

Partnerships, Action, and Collaboration, Together (PACT): A Community-Based Partnership Where Innovation, Collaboration, and Impact Reshape Stakeholders' Vision

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Abstract

Project PACT (Partnerships, Action, & Collaboration, Together) (a pseudonym) is a multi-stakeholder partnership that reflects multiple goals, commitments, and priorities for early childhood education. PACT was informed by the literature on community-based research (CBR) and a commitment by partners to strengthen P-3 education where stakeholder assets contributed to reciprocal learning experiences in early childhood education. PACT stakeholders transformed two early childhood education classrooms into Montessori classrooms within a district public school. As one in a series of investigations, this research specifically examined partner commitments to a unique collaboration, the emergence of roles and responsibilities over time, and manifestations of innovation within a traditional public school setting. Data illustrate how stakeholders established a collaboration that allowed for flexibility, perspective-taking, and the opportunity to work together to reconsider and strengthen P-3 education through a model typically reserved for children of affluence. Beyond the operational demands of a startup initiative, findings also reflect the power of a collective through flexibility and a stance that values the assets of a community. The impact of this work demonstrates the potential to successfully impact quality education in early childhood settings through equity and opportunity.

Project PACT (Partnerships, Action, and Collaboration, Together; a pseudonym) is a multistakeholder partnership that works to achieve multiple goals and priorities for early childhood education. Beyond typical actions designed to improve education for a diverse community of students, this community-engaged collaboration integrates the perspectives of a traditional public school, a private school, an urban school district, and a public institution of higher education. PACT is unique in its emphasis on a Montessori ethos and pedagogy within the context of a culturally and linguistically diverse Title I public school.

PACT was informed by community-based research (CBR) and by the partners' commitment to strengthen P-3 education. This work embraces stakeholder assets to contribute to learning experiences in early childhood education. The present study is one in a series, and it examines how community engagement can influence early childhood student learning by building a culture of opportunity in a school identified as underperforming (Burbank et al., 2020). Research questions specifically examined partners' commitments to this collaboration, the emergence of roles and responsibilities over time, and the manifestations of innovation within a

traditional public school setting. Data illustrate how stakeholders collaborated to reconsider and strengthen P-3 education through a model typically reserved for children of affluence. Findings reflect not only the operational demands of a startup initiative but also the power of a flexible collective and a stance that values the nuanced assets of a community.

The Foundations of PACT

PACT is a collaboration among stakeholders who share a mission to provide quality K-12 education for all learners. Unique to PACT is a framework that connects partners invested in early childhood education through (a) direct engagement in an urban Title I school, (b) teacher professional development, and (c) the willingness to remain limber in work that is dependent upon individual and collective needs.

In 2016, key stakeholders from Western City School District, Jasper Elementary School, Charlotte Montessori School, and Western Hills University (all pseudonyms) embarked on a plan to strengthen P-3 education. Two traditional kindergarten classrooms in Jasper Elementary School, a Title I elementary school, were converted to Montessori settings for children ages 3-5. The

Montessori classrooms emphasized independent learning, equity, and validating learners from diverse cultural and linguistic communities (Debs & Brown, 2017), and they included the practical components of Montessori environments (e.g., developmentally appropriate Montessori instructional materials and curricula). PACT provided Montessori training for two teachers and two paraeducators.

PACT embodied elements of what Kuhn (2015) described as the complexities of collaboration, including a process that developed over time. In addition, the unique characteristics of PACT participants shaped the evolution of effective communication and actions within the partnership. These dimensions allowed for problem-solving that was complex, iterative, and aspired to more than meeting an end goal.

Reasons for the Collaboration

Strengthening student learning. PACT emerged when long-standing partners came together to consider opportunities to strengthen the academic performance of students attending Jasper Elementary. The school was under review by the district based upon its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standing. District leaders, Jasper administrators, and university stakeholders examined a range of possible ways to bolster students' skills and strengthen teaching to help students meet learning outcomes. Although standard teacher professional development and tutoring were certainly viable contributions, the additive nature of these "solutions" failed to recognize students and the community in ways they believed to be meaningful and necessary. That is, the stakeholders had to consider how the unique assets of Jasper's site, teachers, students, and community would shape efforts to support student success.

