

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Bringing Equity to Implementation Supplement
Listening to Black Parents
By William Jackson & Kristine Andrews

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Summer 2021

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
www.ssir.org
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Consider: What type of SDOH outcomes could you also measure as you implement your interventions? How might you prioritize selecting interventions that affect more than just proximal outcomes? And how might you examine the impact of the interventions beyond the main target outcomes?

Call to Action #3: *Develop equitable implementation strategies.*

Just as we advocate for implementation researchers and practitioners to consider SDOH outcomes in the development and measurement of their interventions, we also urge them to adopt implementation strategies that are focused on systems. Implementing systems-level strategies is not a simple task, because identifying and measuring contextual factors is challenging. Context too often tends to be an afterthought of our work, but it drives differences in our studies and sustains inequities. To enhance equity, implementation researchers and practitioners must address the *structural* determinants of health—the socioeconomic, historical, and political contexts—that contribute to the socioeconomic position of those being served. Equity-focused implementation strategies ensure that people from underserved communities are not blamed or deemed to have character deficits. They address the historical mistrust, anger, and fear that these communities rightfully have with traditional systems of care. The previous two calls to action asked implementation science stakeholders to embrace their place as advocates for justice. Justice, in turn, requires implementation researchers and practitioners to address the context that the individual faces.

To achieve equity, we must develop strategies that support communities to be safe, heard, and empowered in traditional service interactions. With justice in mind, we should develop implementation strategies that not only meet immediate needs but also rectify the consequences of inequitable systems. Implementation researchers and practitioners must move beyond programs and practices to institutional and social policy. Only this way can we counteract the relational ruptures and compound inequities of the SDOH with historically underserved populations. We could also benefit from learning the harmful effects of legislation on these populations, including their access to protections and quality service. Laws can reinforce discrimination, protect those with power, and increase the disadvantage of those without social capital. Alternatively, they can create systems for equitable outcomes.

To dismantle racism and enhance equity, we need a seismic shift in the current academic model. We will not be able to make a significant difference with piecemeal studies under current funding mechanisms. We must build a stronger collaborative practice, with thoughtful sharing of resources and deliberate capacity building. The field of implementation science needs to infuse social justice concepts in its work and deliver ongoing anti-bias and anti-racism training to its researchers and practitioners. Implementation scientists can benefit from learning how to examine issues of power (e.g., how our social position affects our research questions and engagement with historically underserved communities), and how to develop and support allyship and collaborative science.

It is time for implementation researchers and practitioners to explore how the field might hold itself accountable regarding equity. We pose the following questions: How do policies impact the reach, implementation, and recruitment of underserved populations in your studies? How could you partner with advocacy groups and policy makers to further equity in your work? How might you develop imple-

mentation strategies that affect the contextual issues that contribute to disparities in outcomes? How could you ensure accountability and self-reflection in learning about the historical contexts of underserved communities? How might you embed anti-bias and anti-racism training in your implementation science trainings and strategies?

MINDING THE GAPS

Our current model of evidence-based interventions that target the behavior of individuals in traditional settings has failed so many people. The implementation science field must quickly catch up by developing equity-focused knowledge, intervention selection, and implementation strategies, lest we fall even further behind the burgeoning social consciousness and social justice movements.

With a more mature understanding of the social determinants of health, we must respond to immediate needs while also advocating for and proffering longer-term strategies that address the ways systems have marginalized people. Correcting the impact of historical oppression and systems-level root causes is the only equitable path forward. ●

Listening to Black Parents

Black children experience racial discrimination in academic environments that actively deplete their self-worth. By accessing the cultural knowledge of Black parents, Village of Wisdom co-designed a liberatory approach to education.

BY WILLIAM JACKSON & KRISTINE ANDREWS

“Oppressed people, whatever their level of formal education, have the ability to understand and interpret the world around them, to see the world for what it is, and move to transform it,” said civil rights and human rights activist Ella Baker. She may not be viewed as a pioneer of equitable implementation, but her outsize impact on the civil rights movement was grounded in her ability to listen and support the leadership and wisdom of people most affected by racism.

My name is William Jackson and I’m the founder and a team member of Village of Wisdom, an organization leveraging the collective wisdom of Black families to support advocacy and organizing for racially just schools. Baker’s approach was unknown to our team when we founded Village of Wisdom (VOW) in 2014, but the spirit of her approach informs everything we do. Indeed, it wasn’t hard to convince us, as the children of Black parents ourselves, that Black parents—a Black child’s first teachers—might know best how to facilitate learning for Black children.

