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**Community-Engaged Research through the Lens of School
Closures: Opportunities, Challenges, Contributions, and
Lingering Questions**

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Abstract: This article expands upon and problematizes the practice of community-engaged research (CES) through the lens of school closings. Rather than employ a one-dimensional view of CES that portrays university researchers and community partners as collaborating equally on all stages of the research, we suggest a broader, more flexible understanding that incorporates various contextual factors. Drawing on local examples, from New York City and Baltimore, and one national effort to resist school closings, we present three forms of CES: participatory action research (PAR), in which university researchers and community partners collaboratively engaged in almost all aspects of the process; the engaged learner, in which the researcher documented a community organizing campaign with the full support of the campaign organizers; and a grassroots listening project implemented without university partners. In each case, participants had to navigate the thorny issues of power differentials, race and racism, ownership and voice, and presentation and representation. Difficulties notwithstanding, CES has made important contributions to both the literature on and practice of school closings. We conclude the article with a discussion of some of the lingering tensions that characterize community-engaged scholarship.

Keywords: community-engaged research; school closings; New York City; Baltimore

Investigación que compromete a la comunidad a través del lente de los cierres escolares: Oportunidades, desafíos, contribuciones y preguntas persistentes

Resumen: Este artículo expande y problematiza la práctica de la investigación que compromete a la comunidad. (CES) a través del lente del cierre de escuelas. En lugar de emplear una visión unidimensional del CES que describe a los investigadores universitarios y socios comunitarios como colaboradores en todas las etapas de la investigación, sugerimos una comprensión más amplia y flexible que incorpore varios factores contextuales. A partir de ejemplos locales, de la ciudad de Nueva York y Baltimore, y de un esfuerzo nacional para resistir el cierre de escuelas, presentamos tres formas de CES: investigación de acción participativa (PAR), en la que investigadores universitarios y socios comunitarios colaboran en casi todos los aspectos de la proceso; el participante comprometido, en el que el investigador documentó una campaña de organización comunitaria con el apoyo total de los organizadores de la campaña; y un proyecto implementado sin socios universitarios. En cada caso, los participantes tuvieron que navegar por los espinosos problemas de los diferenciales de poder, la raza y el racismo, la propiedad y la voz, y la presentación y representación. A pesar de las dificultades, el CES ha hecho importantes contribuciones a la literatura y la práctica del cierre de escuelas. Concluimos el artículo con una discusión de algunas de las tensiones persistentes que caracterizan a las investigaciones que compromete a la comunidad.

Palabras-clave: Investigación que compromete a la comunidad; cierre de escuelas; Nueva York; Baltimore

Pesquisa que envolve a comunidade através das lentes do fechamento escolar: Oportunidades, desafios, contribuições e perguntas persistentes

Resumo: Este artigo expande e problematiza a prática de pesquisa que envolve a comunidade (CES) através das lentes do fechamento escolar. Em vez de usar uma visão unidimensional do CES que descreve os pesquisadores da universidade e os parceiros da

comunidade como parceiros em todas as etapas da pesquisa, sugerimos um entendimento mais amplo e flexível que incorpora vários fatores contextuais. A partir de exemplos locais, de Nova York e Baltimore, e de um esforço nacional para resistir ao fechamento de escolas, apresentamos três formas de CES: pesquisa de ação participativa (PAR), na qual pesquisadores universitários e parceiros da comunidade colaboram. em quase todos os aspectos do processo; o participante comprometido, no qual o pesquisador documentou uma campanha de organização comunitária com o total apoio dos organizadores da campanha; e um projeto implementado sem parceiros universitários. Em cada caso, os participantes tiveram que navegar pelos espinhosos problemas de diferenciais de poder, raça e racismo, propriedade e voz, e apresentação e representação. Apesar das dificuldades, o CES fez contribuições importantes para a literatura e a prática do fechamento de escolas. Concluímos o artigo com uma discussão sobre algumas das tensões persistentes que caracterizam os pesquisas que envolvem a comunidade.

Palavras-chave: Pesquisa que envolve a comunidade; fechamento de escolas; Nova York; Baltimore

Introduction

Collaborations between university researchers and their surrounding communities began forming in urban settings in the 1960s (Stoecker, 2001). Largely aligned with the burgeoning social movements of that decade, these collaborative research practices have continued to the present, albeit under many different names including, *action research*, *community-based research*, *community-driven research*, *community-engaged scholarship*, *participatory action research*, among others. While some of the variance in names does denote differences in practice, these approaches all face a similar set of opportunities and challenges, not the least of which are the questions of how social science research is conducted and whom it benefits. The objective of this article is to expand and problematize current understandings of community-engaged scholarship (CES) through the lens of school closings.

Small and Uttal (2005) describe the goals of CES as “producing knowledge that can be used by community partners to contribute to positive social change and the well-being of individuals, families, and communities” (p. 938). CES emphasizes “social justice embedded in democratic ideals” (New England Resource Center for Higher Education, 2013). When done well, this type of scholarship benefits a range of stakeholders and enriches research, teaching, and community-based institutions and neighborhoods (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Peterson, 2009). This approach to research is built on several key assumptions: collaboration is key to developing research that addresses social problems; collecting and analyzing data should always involve critically examining how trust and power play into interactions between researchers and participants; investigators must remain open to developing a flexible research design; and researchers need to value knowledge from community partners as much as they value knowledge that is produced in the academy (Small & Uttal, 2005).

CES is thus an important counterpoint to traditionally privileged forms of research such as positivist experimental and quasi-experimental designs that emphasize neutrality, objectivity, and the distanced stance of the expert researcher. While CES does not preclude the use of quantitative research methods, it challenges the positivist epistemology that views neutrality as the gateway to understanding and instead acknowledges that subjectivity is inevitable and consciousness of

positionality important.¹ CES also strives to address power asymmetries in the research process and to distribute voice and decision making in all aspects of the research process to community partners not housed in the academy, where there is relatively more access to research and which tend to be dominated by white researchers.

