Participatory Action Research Addressing Social Mobility

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Abstract

Low wealth and first-generation high school graduates face many information barriers in accessing college information. Most of these students attend public high school without sufficient high school counselor staff and information resources to support college going. Further, limiting information about college to one location such as the high school excludes supports from the community. The purpose of this participatory action research (PAR) study was to investigate an alternative to the high school centric model of college access service delivery with a goal to reduce barriers to college information to improve social mobility. This paper first presents background on the challenge of college access and the theoretical framework guiding the study. Next the paper documents the participatory action research study examining how a community came together to create an action plan to increase college going and attainment. The PAR process engaged ten students and four adults in a rural high poverty Mississippi Delta community through photovoice and Q methodology. The community identified locations for outreach and noted the importance of trust in the institution and persons delivering the college access services. The resultant action plan created a roadmap and guide for community action. The study has implications for social mobility and the design of college access outreach and programs. Implications for communities considering college access outreach programs are provided. Policy implications are outlined including the need to fund sufficient planning time to enable low wealth and minority communities to design and plan social mobility programs.

Keywords

Social Mobility, College Access, Participatory Action Research, Photovoice, Q Methodology

1. Introduction

Gaining access to information about colleges is critical for college choice, applica-

tion, and enrollment (Bryan et al., 2011). For most low wealth and first-generation college students (those who are the first in their family to pursue a college education), high school counselors and teachers serve as important information channels for the application and enrollment processes (McMahon et al., 2017). Many high schools (especially in rural areas) have high school counselor to student ratios leaving minimal time in counselor's schedules to assist with college planning and advising (Woods & Domina, 2014). Helping students plan for and prepare for postsecondary education is an accepted role for school counselors; however other assigned duties often limit the time counselors have to accomplish this task (Clinedinst et al., 2016). Even in schools with adequate school counselor supports, Bryan et al. (2011) found school counselors may not be the preferred source of information for Black and Hispanic students. Studies indicate parents are the primary source of information for students and families who historically have had limited access to higher education (Bell et al., 2009) although students report parents may not have up to date information on the application process, financial aid, and admissions requirements (Harper et al., 2021).

Researchers point out that most studies of college access focus on counseling services in schools serving White, urban, and affluent populations (Bryan et al., 2011), however the situation is different in schools serving predominantly Black, low-income, or rural populations. In rural schools where few resources exist for college planning and preparation, students may also experience low expectations for college attendance (Bryan et al., 2011; Griffin et al., 2011; Morton et al., 2018; Perna, 2006) and college information in high schools may be limited (Israel et al., 2009; Roscigno et al., 2006; Scott et al., 2016). Numerous studies find rural students' ability to access postsecondary education is related to having resources and support to navigate the admissions process and being able to pay for postsecondary education (Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011; McMahon et al., 2017). In a rural context, encouragement and support from family and teachers to pursue postsecondary education is essential to pursuing postsecondary education (Means et al., 2016, 2021; Morton et al., 2018). Researchers studying postsecondary education access for rural youth have cautioned educators and policymakers against placing blame on rural youth and their families for postsecondary education access inequities (Means, 2019). Such a deficit-based perspective overlooks the systemic nature of education inequities and ignores the assets, resources, and networks possessed by youth and their families, especially minoritized youth and their families (Harper, 2012; Means, 2019; Yosso, 2005).

Policy targeting college access services for low wealth and first-generation students may not achieve its intended outcome of increased college going and completion due to numerous barriers (McMahon et al., 2017; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). Fukuyama points out that international development policy failed not because of misdirected policy, but rather the policy was incomplete in that it assumed a "competent, strong, and effective state" (Fukuyama, 2002: p. 24). A similar situation exists with rural college access and success initiatives where most

services are limited to high school offerings. The model of high school college access service delivery is dependent on informed, socially connected, and self-confident individuals (Coleman, 2011), and does not reflect the value of community cultural capital in addressing the need for assistance in the college decision making process. Limiting college access services to high school means students and families need to seek out assistance within the confines of the four walls of the school which may be a perceived barrier (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Carey, 2019; Scott et al., 2016). The model is time bound and it is dependent upon a sufficient number of educators and support staff who are knowledgeable and able to reach all students with support (Woods & Domina, 2014). Further, the high school may be seen as a biased environment to first-generation and minority students and their parents (Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2015) reducing the incentive to seek out assistance. As in Fukuyama's observation of a competent, strong, and effective state, college access policy assumes high schools have capacity (or can achieve capacity with additional resources) to serve and support college aspirations. Given the challenges of high school centric college access supports and services, an alternative model of providing college access and support services is needed.

