Parent Leaders Taking the Lead: Capacity Building and Co-Constructed Relevance in Community-Engaged Research

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This article reflects on a multi-year project involving participatory research with parents. Specifically, it reports on an ongoing capacity-building endeavor that consciously places parents at the center of a parent education project – wherein parents are regarded as project participants, possessing valued knowledge, rather than as more traditional passive research participants. Based in participatory action research, systematic inquiry methods are used to determine the project issues and engage all participants in co-construction of knowledge. By building capacity in parents, we observed improved outcomes in their own lives as well as in the lives of the children they nurtured. Implications of our study for the growth in public scholarship are explored.

Introduction

This article reflects on a multi-year community-engaged research project in the area of capacity building with parents. Since 2011, parent researchers in several Connecticut communities have joined with University of Hartford researchers to examine the role of information in parents’ lives – specifically how to best support parents with young children, from birth through age eight, to be critical consumers of information as well as producers of essential knowledge. In this article, we discuss the process surrounding development of an issue guide to facilitate deliberative dialogue with parents as co-participants in community activism. The issue guide – *Looking for Answers Together: How Should We Nurture Children to be Healthy and Make Better Choices?* – was collaboratively developed by university researchers and parent co-researchers, referred to as Parent Researchers, using systemic inquiry methods. Parent Researchers took the role of moderators/leaders during community deliberations around the guide – parents occupied the center of the project, as engaged individuals possessing valued knowledge rather than as more traditional passive research participants.

Motivating development of the issue guide, *Looking for Answers Together*, was the idea that we as adults, citizens, and community members (not just parents) have a role (if not a responsibility) to nurture children. Because of the nature of how this particular issue guide was brought forth, a working theory of change was enacted. The capacity building of the Parent Researchers using an inquiry model directly connected the work of the issue guide to specific communities and thus was an opportunity, in and of itself, to invest in the adults who nurture children. The Parent Researchers then had the practice of applying the inquiry model throughout their own commu-