In sum, CES is distinguished from the traditional, positivist research approach in its objectives (social justice), its considerations (how power and privilege play out in the research; how voice and ownership of the project are developed); its practices (collaborative); and, consequently, its conclusions. These dimensions, however, are not static, and they sometimes run counter to conventional assumptions. For example, in some situations the community partner may have more or different power than the university researcher. Similarly, community partners may be happy to hand off data collection activities to a researcher as a matter of practical consideration (e.g., they lack the time).² Thus, rather than adopting a one-dimensional view of CES that portrays university researchers and community partners as collaborating equally on all stages of the research, we suggest a broader, more flexible understanding that takes into account a variety of contextual factors. Adopting this more nuanced view of CES allows for variation in the forms that collaboration takes.

In the cases that follow, we present three forms of CES: participatory action research (PAR), in which university researchers and community partners collaboratively engaged in almost all aspects of the process; the engaged learner, in which the researcher documented a community organizing campaign with the full support of the campaign organizers; and a grassroots listening project implemented without university partners. Despite the different forms of the collaborations, the projects each had to deal with tricky ethical questions around power differentials, race and racism, and ownership and voice.

Using the lens of school closings, we demonstrate why CES is a necessary correction in the field of policy related research, traditionally the terrain of technocratic experts who work with little or no input from the communities that policies are intended to reach. Fueled by philanthropic dollars, political rhetoric, and policy changes over the last decade, public school closures have swept across the nation, displacing massive numbers of low-income black and Latino students. In 2013, for example, a particularly egregious year for school closings, Chicago closed 49 public schools whose collective student body was 87% black, 11% Latino and 94% low income; Philadelphia closed 23 schools affecting a student body that was 81% black, 11% Latino, and 93% low income; and, New York City closed 22 schools whose student body was 53% black, 41% Latino, and 81% low income (Schott Foundation, 2013). School closure represents a clear case of a policy that has been enacted and widely replicated, with little research evidence attesting to its efficacy and often in opposition to community desires (Conner & Cosner, 2015; de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Engberg, Gill, Zamarro, & Zimmer, 2012; Ewing, 2018; Kirshner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2010; Lipman & Person, 2007; Pappas, 2012, 2015, 2016; Shiller, Jordan, & New Lens, 2015). By contrast, the three cases featured in this article incorporated community and youth voice to create pushback to this policy and to contribute to building a large knowledge and advocacy base.

In what follows, we introduce the three case studies, which illustrate some of the forms that CES can take. Using these cases as our foundation, we then explore how participants in CES navigate the thorny issues of power differentials, race and racism, ownership and voice, and presentation and representation. We then examine the important contributions of CES to the literature on, and practice of, school closings. We conclude with a discussion of some of the lingering tensions that characterize community-engaged scholarship.

¹ We distinguish subjectivity from biased research. We believe that subjectivity shapes the research question, the methods used, the cases selected, and the like. Thus, no research is completely objective.

² These points will be developed in the next section.

Contesting School Closings: Three Cases

There have been many collaborative efforts across the country to chronicle and contest the harmful effects of school closings on students, teachers, parents, and communities (Ayala & Galletta, 2012; Cekander et al., 2014; Kirshner, Gaertner, & Pozzoboni, 2010; Lipman & Person, 2007). These efforts have varied in scope, in methodology, and in the composition of the research teams. The following three cases demonstrate the range of what is possible in community-engaged research in terms of focus, methodical approaches, and roles for university-based researchers. In the first study, Jessica Shiller brought together university students and youth organizers to produce a video on the ill effects of and community resistance to school closures in Baltimore. In the second study, Liza Pappas, a university researcher, documented the work of a powerful parent-organizing group as it fought against school closure policy in the New York City. Among this group's parent leaders were Claudette Agard and Zakiyah Ansari. And in the third study, a national coalition of grassroots organizations, the Journey for Justice Alliance, synthesized the knowledge amassed and the analysis advanced by the participants in its member organizations, as it initiated campaigns against school closure in their cities and at the federal level. Although the design, research questions, and goals of these three projects all varied, they are unified by a shared commitment to uplifting the voices of the community members most affected by school closings and supporting grassroots activists' efforts to challenge the logic animating school closure policies.

Baltimore: Towson University and Baltimore Algebra Project

Alarmed by the significant number of school closings nationally and their disproportionate impact on low income communities of color, a researcher at Towson University, wondered if something similar was happening in Baltimore, near where Towson is located. Researching the issues, she found that all of the Baltimore schools slated for closure were not only in African-American neighborhoods, but also in the poorest neighborhoods in the city. She shared this finding with her students in her urban education class, who wondered whether this practice was intentional. Rather than write a critique of the school closure plan, she and her students decided to engage in a version of community-based research and share the initial findings with the community to see if they would be useful to local education advocates. They attended several community meetings in Baltimore where people were discussing education issues in order to find out if this research would be useful to them.

At the time, there were few discussions about school closings because Baltimore had a plan in place, the 21st Century Plan, which promised school renovations in return for closing 26 schools and "right sizing the district." The district schools were built 50 years ago to house over 100,000 children at a time when Baltimore's population was over one million. Now, a city of 600,000, with only 80,000 children in the school system, Baltimore has a surplus of schools. The state argued that the city needed to close schools to "right size the district." The renovation plan superseded any discussion of school closings because the promise of improved school buildings was very exciting to local groups. However, that changed in the fall of 2014, when announcements were made about the individual schools closing. Suddenly, community organizations became interested in school closings.

One group that had been interested in school closings was the Baltimore Algebra Project (BAP). BAP is a democratic, student-run and organized non-profit organization focused on one-on-one tutoring in math at the middle and high school levels but also with a history of taking collective action for educational justice. Comprised of African-American youth aged 16-24, BAP was particularly concerned about the closings for two reasons. The first was personal, as several of the

young people had gone to the schools slated to close. The second was a concern that closing schools would negatively impact young people of color, BAP feared that it would be even harder for them to graduate because the schools that they would be sent to would not necessarily be of better quality than the ones they had attended. More importantly, the lack of familiarity and distance to the new school would mean that high schoolers would probably not attend the new school or any school at all. However, when they raised the issue of the closing schools in the neighborhoods in which they worked, very few people seemed to be as concerned as they were.

