

Re-imagining and Humanizing Parent-Teacher Conversations and Interactions Through Role-Play

The Family Leadership Design Collaborative
Stories from the Field : Apertura
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WHAT IS THE ISSUE OR PROBLEM?

Hundreds of parents in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) shared their stories of experiencing negative interactions with teachers and administrators in schools, often times feeling disregarded and marginalized due to racial stereotypes and anti-Black and Latino racism, particularly when they pushed back on the ways in which their children were being disciplined. Historically, these institutionalized disciplinary policies have disproportionately targeted and unfairly criminalized Black and Latino youth, thus structuring a “school-to-prison” pipeline. In response, Community Asset Development Re-defining Education (CADRE) parent leaders campaigned to push LAUSD to eliminate race-based discipline policies and practices and disrupt the school-to-prison train. Although CADRE has been successful in passing school discipline policies that systemically address racial disparities, the fundamental relationships and interactions between parents/families and teachers in schools require transformation in order to effectively disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

With the intention of reimagining parent-teacher conversations and interactions, CADRE parent leaders participated in a series of design circles where they engaged in role-playing and collective reflection to humanize conversations and disrupt entrenched power dynamics that policy alone could not achieve. Role-playing in this context entailed parents assuming roles as teachers and as themselves, acting out scenarios drawn from lived experiences they have had with educators in school settings. Role-playing lends itself to individual and collective reflection and requires coming to terms with one’s own resistance to each other, one’s own resistance to tension, or one’s own resistance to being open to change. Role-plays hold much promise for rethinking and transforming parent-teacher conversations, serving as an effective strategy to humanize parents’ demands and refine the message around them.





CADRE: ROLE PLAYING

WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU

“Collectivity is a transcendent value and property of everything that we’ve talked about, it’s where people feel healthy enough, well enough, secure enough, to actually lean in on each other, to build on each other, build community, build relationships, and look at systemic change together rather than apart”

–Maisie Chin, Executive Director and Co-founder of CADRE

Role-plays with reflective discussions can be powerful tools to unpack and re-imagine powered relationships. This strategy surfaces tensions that occur between teachers and marginalized families and seek to open the possibility of transforming how they engage with each other. By re-imagining how these parent-teacher conversations might feel and look like, CADRE sees role-playing as a step towards developing shared knowledge and capacity of parents so they can then prepare teachers to better engage with parents and communities. Below are three examples of contexts where role-plays might be used.

- Parent-leadership development: Building parents’ capacity to coach educators and begin shifting teacher-parent conversations that position nondominant parents as “natural enemies” and marginalize their experiences and concerns towards more dignifying exchanges.
- Culturally-responsive teacher/educator training: Engaging parents in the training of teachers and formal leaders, utilizing their familial expertise and proposed solutions that are reflective of their wisdom to model how humanizing conversations with parents can transform power dynamics, in particular those that are infused with racialized and cultural tension. Re-positioning such tension as the crux of the work and potential to transform parent-teacher interactions into liberatory experiences.
- Cross-racial solidarity or coalition building: Actively building cross-racial solidarity and alliances among education leaders and families to deepen their awareness, knowledge, and abilities to address issues of race and equity via collective reflection.

CONNECTING ROLE-PLAY WITH CO-DESIGN WORK

Paralleling co-design work, role-play engages families’ experiences, histories, and vital knowledge to catalyze change within parent-teacher interactions that speak to broader structural forces. These re-imagined conversations take place in an improvisational forum that brings parents together to uncover and explore shared ideas and concerns around the sensitive subject of their children’s behavior and discipline. Though tensions and contradictions may arise from these conversations, they offer promising possibilities to achieve collective agency to disrupt racial inequities.

Through role-play and reflection, parents confront their own challenges in refining and humanizing principled demands of educators by prompting them to consider how their initial reactions can shape the conversation. Equally meaningful, by reflecting on the nature of these conversations in relation to broader systemic racial disparities, parents can begin to draw on their collective wisdom to identify strategies that humanize the relationship between teachers and parents. Attention is paid particularly to the deep histories of inequity that sustain micro-level relations that are saturated in racialized inequities. Role-play and reflection provide a forum and step towards collective learning that draws on the important expertise from both parents and teachers to help address the multiscale dynamics of social inequities.

WHAT ARE TENSIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN DOING ROLE-PLAYS?

- Conversations during role-play may default to asymmetrical power dynamics, this could mean that the role of the educator places blame on parents or casts them as “difficult.”
- It takes time to understand the power and privilege in the reversed roles, particularly in assuming roles as educators, as parents understandably may default to what they have seen and experienced rather than “what could be.”
- The very nature of these conversations are set up as confrontational, thus, adding an additional layer of tension when parents re-imagine conversations with teachers about student behavior; they can potentially perpetuate stereotypes, given that there is no context before or after the intentionally loaded moment.



CADRE: ROLE PLAYING

WHAT IS THE TOOL, PRACTICE, PROCESS AND HOW DO YOU DO IT?

"...the moments in which schools have talked to parents about their children's behavior, especially that's perceived as negative or problematic, are very critical points in the relationship. And in that moment where they were treating each other as human beings or not, our full humanity is often on the line"

-Maisie Chin

Starting by practicing role-play in pairs, parents assume reversed roles as educators as well as themselves to mirror first-hand experiences of visiting their children's schools and feeling disregarded, powerless, and discriminated. In the role of an educator, parents re-imagine and improvise how conversations concerning their children's behavior can play out using a positive, welcoming approach, wherein teachers would not patronize parents or inadvertently disparage them. After one parent has the opportunity to assume the role of a teacher, they switch roles, so the second parent has the chance to role-play the part of the teacher. Then, regrouping with the rest of the CADRE parents, each pair of parent leaders act out their rendering of a parent-teacher conversation that shed light on the veiled realities of power dynamics and possibilities for shifting them.

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ATTENDING TO RELATIONSHIPS, HISTORIES, & POWER

The aim for role-playing and reflective discussions is to shift parent-teacher conversations that cast nondominant families as problematic and disregard their life experiences. When parents author conversations in which they are active agents in schools, their voices serve as a compelling lever for change in a power-imbalanced space. By attending to how histories and power shape current contexts and relational dynamics, particularly for families and communities of color, the participatory role-play and collective reflection can surface underlying social dynamics of racism and injustice. Role-playing with reflective discussions aligns with the broader co-design paradigm that creates openings to fundamentally transform prescribed parental roles through new forms of power sharing and collective decision. This practice can be a step towards collective learning and doing aimed at transformative parent-teacher interactions

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

→ Theater of the Oppressed (TO) fits with the goals of CADRE's role-playing strategy as a means of facilitating relational change through role-play. Established in the early 1970s by Brazilian director and political activist Augusto Boal, TO serves as a dialogic forum to analyze, discuss, and explore group solutions to social injustices. Rather than the conventional theater practice of rehearsing a script, participants of TO are framed as problem solvers to unscripted tensions drawn from life experiences. The goal of the Theater of the Oppressed is to create a mechanism for communities to propose suggestions and alternatives to shared struggles.

THE FAMILY LEADERSHIP DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

We are a group of 40 family members, community leaders, educators, and researchers from across the United States, whose work centers racial equity in family engagement. The collaborative reflects a wide range of our cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, sexual orientations, ages, religions, and social class identities. We belong to and lead early childhood, K-12, and higher education institutions as well as community programs, cultural organizations, organizing groups and national networks.

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