



Lady Researchers: Mapping Urban Community and Learning Spaces

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Abstract

This paper documents a collaborative research project with middle and high school young women during an afterschool program at Children and Urban Family Movement (CFUM) in Des Moines, Iowa. A research team consisting of members from the School of Education, Community and Regional Planning, Human Development and Family Studies, and Extension and Outreach from Iowa State University partnered with CFUM to provide programming for gender-specific youth called Design Dialogues. The research team, with the help of ISU Undergraduate Facilitators, conducted six discussion groups with middle and high school youth. During the fall of 2015, The Whyld Girls, also known as Lady Researchers, literally and figuratively “mapped” their community and learning spaces during each activity.

Keywords: community-based research, youth empowerment, interdisciplinary research, critical reflection, narratives, youth leadership

Introduction

This paper documents a collaborative research project with middle and high school young women during an afterschool program at Children and Urban Family Movement (CFUM) in Des Moines, Iowa. A research team consisting of members from the School of Education, Community and Regional Planning, Human Development and Family Studies, and Extension and Outreach from Iowa State University partnered with CFUM to provide programming for gender-specific youth called Design Dialogues. This research project directly supports a new initiative at Iowa State University called the ISU 4U Promise (<http://www.hs.iastate.edu/isu4u/>) and is an example of community outreach as required by a land-grant institution.

Simply put, the ISU 4U Promise is a university-sponsored and supported college access and affordability initiative. It works in partnership with schools and community organizations to further human possibility for youth and families in two particular inner-city neighborhoods. Unique among its early-commitment or “promise” program peers for its emphasis on the elementary educational experience, the ISU 4U Promise makes tuition awards available, up to 100% depending on years of enrollment at the partnered schools, in order to promote higher education for youth historically excluded from college. These “promise” programs are relatively recent additions to the higher education landscape. They reflect a move away from targeting high-achieving underrepresented youth late in schooling, and towards broadening access with identification as “promise scholars” earlier in schooling and through less restrictive eligibility criteria. As a research- and extension-intensive land-grant university with a mission to serve the people of the state, the ISU 4U Promise is unique among existing national programs not only in the earliness of its outreach but also in the university’s sole implementation responsibility (borne across its Financial Aid, School of Education, and Extension and Outreach units). It is, indeed, a partnership between the university and the schools.

Working in partnership with a key commu-

nity-based organization in one of our target neighborhoods, Children and Family Urban Movement (<http://cfum.org>), we created and implemented a new program for their middle-grade youth groups; the Backyard Boyz and Whyld Girlz. A series of six sessions, called Design Dialogues, facilitated conversations among youth about their communities as learning spaces. We asked them to map where they felt they learned most, where they thought they could learn better, and what spaces they most wanted to change and how. Driving our work with youth was the essential understanding that families and communities are resources for learning, and that learning, including our own schooling by youth themselves, is a tool for change. This paper illustrates the bidirectional nature of learning in the ISU 4U Promise work through the educational self-reflections of two of Design Dialogues’ adult educators.

The Research Team

The Design Dialogues team consists of scholars from Education (Drs. Richardson Bruna and McNelly), Community & Regional Planning (Dr. Jane Rongerude), Human Development & Family Studies and Extension and Outreach (Dr. Kim Greder), and Community and Economic Development Extension and Outreach (Dr. Glenda M. Bivens). Collectively, the team brings academic background as well engaged community experience pertaining to the support of K-16 African-American and Latino youth and families on issues related to education in formal and informal spaces. It also brings quantitative and qualitative approaches to such inquiry. While initiated primarily as a needs assessment effort in response to the ISU 4U Promise, the information gained through the Design Dialogues project is also intended to inform ongoing activities of team members in the target neighborhoods. These included a community neighborhood revitalization plan commissioned by the city of Des Moines (Rongerude), a family and youth program focused on families learning to navigate their communities and school systems in order to help their youth succeed in school and gain access to higher education (Greder),

and economic development assistance (Bivens). The ISU 4U Promise's goal of increasing access to higher education with its projected outcome of spurring social and economic mobility among historically excluded populations provides a highly-visible "umbrella" under which to synergize all these educational and environmental enhancement efforts.

Five Undergraduate Facilitators were hired to implement the Design Dialogues discussion groups at CFUM. Three are seeking majors in the School of Education (Andrea, Caitlin, and Josie) and two are seeking majors in Community and Regional Planning (Frankie and Tanatswa). There were two parallel projects happening at the same time with the two gender-specific programs within CFUM: the Whyld Girls and Backyard Boyz. Our gender-specific partners at CFUM are: Carla, Claudia, Dontreale, and Emmett. For the purpose of this paper, we will concentrate on the experiences of Carla Dawson and Carla McNelly, also known as "Carla Squared" and the Whyld Girls. The Whyld Girls, also known as Lady Researchers, literally and figuratively "mapped" their community and learning spaces during each discussion group activity.