VOW’s solution was simple at its core: Leverage the cultural wisdom of Black parents to affirm their children’s Blackness as an antidote to a world that actively depletes their self-worth through systemic racism and

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Parents in a breakout session during a Family Learning Villages workshop.

interpersonal racial discrimination.¹ Our work was initially informed by strength-based racial socialization research, which traditionally focuses on how Black parents communicate the idea of race to their children.² We aimed to create spaces where Black parents shared racially affirming messages they used with their children and how they used those messages to prepare their children to cope with the racism they would experience in school. We drew upon the research of scholars such as Enrique Neblett, Stephanie Coard, and Howard Stevenson.

We initially called the workshops we developed to support Black parents in assisting their children Family Learning Villages. We gave families space to develop their approach to navigate school settings dominated by white teachers and plagued by white supremacy (such as devaluing and erasing the contributions of Black people, prioritizing white teacher comfort over Black student learning and rights, and villainizing Black student language, hair, and clothes). The name we chose for these sessions reflected our team's instinctive beliefs as the children of Black parents who had helped each of us navigate American schools. We knew Black parents had a lot of wisdom to share; we just needed to create a space for them to share insights with and learn from each other. We also provided content to encourage conversation between parents that would amplify racial pride and deepen perspectives on racism and how to undermine it. Realizing the connection between economic oppression and racism, we also established the practice of compensating Black parents for their time and intellectual contributions during these first workshops.

Our communal approach that structurally and financially demonstrated respect for Black parent wisdom struck a sharp contrast with the majority of parent support programs: As psychologist Stephanie Coard has asserted, most parenting programs have been problematically designed by whites looking to fix the parenting of Black people.³

Unfortunately, the working assumption of most parent training programs seems to be that the Black parents lack the expertise to contribute to conversations about parenting Black children.

Our intentional approach to structure our workshops to promote and compensate Black parent wisdom sharing proved fruitful. Specifically, the Family Learning Villages revealed what parents knew, what they wanted for their children, and what teaching strategies would likely be successful with Black students. (See "Culturally Affirming Strategies" on page 19.) Even more, we learned that when we approach parents with information to explore, Black parents will not only deepen our understanding of the issues facing Black families but also contribute to the work themselves. They saw us and more importantly themselves as coconspirators in the collective struggle for liberation—a future where self-determination for all, especially for Black people, is a reality and a right.

As VOW staff listened to the dreams and frustrations of parents, we noticed that many of them were passionate about the same issues: their children didn't trust their teachers; their children weren't interested in the lessons; and there wasn't enough Black history being taught. We weren't the only people hearing Black parents' complaints—but we were different from others in that we were one of the few groups really listening to parents' concerns as valid critiques.

Through this listening, VOW staff realized that Black parents were experiencing the same processes of dehumanization as their children. Black parents were clearly articulating their realities and acutely identifying the root causes of how schools were failing them and their children. However, due to the white supremacist motivations of schools (e.g., worship of the written word), the genius of Black parents was being overlooked and undervalued. Through my understanding of the world as constructed in the Black homes, baseball parks, and churches where I grew up, I heard the Black parents' voices loud and clear.

In fact there was a lot of research theory that aligned with their wisdom. For instance, Brené Brown's research on vulnerability tells us that if a child can't trust you, they can't learn, love, or create in that environment.⁴ Even more, we know that if students are not interested in the instructional content, they cannot sustain the type of learning psychologists Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan cite in their self-determination theory as necessary for tasks requiring sustained effort.⁵ Just as important, the need for Black history is well substantiated by a multitude of Black researchers who have outlined the importance of racial identity affirmation for Black children.⁶ Our team heard parents clearly say that their children did not deserve to be taught how to cope with racism; their children deserved liberatory learning environments that affirmed their humanity.

With critical insights gleaned from Black parents, VOW team members—especially Taylor Webber-Fields, Amber Majors, and Aya Shabu—pushed me to center the cultural knowledge and experience of Black parents in all of our work. Not only did we decide to center our organizational theory of culturally affirming instruction based on parents' observations, but we also realized we needed to codify Black parents' insights about the tools and strategies needed to build culturally affirming instruction that could help educators and others better use these insights. Therefore, parents became collaborators in developing the grounding framework of our organization: the Black Genius framework. This structure brings together six elements of culturally affirming learning environments that encourage the healthy development of Black children's intellectual curiosity and racial identity. (See "Black Genius Elements," on page 20.) The identification of the Black Genius framework also solidified the evolution of our program model to focus our efforts on transforming schools into more culturally affirming learning environments where Black children experience less discrimination.

