Critical Participatory Action Research as Leadership Praxis:
Sociopolitical Crises as Ordinary Moments for Expansive Educational Leadership

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Abstract

Philadelphia offers an ideal case study for understanding how community and education leaders negotiate the contemporary sociopolitical context and various crises to advance educational equity and justice. This paper focuses on our critical participation action research and organizing within an education coalition to offer an example of community-engaged research that strives for education equity and justice through leadership development. Our goal is to expand conceptualizations of educational leadership to include diverse stakeholders connected to school communities as experts. Toward that end, we examine and amplify the expertise of informal education leaders (e.g., families and communities) involved in struggles for education justice with attention to their response to the twin crises of COVID-19 and uprisings against anti-Black racism and police violence. Our work centers those directly impacted by systems and structures of oppression as experts on relationship building and community engagement. Findings offer insights and strategies to educational leaders for fostering family and community engagement and collaboration in times of crises and conflict.

Keywords: Education organizing, leaders, leadership development, intersectional praxis, critical participatory action research

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The current sociopolitical context includes pervasive crisis discourse—student debt crisis, climate crisis, housing crisis, healthcare crisis—a feature of neoliberal ideology often deployed to support reforms, particularly in education (Takayama, 2007). Viewing public education in Philadelphia through the lens of crisis constructs a story of political contention between local and state governments evidenced by various privatization strategies that disproportionately affect schools in predominantly Black and/or poor neighborhoods and reifies historical legacies of racism, discrimination, and urban disinvestment (Good, 2017; Lipman, 2017). Philadelphia offers an ideal case study for understanding how leaders effectively negotiate rapidly changing complex material conditions through various crises—specifically COVID-19 and uprisings against anti-Black racism and police violence—toward educational equity and justice. Philadelphia parents, students, educators, and community members have long fought against these manufactured crises toward a radical vision of quality education. More recently, the Philadelphia Education Coalition (PEC [a pseudonym], or coalition) led and won the fight for local control of the district as a racial and social justice issue.

ABBY COLE, 10TH GRADE

This paper focuses on our critical participation action research (CPAR) and organizing within PEC to offer an example of community-engaged research that strives for education equity and justice through leadership development. Our goal is to expand conceptualizations of educational leadership to include diverse stakeholders connected to school communities as experts. Toward that end, we examine and amplify the expertise of informal education leaders (e.g., families and communities) involved in struggles for education justice with attention to their response to the twin crises of COVID-19 and uprisings for racial justice. We consider "formalized" leaders as those with institutional positions of authority (superintendent, school boards, administrators) and "informal" leaders as families, youth, educators, and communities (Ishimaru, 2019a).

First, we define key concepts and ideas from research on school–community engagement and education leadership. Second, we provide details of the study, context, and methods. Third, we present a

data-driven narrative that illustrates key moments of learning and leadership in PEC responding to COVID-19 and the uprisings. Fourth, we offer insights informed by Ishimaru's (2019b) framework for equitable collaboration organized by three key ideas: 1) culture shift, 2) practices and structure, and 3) transformative relationships. We conclude by summarizing key points and implications.

Community and Families as Educational Experts

Critical education scholars have long advocated for a view of schools as community resources and sites of transformation (Boutte & Johnson, 2014; Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Viewing schools as community assets and a source for generating "intracommunity ties" is key to building "community control," which generally refers to increasing parent/family influence on schools through shared governance and empowered families and communities (Mayger & Hochbein, 2020; Noguera, 2001). Education organizing situates families, parents, students, teachers, and community members as experts while developing power through relationship building and leadership development (Hong, 2012; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Education organizing addresses family and community engagement as an equity issue with a participatory approach to school–community collaborations where historically marginalized communities collectively build power and take action to dismantle policies and practices that systematically undermine their schools and neighborhoods (Epstein, 2016; Ishimaru, 2019a). Education organizing flips traditional hierarchical relationships between families, communities, and schools to a reciprocal relationship where there is a mutual exchange of knowledge and learning between communities and schools (Welton & Freelon, 2018).