The university researcher and her students met with the Algebra Project youth to discuss how they might elevate the issue together. BAP suggested that a video with the voices of the teachers, students, and families most affected might convey the issue better than a discussion about the policy itself. Together, they wrote a grant to the university's office of civic engagement and received funds to create a video based on research they would do as a team to find out how the students, teachers, and families viewed the school closings.

The grant allowed the team to pursue a community-engaged research project incorporating research that the university professor had already conducted. That work, which combined GIS mapping and data from the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance Database, resulted in an annotated map that listed poverty, unemployment, and crime rates, as well as number of vehicles per household, for the areas slated for school closings. These indicators emerged out of conversations with people impacted by the school closings.

The second part of the research project involved the whole group: University students, Algebra Project activists, and the university professor, as well as youth from another community-based organization called New Lens, which teaches young people of color in Baltimore the skills of video production to bring issues of social justice to the public. Together, they generated interview questions and a plan to conduct videotaped interviews with teachers, parents, and students impacted by the closing schools throughout the city. They spent about four months planning and then conducting interviews. Over a period of three additional months, after the interviews were complete, the team wove the individual clips into a short video that the group created and then screened around the city to interest people in organizing against the school closings. As a result of the screenings, students, parents, teachers, and community activists joined the Algebra Project in their organizing against school closings. Launching a campaign in Spring 2015 to save Langston Hughes Elementary School, this group participated in weekly marches between Langston Hughes and the new school to which the students would be sent, and led rallies and protests at school board meetings. Ultimately, the school board still decided to close the school, but the organizing continues against school closings. The goal is to get the city to put a stop to closing schools and to repurpose closed buildings for something that the community would like to have (i.e. a library or a recreation center).

New York City: Coalition for Educational Justice

In the wake of mass school closure policy developed and promoted by the New York City Department of Education (NYCDoE) during Mayor Michael Bloomberg's control of the school system, a doctoral student from the City University of New York (CUNY) sought to capture how this policy was interpreted and contested on the ground. While the Mayor and NYCDoE framed school closing proposals as a means of school improvement, many other members of the public believed otherwise. At the center of the doctoral student's dissertation study were the efforts of a citywide parent-led organizing coalition of Black and Latino parents, the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) to challenge the rationale and implementation of school closings. From its

inception in 2006, CEJ has emerged as one of the most influential, if not *the* most influential, parent organizing coalitions working for educational excellence and equity for all public schools in New York City and in the country.

Prior to graduate school, the doctoral student had worked for a national school reform network that supported parent and youth education organizing groups. She approached CEJ and two other groups in New York City about the school closing proposals in the fall of 2009 when they were announced. Although none of CEJ's member groups were dealing directly with school closings in their neighborhoods, to CEJ school closings immediately signaled a short-sighted and destructive policy that would harm students, especially those least well served by the school system – Black and Latino students not being prepared for college. Consequently, CEJ decided to dedicate their coalition's organizing efforts to confronting a policy citywide in scope. CEJ agreed to the doctoral student observing their campaign "Fix Our Schools, Don't Just Close Them," viewing it as an opportunity to tell the stories of grassroots organizing and leadership and to present an alternate vision for school improvement. In particular, CEJ thought that the doctoral student might have the luxury of time for writing that they lacked. They also considered that academia might provide an avenue into different and wider audiences for their vision for sustainable school success.

The research project that developed might best be described as a documentation effort in collaboration with CEJ's organizing coalition. The doctoral student embedded herself in CEJ, with the intention of using research methods to chronicle their community-based anti-school closure campaign in ways that were secondary to the organizing campaign itself. She developed trust with organizers and parent leaders over an extended period of time—a year and a half. She sought ways to recast a traditional researcher role, utilizing research methods as ways to develop relationships with parents and subsequently making use of academic conference opportunities to both deepen collaborations with parent leaders and help expand spaces within the academy for parent leaders to represent their work. This approach called attention to parent leaders' expertise and real knowledge, which are often ignored, while also supporting parents to be what parent leader Zakiyah Ansari called "bearers of our own stories."

Smith (1999, 2012) wrote about colonizing western research methodologies that are fueled by principles that have asserted that indigenous people have to be civilized, saved, and/or protected. The same can be said about research on Black and Latino communities, either U.S. born or immigrant. Common assumptions and principles that undergird many research (and policy) initiatives are that individuals and communities of color need to be civilized, corrected, saved, and/or protected. The doctoral student sought to employ the opposite principles in her own approach and interactions with CEJ leaders about their organizing efforts to stop school closures: acknowledging that parents know best for their children, families, and communities, especially parent and community leaders of color who are burdened to protect their children from the very systems purportedly designed to serve them, and acknowledging that one value of the research and researcher's role was not to offer expertise, but to learn from parents' expertise. As a result, the doctoral student sought to participate in the research process as an *engaged learner*.

The doctoral student conceptualized *an engaged learner* researcher positionality distinct from a participatory action research positionality where the researcher would engage in the process alongside research participants, and distinct from a removed observer positionality where the researcher would study research participants without participation in the process. *An engaged learner* positionality, the doctoral student theorized, would be one way to participate in the research process, but from a position where she could learn and build relationships.

The doctoral student understood that her main responsibility as an *engaged learner* was to show up—to any meeting, event, or celebration to which she was invited—and to be fully present as a learner. Time and attention—not expertise—was the offering that the doctoral student recognized

could be of value to the organizing group and that she could give. Additionally, many of the parent leaders in CEJ had been organizing for 20 years, and the doctoral student methodology was to learn from parents' knowledge and expertise.