Promoting equity. PACT consciously addressed inequity in early childhood education by employing a Montessori approach to teaching, which is rarely available to children from low-income communities. Gorski (2014) referenced the significance of disparities among low-income communities as the result of inequities within these communities and not as an inherent feature of more affluent communities. Gorski and others (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2006) have further argued that examining disparities in areas such as resources, quality preschool, and health care can create spaces that cultivate ways of reducing discrepancies and building opportunities for success.

Within the PACT classrooms, a social justice ethos informed an approach to teaching, learning, and interactions that acknowledged each individual. Young students received learning experiences—a diverse curriculum, examinations of power, and problem-solving—that allowed them to explore their individual identities through negotiation informed by Montessori principles (i.e., attention to classroom cultures and culturally relevant and sustaining instruction, and social justice curricula; Banks & Maixner, 2016; Debs & Brown, 2017). PACT also focused on academic and nonacademic opportunities for student success, such as efficacy, leadership, and engagement with topics of race, which are typically missing in traditional classroom settings.

Partners

Western Hills University and Western City School District had previously collaborated in teacher preparation and broad-based community-engaged research, including issues related to education support, employment, housing, and civic engagement. As long-standing partners, PACT stakeholders capitalized on their familiarity and trust in each other by listening and reflecting together. Partners accepted each other's unique assets to create a space for innovation. PACT's operational scope included integrating curricula, securing students' access to resources, and offering ongoing teacher professional development. From the beginning, PACT informed a culture where stakeholders worked as a community of coeducators committed to P-3 education, pushing boundaries and traditions between typically unaffiliated stakeholders (Richmond, 2017).

Western City School District. Western City School District is located in a city identified as among the fastest growing, most ethnically diverse communities in the United States. Population projections estimate that 61% of population growth over the next 20 years will occur within Latinx and Asian communities. The population will reach 25% by 2025 (Hodgkinson, 2002; Santiago & Reindl, 2009; Stanford, 1999). Six continents and 100 languages are represented across Western City School District's schools, and 56% of students are from varied religious and ethnic backgrounds. Language learners constitute over one third of the K-12 population.

Jasper Elementary. Jasper Elementary, PACT's focal site, holds a Title I designation. The school has served the educational needs of the Jasper community for over 50 years and serves

approximately 550 children and their families. The student body includes 78% students of color, 51% students who are language learners, and 88% recipients of a free or reduced-price lunch. The school's focus on trauma-informed practices is designed to support children, families, and educators in their work.

Jasper's social justice curriculum supports students' learning experiences and examines issues around social injustices that both visibly and invisibly, maintain an oppressive and unequal status quo. Using a social justice framework, Jasper promotes a critical consciousness of inequities and is committed to solidarity toward the goal of social change (Bell, 2016). School-wide, Jasper's social justice values are evident in its commitment to each child's individuality and the importance of social values (Papalia & Martorell, 2015). These values are manifested through (a) caring for each other, (b) engaging honestly, (c) creating opportunities that challenge, (d) honoring culture and identity, and (e) believing in the capabilities of each person. These goals are meant to free each child's potential rather than create experiences with which students must conform (Rathunde, 2001).

Charlotte Montessori. Charlotte Montessori is a private Montessori school committed to educating students from across the ability spectrum. Its mission is to create a fully inclusive educational setting that allow for individualized learning, cooperative education, multiage classrooms, consistent use of concrete materials, and a spiral curriculum. Charlotte values inclusion. Sensorial materials, among other dimensions of the Montessori model, are used at different learning levels to meet children's varied needs and abilities. As part of the PACT partnership, Charlotte provided an initial model for practica and professional development.

Western Hills University. Western Hills University is a research-intensive university in a major metropolitan city. Its teacher education program is located within a college of education and has a history of collaboration and partnerships linked to teacher preparation, teacher professional development, and community engagement. The teacher education program specifically emphasizes urban education in its curricula and practica.

Literature Review

Effective Partnerships

CBR principles, including a collective commitment to exploring ways of meeting agreed-upon goals and priorities, are foundational to PACT.

Like others engaged in CBR, the PACT collaboration values the democratization of knowledge and social change (Aagaard-Hansen & Ouma, 2002; Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Campbell, 1995; Kemmis, 1995; Strand et al., 2003). CBR partnerships integrate financial and human resources, social networks, and the life experiences of multiple stakeholders.