Educational leadership scholarship has demonstrated both the urgent need for educational leaders committed to equity and justice as well as the complex challenges they face (Mayger & Hochbein, 2020; Medina et al., 2020). Scholars have argued that education leadership programs are responsible for providing future leaders with the skills, knowledge, and disposition necessary to be effective leaders in a rapidly changing and increasingly diverse society (Barakat et al., 2019; Furman, 2012; Horsford et al., 2011). Social justice leaders must address the widely recognized opportunity gaps which lead to academic disparities for nondominant racial and cultural groups (Carter & Welner, 2013) and pervasive deficit perspectives in education policy and practice contributing to educational disparities (Anyon, 2005; Warren, 2018). Further challenges include contradictions between district mandates and community needs (Watson & Rivera-McCutchen, 2016), struggles with their own lack of cultural competence (Horsford et al., 2011), or a lack of racial literacy (Horsford, 2014). These challenges become heightened when considered within a social justice leadership framework. It is essential for socially just leaders to develop trust through honest public dialogue that deconstructs and situates issues within the sociopolitical context and openly acknowledges how schooling reproduces inequity and oppression (Rivera-McCutchen & Watson, 2014). Transformational educational leaders: 1) understand the school's surrounding community and political context, (2) care for sustainable authentic relationships with communities, and (3) collaborate across stakeholders (Watson & Rivera-McCutchen, 2016).

We apply Ishimaru's (2019b) framework for equitable collaboration informed by organizing, critical race, and sociocultural theories to our analysis and discussion. In contrast to traditional involvement approaches underwritten by deficit assumptions, equitable community–school collaborations entail (a) systemic change *goals,* (b) *strategies* that build capacity and relationships, (c) the *role* of lower-income parents and families of color as experts and fellow educational leaders, and (d) educational change as a *context-specific* political process. (p. 354). Three dimensions are used to contrast equitable collaboration strategies with traditional partnership approaches: "intervention level (individuals vs. collective), directionality (unidirectional vs. reciprocal), and power (unilateral vs. relational)" (Ishimaru, 2019b, p. 355). Ishimaru's (2019b) typology of strategies guides our interpretations and insights. First, parent/family capacity-building strategies focus on developing knowledge and skills to foster family and community agency and capacity. Second, parent-to-school and parent-to-parent relationship-building strategies involve "cultural brokers" at the school level to connect with nondominant families, parent-centered practices, and spaces for parents and families to build relationships with each other. Lastly, systemic capacity-building strategies that address infrastructure and capacity for educators, meaning family collaboration as well as platforms for families/communities to exercise leadership and influence in schools and school systems.

Critical Participatory Action Research as Leadership Praxis: The Rootwork Project

We begin by describing our research approach and positionality. Next, we introduce the context, coalition, and collaborators/participants. Finally, we outline the data collection and analysis methods utilized in this inquiry.

Research Approach and Positionality

CPAR is an epistemological and methodological approach to research grounded in democratic participation and critical analysis to advance social justice aims (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fine & Torre, 2021). Organizing and CPAR are underpinned by the premise that the individuals closest to the issue—neighborhood schools—are experts and best situated to make decisions and develop strategies for educational equity (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2012; Fals Borda, 1979). People's ability to build meaningful trusting relationships across differences is essential to these forms of collaboration. Our intersectional critical praxis is designed to support social movements, illuminate the intricacies of social justice work, critique education as a complex system of inequalities, imagine possibilities, and inform collective action (Hill Collins, 2015). Transformative organizing's dual focus on self and societal transformation considers personal growth as essential to systemic change (Pastor et al., 2011) and guides our work to build coalitions with a leadership development culture (Ganz & Mckenna, 2019).

Kristen and pep began working together within a city-wide education coalition in 2016 and have been researching and organizing for public education in Philadelphia since then. We founded the Philadelphia Participatory Research Collective (Research Collective) in 2019 with a group of diverse stakeholders who use participatory, community-led research to build the power of local leaders and grassroots social movements. Kristen is a public-school graduate, scholar-educator-activist-artist from rural Missouri. She uses CPAR to create spaces of belonging where people build meaningful relationships, construct knowledge, and take collective action. pep marie, the current PEC facilitator, is a proud graduate of the school district and family to current students. Since they were in high school, they have been working alongside school community members to build more pathways for their leadership, while calling for more immediate investments and divestments. Alice, a recent education policy graduate student, is also family to current Philadelphia students. She has provided support to diverse community stakeholders throughout the region, fostering community partnerships and engagement with ongoing political initiatives.