The doctoral student also sought opportunities to build relationships with parents. She utilized research methods to conduct "one-on-ones" with individual parent leaders (a common practice in community organizing) at multiple points throughout the campaign. Over time, she learned that both leaders and organizers found this helpful to their own work as these relational meetings afforded opportunities to pause and reflect on the campaign as it was unfolding. One-on-one meetings with parents also served to build trust and relationships and to amplify what could be learned from the campaign work, while the research produced a useful record of their work. Claudette Agard indicated that she had become more informed about the value of documenting an organizing campaign, because, as she put it, leaders are often consumed by the work itself. She said, "As communities of color, we don't always document what we do, and it is helpful to be able to point to what we have done."

Journey for Justice

Founded in 2013, the Journey for Justice Alliance (J4J) is "an alliance of 36 grassroots community, youth, and parent-led organizations in 21 cities across the country... All of [its] members are base-building organizations pushing back and demanding community-driven alternatives to the privatization of and dismantling of public school systems."³ CEJ and BAP were among the organizations that are members of the J4J coordinating committee. In May 2014, J4J published *Death by a Thousand Cuts: Racism, School Closures, and Public School Sabotage*, a report documenting the extremely negative consequences of school closings and charter school expansions.⁴ In contrast to the prior two cases, the J4J project did not involve an academic partner. Rather, it was an ambitious collaboration among grassroots organizations from across the United States, representing eight different states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. In the opening line of the report, the authors identify themselves as follows: "We, the members of Journey for Justice, are comprised of thousands of youth, parents, and other concerned citizens from communities of color across the United States" (2014, p. 1).

Challenging the view that failing schools are the result of uncaring teachers, self-serving unions, and misbehaving students, and that the remedies to these problems involve closing district schools and replacing them with charter schools, J4J enlisted individuals from its member organizations in 13 cities to conduct "Grass Roots Voices Listening Projects." Through these projects, J4J heard first hand from students and teachers about their experiences with school closures and charter schools. Combining this information with aggregate data from 20 school districts on school closings, charter expansion and lost students,⁵ and secondary research sources, J4J produced a scathing indictment of the corporate reform agenda. In order to stem the tide of these egregious assaults on public education, the report recommended replacing the Department of Education's "Turnaround School" models with a "Sustainable School Success Model;" declaring a federal moratorium on school closures and charter school expansion; and conducting senate hearings on the issues.

³ <http://www.j4jalliance.com/whoweare/> the cities are: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Eupora, MS, Hartford, Los Angeles, Newark, Patterson, Camden, Jersey City and Elizabeth NJ, Minneapolis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Washington D.C., and Wichita.

⁴ http://www.j4jalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/J4JReport-final_05_12_14.pdf

⁵ In many cities, when schools close there are a number of students that the district cannot locate. It is as if they have literally fallen through the cracks.

While none of the university-based authors of this article have been directly involved with J4J, we include it because this case highlights the strengths of community led work that does not involve academic partners. As such, it helps to broaden our understanding of community-engaged scholarship as it shifts the role of university researchers from participant to audience, listening to and learning from community expertise.

Community Engaged Scholarship: Navigating Complexity in Ambiguous Terrain

There is a sizable literature on university-community collaborations focusing on the motivations of researchers and community organizations for such engagement, the issues that arise when the two collaborate, and practices that can mitigate some of the tensions (Axel-Lute, 2000; Baum 2000; Ferman & Hill, 2005; Nyden & Wiewel, 1992; Nye & Schramm, 1999; Stoecker 2001). University researchers are motivated by multiple factors including commitments to social justice, intellectual curiosity, desire for data, and pedagogical factors (e.g. placements for their students). On the community side, organizations are interested in obtaining data to support their project/cause, leveraging additional resources, accessing networks, and increasing the legitimacy of their work (Ferman & Hill, 2005). While the reasons for partnering on both sides suggest the possibility for synergistic relationships, there are other confounding issues that compromise this possibility, including the following: different agendas, incentive structures, and time frames; questions about the ownership of data; varying levels of capacity; and institutional space and demands (Ferman & Hill, 2005). The cases above support the general findings in this literature as well as build on them by engaging questions of power and privilege, race and racism, development of community/youth voice, and presentation, representation and interpretation. It is to these questions we now turn.

Power and Privilege

Power and privilege accompany the researcher's place in a university. Access to resources, implicit legitimacy, and social capital rich networks significantly elevate the status of university-based researchers vis-à-vis their community counterparts. This inevitable power imbalance can be utilized towards productive ends if researchers recognize their institutional privilege and adopt the role of "empowerment agents." According to Stanton-Salazar (2011), "empowerment agents" are individuals who use the benefits they derive from their place within larger systems of stratification to empower those with less resources. They understand the roles of economic and political structures in limiting opportunities for and the mobility of low-income and minority populations, and they have a keen appreciation of, and ability to use, institutional support for promoting the opportunities of those groups (Ferman & Smirnov, 2016). In the Baltimore case, for example, the researcher took advantage of Towson University's commitment to civic engagement to leverage the resources necessary to carry out research and produce a video on the deleterious impacts of school closings. The researcher also used the university as a screening site for the video, thereby putting the research into the public discourse.

Although university settings typically provide levers of power to academic researchers, power is not one dimensional. Community based groups have varying levels of influence, funding, and prowess, which may trump that of the researcher. In New York, for example, CEJ was a very powerful organization whose members had strong legitimacy among parents and within communities. This translated into ready access to the mayor's office, the school Chancellor's office, and other elected officials. Moreover, academic, civic, and religious leaders were well aware of CEJ's stature and would also make time to meet with them. The researcher, by contrast, did not have this

kind of clout. And, as a doctoral student, her university-based power was far less than that afforded to a regular faculty member. Nevertheless, she still grappled with issues of power since her research would help to earn her a PhD while the parents' participation in the research would not earn them a comparable reward.

The New York case also highlights the ambiguity of power relations. Positioning herself as an "engaged learner," the researcher was both deferring to and validating the expertise of the parents. And, as the case points out, this deference was not only acknowledged and appreciated, but it also developed a deep trust to the point where parents were willing to share their reflections on the process as well. This leveling of power relations translated into a win-win situation, as the engaged learner position helped the parents to better understand their own work while also providing the researcher with a deeper level of data and nuance than would have otherwise been available.