Challenges for Partnerships

Partnerships become particularly complex when issues such as resource allocation are considered. The limitations of partnerships stem, in part, from an inability to manage resources, such as startup costs and supplies (Hall, 2015). For education partners, key questions to consider when working together include (a) identifying the required criteria for partnerships that support teacher preparation and professional development and (b) determining components of partnerships that satisfy operational needs, sustainability, and the interpersonal and human resources necessary for fostering trust, value, and reciprocity.

To reach these goals, effective partnership efforts must commit to the "knowledge systems" that all relevant stakeholders (i.e., families, schools, communities, higher education, public education, and private education) bring to the conversation about how to affect early childhood education (Hall, 2015). Pulido et al. (2013) underscored the importance of decision-making and accountability measures designed to advocate for all participants in public-private partnerships, particularly those that involve initiatives to improve community conditions while keeping public institutions viable (Jordan et al., 2013).

Finally, extending partnerships to include research requires a unique stance that values how data, broadly speaking, are generated and shared (Muñoz & Rodosky, 2015). Goals are met through alignments between research and stakeholder goals, a research focus that is possible to generalize, and shared ownership of any research generated from the partnership (Wentworth et al., 2016).

Partnerships in P-12 Education

As a contemporary iteration of stakeholder engagement with public education, PACT reflected a shift away from historical approaches to P-12 engagement within higher education. The Professional Development School model, which originated in the early 1990s, established a formal structure for partnerships between universities and public schools (Bullough et al., 1997; Kennedy, 1990; Rushcamp & Roehler, 1992; Teitel, 2001).

The factors informing large-scale reform in public-private partnerships involving higher education institutions include changes in contemporary environments, synchronized goals across stakeholders, and commitments to core agreements about partnerships (Lyman, 2013; Sabol & Puentes, 2014). Partnership goals are successful when they are identified together, measurable, and transparent because mistakes can provide opportunities for improvement (Sabol & Puentes, 2014). Within the context of early childhood partnerships, broad-based goals often center on nutrition, health, education, and overall well-being. Education goals may address teacher training, curriculum development, materials and technical support for instructional delivery, and financial support for educational resources. Increasingly, the sharing of resources has expanded to include collaboration that reflects creativity and innovation (Gustafsson-Wright et al., 2016).

Historically, varied agendas have driven the focus of partnerships and influenced institutional priorities within education-related circles. For example, grassroots initiatives often champion opportunities that bring together stakeholders committed to improving P-12 education, health care, and community engagement (Israel et al., 2006; Murrasse, 2001; Pulido et al., 2013). Among university partnerships committed to historically marginalized communities, a research-to-practice ethos is critical for lasting systems change (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; National Research Council, 2012).

A range of collaborative efforts within education systems are designed to improve education. Engagement may include added financial support as a way to meet goals (Gustafsson-Wright et al., 2016). For example, early childhood partnerships may include a financial or service agreement where remuneration occurs when benchmarks for student achievement takes place or when trainings take place. Subsidies may also be provided for various services designed to support early childhood education (i.e., O'Gara, 2013). The interrelated nature of the public service components of many partnerships allows for both planned and unexpected connections.

Methods

PACT used a case study approach (Merriam, 1998) that allowed for an in-depth understanding of the PACT collaboration and its outcomes (Yin, 2006). Data were collected from a variety of sources to ensure its robustness (Owens, 1982). These findings have limited generalizability, as it

is a single case study. However, even individual case studies can allow for connections to larger phenomena (Vaughan, 1992). These findings—which demonstrate that risk-taking and unique collaborations can be effective in education, particularly in areas related to equity—may thus inform the work of others.

Evaluation is integral to CBR; when programs are evaluated conscientiously, collaborators can identify their successes and potential areas for improvement (Strand et al., 2003). PACT's evaluation encompasses a year of planning (Year 1) and two years of implementation (Year 2 and Year 3). Program evaluation efforts measuring stakeholder attitudes were generated from one year of planning (Year 1) and one year of implementation (Year 2). Data sources included in-depth interviews and surveys designed to measure stakeholder attitudes and caregivers' reactions to participation. These data were generated in an effort to assess the successes and challenges of PACT as described by key stakeholders from across the partnership. Program evaluation efforts measuring outcomes occurred in the first two years of PACT implementation (Year 2 and Year 3). Beginning in Year 2, an external evaluator collected outcome measures of student learning through district-supplied data at the time of PACT's first year of implementation. The external evaluator also collected these same outcome measures for PACT's second year of implementation in Year 3. Data collection efforts were cleared through the Western Hills University and Western City School District institutional review boards.