Context

The School District of Philadelphia is the largest and most diverse district in Pennsylvania. At the outset of the 2021 school year, nearly 200,000 students were enrolled across the district's 323 schools, with a student body of 52% Black/African American, 22% Latinx, 13% White, 7% Asian, and 5% multiracial/other (School District of Philadelphia, 2022). The 2019-2020 school year, leading up to COVID-19, at least 10 Philadelphia school communities faced closure due to asbestos, mold, and lead. The lack of pathways for the public to engage with the district resulted in public outcry and direct action, as well as a lawsuit by the teachers' union for mishandling dangerous building conditions (Philadelphia Inquirer, 2017/18).

The Coalition and Participants

PEC strives to represent the city's diversity as a multiracial intergenerational coalition that amplifies campaigns and concerns led by school-based directly impacted groups. PEC

> shifts power and resources in Philadelphia for the sake of great schools in our historically neglected neighborhoods through citywide campaigns. We do this work for the sake of great schools in our historically neglected Black, Brown and working class neighborhoods. We include leadership development in campaigns that build citywide movements and capacity of leaders working at the school level. (PEC Grounding Statement, September 2019)

The research praxis has focused on building a coalitional culture of leadership development that embraces learning as integral to building individual and collective power, especially for those often pushed to the margins and out of conversations about their own livelihoods. PEC prioritizes responsive structures including a collective process for reflecting and evolving them.

The PEC facilitator holds cross-organizational long-term strategy building spaces, monthly full coalition meetings, and regular one-on-one conversations with members. pep was the PEC facilitator at the time of this study. PEC meetings and activities take place via phone, Zoom, email, and in person. We model our vision of leadership and follow a consensus decision-making model and center directly impacted folks' expertise for contentious issues. When PEC launches a campaign and official stance, all member organizations are listed as supporters in the name of transparency and accountability. Since the coalition's inception, member organizations select at least one individual as their representative. From 2019-2020, an influx of predominantly Black and Brown youth, parent, and educator organizations joined the coalition. In summer 2020, the coalition included representatives from 25 youth, caregiver, school staff, and community organizations. PEC's platform includes campaigns spanning issues of local and state funding, school governance, and school district investments.

Rootwork Data Collection

This two-year CPAR project began in early 2020 with the goal of documenting and assessing the research praxis as leadership development. Our methods bridge community organizing and qualitative research to track changes at the micro, local, and macro levels. This inquiry focuses on a topical dataset relevant to COVID-19 and the uprisings, including pep and Kristen's researcher field notes, focus group #1, and PEC and district cultural artifacts. We use field notes to document and reflect on organizing practices and evolving research process. To accommodate schedules, we provided PEC members the choice of three different sessions to participate in focus group #1 on Zoom between August and December 2020. Focus groups lasted about two hours, were recorded and transcribed, and included questions about the impact of COVID-19 and the uprisings. Participants included 13 PEC members representing 12 different organizations. PEC cultural artifacts included private structure, training and campaign documents, meeting agendas and notes, and member organization campaigns and tools. District artifacts included publicly available data, website and social media, press releases, and Board of Education (BOE) communications.

Data Analysis

We used a hybrid thematic and conventional content analysis approach to prepare, organize, and make meaning of our data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002). First, we prepared and reviewed all our collected data to identify a dataset explicitly related to COVID-19 and the uprisings. Second, we conducted an inductive, data-driven analysis of the focus groups to identify codes and emergent themes about leadership and leaders' responses to the crises. Third, we compiled and organized the focus groups, field notes, and cultural artifacts chronologically to identify key moments of learning and leadership within the data. Finally, we applied Ishimaru's (2019b) equitable collaboration framework to attend to: 1) culture shift, 2) practices and structure, and 3) relationships within the data.

Education Organizers Learning and Leading through Crises

This data-driven narrative is presented chronologically beginning with the first school closures in March 2020 followed by two significant moments of learning and leadership that emerged from the data. Participant quotes and data excerpts were edited minimally for basic grammar and ease of reading. Because our work is rooted in our local education justice ecosystem and deep long-term relationships, some descriptive information is withheld while organization and participant names are anonymized with an attempt to honor identities while protecting privacy and confidentiality.