Design Dialogues Discussion Groups

During each of the six discussion groups, the Lady Researchers were asked to work individually and in small groups to share their funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) regarding their local community and learning places. There were five small groups of Lady Researchers assigned to Undergraduate Facilitators during the implementation of the Design Dialogues. Each participant was given a \$20 Walmart gift certificate at the end of each discussion group.

The first three discussion groups, based on a unique form of community engagement, asked the Whyld Girls as individuals and in small groups to "map" their communities, identify safe spaces, places that need to be improved, and spaces where they learn. The research team and Undergraduate Facilitators collaboratively developed the last three sessions based on the emerging themes from the

work of the Lady Researchers in the first three discussion groups. The main themes that emerged from the Whyld Girls' "maps" were: CFUM, Schools, and Community Spaces.

This model of curriculum development advances the pluralistic, identity-affirming, and consciousness-raising goals of multicultural education (Nieto, 1996), through place-based and change-agent work of youth participatory action research (Camarrota & Fine, 2008). The last three discussion groups asked the Lady Researchers as individuals and in small groups to identify what they liked about each place and what actions they could do together to make it better. This paper highlights the process of the Design Dialogues' six discussion group "mapping" activities and captures the collective voices of the Whyld Girls. The scholarly significance is that the Design Dialogues project worked collaboratively across disciplinary fields to provide a more holistic foundation for both education and community planning efforts, centered with youth as the most essential stakeholders in transformation efforts. Our goal, as a research team, was to understand the community context of education, including schooling, in assessing what ways local funds of knowledge (González, et al., 2005) are tapped as resources for human development. This goal has particular weight in communities challenged by historical dynamics of racial/ethnic and class oppression, dynamics that are further complicated through new immigration and settlement patterns.

Perspectives and Experiences from "Carla Squared"

Both Carla Dawson and Carla McNelly, also known as "Carla Squared", have long histories of activism in their communities. Each has a story to tell about the importance of encouraging youth to become activists in their own communities. Therefore, in this section, "Carla Squared" worked together to create an autoethnographic narrative about their perspectives and experiences with the

Design Dialogues project with the Whyld Girls. “The primary purpose of personal narrative is to understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context” (Ellis, 2004, p. 45). In autoethnographic writing, authors are encouraged to reveal their lived experiences in their own voices with the goal of writing about topics that make a difference (Ellis, 2004). The hope is that the individual and collective stories of experiences within the Design Dialogues project represented in this paper move the reader to their own action of encouraging youth to become activists in their community (Bell, 2010).

Carla D Speaks from the Heart at the Annual Cambio de Colores Conference in June 2016

Carla Squared, everybody knows what squared is right? To the power of two. Carla McNelly, Carla Dawson. We, as smart as we think we are, we did not come up with that term. The Lady Researchers, who are girls from 6th grade through high school, they came up with that though. We’d like to take credit for “Carla Squared” but we want to give credit where credit is due and that is the young girls we work with. But then if I was at a site by myself, they’d be like “what’s one Carla?”, I’m like, just one Carla. And then when Carla McNelly would come they’d be like “It’s Carla Squared!” So it was very moving to have the girls refer to us as Carla Squared. In this relationship that we have throughout the Design Dialogues, ISU 4U Promise came to us and said, “because CFUM”, who I work for and CFUM stands for Children and Families Urban Movement and the kids go to one of the schools, Moulton Elementary, so some of our kids who have been in the CFUM program have been in CFUM since they were in kindergarten. So when ISU came to us and said “We’d like to partner with you on doing the Design Dialogues”, we’re like “Hey that’s so good!” Because we have the kids that they need to work with in the community and they’re a captive audience, they come every day so it’s not like we have to pull kids from all over ‘cause they’re neighborhood kids

and we were thinking, “if kids start thinking about their neighborhoods in different ways, and about their communities in different ways, and seeing that they are the researchers in their community, they are the experts in their neighborhood, they know what’s good in their school, they know what’s not good in their school, then we can work with them.” But I am the coordinator of the program called the Whyld Girls and the Whyld Girls are the Lady Researchers. And when we say, “Whyld Girls, Ladies, we’re getting ready to do research.” They’re like “yes!!” You would never think that 6th grade girls or 9th grade girls would really love to be researchers, but they do. The Whyld Girls program was started 13 years ago. It was started because a lot of the girls in our community, and I live in that community so I can speak from experience, a lot of the girls in that community were having babies at young ages, they weren’t finishing school, they were not making the best life choices for themselves. So they started the program the Whyld Girls and they were like “we want to teach girls that they have empowerment in them, but we’re going to help you learn that you have empowerment in you and what you can do with your life if you make different choices. We’re talking about girls who look like a lot of you girls in here. We’re talking, the program that I am the coordinator for, I would say 45% of our girls are Latina, 45% of our girls are African American, 5% Asian, and 5% are Caucasian young women. We’re talking about a diverse group of young ladies. We’re not talking about what everyone thinks about when they think about kids, we’re talking about a group of girls who are changing their lives and changing their communities, that’s changing their families. And our Whyld Girls motto is: We have wild dreams for ourselves, for our community and for our world. And then we say, “go out and dream”. So working with ISU and having our girls map their community, map their world, seeing what’s good in their community, seeing what needs changed and seeing how they fit as researchers and doing the change, being the change that they

want to see in their community. You know it's one thing if I can help myself, but it's another thing if I can help somebody else. And we're big about not only helping girls who are in Whyld Girls, but helping our community.