Stakeholder Attitudes

Teacher, paraprofessional, and administrator attitudes. Within PACT, Year 1 stakeholder attitude data reflect planning stages through the viewpoints of collaborators at the district, public school, private school, and university. During Year 2, the implementation of PACT offered concrete feedback from collaborators.

Year 1 data were collected via 45-minute face-to-face interviews conducted by a program evaluator. Six interviews took place with administrators and early childhood education specialists at Western Hills University, Charlotte Montessori, Jasper Elementary, and Western City School District. The interviews included a series of open-ended questions that measured stakeholders' thoughts, behaviors, and motivations for collaboration. Questions probed respondents' roles, the perceived benefits of the project,

potential roadblocks to the collaboration and implementation, as well as the anticipated outcomes for student learning, district teachers, community members, and partners. The program evaluator also asked questions unique to each respondent, which allowed for in-depth understandings of participants' expectations of the multilevel partnership (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Data were analyzed through a process of data segmentation and coding of themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

At Year 2, PACT stakeholders completed an online survey designed to measure attitudes regarding the impact. Classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators at Jasper Elementary, as well as an administrator at Charlotte Montessori completed the survey. The survey contained four closed-ended and 10 open-ended questions addressing project implementation, teacher and administrator roles, and perspectives on the collaboration's potential to affect P-3 education. The survey garnered an 86% response rate (n=6). Survey data were analyzed using frequency distributions for the closed-ended questions (Neuman, 2003) and data segmentation and coding of themes for the open-ended questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data collection methods varied from year to year (i.e., in person interviews versus an electronic survey). CBR can sometimes demand flexibility in program evaluation efforts (Strand et al., 2003). For example, the face-to-face interviews conducted during Year 1 allowed for interactions where collaborators felt comfortable expounding on their thoughts, beliefs, and project expectations. The online survey administered during Year 2 resulted from scheduling constraints and allowed for respondent anonymity.

Caregiver feedback. PACT program leaders involved families in their decision-making. Initially, families were part of focus groups that facilitated information sharing and question-and-answer sessions during Year 1. An open house gave community members and families an opportunity to learn more about the PACT model. Program developers provided materials in multiple languages, such as Spanish, for caregivers who did not speak English. At the end of Year 2, caregivers provided feedback on their children's experiences via a survey. Survey questions asked caregivers to rate their children's overall experiences, describe their reasons for choosing a Montessori classroom at Jasper Elementary, offer suggestions for program improvement, and describe any differences they perceived in their child's behavior and learning after completing the program.

Paper copies of the caregiver survey, cover letter, and instructions were shared with each classroom teacher. Materials were available in English, Spanish, and Somali. Data collection lasted 3 months. Over that time, the response rate was 49% (n=17). Ten responses in English and seven responses in Spanish were received.

Student Learning Outcomes

The authors of this study collaborated with colleagues at Western Hills University to conduct an analysis of student learning outcome data that encompassed 2 years of the PACT program (Year 2 and Year 3). The Education Policy Center completed data agreements with Western City School District that permitted the Center to obtain, analyze, and then report the student learning outcome data to the authors. Specifically, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is a standardized test of student learning in the literacy development of K-6 students, aiming to predict a student's future reading abilities. DIBELS data include benchmarks for student achievement.

PACT students' average end-of-year DIBELS scores were compared with the average DIBELS scores of similar students in traditional kindergarten classrooms at Jasper Elementary and another socioeconomically similar school within the same district. Descriptive statistics and means testing were performed on the number of days of school attendance, DIBELS scores at the beginning and end of the school year, and the DIBELS benchmark goals for these kindergarten student populations.

Regression analyses were conducted to determine whether participation in PACT had an impact on students' end-of-year DIBELS scores, while accounting for other factors that could have affected scores. A regression analysis compared PACT students with kindergarten students in the other early childhood education classrooms at Jasper Elementary. An additional regression analysis compared PACT students with kindergarten students from a socioeconomically similar school located in the same district. These regression analyses included the beginning-of-year DIBELS scores across two years. Other variables related to student and school demographics that could have reasonably affected end-of-year DIBELS scores were included as covariates in the regression model. However, because these additional variables have the potential to compromise students' anonymity, they are not included in our data presentation. Sample sizes are small for PACT students (see Table 1).