Cross-Stakeholder Collaboration to Safely Re-Open Schools

On March 13, 2020, Superintendent Hite announced district schools would close for two weeks. The statement blamed the closures on staff shortages, rather than COVID-19:

> **Though the School District of Philadelphia still does NOT have any suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 (coronavirus) in schools or offices** [Bold in original], this closure has become necessary as many SDP employees who reside in neighboring counties are being asked to avoid non-essential travel and to not report to work. (Hite, 2020a)

The letter stated that students were encouraged to take home all of their belongings and anything they would need during the closure but provided insufficient information about what families could expect moving forward. Following Hite's letter, the BOE announced there would be no public input at the March Action Meeting. These two initial responses from formalized institutional leaders lacked transparency and eliminated communication with the public, leading to mass confusion and public outcry. PEC immediately asked their network to call, email, and tweet concerns about the BOE meeting and the district's inadequate response to COVID-19. Promptly, the BOE changed the meeting format to allow written public testimonies, and Board members responded to live tweets and emails for over two hours. Further communication improvements were made to the SDP website and Hite held weekly "Q & A" sessions on Facebook Live.

The pandemic catalyzed an important developmental period for PEC: we intentionally had to resist feelings of urgency and reactivity heightened by the crises. Emotions were intense, folks were angry at the district, and tensions emerged between stakeholder groups around making public statements before communicating with the full coalition. When Hite announced the two-week closure, educators launched a petition calling for all schools to be closed immediately and indefinitely. Youth and families scrambled to make childcare arrangements amidst uncertainties around employment, confusion, and concerns as to why they were not involved in the school closure decision. With no clear plan from district leadership, PEC gathered all coalition members to work through widespread misinformation and uncover the truth about what was happening in our schools. We were horrified to hear from educators and staff that many schools had fewer than five adults in the building at a time with all students packed into auditoriums and cafeterias. When everyone finally understood what was happening inside schools, the coalition unanimously agreed buildings should be closed until it was safe to return.

Following early missteps and confusion, most school-based groups paused operations to prioritize their members' changing needs before taking public-facing actions. One method that pep and the PEC Leadership Development Committee established was a weekly space for cross-stakeholder groups to meet, share, and listen. This led to a more cohesive response that centered the experiences of our most directly impacted groups. During the focus group, Queenie, a parent leader and organizer, reflected on the importance of PEC as a place of support and leadership development during that time. Queenie shared, "We need each other. We couldn't do it by ourselves anymore and having pep be there as a strong leader made you want to come into the fold."

Throughout the pandemic, the coalition's "safe schools" demands have maintained three ideas: 1) communication with families and school communities, 2) equitable access to internet, technology, and accommodations to support student success, and 3) safe, healthy, and clean schools. PEC's organizing work holds the central desire for educational leaders to work alongside school communities to repair harm from decades of disinvestment, to rebuild trust, and reimagine with us what schooling can be (PEC Re-opening Statement, March 20, 2020). The re-opening statement reflects the power of collective voice that is informed by people's lived experiences of policies and practices. We have seen the impact of our strength in the ways that district leadership altered their engagement reflecting the coalition's demands, including the BOE replacing their one-way public virtual meeting format with Zoom, a translation hotline, and attention to Chromebook distribution issues.

Responsive and Supportive Educational Leadership During Crisis

The murder of George Floyd by police officer Derick Chauvin on May 25, 2020, sparked global uprisings against anti-Black racism and police brutality. The national spotlight quickly shone on Philadelphia as near daily protests and demonstrations began on May 30, 2020, and lasted through July. Many actions were organized by local, Black-led groups, were peaceful, and took place across every corner of the city, including the front steps of the school district building where Superintendent Hite spoke. He showed a side of himself that the public rarely sees as he implored the crowd to, "Stand up against racism, any time we see it in our schools," and that, "Institutionalized racism is when the Philadelphia school system doesn't get the funding it needs… We can't stand that anymore" (Hite, 2020b).

All PEC members expressed appreciation, hope, and inspiration from the protests. However, as uprisings continued, it became more complicated for the coalition's Black organizers. Philadelphians expressed their anger at police brutality while they were also responding to historical exploitative and oppressive material conditions exacerbated by COVID-19. Police tactics escalated with the use of force, tear gas, air guns, and eventual militarization of our neighborhoods with armored tanks, helicopters, and armed National Guard. Public transit shut down and major interstates and thoroughfares were closed. Philadelphians were scared, unable to sleep, and had limited access to necessities like food and medicine.