FIX THE WATER, NOT THE FISH

Equity consultants and evaluators Donna-Marie Winn and Marvin McKinney offer a useful analogy of fish swimming in dirty water to help elucidate the difference between liberatory, resilience and deficit-based efforts.⁷ In a situation where the majority of fish in a body of water are dying, the only rational conclusion is that the water is dirty or poisoned. A deficit approach focuses on fixing the dying fish rather than the water that is killing them. Unfortunately, most interventions and organizations purporting to serve Black children see them as problems to be fixed, and

even more often see their families and communities as the source of their issues. Racial socialization research and our first workshops with parents taught us that Black parents were instead critical agents protecting their children from the dirty water that was killing the spirits of their children.

Focusing on learning from and with the community is a core tenet of equitable implementation. Unfortunately, investing in the wisdom of Black parents was a difficult concept to describe and build support for in the philanthropic and social science sectors, where intervention work too often starts from the deficit-based, fish-fixing paradigm. For example, requests for proposals (RFPs) call for responses to, "How will the work improve student performance?" "How will your organization change student behavior?" "How many students will your organization work with this year?" These types of RFP questions discourage equitable implementation strategies and incentivize problematic, deficit-based approaches focused on fixing students and not the water.

As an organization, we began looking for assessments that would elucidate the culture and climate Black students face. We wanted to know how dirty the water was. Only then would we be able to identify the impact of racism and demonstrate how efforts could reduce both the impact and presence of discrimination in schools. We knew that if we wanted to measure the issues that were the most important to change, we would need to assess the water.

The exploratory structure of our Family Learning Villages workshops gave parents a forum to tell us what their children deserved in learning environments. We took the six factors Black parents identified and developed a student-perspective survey so that youth themselves could evaluate whether the instruction they were receiving was culturally affirming. We validated the survey with more than 1,000 students from five different schools. Preliminary statistical results found the items within the survey were measuring the phenomena related to cultural affirmation in the classroom. Student positive reports of cultural affirmation across the six factors were positively correlated with attendance and negatively correlated with suspension rates. Two of the cultural affirmation factors were correlated with overall academic performance. In other words: Exploring the wisdom of Black parents led us to an assessment design that was desperately needed by the field to assess how to create ideal learning environments for Black children.

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING LEARNING STRATEGIES

Coping strategies are obviously necessary as institutional racism is not going to be dispelled by a magic wand. But building resiliency is not a pathway to liberation, nor does it address the inequities that give racist systems their power. An equitable implementation approach allowed us to see that we were called to do more than just work with Black parents to prepare their children to cope with racism and discrimination in school. Our work had to include transforming instruction into being more culturally affirming.

We struggled to balance our potential impact in schools with our original commitment to center Black parents in our work. We needed a way to make the process of identifying a Black-parent informed framework and developing a Black-parent validated instrument more intentional and repeatable. This realization led

Culturally Affirming Strategies

Village of Wisdom has adopted the use of culturally affirming strategies to describe practices originally conceived by Gloria Ladson-Billings—professor, educator, and trailblazer, who authored the term "culturally responsive pedagogy." Ladson-Billings and others have since refined the term and devised different variants of culturally responsive pedagogy. When we use it, we are referring to instruction that reflects the concepts in our Black Genius elements, which ultimately means instruction that affirms the racial identity of Black children and develops their academic interests.

One example of a culturally affirming strategy: High levels of lead are endemic to a disproportionate number of homes in a learner's community. The learner's teacher engages the learner by using this as a jumping-off point to discuss the impact of lead on the health of young children or the science behind lead remediation techniques.

our organization to our most compelling question to date: What if we identified processes that intentionally did what we previously did in a more organic fashion—put parents in spaces to identify and evaluate culturally affirming strategies?

We found our answer in community-based participatory research (CBPR): the act of putting people closest to the phenomena being explored by a research study in control of the study. We endeavored to identify culturally affirming strategies that would be validated by Black parent researchers. We started where we began—with a group of parents in workshops talking to each other about how they were affirming their children in the middle of a double pandemic (i.e., COVID-19 and racism). We identified five parents from this group to be our inaugural group of Black Parent Researchers. Just as before, we compensated these parents throughout the process for their intellectual contributions.