The Journey for Justice case avoids these power asymmetries between academics and community stakeholders by not enlisting university-based researchers in the research and writing processes. In so doing, they claim their own power and demonstrate their capacity to conduct their own research, produce their own analyses, and release influential reports *on their own*. The J4J coalition also asserts its power by mobilizing large numbers, pulling together 36 organizations, which represent "thousands of youth, parents, and concerned citizens" (p. 1) to speak in one voice.

Race and Racism

While power imbalances can be mitigated, as the above discussion suggests, they are often complicated by issues of race as well as class. In the J4J case, all of the researchers and authors of *Death by a Thousand Cuts* were people of color, whose communities were directly affected by school closings. By contrast, in both the Baltimore and New York cases, the university-based researchers were middle-class white women, who were not directly affected by school closures, while the frontline organizers with whom they partnered were people of color whose communities were impacted by these policies. In some cases, as discussed below, these differences in race and status between the university-based researchers and the community partners precipitated important conversations about how the research process or the presentation of the research would be negotiated.

In the New York case, it is important to note that CEJ is deliberate about creating a space led by parents of color. The doctoral student understood an engaged learner positionality was even more crucial for her to adopt as a white woman, as someone who did not have personal relationships with schools proposed to be closed, and as a non-parent who did not have children in the school system. As a result, she was diligent about inserting neither herself nor her dissertation research agenda into CEJ's space. She reminded herself that any research questions she had (including her understanding of how CEJ was indeed interpreting and contesting school closings) were secondary to their actual organizing work. For example, if she had questions during the organizing meetings that she sat in, she found other times to ask them. Again, the organizing work was primary, and she took a back seat as a researcher.

The racial composition of academic spaces is generally populated by white people holding degrees, and starkly different from CEJ organizing meetings where parents identify as either Black or Latino, and many (although not all) have not had access to formal education channels. Upon reflection, both Claudette and Zakiyah observed that they do not often have opportunities to speak about their work before researchers, and in these academic spaces as in other spaces, they are intentional about making sure issues of race and class are front and center. Zakiyah underscored that academic spaces tend to be whiter, and that she has observed that her statements in these spaces

often give white audience members pause, as they come to see things differently as a result of hearing her speak about CEJ's work. She said her goal is to always share the "truth of her experiences and knowledge," and that she has been asked to offer suggestions on how researchers can better support organizing. Liza said that she, like other white researchers who are conscious about white supremacy in the research world, struggle with both aiming to alter academic spaces that can be dominated by white degreed professionals to instead listen to parent and community leaders' expertise and inevitably contributing to a dynamic where parent and community leaders' expertise is presented in trivializing and tokenistic ways.

In Baltimore, issues of racial and class differences were accentuated by the fact that the majority of the university students involved were white and from middle class backgrounds, whereas the Baltimore Algebra Project (BAP) and New Lens members with whom they partnered were largely low-income African American youth. Many BAP youth were still in high school and had neither many resources nor the ear of political and educational leaders. These differences in race, class, and educational status posed challenges to understanding the perspectives of the people impacted by the school closings and also presented problems when making decisions. Although the professor worked to prepare her students and talked a great deal about race, institutionalized racism, and historical injustices, challenges arose. For example, in one critical moment, one of the New Lens youth said, "You think you can come in here and in a semester understand what it's like to be black in Baltimore? This is not a school project for us. It's life. It's every day. We can't go home and call our mom to tell her how crazy it was out there in the city... Y'all don't get it. Y'all need to go back to campus, go to some fraternity party, and leave us alone."

Following this critical moment, the university professor facilitated a conversation with the whole group to work against the racism and classism that were surfacing. These issues did not go away throughout the project, and they had to keep returning to it. The university students wanted to continue with the project because they were learning from the experience. They did not understand why the New Lens youth were so angry, and where the weight of their anger was coming from, but they wanted to learn. Neither the New Lens nor the BAP youth wanted to educate the college students on race and racism in that moment, but they did want the extra hands to mobilize resistance to school closures. This recognition of different motives led to a discussion about allies and how university students could be allies in the project. The roles of the team members shifted: university students and the professor continued to provide research, advice on strategy, social media spaces, and physical meeting space to elevate the work of the community, but they did not guide the work and did not make determinations about whose voice was going to be heard in the project. BAP youth led the way on that issue.

While engaging people of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds in collaborative research can sow the seeds of solidarity and yield valuable research products, like the Baltimore video, which then stimulate further discussion and advocacy, the actual work that generates these products can be contentious, even painful, rife with misunderstandings and mistrust. As important as it is to engage in frank conversations about race and address emergent concerns directly, it is also imperative to center relationships, so that the research process neither trumps nor comes at the expense of developing mutual respect, understanding, and shared aims.

Developing Youth and Community Voice and Ownership

The three collaborative research projects that we discussed vary along several dimensions, one of which concerns the roles of academic researchers, especially as they are negotiated in relation to community or youth voice and ownership of the project. In the New York case, the researcher sought to document the voice of CEJ, as it already existed in the world, while finding new academic audiences with whom it could be shared. The researchers' goal was to contrast CEJ's analysis of

school closure with the analysis put forward by the New York DoE. CEJ owned its analysis; however, the researcher's accounts of it in her dissertation and subsequent writings were always shared with CEJ members to ensure that her representation was accurate. This member-checking technique ensured that CEJ had a voice in how it was represented in academic arenas by the researcher. The researcher also sought to include CEJ leaders in public presentations. In the Baltimore case, the university-based professor worked with her students to amplify the voices of the youth affected by school closure, leveraging university resources towards that end. In both the Baltimore and New York cases, the university-based researchers took their cues from the frontline organizers, only engaging in the research in ways that the organizers endorsed.