Throughout the uprisings, pep continued regular check-ins with Black organizers who wanted to share events in their lives and communities but were wary to discuss with non-Black people. pep created an unstructured space for Black members to share and process their feelings. Concurrently, many White organizers were moving with a sense of urgency but a lack of clarity about what to do. In June 2020, pep drew upon the direct guidance from Black members and led PEC into a new area of work with racial affinity caucuses: Black caucus, non-Black POC caucus, and White caucus. Kristen co-coordinated the White caucus with an initial aim of calling-in White folks and deepening our commitment to our racial consciousness development to be more effective co-conspirators in a multiracial coalition.

Also in June, the Consortium (a student-led organization), led PEC's learning about policing in schools. For years, Philadelphia students have fought against carceral policies and practices that disproportionately criminalize racialized students. In 2019, student groups in PEC pushed to have all metal detectors removed from schools, but the BOE voted against the students. Thus, the Consortium's police-free schools campaign was a continuation of their work and expertise. pep began facilitating consensus conversations following one-on-one conversations, a specific organizing tactic, with concerned member organizations and invited the Consortium to share their expertise as political education for PEC. Kristen integrated activities connecting race with policing and abolition in the White caucus to facilitate critical reflection on the pervasiveness of White supremacist values, which was contentious for some folks. Particularly compelling to some of the more hesitant PEC members was the students' divest/invest analysis. The students illustrated their vision for school safety as divestment from the $31 million yearly spending on policing to investment in mental health resources for healthy schools and communities. In collective conversations, folks offered great insight into alternatives to policing; some even committed to fill proposed roles. This was deeply personal work for Black and Brown coalition members. pep reflected in field notes: "I was much more vulnerable than usual with White organizers and shared experiences with policing. I do believe it was that personal relationship with me and the youth-led orgs that got the sign-on" (August 2020).

Leadership development was evidenced in individuals, organizations, and within the coalition as members took on new responsibilities while uplifting others. In the focus group, diverse members shared how the police-free school campaign felt restorative by reigniting the original spark from some activist paths, including elders who were part of copwatches in Boston in the 1990s or Civil Rights marches in the 1960s. Others shared how this moment challenged and shifted their organizing work. During the focus group, Blue Ivy, a parent organizer, described how this pushed her role as a parent organizer at her child's elementary school:

I had to then go have a conversation around police-free schools with the School Advisory Council, who are comprised of older Black moms who aren't really like anti-cop and who aren't really like, you know, abolitionists when it comes to police reform, and being that X is an elementary school, the one officer that we have there is, the dynamic is not the same that you get at a high school level … So I was very nervous about having that conversation, you know, even with experience and as an organizer.

This work posed unique challenges for differently positioned members and brought underlying tensions to light, and thus exposed areas for collective growth that PEC is currently addressing.

Although many members were happy with this new work, there was also significant pushback. Primary resistance was from White organizers who thought, based on differing political analyses or concerns, that creating distinct spaces based on racial identity was unnecessarily divisive (K. Goessling, personal communication, August 14, 2020). The caucuses played a vital role moving PEC toward consensus on police-free schools, an area of work the coalition had previously been unable to formally support, despite its centrality to our student organizations. For some organizations, the real concern was not about the youth, but about having their logo listed on an abolitionist agenda alongside city-wide calls to defund the police; they did not feel prepared to justify their support in the face of any potential backlash. Although some groups will still not join the city-level campaign to #defundthepolice, PEC expanded support for police reform and a police-free sector of our society. This is growth.

Insights from Informal Education Leaders: Relationships for Transformation

We summarize key insights from the narratives to compel educational leaders to highlight authentic relationships with families, communities, and educational stakeholders as essential for effective leadership. Our insights are inspired by Ishimaru's (2019b) ideas organized as responses to questions attending to: 1) culture shift as necessary systemic change, 2) shifting culture through practices and structure, and 3) transformative relationships as the foundation and driving force. We identify strategies and lessons from our experiences to support educational leaders working toward transformative aims of equity and racial justice in collaboration with families and communities.

Culture Shift: How Do We Move an Ecosystem from a Traditional Ethos to a Transformative Intersectional Ethos?