Data Summary

Interview and survey data provide stakeholder assessments of the process and impact of the PACT collaboration. These stakeholder perspective data identified three important themes: (a) the importance of partner commitment, (b) the formulation of roles and responsibilities for stakeholders, and (c) the realities of innovation within a traditional public school setting. In this section, we also present preliminary outcome data.

Teacher, Paraprofessional, and Administrator Attitudes

Commitment to a unique collaboration. Table 2 summarizes the findings from program evaluation efforts. It depicts both stakeholder expectations during the Year 1 planning phase and the realizations reached during Year 2, which was the first year of project implementation.

In the Year 1 data, stakeholders viewed PACT as unique, noting that a partnership among public and private schools and among primary and higher education institutions is atypical. In the mind of one Year 1 stakeholder, PACT created a platform for implementing a plan that could address the needs of all learners. This partner noted,

The climate in contemporary classrooms doesn't allow for much modification and there is very little wiggle room in curriculum and assessment, and so those narrow bands of what we count as quality or assessment may or may not work for all students.

Early on, the PACT approach required the members of the collaboration to agree that risk-taking had the potential to strengthen student learning. One respondent described PACT as an “opportunity to kind of be bold and try something different and see if it works,” noting that it is good to “stir things up in education.” Collaborators felt that taking risks in this context was reasonable because the relationship was facilitated by “credible” partners, some of whom had a “history” of past partnership successes.

As with Year 1 data, Year 2 data indicated that partners perceived benefits to their unique relationships across educational institutions. During Year 2, when asked about the value of participating in PACT, all respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their participation. Noting the uniqueness of the arrangement, one respondent said, “The level of collaboration between public and private entities is remarkable, and very rarely happens.” One stakeholder summed up by saying, “The partnership itself is a success in that it exists! How unique and wonderful as a model for how institutions who would otherwise be separate can come together to do meaningful work for students and families.” Another stakeholder noted, “I believe the success of the project is in large part due to the fact that everyone involved recognizes that none of us could do this alone! Through working together, everyone is learning and growing!” Stakeholders’ satisfaction with PACT enabled the institutions involved to carry out meaningful work for students and families.

Roles and relationships between partners. Year 1 participants described their roles and those of their partners using various general descriptors, such as “liaison,” “facilitator,” “the one with the connections,” “the visionary,” “the one with resources,” “the Montessori expert,” and, importantly, people who “came up with this idea together.” After a year of implementation, individuals’ roles became more explicit, and in the Year 2 survey, respondents were able to articulate their responsibilities in more concrete and intermingled ways. According to Year 2 respondents, the university had taken on the role of “oversight” and “check-in[s],” Jasper Elementary provided “the site, the students, and the teachers,” and a “wonderful team that I can rely on and ask for help.” Charlotte Montessori provided Montessori experience and expertise and “[gave] us tips and insight and [showed] us lessons.”

A primary responsibility of the partnership was to attend to, in the words of a Year 1 stakeholder, the “merging of different school cultures.” Two

Table 1. Sample Sizes for Student Outcome Analysis

Implementation Groups	Year 2	Year 3
PACT kindergarten students at Jasper	16	11
Traditional kindergarten students at Jasper	56	53
Traditional kindergarten students at a comparison school	107	105

Table 2. Summary of PACT Collaborators' Attitudes by Year

Theme	PACT Year 1: Planning stakeholders	PACT Year 2: Implementation stakeholders
Commitment to a unique collaboration	• Atypical collaboration with credible partners • Opportunity to do something new in education	• Satisfaction with PACT • Remarkable collaboration • Working together
Roles and responsibilities	• General descriptions of roles • Anticipated issues with families and the community <i>Teacher roles:</i> • Professional development • More teaching options	• Concrete and intermingled descriptions of roles • Respond to needs <i>Teacher roles:</i> • Able to use collaboration as a resource for teaching • More choices in teaching • Better able to meet student needs • Requested additional support in implementing Montessori model • Felt unsupported by nonproject peers at times
Realities of innovations	• Knowledge of the school community • Anticipated family involvement because of Montessori • Social justice curriculum already present <i>Sustaining support for PACT:</i> • Desire for project expansion • Optimism in dealing with roadblocks • Concern with retention of program teachers and district-level support	• Meeting the needs of family and school communities • Explaining Montessori to families • Increase in family engagement • Increase in attention to language • Enhancement of the social justice curriculum <i>Sustaining support for PACT:</i> • Concern with retention of program • Support from teachers and district

respondents suggested that the partnership would create a division among those who were involved in the program and those who were not. A Year 1 respondent explained that the selection of students for these new classrooms would prove challenging, as it was the goal of the collaboration to mirror the demographics of the school community within each classroom. Stakeholders were also responsible for making connections and working with caregivers. They discussed with caregivers the rationale for participation in an early childhood Montessori classroom and how it compared to a traditional classroom setting.