The purpose of this participatory action research (PAR) study was to investigate an alternative to the high school centric model of college access service delivery to reduce barriers to postsecondary education information and supports. The objectives of the research were: 1) to give voice to community members in low social capital groups in the conceptualization of a community-centric network of college access services, 2) to establish or expand civic infrastructure through a loosely organized network of volunteers providing college access and success services in the community, and 3) to document a replicable model of engaging social networks in the work of college access and success for social mobility. The study objectives achieve the three primary features of PAR including collaboration, mutual education, and acting on results of the research process (Brand & Gaffikin, 2007; Fetterman et al., 2013; O'Sullivan, 2012).

The study took place in a small city in the heart of the Mississippi Delta with a population of just under 29,000 residents. The city is losing population. From 2020-2021, the city lost 3% of its population (American Community Survey, 2022). The median household income in the research site city is 40% less than Mississippi's median household. Poverty is pervasive with nearly 38% of the population living in poverty, approximately three times higher than the US average. Most importantly for the purposes of this PAR research project, educational attainment is lower than the national average with under 20% of residents holding a bachelor's degree or higher compared to the US educational attainment average of 33.3%. The city is 84% African American, 14% White, and 2% other races. The city is a rural community overcoming its Southern history of segregation and racism. Improved educational attainment is needed to improve social mobility, to reduce population loss, and to improve economic stability.

2. Theoretical Framework and Perspectives

The study is grounded in two theoretical frameworks: social capital and Perna's model of college choice. Social capital is described first and is then situated within Perna's college choice model.

2.1. Social Capital

Social capital as a construct has varied definitions depending on the lens through which it is viewed. Coleman (2011) defined social capital by its function with a variety of different entities with two elements in common: social structures and individuals within the social structure. For those in contact with each other through social structures, Coleman explains there is a productive aspect of "making certain ends possible that in its absence would not be possible" (p. 98). The outcome of social ties and connections provide a form of insurance that creates trust and cohesiveness. Bourdieu (1986) asserted social capital could be measured as the size of an individual's network connections that can be effectively mobilized and the individual's own economic cultural or symbolic capital.

A key component of social capital is information exchange which in the case of college access is an extremely important function. Coleman proposed that social capital enables the "resources of one relationship to be appropriated for use in others" (p. 109) and it is often seen in parents sharing information with each other. This works through two types of relationships: social capital exists between the children of parents interacting together, and the relationships of their parents with other parents or adults of similar social status. These relationships are more important to college choice when they are connected to the school the child attends and the broader context of the environment in which they reside.

Social capital is an important theory for guiding this study as college access is dependent on information. First-generation and low wealth individuals may not know anyone who has attended and graduated from college. Low social capital can limit their knowledge of college options. Perna's model of college choice provides a macro level and holistic view placing social capital within the broader context of the college choice environment. Perna's model is described next.