The J4J project, by contrast, was able to avoid this negotiation between university and community partners entirely, by engaging only community members in the research process and writing exclusively in their voice. As the authors write,

We are the students [the reformers] claim to be [closing schools] for. We are the parents and family members that they claim to be helping. The communities they're changing so rapidly are *our* communities, and our experience with school closures and charter school expansion confirms what an abundance of research has made quite clear: these policies have not produced higher-quality educational opportunities for our children and youth, but they have been hugely destructive. (Journey for Justice, 2014, p. 4)

Coordinating a group of 36 organizations in a research and writing project is no easy feat, especially when each of those groups engages a multitude of stakeholders as well, and the work that went into producing *Death by a Thousand Cuts* likely involved careful negotiation to ensure balanced representation across cities and affected populations, including parents, students, and community members. The strategies of forming an alliance, giving it a name—Journey for Justice—and articulating a clear, succinct mission help to diffuse power imbalances across organizations, to present a unified front, and to advance a shared purpose. Indeed, although some pull-out quotations in the report are cited by the speaker's first name, no other names of individual contributors or organizations' executive directors appear in the report. In fact, the report is written in a way that makes it nearly impossible to know who the lead authors for the report were or who the "principal investigators" of the research might have been. This deliberate strategy serves to uplift the voices of the many people who contributed to the project, rather than vaunting a few individuals who might have spearheaded the research effort. In this way, the report not only distinguishes itself from, but also challenges more traditional academic pieces, in which authors' names are featured prominently, usually in an order that signifies something about voice and power, while the "subjects" of the research remain unknown or anonymous. In the way it handles issues of voice and representation, the J4J report offers a subtle but sharp rebuke against traditional academic research that is done on, for, or even with aggrieved populations, wherein the university-based researchers claim credit for the knowledge produced.

Although PAR projects in which community and university stakeholders enjoy equal say in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the research study are often held up as an ideal within the field of community-engaged scholarship, the three projects we discuss here illustrate how voice and ownership can be negotiated or simply asserted in a variety of ways, all of which privilege the perspectives and analysis of the community-based stakeholders. This negotiation was a little more challenging in the Baltimore project than in the New York and J4J cases if for no other reason than that there were more university partners involved than the professor, and the voices and investment of her students required managing as well. And, unlike the New York case, there were two community partners, both of whom were youth-led organizations with far less expertise than CEJ.

This led to project delays, frustration, and some missteps, all of which complicated the process of trust building and project implementation.

In the Baltimore project, the team deferred to BAP to decide how to approach communities and with whom to connect in particular communities. This was important for developing youth and community leadership; as one BAP youth member said, “We are products of the Baltimore City school system, so we have a personal stake in the project.” As another BAP youth member explained, they have been historically excluded from the decision-making processes and from powerful institutions:

Communities like ours are being kept in the dark about the decisions that are being made about schools. It would be like someone saying to you that they want to remodel your house but you can’t have any control over the remodeling but you could have input, but then they don’t ask you for any input (BAP interview 4/10/14).

Consequently, the ownership over the project and over the knowledge generated was a crucial issue. The team would generate new knowledge, but the data was kept by BAP and decisions about how to use it, and about what organizing and action would result, would be theirs.

However, there were challenges with this approach. Youth-led organizations like BAP, and the other partner New Lens, who did the filming and editing work, are sometimes difficult partners in that they are involved in many projects and can be distracted or take a long time to complete tasks. Additionally, their members’ lives are in flux, and they can have changing contact information, or they may have to stop and take care of a family member. These issues made handing over control of parts of the project difficult because time would pass without anything happening or without an understanding of new circumstances. There were times where the university faculty and students wanted to complete tasks without the youth because it would be faster, but they had to acknowledge that the process of allowing the youth to lead would be the way to ensure change was possible. That meant letting the young people from BAP and New Lens take the lead, which added three months to the project. Ultimately, this process built trust between the community organizations and the university faculty and students that would not have been built otherwise.

Trust was essential in the New York case as well. Claudette observed that communities of color are often blamed in research, especially when pertaining to school closures, as “either we accept [school] failure or we don’t want to change it.” She perceived that there are far more examples of research done to or for communities rather than with communities. She pointed out that organizing groups need researchers to be respectful in how they embed themselves in the work. They should consider how they ask their questions. “How are they not inserting their expertise or themselves as experts but instead enhancing what parents and community leaders know?” These are just a few guiding questions in developing stronger and more mutually beneficial partnerships between university-based researchers and community partners. These questions also matter to wider audiences who experience the research-based projects and presentations these relationships yield.

Presentation, Representation, and Interpretation

Claudette’s comments are a reminder that ethical consideration in CES around issues of presentation, representation, and interpretation abound: Who gets to present the work, whose interests are represented by the work, and how is the overall project interpreted by external audiences? How these questions are answered often depends on some combination of opportunity, resources, strategic concerns, and comfort levels. In the New York and J4J cases, a convening by national URBAN in Boston provided the opportunity and resources for community partners to present their research to other researchers and activists from across the country. Representatives

from CEJ were also invited to present that work at a convening in Philadelphia on school closings and one at Rutgers University on the intersection of education and social justice; however, in both cases, the group from CEJ was the only research team to involve community leaders. Indeed, opportunities for co-presentation are rare, and the onus to include community leaders usually falls to the academic researcher. In each of the conferences mentioned here at which CEJ presented, conference organizers provided financial support to the community presenters who, unlike academics, do not receive “travel allowances.” Co-presenting takes more than financial resources, though. Time is also needed to prepare proposal submissions and presentations and to attend conferences.

In the New York case, the university-based researcher deliberately sought out opportunities to present the work collaboratively with the parent leaders with whom she had developed relationships. Since 2013, they have done roughly three presentations a year, nine in total to date. Four different parent leaders have been involved and said they participate because they appreciate being part of different conversations and networks and that these were opportunities to think about and discuss their work in broader and different contexts. For the researcher, sharing the microphone with parents represented an opportunity to continue to value the expertise of parents, to share the power of research, and to be accountable as someone with membership inside the academy to both create spaces that genuinely reflect principles espoused around community-based research and to help reshape those spaces. But there are constant tensions in this process. Zakiyah said that researchers should not just utilize community members’ expertise for their own gain, but support organizing groups’ work and help get the word out. She said that when done in this way, another level of legitimacy and credibility is added to the organizing campaigns. The collaborative approach to research developed in the New York case allowed the parent leaders to build on their story, with the research becoming a living document rather than simply a paper that becomes out of date over time. Moreover, the relationships and trust that were established created a pathway to other areas of work and partnership.