Partners had to assume responsibilities in creating the new learning environments. In Year 1, team members worked together to transform the traditional public school classrooms into Montessori classrooms, complete with learning

materials. During Year 2, teachers and other team members highlighted the importance of effective communication as classroom needs unfolded. For example, five respondents reported that the classrooms needed more supplies such as books, cabinets, and materials for social studies, science, practical life, language arts, reading, geometry, and botany.

Teacher roles: Infusing Montessori. The majority of Year 2 respondents described the fusion of Montessori techniques with the school's social justice curriculum as successful. Montessori's recognition that knowledge is experiential and layered perhaps established it as a fitting vehicle for affirming the lived experiences of the children in the PACT classrooms. In these ways, the Jasper Elementary teaching community honed the curriculum to represent the children and their

families. Specifically, other Year 2 stakeholders mentioned that the classroom integrated “[discussions of] race, racism, equity, and access with our students. They have not really learned to advocate for themselves or others.” Speaking more generally about the Montessori curriculum at Jasper, one stakeholder said,

We are continuously working to educate staff and students about social justice. We certainly have not arrived, if there is such a thing. Having Montessori here, where families who otherwise would not have access to this program, is itself an example of social justice—closing a gap that would otherwise exist.

The flexibility of the Montessori curriculum allowed for adaptations that embraced the children’s unique stories and lives. This has been perhaps the most unexpected and significant outcome of PACT’s efforts toward reciprocity.

Realities of innovation in a collaboration.

Collaborators redirected their thoughts from initial expectations to the realities encountered when meeting the needs of early childhood education students. After a year of planning, stakeholders revealed genuine excitement about the possibilities of influencing student learning, in-service teachers, and the community. Stakeholders were invested in the opportunity to incorporate social justice teaching within the early childhood classroom in accordance with CBR practices. Deploying the Montessori model in a traditional public school offered teachers a philosophy, an approach to curriculum and pedagogy, and the opportunity to reflect on how the model underscored the social justice practices that were central to their school community.

Sustaining support for PACT. Throughout, partners considered PACT’s longevity. Respondents articulated some possible roadblocks for PACT. Three Year 1 respondents noted that finding licensed teachers trained in Montessori principles could potentially be problematic. Two respondents felt that Montessori-trained teachers may turn over quickly and would not be available to the program for its duration. Year 2 stakeholders suggested that the program would benefit from more training for the teachers and paraprofessionals as well as a more rigorous process to identify teachers who have a deep understanding of teaching in ways aligned with Jasper’s mission.

One Year 1 respondent mentioned that turnover of educational community leaders, such as a decision-maker within a school district, could hypothetically influence PACT’s future at Jasper. Another Year 1 respondent noted that “navigating the logistics of agencies” will be key to this initiative. This particular challenge remained during Year 2; one Year 2 respondent noted,

I feel the biggest roadblock is the constant worry that the Western City School District will not continue to support the project. No matter how great the children are doing in the classrooms, fear of the project being shut down hangs over us like a dark cloud.

Caregiver Feedback

Caregiver feedback on the Montessori program at Jasper was overwhelmingly positive. Caregivers reported changes in their children’s behavior and noted the benefits of learning within the Montessori classrooms. Caregivers saw changes in their children’s language development/ language usage, friendships with other children, behavior at home, and independent learning. They also noticed positive differences in how their children worked with others, talked with adults, and played with other children. Caregivers indicated that their children changed academically in the learning of art, social studies, music, math, geography, and science.

When asked how, if at all, program participation would affect their children’s learning experiences in the future, caregivers said they noticed stronger vocabulary from their children, increased socialization skills, and learning that came more quickly and with less difficulty. One caregiver said of her child’s experience in the Montessori classroom, “It has had a holistic positive effect and has helped him in all aspects of his development.”