2.2. Perna's Model of College Choice

Perna's conceptual model of college choice (2006, p. 117) is a multi-layered model illustrating the environment within which students and families make decisions about college. Perna argues that students' college-related decisions and behaviors do not occur in a vacuum, but instead, occur within the social context in which the student is embedded (Perna, 2006; Perna & Kurban, 2013). More specifically, Perna proposed that students' analyses of expected costs and benefits are nested within several layers of social contexts from the level of the individual to the broader social, economic, and policy context. Perna (2006) identified and described four contexts that can influence students' decision-making processes.

o *Individual habitus* includes demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity, class,

and gender), plus access to social and cultural capital. Perna (2006) argues (p. 119) that individuals' habitus toward college enrollment may influence their decision to become academically prepared for college, which will, in turn, influence later stages of the college-choice process.

o *Social and community context* involves those characteristics that facilitate or impede student college choice. Perna emphasizes access to institutional agents (teachers, counselors, middle-class peers) who can provide information about college and help with college admission. However, certain restrictive structures within schools can limit students' ability to develop trusting relationships with institutional agents. She notes that teachers and counselors often play dual roles as mentors and gatekeepers, and interactions tend to be short in duration.

o The *higher education context* involves the role that institutions of higher education play in shaping the college choice process. Perna argues that these institutions can influence students' decisions by recruitment and marketing initiatives. Perna argued that students prefer institutions consistent with their personal and social identities, needs for personal acceptance, and needs for institutional support. Certain characteristics or attributes (size, specialization, diversity, selectivity, reputation, location) may affect students' decisions, if a student prefers to attend institutions with certain characteristics. Finally, higher education institutions affect students' enrollment decisions through admission standards and criteria, as well as availability of enrollment slots, financial aid, grants, and scholarships.

o The outermost layer of Perna's model is the *broader social, economic, and policy* context. College enrollment decisions are influenced by society's demand for more highly trained workers, investment in higher education, and economic conditions.

Within each context, social capital is a driving force through extended social connections. At its highest level, college access and success is dependent on individual choices derived from within the social, political and policy contexts of college supports which may be in the form of state financial aid or college going campaigns (Perna, 2006). Social capital for college access and success recognizes the ways in which social structures and resources facilitate or impede student college choice (McDonough, 1997). Considering social capital within the broader context of college choice is important for this study. Community-based college access and information is theorized to extend social capital and connections to those who may not have strong social connections or who may not benefit from the current model of high school centric services. Without the social capital or supports, social mobility is limited. This study aims to use the PAR process to improve social mobility by expanding college access and information for those with low social capital.

The research process is described next. The study used a participatory action research approach to craft an action plan for social mobility.

3. Participatory Action Research Methodology

Participatory action research (PAR) is grounded in a constructivist approach to creating knowledge. At its core PAR is a collective and reflective inquiry jointly undertaken by researchers and those living the topic of study (Brown & War-wick, 2019; Sankaran et al., 2017). First, those engaged in PAR need to recognize that expertise and knowledge are widely distributed and researchers should assume those who have been most systemically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specific knowledge of the history of the problem and how action might create a self-determined solution (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

PAR projects work to yield evidence-based solutions with the intention of social change by creating practical and applicable knowledge through engaging participants with insider knowledge of the topic of study (Schubotz, 2020). PAR seeks to engage those with lived experiences so researchers can understand the context with a goal to improve the world by changing it (Baum et al., 2006). Schubotz (2020) writes PAR emerged because "conventional methods had persistently failed to capture the voices and experiences of underrepresented, marginalized, or hard to reach groups in society" (p. 9). Means et al. (2021) indicate PAR can "range from changing public policy, to making recommendations to government agencies, to making informal changes in the community that benefit people living there, to organizing a local event, to simply increasing awareness about an issue native to a particular locale" (p. 45). Schubotz also notes "it is widely accepted among PAR researchers that active involvement of the subjects with lived experience in question may lead to more appropriate and better questions (p. 12). Rather than a positivist science approach trying to control and manipulate variables, PAR views the research site as an opportunity to impact the topic of study through active engagement and observation of data and information within their contexts (Baum et al., 2006). Further, the research process is intended to lead to action influenced by understanding of the local context and social relationships (Baum et al., 2006).

With the goal of creating action from PAR, this study utilized two methods suitable for participatory action research: photovoice and Q methodology. Photovoice was selected as a methodology to engage high school students, college students, and parents of high school students in documenting challenges and opportunities. The photos provided data for conducting a Q sort to uncover various perspectives on college access. Each method is described next.