The Baltimore case illustrates the challenges of presentation, representation, and interpretation as well. The research project in Baltimore resulted in a map and a video. Although both products were open source, meaning that anyone can access them, the question of who would be the face of that work still emerged. The compromise they reached depended on location and audience; when the work was presented in Baltimore as an organizing tool, BAP youth presented the project. University researchers were invited to the presentations but did not have a speaking role. When the work was presented in more academic settings, the university faculty led the discussions. In efforts to soften these divisions, the university researchers began inviting the youth to join them in the academic settings as co-presenters.

In the end, there was no clear owner of the final products. Still this raised some questions: Could the university faculty member claim any ownership or co-authorship since BAP youth took the lead on the project? Could BAP youth be co-authors on the project when the work was presented in academic settings? Navigating those challenges were difficult as all involved claimed that this was a collaborative project, careful not to overstate the role of the university partners. Audience members sometimes challenged the researchers on the research itself and wondered if there was an “agenda,” undermining the idea that the project was research at all. In response, the team explained that they collaborated on the research, and involved some of the same processes that all research goes through (e.g., institutional review boards). This explanation was convincing to some audience members but not others.

The issue of representation arose in the context of the video content. As the team edited the video together, differences of opinion emerged and caused disagreements over what should make it

into the video and what should not. University students wanted to showcase some of the worst conditions of the schools and neighborhoods. They wanted to hear stories about the struggles of neighborhood residents, teachers and students dealing with the challenges of inequities. BAP, by contrast, wanted to showcase community expertise, believing that the approach of the university students would create the image of a deficit-ridden neighborhood. The final product reflected BAP's objectives; the video contained interviews that demonstrated expertise and resilience along with resistance to being excluded from decision-making processes.

The issue of interpretation, at least in the Baltimore case, points to yet another layer of complexity. While the presentation and representation issues occurred and were addressed within the project team, interpretation introduced an external actor—the university. The University's Office of Civic Engagement wanted to showcase the work as an example of the university's commitment to the community. As a result, even with intentionally representing the project as a collaborative undertaking and one that was led by youth, some audiences might see it as a university product. Even BAP had some criticisms of how the final video turned out because they wanted a more radical message, one that conveyed the idea that Baltimore needed schools controlled by grassroots black communities. BAP was able to get this message across in the presentations of the research, but it was not included in the video itself. Thus, the university's interpretative spin was that the project was driven by university students who wanted to make a positive impact on the community by addressing a problematic issue. Despite the researchers' best efforts to highlight the collaborative and youth-led nature of the project, the university's portrayal was clearly at odds with the reality.

Finally, issues of presentation and representation are often complicated by the varying time structures between those inside and those outside the academy. This article, in fact, well illustrates that point. While the goal was to have a roughly equal balance of academic and community voice, the realities of publishing, in particular submission deadlines, requests for numerous revisions, and short turnaround times, do not easily fit the schedules of community organizers. Meanwhile, pushing by academics for inclusivity can strain the relationships that took so long to build. Three of the authors on this piece are academics, and the New York case study was written by the former doctoral student, though the ideas presented were developed in ongoing discussion with the CEJ parent leaders.

Contributions of CES to School Closings Literature

When cities such as Washington, DC, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Philadelphia began to experience mass school closings in the early part of this decade, there was not much research on the effects of school closure; what little research existed at the time was generally not favorable (see Sunderman & Payne, 2009, for a review). Rather than relying on empirical evidence of its effectiveness when touting school closure as a policy solution, policymakers would point to reports issued by private philanthropic organizations, such as the Broad Foundation (2009), or firms, such as Boston Consulting Group in Philadelphia (2012) and the Manhattan Institute in New York (Winters, 2010). These reports advocated school closure as the only financially viable response to outdated, under-utilized school facilities and poor student achievement in districts in which charter school expansion was driving enrollment away from traditional district-run schools.

In the last five years, the research on school closure has grown, as more and more students have been displaced by the shuttering of their schools. As is often the case in the academic literature, different methods and analytic approaches yield different conclusions. There is one line of positivist research, best exemplified by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which finds that closing schools benefits students (see also, Brummet, 2014; Kemple, 2016). In Fordham's study, the researchers

determined that students affected by school closure gained the equivalent of one month of learning in their new schools, as measured by standardized test scores (Carlson & Lavertu, 2015). Meanwhile, other positivist research, in which the researcher aims to adopt an objective and independent stance and trusts in the validity of the quantitative data, comes to opposite conclusions, finding no effect or even a negative effect of school closure on students (e.g., Conner & Cosner, 2015; de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Engberg, Gill, Zamarro, & Zimmer, 2012). For example, analyzing school district data for graduation, drop out, and test score trends, Kirshner et al. (2010) found that students displaced by school closure showed statistically significant declines on standardized tests and had a lower probability of graduating and a higher probability of dropping out than they would have had if they continued at their shuttered school. Other articles and studies scrutinizing district budgets, county property records, and financial documents have found that school closures rarely result in the monetary gains districts anticipate, and sometimes cost much more than was budgeted (Brown, 2012; Conner & Monahan, 2016; Philadelphia Research Initiative, 2013). Positivist research studies, like these, may be directly responsive to questions posed by grassroots community organizing groups, and they may even be used by these groups in their advocacy efforts and campaign work; however, community-engaged scholarship that honors the voices of those affected by the policy contributes a new angle of vision and understanding to the research base.