Some caregivers chose to have their children participate in the Montessori classroom because of PACT’s reputation. Other caregivers said they participated because of the “new learning techniques,” the “focus on each child,” the “different way to learn” that it provided, and the impression that the program “helps children develop.”

Caregivers suggested expanding the Montessori program to include older children and additional grade levels, increasing socialization with other children in the school, encouraging

more caregiver involvement, and providing more materials. Several caregivers did not offer suggestions for improvement or said they liked the program as it was.

Student Learning Outcomes

Stakeholders reported in Year 1 that PACT was beneficial to early childhood education, particularly due to the Montessori ideologies and methods employed. Additionally, stakeholders anticipated improvements in student learning and professional development. Year 2 stakeholders reported positive outcomes for student learning as teachers gained pedagogical options to meet student needs. Teachers also cited periodic struggles to gain support for the Montessori curriculum from their peers who did not participate in PACT.

Student learning was also measured through statistical analyses of DIBELS scores from each student participant, benchmark comparisons, and a regression analysis of associated key variables during the first two years of implementation (Year 2 and Year 3 of PACT). As Table 3 shows, performance data indicated that PACT participants attended significantly more school days than did students in traditional kindergarten programs at Jasper Elementary.

Table 4 shows the DIBELS scores for the first two years of PACT’s implementation. For the first year of average DIBELS scores (Year 2), PACT participants ended the year below benchmark, whereas the traditional classroom of early childhood students at Jasper Elementary and the comparison school finished above benchmark. Students in all three classrooms had started the year similarly below benchmark. During the second year of DIBELS score reviews (Year 3), PACT participants started and ended the year above benchmark. The traditional classroom of early childhood students started below benchmark and finished above benchmark. Students in the comparison school began and ended the year above benchmark.

As shown in the regression analysis results in Table 5, in Year 2, PACT students’ end-of-year DIBELS scores were 40 points lower than traditional-classroom students’ scores within Jasper. There was no significant relationship between PACT participation and the end-of-year scores in Year 3. Comparing PACT students’ DIBELS scores with the comparison school scores revealed that, on average, PACT students scored 33 points lower in Year 2 and 21 points higher in Year 3. Preliminary feedback from Jasper and the district following Year 4 indicated that PACT student performance data now meet or exceed comparable student data for this age range.

Conclusion

PACT shifted traditional pre-kindergarten classrooms with the goal of transforming the education experience of a community of young children (Strand et al., 2003). A Montessori curriculum and philosophy served as a flexible framework to guide stakeholders, maintain a focus on individuals, and provide support for a school designated as in need of improvement. The decision to implement PACT was informed by the partners’ critical examinations of current educational practices for children from a historically marginalized community. These actions allowed partners to address the fundamental disparity in education that disadvantages many individuals from marginalized communities (Gorski, 2014).

PACT united a cohort of unlikely partners who have historically engaged in relatively generic ways (e.g., through student teaching sites). PACT stakeholders learned to understand the similarities and nuanced assets brought to the table as collaborators. As part of the process, there was a willingness to value knowledge as a conduit for social change (Strand et al., 2003). The partnership invited transparency in conversations and actions toward change (Sabol & Puentes, 2014).

Table 3. Days of Attendance by Year

Implementation Group	Year 2	Year 3
PACT kindergarten students at Jasper	170	166
Traditional kindergarten students at Jasper	134	124
Traditional kindergarten students at a comparison school	145	140

Table 4. DIBELS Scores by Time of Year for PACT Implementation

Year 2	Beginning of the year	End of the year
Benchmark	26	119
PACT kindergarten students at Jasper	18	101
Traditional kindergarten students at Jasper	15	134
Traditional kindergarten students at a comparison school	25	141
Year 3	Beginning of the year	End of the year
Benchmark	26	119
PACT kindergarten students at Jasper	40	167
Traditional kindergarten students at Jasper	22	129
Traditional kindergarten students at a comparison school	38	142

Table 5. Linear Regression Predicting End-of-Year DIBELS Scores for PACT Implementation

	PACT vs. Jasper		PACT vs. similar school	
Year 2	β	(SE)	β	(SE)
Beginning-of-year DIBELS score	0.860	(0.230)	1.226**	(0.191)
PACT participation	-39.531**	(13.202)	-33.726**	(10.876)
Constant	65.646**	(25.229)	21.166	(33.908)
Year 3				
Beginning-of-year DIBELS score	1.371**	(0.310)	1.330**	(0.144)
PACT participation	9.579	(11.782)	21.413**	(10.499)
Constant	20.667	(26.071)	56.272**	(23.324)

Notes. ** $p < .05$; to preserve school anonymity, not all covariates in the Year 2 and Year 3 models are shown.