Carla Mc Speaks from the Heart at the Annual Cambio de Colores Conference in June 2016

So imagine how exciting it was to be a group of researchers from Iowa State and to get paired up with Whyld Girls and the CFUM group in Des Moines. So what we did was, which is also super exciting to report, is hire some undergraduates to be the facilitators when we did the discussion groups with the young people at CFUM. And we not only were able to pay them \$12 an hour, a decent wage, we also gave them credit for coming every week to a course where they helped us develop the curriculum, work through the protocols of the discussion groups, and gave them a community-based experience. Students were part of Community and Regional Planning major and also from the School of Education. Ok, so now I told you all the academic stuff, and I've told you all about the really cool collaborations that we have going here, but the paper we're working on together is an autoethnography. It's about our experiences when we actually did the Design Dialogues. As the person who actually implemented the Design Dialogues in collaboration with Carla, so Carla Squared, what we did. The term "lady researchers" actually came during the third session. I would always say "ladiesss" to try to call people back together and that was just my fun way of respect to get them back, off the task they were working on to transition them to the next activity. One day I said "lady researchers" and they went crazy! If I didn't call them that going forward, they were correcting me. It has been such a privilege and an honor to work with the young women and to work with the CFUM staff, with the professors at Iowa State and our undergraduate facilitators. It's been an amazing opportunity for me, but I'd like to share

my favorite moment. My favorite moment was when we were talking about the schools. There were some powerful things that came out. They talked about what needed to be changed. They talked about issues of racism, oppression, poor school quality, the building, the food, and the fact that they are the only school that wears uniforms at their middle school. They asked me to share out what I've been learning from the experience, "oh so what did you think about today" so they asked me to say, so I had to use my skills that I'm using right now which are wiggling my toes so I don't cry, if you don't know that, it works, if you rub your tongue across the roof of your mouth that also works. So I was at the point of tears I was so proud of them. The things that they said that they wanted to do, I was blown away. These are junior high girls and on issues that are so important, I wanna read to you what they said: "Start a petition, give it to the principal; tell teachers how you feel; talk to the school district leaders; work things out; if you need a break, talk to your teacher; make a complaint and send it to the government; we can write letters to the school and try to make a difference; have a class leader; stand up for yourself and other people; be positive to your teachers and your peers; write Obama a letter; and be the best person you can be." I wanted to include the voices of the young women and that was my way of doing it because these are the actual words they gave us, and those are the words that made me so proud and to the point of tears where I was curling my toes up. So the work is important and CFUM's mission, I'll read it to you, is: "To create a community to support the potential of youth, children, and families through educational success, healthy living, and community engagement."

Implications and Plans for the Future

One of the most exciting outcomes of this research project is that the research team will be joined by Julio Cammarota to create programming that will engage the Lady Researchers at CFUM to a

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project based on their own emerging themes from the Design Dialogues. This work supports the mission of CFUM, “to create a community to support the potential of children, youth, and families through educational success, healthy living, and community engagement”, the ISU 4U Promise program, and the goals of ISU Extension and Outreach. The research team was also contracted to write a book called: “Speaking Out Our Minds” Designing Dialogues with Youth for School and Community Transformation in spring 2017. The book includes the participation of the Undergraduate Facilitators from the School of Education and Community and Regional Planning department who reflect on their experiences of implementing the Design Dialogues and how partnering with a community-based organization enhanced their educational experience. We’re also pleased to share that the research team will partner with Des Moines Public School’s Callanan Middle School to implement Design Dialogues early release programming in fall 2016 with ISU 4U Promise students from the King/ Irving neighborhood.

Another implication of the Design Dialogues project is that other institutions of higher education are encouraged to partner with youth and family-centered community-based organizations to work collaboratively across disciplinary fields to provide a more holistic foundation for both education and community planning efforts. Engaging other Lady Researchers and/or Gentlemen Researchers in assessing ways that their own local funds of knowledge (González, et al., 2005) are tapped as resources in transformation efforts in their schools and community.

From the heart, Carla Dawson says, “For Whyld Girls to engage in steps to make their schools and communities better is a win-win! The Whyld Girls have dreams, and to make a dream a reality they will learn in the process that it is better to work on solutions, not get stuck on the problem. Being an integral part of finding solutions makes you believe that you are the change the world needs.”

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