3.1. Photovoice

Wang & Burris (1997) developed photovoice based in Freire's (1970) theory of critical consciousness as a means of involving groups in defining their strengths and concerns. As a participatory action research method, photovoice is both a visual and verbal approach useful for capturing the individual and group reality related to a topic of concern. Photovoice asks a group of individuals to take part in a delineated process 1) to enable people to record and reflect their communi-

ty's strengths and concerns, 2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussions of photographs, and 3) to reach policy makers with recommendations for action (Wang & Burris, 1997: p. 370). Photovoice findings provided data to conduct a Q methodology study described next.

3.2. Q Methodology

Q-methodology was developed by William Stephenson in the 1930s to study behavioral preferences across different context (Stephenson, 1953). Q-methodology allows exploration of a complex problem from a subject's point of view and provides a glimpse into mental models across and between participants (Stephenson, 1953). In a Q-sort, participants weight statements in response to a question, in accordance with how *they* see the issue at hand thereby capturing subjective points of view of participants (Coogan & Herrington, 2011; Harris et al., 2021). Because all participants are asked the exact same questions in the same format, Q methodology analysis contains more rigor than some qualitative methods would allow. Q methodology involves technique (sorting) and method (factor analysis) enabling the systematic study of behavioral preferences and providing a glimpse into mental models across and between participants (Stephenson, 1953). This is accomplished through a sorting activity (Q sort) resulting in a by-person factor analysis creating clusters of individuals who share similar opinions (Coogan & Herrington, 2011; Harris et al., 2021). The Q methodology process makes it an ideal participatory research methodology.

3.3. Participants and Data Collection

Through connections in the mayor's office in the city, six high school students, four college students, and four parents were recruited to participate in the photovoice study. The ten high school and college students were all first-generation students. Five African American males, three African American females, and two White female high school and college students agreed to participate in the research project. The four parents recruited for the study were all African American females. The parents had all completed college and had children who had completed college.

Participants were first gathered in two groups (students and parents) and introduced to the study. The two groups were asked to describe and define opportunities for college in the city and what stands in the way of citizens wanting to go to college. The process of describing and defining the opportunities and challenges of going to college created within group consensus and pointed the groups to the purpose of action resulting from the project. Following the meeting of each group, the participants were assigned the task to document challenges to getting college information outside of the high school environment and to document opportunities for locations to reach the community with college information through photos. Participants were asked to limit the photos to the city geo-

graphy to keep the project focused on the city and to enable development of the city specific action plan.

3.4. Phase 1: Photovoice Data Collection and Analysis

The participants documented the photos on personal cell phones and uploaded into a Dropbox folder for the researcher. Once all the photos were gathered, individual interviews with each participant were conducted to probe the meaning and importance of the photo's message to the individual. High school and college participants described going to college as hard in the city's environment of high poverty and rural location. Some described living in the worst section of the city and the challenges of staying in high school as the greatest challenge to going to college. High school and college student participants described common challenges faced in deciding to go to college. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2013). Common themes included money to pay for college, not knowing anyone who went to college to ask for help, time to get information due to work and home commitments, transportation to get to information sources outside of the high school, not having a home computer, not knowing how to plan for college, not knowing how to find information, lack of reliable internet service to be able to search for information, distractions from college by friends and the local environment, lack of information about college in the community, and the overall poverty condition of the city.

The parent participant interviews were also recorded, transcribed and analyzed for themes (Miles et al., 2014). Parents indicated the same challenges as the high school and college students but focused more on the lack of college information available outside of the high school. Parent participants also noted transportation as a top challenge in the rural city with no public transit. The parent participants noted that most families did not own a personal computer but conducted business on their phone making college applications especially difficult. Parent participants also noted issues of safety, nighttime lighting, and parking as key considerations for planning college information locations outside of the high school.