In her reflections on entering the PACT partnership, the principal at Jasper noted,

After spending time to learn more about Montessori education, I realized that to pass this opportunity up would be a mistake. While not perfect, Montessori embodies many of the pedagogies that support students of color, [and it is] a way to provide access to those who otherwise could not afford such an education.

Operationally, PACT promoted awareness of and advocacy for quality education for all children through the infusion of a student-centered curriculum that promotes students as individuals and encourages students to be independent in their decision-making. At its inception, partners did not anticipate that the project would result in much more than transformed classrooms that would simply replicate a model found elsewhere. Instead, PACT affected students’ experiences because of the partners’ belief in individual learners as capable

and unique. As such, stakeholders approached the curriculum design in ways that supported the unique qualities of all students.

Although Year 2 student data revealed that PACT students had lower DIBELS scores than their counterparts, standardized testing data over time indicate some positive outcomes for students, even in the early stages of implementation. That is, PACT students attended more days of school than their peer students in Year 3, finished the year above benchmark, and had higher test scores than their counterparts in a comparison school. Additionally, other data indicate that PACT positively affected early childhood education students at Jasper. Specifically, caregivers were satisfied with PACT and reported positive changes in their children's learning. Importantly, stakeholders viewed the collaboration as successful, even though they had concerns early on about the risks and practicalities of such a unique project.

Partners worked together with a nimble responsiveness guided by direct work in classrooms to generate solutions through specific actions. Integrating the Montessori model depended on the community's recognition that it needed more than just the implementation of a predictable curriculum. Jasper Elementary's social justice focus recognized and celebrated individual students' identities, and these priorities allowed for the spiraling of the Montessori curriculum within the culture of the school and its members.

As institutions, educational communities are slow to change (Lyman, 2013; Sabol & Puentes, 2014). Politics, fear, and systemic entrenchment have the potential to limit alternate ways of viewing education (Kuhn, 2015). Viewpoints and actions that smother expansions or program shifts are particularly challenging when resistance is linked to issues of race, class, gender, and language. As such, efforts to rally stakeholder participation in support of early childhood education are varied and complex (Gustafsson-Wright et al., 2016). PACT reflects one such initiative to counter the status quo through foundational efforts linked to community engagement.

Cultures

Through its commitment to P-3 education, PACT explored alternatives to traditional curricula and teaching. This educational culture shift included a commitment to reciprocal learning, relationship-building with stakeholders, and camaraderie between educators and the wider community. Structural mechanisms for

teaching young children reflected the nuances of stakeholder needs, informed practice, and expanded opportunities to consider best practices for P-3 teaching and learning.

Committing to Innovation and Collaboration Within the Context of Today's Realities

Public education is complex. Operational demands, funding, policies, individual and site cultures, as well as institutional priorities dictate operations. Even when stakeholders band together, they must continue to operate within the systems in which they reside. PACT stakeholders were thus keenly aware of how a public Montessori elementary school must manage pressures of high-stakes accountability.

Keeping the proposals of Kuhn (2015) at the forefront, PACT reflected the complexities of collaboration. As a community-engaged partnership, PACT embodied collaboration linked to specific tasks: a willingness to understand participants' characteristics and their impact on quality education experiences for young children, a sustained expectation that partners would grapple with problem-solving as more than an end goal, and the freedom to engage in effective communication. Where PACT can serve as a model for others is in its approach to community engagement, which was more than ad hoc problem-solving or bolstering standardized test scores. Unlike typical responses to problem-solving that are formulaic and static, PACT encouraged varied viewpoints as means of shaping responses. PACT created a platform that motivated thinking and action by deeply exploring the complexities of cultures within classrooms and schools.

The foundations of this multipartner collaborative created an operational and intellectual venue that fostered the beliefs that every student can learn, that classroom environments must be safe and supportive for teaching and learning, and that diversity should be both acknowledged as an asset and as a way to drive curriculum (Allen et al., 2017; Banks & Maixner, 2016). Together, these elements provided opportunities and success in early childhood education by responding to the needs of a community.

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