Embracing a transformational or social justice approach to educational leadership begins by attending to the sociopolitical context. It cannot be apolitical (Ishimaru, 2019b), while simultaneously striving to transform society and individuals as they are interrelated (Pastor et al., 2011). The PEC culture shift began in 2019 with one-to-ones and continued conversations about what members envisioned for the coalition and public education. The clarity of vision and shared purpose led to a *collective commitment to a transformative, intersectional culture.* A through-line of the coalition's work includes fighting the school district for more pathways to decision making for school communities. By turning the gaze inward, PEC is building a culture that reflects the vision and structures we want to see in the district. The twin crises have been referred to as a reckoning, a moment of reflection, an awakening of a nation to the fact that structural oppression and White supremacy are woven into the social fabric of this nation, but this was not an awakening for the Black, Brown, and racialized PEC organizers. Black folks are experts on the ways in which racism, as a structure of oppression and power, operates at the ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels. If there are no Black, Brown, Indigenous, or People of Color in educational leadership spaces, there is a glaring gap in knowledge and experience.

Traditional coalitions are temporary, short-term formations typically focused on a single-issue or campaign with a hierarchical structure (McCammon & Moon, 2015). PEC offers a new coalition formation based on a transformative organizing approach that amplifies a platform of campaigns and concerns led by school-based groups. Echoing our demands to formalized district leaders, coalition members must listen to and trust the expertise of youth, caregivers, school staff, and

community members. A transformative intersectional culture is a paradigm shift intended to dismantle traditional oppressive or "unilateral" to "relational" (Ishimaru, 2019b). From this stance, directly impacted individuals and groups hold invaluable knowledge and expertise to inform PEC's work and collective stances.

Honoring the experiences and knowledge of community members as equal to that of formalized leaders anchors the work in the material reality of what truly happened when schools closed and uprisings brought military occupation home. For PEC, these crises reaffirmed the importance of coming to a shared understanding that collective action must be informed and driven by lived expertise. This reinforces the understanding that any action or education policy uninformed by lived experience is inherently flawed and advances schooling as a system that reproduces inequity (Watson & Rivera-McCutchen, 2016).

Culture to Practice: How Do We Build Supportive Structures and Practices?

There must be labor and commitment to continuously revise practices and approaches to navigate ever-changing material conditions. In this way, transformational *educational leaders build and maintain responsive structures.* While PEC fights for pathways to participation for school community members, it strives to create and model responsive internal structures. This includes creating autonomous spaces where participants confront distinct needs as they arise, such as racial affinity caucuses. Transparent structures are reinforced through consistent communication and accessible meetings for all members, which is reinforced through complete information and resource sharing. Members are encouraged to communicate directly with each other to reinforce relationships and collaboration. Other examples include our living curriculum, time-sensitive conversations, and capacity-flexible agendas.

Responsibility for Responsive Structures

PEC is a grassroots organization funded by grants and donations overseen by a fiscal sponsor led entirely by a part-time, paid facilitator position. Being resourced provides capacity and time to schedule one-on-one conversations with members when convening the full coalition was difficult, especially during this phase of data collection. As the facilitator, pep was flexible and met members with different capacities where they were by offering time for members to share feelings and requests for the coalition. pep draws support from PEC's Leadership Development Committee and Research Collective, by holding and weaving the vast array of stories and perspectives within PEC into full coalition conversations intentionally to inform long-term strategy.

Educational leaders: Disagreements and Challenges as Transformational Opportunities

Mostly, PEC arrives at shared understandings and agreements on effective responses. The coalition embraces differing opinions as an opportunity to grapple with the many divergent perspectives in the larger educational ecosystem. By leaning in and facing disagreement directly, we understand each other and ourselves better. We are forced to face the fears and insecurities that come with working across differences. We grow our collective power by learning together. We had to revisit our commitments to re-centering school-based groups and trusting their leadership. Formalized education leaders must lean into disagreement and contend with differences to overcome symbolic, surface-level engagement and instead build structures and platforms to meet directly impacted folks' needs and desires. This is a stark contrast to the district's culture of leadership as demonstrated by formalized education leaders' attempts to foreclose opportunities for communication and engagement in initial responses to COVID-19.

Culture of Relationships: How Do We Build Authentic Relationships Toward Transformational Aims and Practices?