Following the interviews, a focus group brought the high school and college students together to share with each other their photos and to probe common themes for locating information sites outside of the high school. Focus group participants were asked to choose the ideal location in the city for getting college information outside of the high school. The students discussed and agreed the public library, the local community college and four-year college shared extension campus, and City Hall as ideal places that could distribute college information. The students noted they would need to trust the people and the location if they were to go to it to get college information. They indicated they did not want to be taken advantage of and they wanted to be able to make a good decision about college that would not lead to excessive debt.

A focus group was also conducted with the parent participants. Parents reite-

rated themes of safety, parking, and nighttime lighting in selecting the college information locations they photographed. Parent photos prioritized locating college information at the public library, the local community college and four-year college shared extension campus, and the K-12 public school district office. Parents also noted the need for trust in the location as reputable and known among the community. With the photovoice phase completed, the study moved to a community-wide input process using Q methodology.

The focus on trust by both students and parents created an opportunity for shared knowledge building and served to guide the next phase of the research. The researcher investigated the role of trust in low wealth and minority communities and found a rich literature in support of the students and parent perspective. Most college access research is grounded in social and cultural capital and has yet to account for elements of trust in the college decision making process. Social science researchers argue that impoverished individuals make "present-minded" or "myopic" financial decisions because they lack the opportunities to overcome their present situation and the immediate reward, if monetary, is more desirable due to financial need (Farah & Hook, 2017). In an information experiment about college returns and costs embedded within a representative survey of US household heads researchers Bleemer & Zafar (2018) report finding no descriptive or experimental evidence of a relationship between cost beliefs and expected college attendance expressing puzzlement as to why information did not change college attendance intentions. The study did not examine the role of trust in the decision-making process. Community trust has been found to partially buffer or offset the effects of low income on myopic financial decisions (Farah & Hook, 2017; Jachimowicz et al., 2017).

3.5. Phase II: Community-Wide Q Methodology Study

The project next moved to framing an action agenda and co-creating knowledge around college access and trust with the community at large. The photos of locations across the city for distributing college information were data points in a Q methodology study (sort). During the Q, sort participants ranked a set of 26 photos of places in City where college information services could be established. Rankings ranged from Most Trusted (+3) to Least Trusted (−3). Community participants sorted the 26 photos in response to a question prompt probing trust in the location as a place where an AmeriCorps member or other volunteer could provide college access services. The student and parent participants invited their connections to a community-wide Q sort event attended by 52 community members.

Findings from the Q study factor analysis distilled three perspectives with statistical significance pointing to locations that were known and trusted among the community. The first perspective was labeled the Traditionalists who viewed the trusted sites through a school related lens. The Traditionalists agreed upon the school district office as a known and trusted site for distributing college information. The second perspective was the Expanders who viewed trusted sites

through the lens of convenience and recognizability. These sites included the public library and the city recreation center. The third perspective was the out of the box thinkers who recommended delivering college information services in places such as McDonalds or at large local employers.

4. Participatory Action Research Results

Building upon the photovoice and Q sort research, the researcher assisted three parent and two college students in the development of an action plan to activate the college access network of sites: the City College Access Network (City CAN). The City commitment is embodied in the City CAN action plan documenting a shared vision and common values in stating; 1) a shared belief that through volunteer efforts the City community can collectively improve college access and success through a shared vision and leveraged impact, 2) a shared vision stating every City child can and should achieve some form of postsecondary education leading to living wage employment, 3) a shared mission to improve City college participation by convening community social service agencies, education leaders, the faith community, city government, philanthropic organizations, service organizations, and college students as volunteers in a network of community-based locations to provide college and financial aid application assistance. The action plan also outlined core values of 1) City CAN is focused on building a community wide college access and success focus, 2) City CAN values all types of diversity and puts equity into action, and 3) City CAN is a learning and doing community of volunteers collectively addressing the challenge of college access and success.

The City CAN action plan outlined the mayor's office commitment to 1) propose a resolution of support from the City for the City CAN network, 2) open doors for City CAN coordinators at the identified sites to begin the conversation of how the work can be done at the site and to create a Memorandum of Understanding as needed for use of the space at no cost, 3) assist City CAN coordinators with promotion and volunteer outreach as needed, 4) be the champion for college going culture in the community by leveraging City communications about the City CAN services, 5) commit the Mayor's Youth Council students to assist the program as a means to achieve sustainability, 6) submit a grant application to the state Americorps office to fund positions to coordinate the work (VISTA volunteers) and to carry out the work, 7) participate in a learning community for effective college access network practice, and 8) to promote college access in mayoral regional and national engagements.

