for how they would negotiate their common space in their work together so they could live out the values we were defining in practice. The King Center stresses such "practice sessions" as essential in embodying a beloved community, sustaining the efforts of activists hoping to disrupt current public education trends.

The scaffolding that the doctoral program afforded me in introducing the CLE pedagogy provided the opportunity to increase my comfort and confidence in utilizing similar activist "practice sessions" independently, and in so doing added a sustainable practice by which to generate community insights and organize for cultural change. I followed up on the introduction the CLE offered to expose additional activist-oriented approaches, including in selecting data collection processes such as PhotoVoice, which allowed participants to capture their insights about the school reform process by sharing photographs at each of our meetings and helping code these for common themes (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005). I relied on additional data collection tools, such as a one-minute essay which could be written or spoken at the end of our sessions, to collect evidence while equalizing voice to ensure the contributions of all participants were incorporated. The strategies contributed to an expanded understanding of the focus of practice and facilitated rich sense-making rooted in the holistic wisdom of the community. Ultimately, they led directly to many of the PAR's most salient findings by demonstrating that progress on laudable goals, such as the CPR team's desire to install trauma-informed alternatives to exclusionary discipline, began and ended with the ability to draw upon local strengths and passions.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Ronny needed a new way to hear from the often marginalized voices of students. He found a different methodology—PAR plus CLE routines and more imaginative data collection tools --that allowed for this. In the end, he was able to develop the necessary

trust with students to hear the authentic voices and was able to make changes based on the insights of the student voices. More importantly, the evidence from the PAR led to substantial local change in an organization that had rituals and routines that seemed impervious to change. The school leadership has seen the value of such research and the voices of students, and the high school has made substantial changes not only in policy and course design, but in relying more on student voice as a necessary component of decision-making.

For years, the middle school and high school at the ISB have primarily been operating independently of one another. As a member of the K-12 Science Curriculum Committee, he advocated for scheduling time between the transition years in the school (fifth and sixth grade, and eighth and ninth grade) to reduce the academic transition stress that students experience. He was able to use the evidence from the transitional research to recommend more collaboration time between science teachers in middle school and high school with the Director of Curriculum and Learning Support, which was granted. In presenting the findings to the school community, the evidence led to substantial changes at other levels of the school. He began to see his role as a teacher leader and student advocate in different terms as he has actively represented the voices of students to other. At the outset of the doctoral program, he might have said he was “just a science teacher,” but, by the conclusion, he saw the value of becoming a practitioner-researcher who used evidence to make changes.

In Lih’s case, modeling the techniques and sharing in the responsibility for utilizing them soon gave way to evidence of transfer. As the co-practitioner-researchers (CPRs) gained facility with the CLE approach, they began to experiment with strategies for engaging additional constituents who had traditionally been left out of decision-making opportunities. In one example, students in grades K-2 were asked to envision their ideal school culture using visual arts modalities such as drawing and sculpture, titling their submissions with the assistance of classroom adults.

Lih’s cycles of research unleashed important learning about the conditions required for sustained educational activism. Within her context, the inclusion of marginalized voices enabled a community-desired change. Perhaps more importantly, using the PAR processes promoted healing and repaired prior incidences of systemic harm. In Freire’s (1997) words, “People are fulfilled to the extent that they create their world (which is a human world) and create it with their transforming labor” (p. 145). Still, harnessing the insights of community members who were frequently at the margins required a commitment to reckon with the harm they had experienced within the current system. The insight revealed the critical importance of promoting healing and resilience, a finding that mirrored those in other social movements. As Black Lives Matters Co-Founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors and co-author aasha bande (2018) write of their work as activists in Ferguson, Missouri: “In our work we must always make space to confront trauma and to consider strategies for resistance” (p. 206).