Authentic relationships are rooted in respect, reciprocity, and care for each other in our full humanness, which informs how we engage with each other through our structures and practices. Our *radical humanistic approach to relationships* recognizes PEC members first as people with

needs, hopes, dreams, and capacities, and second as organizational representatives. This relational view guided the coalition's steps through these crises. Members shared stories in personalized conversations, focus groups, and meetings laden with themes of death, loss, grief, alienation and isolation, and guilt and privilege. This recognition provided a pathway for us to pivot our work and create containers to process emotions and meet urgent needs. Slowing down is contrary to what most educational leaders experience in their work (formal or informal), yet time to listen and learn about each other is essential for our own understanding of the world and our possible accomplishments. To reiterate the call from the Black caucus: "Ask people how they're doing and what they need" (PEC cultural artifact, June 3, 2020).

Finally, authentic relationships *celebrate mutual accountability.* The commitment to a culture shift of transformative intersectionality is based on a relational structure of mutual accountability. In other words, we are accountable to each other by way of the collective spaces we share, collective strategy building, and by centering those directly impacted. There are structures in place for when people fail to meet the agreed upon expectations. Curiosity, rather than judgment, guides conversations to identify barriers and gaps in existing structures to ensure members have what is needed to uphold their commitments. For example, after the teachers responded without cross-stakeholder collaboration, we established a weekly COVID-19 meeting to facilitate collaboration and communication and reduce chances for uninformed actions.

Conclusion

We call for an expansive view of educational leadership and increased leadership pathways to democratize the institution of schooling. We define leaders as people who support and develop other leaders. We hold ourselves accountable to modeling the leadership we want to see in our district by centering people and groups who have been disenfranchised, marginalized, and silenced as experts. The data and insights shared here show how research can be used to refine and adapt leadership practices to successfully navigate changing material conditions. The coalition provides an example of effective educational leadership that centers authentic relationships across diverse stakeholders working toward equitable and just education.

Embracing a transformational rather than traditional approach to organizing or schooling is a philosophical shift operating across the cultural, practice, and relational levels. In PEC, this shift began with the understanding that relationships are a site for personal and social transformation. To strive for transformational aims like equity and justice requires change at both individual and social levels; you cannot have one without the other. This commitment is not explicitly outlined in most formalized leadership positions, yet this is how leaders advance social and restorative justice beyond symbolic gestures. Educational leaders make difficult decisions every day, knowing there is no perfect choice and that challenges will always exist. In the face of crisis and in the pursuit of equity and racial justice, educational leaders must rely on the authentic relationships they have with families and communities to respond in a meaningful and relevant way. Having a leader who can establish, uphold, and deepen commitments over time is often what makes the difference between the success or failure of social change efforts (Ganz & McKenna, 2019), and this applies to formalized educational leaders' efforts to improve schools and academic performance (Ishimaru, 2019b).

We ask formalized educational leaders to consider what it would take to create an institutional structure that fosters stronger connections across families and communities who are empowered as educational leaders to make decisions and take action toward their own aims rather than administrative determined outcomes. This relational commitment to others is beyond what most traditional, formalized leadership roles entail, possibly even contrary to expectations and responsibilities of those institutionalized positions. We recognize this is challenging, time-consuming, frustrating, and can be inharmonious with institutional roles and expectations. We believe the collective power of authentic relationships is the way to move the needle toward justice.

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pep marie has been organizing alongside Philadelphia's young people, school families, educators and community members for the last 15 years. Today pep coordinates a coalition of school stakeholder organizations focused on school governance, progressive funding, and transformative investments. With the support of the Philadelphia Participatory Research Collective, pep and their network have built more capacity for data collection, analyzing, and reflection, despite well deserved reservations about research. pep is committed to combating marginalization not only from school district leadership, but internalized in our Educational Justice movement itself. pep seeks to facilitate spaces for leadership development, relationship building and collective visioning that center Black, Brown and Working class school community members.

Alice Saladino Cooper received her B.A. from Rutgers University and her M.S. from the University of Pennsylvania. As a Research Assistant with the Philadelphia Participatory Research Collective, she helps build PPRC's infrastructure and develop curriculum databases, while contributing to regular research-related activities. In her research, she hopes to provide post-colonial critical inquiries of power in order to analyze and re-define education, excellence, and restorative justice. From policy outreach, to food-banking, to COVID initiatives, Alice continues to work with diverse community stakeholders throughout the greater Philadelphia area.