After receiving training on facilitating focus group discussions, the Black Parent Researchers facilitated a series of focus groups for parents, teachers, and students about their dreams for a culturally affirming learning environment. Using both equitable implementation and CBPR practices, we involved those parents in interpreting the meaning of the research findings. We used the emergent findings from the CBPR process to ignite a user-centered design process.

Black Genius Elements

A Liberatory Framework for Whole Learner Development

Interest Awareness: The practice of using a learner's interests to engage them in learning activities, typically allowing the learner to embrace significant challenges and be motivated to persist in learning for long periods of time.

Racial Pride: The practice of using a Black learner's connection to their race and culture to increase the relevance of a learning task. This practice is also important in our current global context dominated by white supremacist thinking to counteract the negative impact this has on Black learners' academic sense of self.

Can-Do Attitude: The practice of creating learning environments that reward learners who extend themselves beyond what they know, creating safe spaces for failure and providing feedback to the learner.

Multicultural Navigation: The practice of creating learning environments that explore various cultures in meaningful ways related to concepts the learner is being asked to master, for the purpose of preparing learners for an increasingly globalized world.

Selective Trust: The practice of identifying and using actions that build learner trust in the instructor for the purpose of increasing the learner's desire to participate in learning activities that require or would benefit from love and creativity.

Social Justice (Genius): The practice of creating learning environments that challenge learners to analyze social injustices, especially those that are relevant to their communities and encouraging learners to devise strategies that either dismantle systems of oppression or create new systems of freedom and justice.

Powered by Black homeschoolers, teachers, and parents, this process identified culturally affirming instructional strategies for teachers and resources for parents. We plan to repeat this process continuously to provide the education field with a myriad of culturally affirming learning strategies validated by Black parents.

OVERCOMING SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

CBPR approaches are a means to achieving equitable implementation. Our approach has included three key elements of equitable implementation. First, we engage the community in assessing the problem, developing strategies, and validating solutions, with Black parents playing an integral role from the very beginning. Second, we make sure that we are compensating contributions equitably. Third, we pay explicit attention to cultural knowledge, history, and values in designing programs, with the shared wisdom of Black parents being integral in designing our frameworks and tools.

Despite these efforts, equitable implementation has its challenges, many of them systemic. We are seeking resources from an inequitable ecosystem where the preponderance of the funding, frameworks, and measures are driven by deficit frameworks focused on fixing the systemically oppressed, rather than the systems of oppression. In fact, many academic historians, including Ibram Kendi, have detailed that much of the historically foundational research informing America's most common assessments in psychology and education have been corrupted by pseudo-scientific scholarship whose primary purpose was to exclude and dehumanize Black people. Funders like to invest in "impact" by supporting evidence-based programming that sees impact as fixing fish.

Our organization—like most organizations—is swimming in dirty water. These factors make it difficult for Black-led, equity-focused organizations to identify evidence that supports their oftentimes sophisticated equitable implementation approaches. Our hope is that other Black-led organizations will see our model and know that, despite the barriers, their work is essential and the "how" of their work is just as important as they think it is. Equally important, those who wield institutional power need to join the struggle for racial equity by examining how they might adopt an equitable implementation approach and shift the institutional inertia of their organizations toward freedom and liberation. Our hope is that we are all not held captive to how things have always been, but rather that we can move forward to pursue more equitable structures built on visions of a transformed world. ●

NOTES

- 1 April Harris-Britt, et al., "Perceived Racial Discrimination and Self-Esteem in African American Youth: Racial Socialization as a Protective Factor," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2007.
- 2 Enrique Neblett, Jr., et al., "African American Adolescents' Discrimination Experiences and Academic Achievement: Racial Socialization as a Cultural Compensatory and Protective Factor," *Journal of Black Psychology*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2006.
- 3 Stephanie I. Coard, et al., "Towards Culturally Relevant Preventive Interventions: The Consideration of Racial Socialization in Parent Training with African American Families," *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2004.
- 4 Brené Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability: Teachings on Authenticity, Connection, and Courage*. Sounds True: Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2012.
- 5 Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, "Self-Determination Theory," in P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, and E. T. Higgins (eds.), *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2012.
- 6 Enrique Neblett, Jr., et al., "'Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud': Parents' Messages about Race, Racial Discrimination, and Academic Achievement in African American Boys," *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 78, no. 3, 2009.
- 7 Donna-Marie Winn and Marvin H. McKinney, "The Toxins in the Water Infect the Fish," White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans (Jackson, MS) on the Leveraging School Community Partnerships and Public and Private Partnerships to Ensure African American Educational Excellence (Invited Panelist), 2014.