The City CAN action plan was adopted through a resolution of support in January 2020. A formal press event was conducted in February 2020 just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The work of college access launched during Covid-19 after the initial lockdown was lifted in the state and continues in the city.

5. Implications for Social Mobility

This PAR project utilized photovoice and Q methodology to activate a local col-

lege access network. The establishment of sites outside of the high school environment staffed with community volunteers is not common in the delivery of college access services. This project extends college access from the high school-centric model to be a community-centric model with a goal to improve social mobility. The model is not intended to replace high school-based services, rather the model is intended to complement and supplement high school services, especially for those with low social capital and disconnected youth and adults who may not return to a high school for college advising. The project takes a holistic approach to improving social mobility through college access by engaging city leaders, philanthropy, social service, faith, and civic leaders in creating a plan for local volunteer efforts to address the barriers to college access. The resulting City CAN initiative establishes a formal structure for organizing volunteer efforts and for monitoring progress toward improving social mobility.

The study is also significant for school and community relations addressing persistent problems of poverty and social mobility. Schools provide a social structure and focus for outreach and services, but schools are not likely to be able to meet the needs of every student without a significant infusion of qualitied school counseling staff and other supports. Perna's model indicates the school is embedded within multiple layers and contexts making the school-based services just one portion of any strategy to improve social mobility through college access. As institutions within a broader community, schools can leverage the community support for the work of improving social mobility through higher education. Findings from this study can be replicated as design principles for school community outreach in high poverty contexts to achieve greater equity. Further, the findings point to the need for engagement by the recipients of the intervention as design experts. Lastly, the study reinforces the usefulness of participatory action research for generating action to alleviate wicked problems.

Lessons learned through the PAR process point to the need for policy that enables long-term investment of time and resources. Combatting generational poverty does not have an easy plan of action, and there are no easy fixes. Schools and communities should advocate policy makers for expanded resources to support community engagement citing the issues of trust in and lack of staffing for outreach. Funding for planning and organizing the action is vital to activating an action plan. Communities interested in expanding college access can conduct a PAR study to determine the local community strategy which will vary across culture and geographic locale. Organizations interested in conducting a PAR project should likely consult with a researcher or evaluator skilled in as PAR is a time intensive and data intensive process. Social connections are especially important in PAR. Communities would be wise to ensure all corners of the social network within the geographic locale engage in the planning process. Lastly, communities focused on improved college access will benefit from the long-term outcome of improved social mobility and its associated benefits of economic security, civic engagement, and lower poverty through increased educational at-

tainment.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

Results from this study indicate PAR is useful for generating action around a specific social mobility project. The PAR process engaged city leadership and the broader community in examining the problem and creating a plan of action to address the problem. Throughout the project, community members expressed the need for trust in the institutions providing information and, in the people, providing the information. Future research into improving social mobility through college access services in high poverty environments should explore the role of trust in student and family decisions to seek services outside of the school environment. Additionally, the long-term outcomes and influences of the City CAN action plan should be investigated by conducting a ripple effect mapping exercise to explore the positive outcomes for both the city and the individuals and families served. At a macro level, research should examine how specific economic and social conditions (employment opportunities, access to social services and healthcare, and access to educational opportunities) lead to postsecondary education access inequities for rural youth. Lastly, the role of PAR in planning and delivering public services should be examined. With a strong emphasis on empirical evidence standards, federal agencies may limit the potential for the investment of public funds by imposing programs that will not be well received by communities. PAR can unlock means to accomplish the intended outcome if the community is allowed time to create context specific solutions. Social mobility among low wealth, rural, and minority communities will require a long-term investment of time and resources to change historic bias and neglect.

Sponsor Information

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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