Community-engaged scholarship on school closure, including the three projects discussed in this article, as well as work by Lipman and colleagues (Lipman & Person, 2007), Kirshner and colleagues (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011) and Galetta and colleagues (Ayala & Galletta, 2012; Jones, Stewart, Ayala & Galletta, 2015), draws attention to the ways in which key stakeholders experience and interpret school closure. These studies accomplish several ends. They illuminate outcomes that researchers might not have anticipated when designing the studies as well as effects that elude quantitative measurement, such as displaced students' experience of stigma and strained relationships between students and teachers in receiving schools. They offer insight into people's sense-making of and emotional responses to a policy that is targeting them. They draw attention to alternative "imaginaries" (Pappas, 2015), visions of the future, and ways of conceptualizing a problem and the solutions to it, privileging community-based solutions. They chronicle, inform, and help mobilize community resistance, and they can help to build community power to contest harmful policies and the deficit-based narratives used to portray low-income students of color, their schools, and their neighborhoods.

The three CES projects we discuss in this article illustrate this range of contributions. For example, the publications and presentations resulting from the New York research study have helped to elucidate and contrast the different logics undergirding CEJ and the NYDoE's visions for school improvement. Meanwhile, the J4J report provided evidence of the ways in which school closings and charter school expansions undermine the quality of education, decrease teacher effectiveness, increase the school to prison pipeline, and destabilize communities. In addition to documenting these harms, the report also recommended an alternative policy approach - a Sustainable School Success Model. The goal of the Baltimore project was not to document the damage that school closings were having on communities, but to provide a platform for advocacy for the Baltimore Algebra Project. Noticing the absence of community voice in the literature on school closings, and the limited pushback to the policy of school closings in Baltimore, the research team that undertook this CES project aimed to elevate community voices to have an impact on advocacy around school closings. Though the impetus for each research project differed and the goals and products of the projects varied, collectively these community-engaged scholarly endeavors have helped to expand and deepen our understanding of school closure, its outcomes for those affected, and the community opposition to it as a policy solution.

Conclusion: Lingering Questions and Tensions

As noted in the introduction, our goal in this article was to expand and problematize current understandings of community-engaged scholarship. As the cases suggested, CES often involves navigating complexity in ambiguous terrains. In contrast to the positivist tradition of research, CES affords the opportunity for new voices and perspectives, thereby broadening the analysis and the range of policy alternatives, ultimately creating the possibility for more just outcomes. However, this approach also introduces complex issues of ownership, voice, presentation, representation, and interpretation. While these tensions can be mitigated, they will never be fully resolved. Exacerbating these issues are the realities of power and privilege that often exist in racialized contexts. These larger structural dimensions are not going to disappear anytime soon, if ever. The United States was founded on notions of racial superiority and built institutions to preserve that system, which endure to this day. Thus, *all* relationships and transactions take place within systems of racial hierarchy and disparity.

Given this reality, what can we realistically hope for? First, we need to continually acknowledge this system and how it confers advantages and disadvantages on different groups in society. At the same time, we need to take a broader view of issues of power and recognize that there are instances where community partners have substantial power, as in the New York case. Similarly, there is a hierarchy of power within the academy. Researchers who engage in CES often decrease their legitimacy within the academy since the positivist tradition, which they are challenging, is quite powerful. Thus, in many ways, they join the ranks of the “marginalized.” In short, issues of power and privilege are multilayered. Second, we need to understand, to the best of our ability, how systems of power shape the understanding and actions of individuals, including our own. Third, we need to be open in our communications and unafraid to ask questions that take us close to the central nervous system of racial difference, while also understanding why our questions may go unanswered. Open and frank conversations about race in our society are few and far between, leaving most of us woefully unprepared for how to productively and sensitively engage in such conversations. Fourth, we need to distinguish between individuals and institutions. While many urban universities have been prime movers in gentrifying their surrounding communities, many of the faculty who teach in those places have strongly opposed such actions. Creating spaces for those academics to come together to share experiences, lessons learned, and suggestions for moving forward, as URBAN has done, provides some comfort and support. Fifth, and on a proactive note, researchers need to be mindful of the privileges that often do accrue by virtue of working in a university and, if we are white, the privileges that come from our racial standing. Acting as empowerment agents, we can leverage this privilege in our work with community and youth partners. Finally, we need to accept and live with the knowledge that some tensions will never be resolved. However, if these tensions push us to further interrogate our roles, our work, our status, and our place in the larger fight for social justice, they may ultimately strengthen our collaborative work, enhancing our ability to effect positive social change.

About the Special Issue

This article is part of a special issue of *EPAA, Collaborative Research for Justice and Multi-Issue Movement Building: Challenging Discriminatory Policing, School Closures, and Youth Unemployment* that was edited by Ronald David Glass and Mark R. Warren and curated by the [Urban Research Based Action Network](#) (URBAN). This special issue reflects the network’s commitment to producing and utilizing research for justice that combines rigorous scholarship with the arts to engage both the

head and heart so as to deepen and express our social justice values in our scholarship. In addition to the cases highlighted in the title of the special issue, there are also essays that interrogate the [limits and possibilities of universities](#) for supporting collaborative research for justice, that explore the role that URBAN has played in fostering the formation of both an academic field as well as experiments in fusing knowledge production with knowledge mobilization and community organizing to build movements for justice, and that argue for multi-modal forms of knowing to build the critical solidarities needed to speak truth to multi-scalar powers at local, national, and global levels. These provocative essays are integrated with [graphics](#) that explore themes of how collaborative research for justice is related to advocacy and research rigor, how it must navigate institutional barriers and create institutional supports, and how it can play a powerful role in policy development and change. One graphic on the [ethics of collaborative community-based research](#) is also integrated with a video commentary. Additional videos feature scholars and activists sharing key lessons about [turning points in their careers](#), accounts of how they [put their research to work for justice](#), and [advice they have for the next generation](#). Another video features scholar-activists reflecting on [their experiences as publicly engaged scholars](#). Taken together, this special issue provides robust guidance for putting truth seeking to work on behalf of and in partnership with the least advantaged communities.

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