The two dissertation vignettes in the article represent the integration of the three foundational frameworks and processes of an iterative and participatory research methodology: (1) community learning exchange protocols; (2) design thinking; and (3) improvement science tools. Other dissertations in our EdD tell the same story – transfer from theory to practice because the doctoral students were empowered to take risks, try new ways of doing and

collecting evidence, and collaborate intentionally with others in their local contexts to design and understand the work. Our focus to create activist-practitioners has been rooted in the work of developing practitioner-researchers. Our program design – pedagogies, activities, and PAR dissertation – integrates research (data collection and analysis), process (improvement science meet design thinking and learning exchanges) with practice.

To do this type of work, we have to disrupt university preparation systems, often resistant to change. Thus, creating and sustaining the program means a change in approach that often puts pressure on the current structures that strangle most university systems from making the necessary changes. For our re-imaged EdD it means one syllabus per semester that combines courses for the doctoral students and keeping busy leaders on track by writing weekly memos; it means faculty conversations that integrate coursework and the dissertation; it means dedicated advisors who have phone conversations about the PAR and how to organize CLEs on a biweekly basis; and it means a university system responsive to changing the number of chapters in a dissertation and not putting up barriers to a different way of doing the work. We believe the road to new practice is paved by creating useful new knowledge, by modeling the practices we think will make substantial change, and by reflecting deeply in order to act responsibly. Like the PAR process itself, leadership work is never sequential, nor does it stop. With core values as a constant beacon and strategic support from advisors deeply familiar with each student’s context, we were able to make substantive changes in the way we operate as university faculty.

Our aim was to create an educational doctoral program for practitioner-researchers that embodied activism and social justice as beacon core values for the coordinators and the program design. At the same time, the values and the structure, frameworks, pedagogy, coursework, and support need to reinvigorate school and district leaders as they pursue an EdD. We created a transformative program to model how they too can transform their current conditions as they transfer knowledge into practice. We know the process starts with a disposition and a set of core beliefs about social justice; we recognize that the belief has to be reified in the ways we construct and instruct.

CONCLUSION

A common query at CPED events is: *What does a dissertation in practice look like?* In this article, we provided two examples of dissertations in practice. Moreover, we provided examples of students as activist practitioner-researchers. We do not separate research from practice nor practice from research. By fusing these roles together, and by anchoring our work in Participatory Action Research in the triumvirate of frameworks and processes of community learning exchanges, design thinking, and improvement science, our dissertations led to real, meaningful change (Rogers, 2003). Combined, the frameworks are invitational and nimble. Without the frameworks, Ronny would not have been able to learn with the students to make policy level change. Without the frameworks, Lih would not have been able to break the traditional hierarchy of school leadership. Without the frameworks, each would not have been able to be activist practitioner-researcher *in and beyond* their dissertations. In the end, the celebration is not the completion of the program, but how this the processes transfer into practice beyond the dissertation exercise and how the program graduates maintain themselves as leaders of equity.



When performance fails to meet goals, a search process for a solution intensifies (Cyert & March, 1963). The search process for a solution usually resides in the neighborhood of the problem itself. March (1997) stipulated, "Search is stimulated by a failure to achieve a goal and continues until it reveals an alternative that is good enough to satisfy existing evoked goals" (p. 12). Leadership programs, like other organizational innovations, have fallen into this solution trap and within years morph back to a traditional format (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). The structure of programs needs to be adjusted, but without frameworks that provide space for risk-taking, inquiry, participation, and conversation, programs will tinker with different approaches, but not attempt to reinvent themselves.

Students in our reimagined program are practitioner-researchers. In the role, they engage a wide scope of community members, and they honor the context of their place and the wisdom of the people in their school and surrounding communities. They use an equity lens on all evidence, and they push colleagues to more equitable practices in leadership and classrooms. For us this is the definition of activist scholars. For us this is a way to foster the development of data-informed, inclusive, equity-minded practitioners who can develop capacity as qualitative researchers to have methods of evidence collection and analysis that can be translated into school and district improvement.

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